

## Article

# Experiences and Strategies of Young, Low-Income, African-American Men and Families Who Navigate Violent Neighborhoods and Low-Performing Schools

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**Abstract:** Violent neighborhoods and low-performing schools continue to devastate young, low-income, African-American men and their families, despite individual and family use of kin and peer network navigation strategies. To learn more, interviews were conducted with 40 young African-American men, ages 18 to 22, from Baltimore City enrolled in a general equivalency diploma (GED) and job training program, and analyzed with modified grounded theory. Young men identified unsafe neighborhoods, chaotic schools, and disengaged teaching. Young men used safety and success strategies such as avoiding trouble and selecting positive peers to navigate unsafe environments. African-American families utilized kin network strategies such as messaging and modeling success, and mobilization for safety. Limits of unrecognized and unsupported strategies were related to: mobilization, limited educational partnership, and disproportionate family loss. Results indicate the continued urgent need for: (1) targeted violence reduction in high-violence neighborhoods, (2) calm and effective learning environments, (3) higher ratios of teachers to students to reduce chaos and improve learning, and (4) genuine teacher partnerships with families to improve access to positive role models, academic supports, and positive peer network development.

**Keywords:** high-crime neighborhoods; low-performing schools; African-American young men; African-American families; kin network activation; mobility; peer selection

## 1. Introduction

As violent neighborhoods and low-performing schools further concentrate on young, low-income, African-American men, there are questions about how unsafe environments shape young men's well-being. There is a growing body of work on the relationship between neighborhood violence and high school dropout in low-performing schools, and the disproportionate impact on young, low-income, African-American men [1–6]. In comparison, less is known about the varied lived experiences and strategies of young African-American men and their families who navigate both violent neighborhoods and schools with high dropout rates.

This research is drawn from a qualitative study focused on depression and well-being in young, low-income African-American men in a Baltimore City job-training program. Using modified grounded theory analysis and a phenomenological approach, four related foundational areas emerged as urgent, according to the young men themselves. The four areas included: the unpredictability and lack of safety in high-violence neighborhoods, the chaotic environment of low-performing schools, traditional strategies of African-American families and youth, and limits of those strategies [7,8].

We used a bio-ecological and critical-race framework to consider how these major areas of youths' micro and mesosystems shaped their well-being [9,10]. Due to youth exposure to police in

the neighborhood and involvement in the justice system, we also considered how the justice and education systems jointly marginalize, isolate, and disempower African-American young men and their families [11].

### *1.1. Experience of African-American Youth in Violent Neighborhoods*

Low-income, young, African-American men suffer disproportionately from both higher levels of exposure to neighborhood violence and lower rates of well-being [1–3], which encompasses multiple dimensions, including physical safety, mental health, and academic outcomes. Specifically, neighborhood violence predicts both lower levels of high school graduation and poorer mental health [1,3].

The negative effect of neighborhood violence and victimization on the high-school graduation rates is both concentrated and cumulative; and it is greater for men, but also has a school level effect [2–6]. Neighborhood violence is concentrated in disadvantaged neighborhoods [2], and the longer youth live in a disadvantaged neighborhood, the more likely it is that they will drop out of high school, particularly African-American youth [4]. Additionally, neighborhood violence mediates the relationship between disadvantage and the probability of high school dropout [5]. In 2017, Diette found that exposure to violence in both male and female children between the ages of 1 and 15 significantly increased the likelihood of dropout, but male children were more likely to be exposed to community violence than female children [3]. Finally, Burdick-Wills found that peer exposure to neighborhood violent crime was negatively correlated with individual academic achievement, with the whole school reporting feeling less safe, more discipline problems, and less trust in teachers [6]. Although the relationship between exposure to violence and low high-school graduation rates for boys is established, the reasons for that connection are not as clear, but for some young men, may be related to mental health.

Studies have consistently found a relationship between exposure to violence in the neighborhood and poorer mental health [12–14]. In a qualitative systematic review of the literature on high-risk urban neighborhoods and exposure to violence, authors found that young African-American men had higher rates of depression and psychological distress, but called for more research on the specific variables and pathways in those neighborhoods that predict poor mental health [12]. Smith conducted a qualitative study of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) discussed by young, African-American men who have lost a loved one to homicide, and found that more than 70% of those youth identified symptoms of PTSD, and most frequently, the need to be on point or hypervigilant [13]. Additionally, in a quantitative study of Black youth, Assari found that adolescent African-American males who reported living in unsafe neighborhoods were at greater risk for major depressive disorder (MDD) than African-American females and Caribbean Black males and females [14].

This paper focuses on young men in Baltimore City, Maryland, where in the year 2016, the homicide rate was among the highest in the nation [15], police brutality received national attention, and the percentage of young, African-American males who graduated on time from Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) was 64.5% [16]. Although the city is diverse and not large,<sup>1</sup> gun violence is concentrated within disadvantaged and high-crime neighborhoods, and largely impacts African-American youth [17]. Baltimore City Public Schools are comprised of approximately 80% African-American students, who are highly concentrated in low-performing schools, defined by graduation rates of below 67% [16]. In 2016, the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR), which is

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<sup>1</sup> Approximately 621,000 residents, which is similar to Washington, DC, but one third the size of nearby Philadelphia, population 1,526,000, and much smaller than a large city, such as New York, with a population of 19,466,000. Residents are 64% African American, 30% White, 4% Latino, and 2% Asian. See: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/24/24510.html>, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/11000.html>, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/42/42101.html>, and <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36000.html>.

the percentage of students who graduate on time, in Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS), was 70.7% versus the state of Maryland at over 87% [18], and for young African-American men, it was 64.5% [16].

### *1.2. Experience of African-American Youth in Low-Performing Schools*

Much of the research on the school experience of young, low-income, African-American men is concentrated in three areas: risk factors for aggression and externalizing behaviors, the institutionalized school-to-prison pipeline (STPP), and predictors and stories of success. The literature on risk factors and predictors of aggression is vast and not the focus of this paper, but noted here because it is so frequently the research framework for African-American boys. However, increasingly, their experience is being understood through the lens of the STPP, and seminal theoretical and quantitative work points to the role of nonpositive learning environments and zero-tolerance discipline policies as critical feeders of the pipeline [19–21]. On the opposite end of the behavioral and experiential spectrum, research examining successful youth points to various predictors of success within bad neighborhoods at the individual, family, and school level [22]. There is limited research on the group of boys between, who live in bad neighborhoods and are marginalized first to low-performing schools, and then out of them, until often, they find themselves at 18, with little or no criminal record, but also no high school diploma.

In Barbarin's 2010 call to interrupt the progression of African-American boys from preschool to prison, he noted that young African-American men growing up in unsafe neighborhoods rely on their survival skills and street smarts on a daily basis to stay safe as they navigate through the neighborhoods [19]. Survival skills help them to avoid unpleasant and risky situations:

Once caught for infractions, African American boys with a history of spotty school attendance often are committed to state facilities for juvenile offenders that are best described as finishing schools for crime. Once in the system, it is difficult to emerge from it. Most juvenile offenders recycle multiple times through the system. Recidivism rates hover around 60%. The consequence of this entanglement in the justice system is a life at the margins (p. 84).

Choices made in the interest of safety and survival can compromise their opportunity for positive, independent, and secure futures. Due to aggressive policing, African-American youth face disproportionate consequences for minor law infractions in youth that impact them for life.

Dancy furthered the push to change education's role in the marginalization of Black males by drawing attention to the systemic misperception and dehumanization of Black boy behavior in the school system [20]. Dancy and Barbarin also observed that, academically, high school level minority male youth are less likely to be engaged in college prep classes and more likely to be enrolled in vocational and less rigorous classes. Additionally, African-American males make up a small percent in schools that offer programs for gifted students compared to their white peers [20]. Students enter school with a frame of reference based on their personal experiences, and want to understand the relevance of the curriculum and how it will impact their personal lives. These students often possess intelligence that is not recognized in school:

Whereas black Americans traditionally have placed much faith in public schools, regardless of outcomes and deliverables, current schooling experiences of many black males remain yet another disappointment. For many of these boys, school is a place that ignores their aspirations, disrespects their ability to learn, fails to access and cultivate their hidden talents, and restricts their identity options. Unfortunately, too many of these students simply give up and give into low expectations and misguided notions about their authentic selves. (p. 489)

Finally, the American Civil Liberties Union [21] stated, "The 'Zero-tolerance' discipline has resulted in Black students facing disproportionately harsher punishment than white students in public schools. While Black students only make up 16% of public-school enrollment, they account for 42% of all students who have been suspended multiple times. This is in sharp contrast to white students

who represent 51% of public-school enrollment yet only constitute 31% of students who serve multiple suspensions.” In- and out-of-school suspensions are cyclical and interrupt the learning process, making it almost impossible for the young men to catch up academically with their peers. Therefore, students lose the opportunity to gain the valuable skills required to be successful in the workforce. In addition, they are unable to practice the soft skills necessary to maintain long-term employment and engage in the community.

Most of the research on success for low-income, African-American children and youth in schools point to similar findings. In the face of barriers, these students are successful when they are encouraged and assisted with their schoolwork; they perceive teachers to be firm and fair; and individual and family strengths are utilized. In a quantitative study of 40 young African-American male 9th and 10th graders in a small, predominantly African-American school, authors found that students who felt encouraged to participate and had educational aspirations had higher levels of academic self-efficacy, but more general feelings of belonging and being liked did not predict academic self-efficacy [23]. *Good Kids from Bad Neighborhoods* highlights the role and predictors of positive school environments and high school safety, finding that these schools are often located in better neighborhoods and have larger numbers of families using positive parenting practices [19].

Similarly, the qualitative studies of low-income African-American children and youth find that students name similar barriers of not receiving help from disconnected teachers and parents with limited social and educational capital. Low-income, African-American girls and boys with learning disabilities from a large city school identified barriers such as parents who had not graduated from high school, disengaged teachers, and their own learning disabilities. Those students also discussed factors that helped them succeed, including personal strengths, parental involvement and structure, isolating from peers, and special education teachers. Additionally, they identified processes such as instrumental support and a powerful classroom presence as important [24]. A study of six successful, low-income, African-American male high school students found that young men had to overcome barriers in their neighborhoods, homes, and at school. Young men named the supports of internal strengths, as well as close relationships with their mothers and select school mentors [25].

To our knowledge, there are few qualitative studies of African-American students who have dropped out of high school, with focus on normative school experiences, rather than gang involvement, substance use, and violence. In one qualitative study of 12 African-American and Hispanic young people who dropped out of high school, authors found that former students discussed similar issues to students who were able to persevere, such as problems at home, personal issues and limitations, and school factors, such as academic and teacher challenges [26]. Youths did not name family and school adults assisting them, or personal resources that helped them, although it is not possible to know if supports in either of these areas were not there or not drawn upon. Academic and teacher challenges begin early in education, and are often rooted in implicit bias. In Bell’s 2015 qualitative study with 18 African-American middle school boys from rural North Carolina, boys talked broadly about enjoyment of school, but perceived teachers to be overly strict and favoring White students [27].

Overall, research has found that African-American youth in schools are often subject to low expectations, cultural intolerance, truancy, academic tracking, disengagement, and a repetitive and unchallenging curriculum which decrease students’ interest in school. Youth who are not tracked into the criminal justice system still often find themselves without the social and educational capital needed to persevere either toward a high school diploma or alternative education and employment outside of the traditional education pathways.

### 1.3. African-American Family Strategies and Experiences in Neighborhoods and Schools

Historically relegated to disadvantaged, high-violence neighborhoods and low-performing schools, generations of low-income, African-American families have developed multiple safety and success strategies. Most of these involve the flexible definition and use of extended kin networks. Strategies include teaching and messaging the value of staying in school, providing role models for

young men, and moving out of dangerous neighborhoods and away from gang-involved peer groups as is possible. Most of that research is on low-income, African-American parenting in low-resource and high-violence neighborhoods, and some is on low-income African-American parents and school.

African-American family use of kin networks has been well documented for decades [28–30]. In her seminal work, Jarrett, 1999 identified youth-monitoring, resources-seeking, and in-home learning strategies used by African-American families living in low-income neighborhoods when raising their children [29]. Jarrett also noted how parents use community-bridging to take advantage of both human capital and community for their children to have access to opportunities outside of their neighborhoods. For example, families depend on family members, trusted friends, and community leaders to gain access to better educational prospects or social outlets for their children.

Specific studies of kin networks and families have also included additional definitions, dimensions, and functions of kin that indicate the flexible, caring, adaptive, and utilitarian nature and role of kin networks [31,32]. In a qualitative study on family functioning in low-income, African-American families, McCreary & Dancy found that families were defined as including not just biological relatives, but other close individuals, and that family functioning included emotional nurturing, communication, doing things together, helping each other, and parenting children appropriately [31]. In *Three Block Fathering*, Roy found that low-income, African-American fathers use local family to assist with non-residential parenting [32].

Kin network parenting strategies for safety have involved considering family support in the immediate neighborhood, as well as relocating children for the short or long term out of town [33,34]. In their chapter entitled *Taking Boys Out of the Hood: Exile as a Parenting Strategy for African American Male Youth*, authors discuss African-American parent use of exile to keep their sons safe by removing them from dangerous neighborhoods, often sending them to stay with relatives and friends for different lengths of time, but when their own social capital is limited, even resorting to cooperating with law enforcement to get children behind bars, rather than on the street [33]. Parents may utilize members of these networks to assist with messaging and to act as role models for a number of reasons, including to prevent youth fighting [34]. All of these are not just resources, but also safety strategies for high-violence neighborhoods.

In recent quantitative studies of low-income, African-American families, kinship social support has been found to be an important moderating variable in multiple studies of African-American families. For example, it moderates the effects of mother–adolescent problematic relations and mother report of internalizing and externalizing adolescent behavior [35], as well as effects of family–financial pressure on mother optimism and mother and adolescent adjustment [36]. These studies add measurable dimensionality to family functioning and kin support.

To our knowledge, there are fewer qualitative studies of low-income, African-American parent experiences with schools. Two recent studies revealed that there is intergenerational transfer of education capital, but relationships between parents and schools can be disrupted with disproportionate punishment of African-American boys, such as suspension [37,38]. Talking to 19 low-income African-American mothers revealed that mothers were guided by the way that they were parented around school and preparation for kindergarten [37]. In a qualitative study of 30 low-income caregivers of African-American children, caregivers valued child success, understood when their children behaved badly, and supported consequences for bad behavior [38]. However, caregivers found school suspensions to be unjust, and sometimes this contributed to a parent withdrawal from participation in schools.

Together, these studies suggest that many low-income, African-American families have extended kin networks that are utilized to support youth safety and success through school, but less is known about parents with less educational and social capital. Also, to our knowledge, little is known about the different outcomes associated with patterns and pathways of exiled youth for safety and success. Finally, although low-income, African-American families are dependent upon a strong public-school system, and in alignment with children's need for discipline, they are alienated when schools punish



children and youth, often disproportionate to and not constructive in addressing the nature of the behavioral issue.

#### 1.4. Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to learn more about the experience that young African American men and their families participating in a GED program, living in a low-income, urban environment, have with navigating high-crime neighborhoods and low-performing schools. Ecological theory was used to answer the following question: How do young men and their families navigate high-crime neighborhoods and low-performing schools? Specifically:

1. How do young men describe the neighborhoods in which they grow up and the role of the police?
2. How do young men describe the schools they attended?
3. What strategies have young men and their families developed to stay safe and achieve success in unsafe environments?
4. What are the limits to those strategies and how do they shape young men's experience with neighborhood and school?

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study is part of several larger research projects examining processes that develop in high-crime and low-income neighborhoods that shape the lives of young, African-American men (see details in Section 2.1). Phenomenological inquiry and modified grounded theory methodology were used in conducting this research [8]. Phenomenological inquiry allowed researchers to focus on experiences specific to African-American young men and their families in high-crime neighborhoods and low-performing schools. Modified grounded theory allowed for the use of sensitizing concepts from literature and folk wisdom throughout the coding process, and the development concepts or theory that emerge from these data.

### 2.1. Field Site and Sample

This study was conducted at the Get Ready program (pseudonym), a job readiness program for young adults located in Baltimore City, Maryland, that was partnered with two different, but collaborative research projects. The program was chosen by John Hopkins University (JHU) as the pilot location of a mental health intervention and evaluation research project designed to address the needs of program participants, as well as a site for a research project at the University of Maryland (UMD) on young men's transition to adulthood. This study was one of multiple sub-studies, and initially focused on the development of depression in young men. The program offers preparation classes for the General Education Development (GED) test, job preparation, counseling, case management, and other services. Most of the program clientele have chosen this program primarily to get their GEDs, but take advantage of other services offered while they are there.

Forty young, low-income African-American men, between the ages of 18 and 25 participated in this project; 20 of them were fathers, and saturation was reached. Most participants in this program either dropped out of high school or were expelled, and were attempting to get a general equivalency diploma (GED). Some were referred from the child welfare and criminal justice system, and a few just needed assistance finding a job. Specific data from mental-health screens conducted as part of the JHU parent project were not compiled for this sample, but previous data analysis has revealed that over 70% of program participants have mild to high levels of depressive symptoms, as measured by the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) [39].

### 2.2. Data Collection and Management

Interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, with an interview protocol (see Appendix A), but flexibility to pursue varying lines of inquiry according to the data as they emerged, as is consistent

with grounded theory methodology [8]. Most interviews were completed in one to one and a half hours. The interview protocol was based on the questions tested in a previous pilot study, questions from other qualitative studies of young fathers, sensitizing concepts from the literature, and the research questions [40]. Interviews were conducted in a private room on site, digitally recorded, and transferred to a password-protected computer. Interviews were stripped of identifying information, pseudonyms and short summaries were created for participants (see Appendix B), they were transcribed by an undergraduate research assistant (UGRA), and transferred into ATLAS/ti Version 6.

### 2.3. Data Analysis and Quality

Modified grounded theory was utilized to conduct four phases of coding [7], according to methodology outlined by Daly [8]. The first and second phase of data analysis were *open coding*, which included two stages. The first stage of open coding involved going through the data line by line and attaching labels to each segment of the data. Labels were created from participants' own language and descriptions or from the literature, entered into the ATLAS system, and attached systematically to the relevant data. The second stage of open coding was to organize the labels into categories. This helped to organize the data into related categories, usually tied to both the major interview areas and across all parts of the interview. The third phase was *axial coding*, which was conducted to compare and contrast categories, across interviews and within, organizing them into larger groups around a single axis [8].

The fourth phase of data analysis was *selective coding*. Selective coding was carried out in order to identify core themes and possible storylines in the data. For example, in this data set, there was a storyline of unpredictability in both neighborhood violence and police activity. Many participants identified the two together, so they were written about as separate constructs but also discussed where and how they appeared to not just overlap, but function as one phenomenon. The data analyzed for this study came from several codes that captured participants' relationships with their parents and families. These included their description of in whose home they lived and who else lived there, their neighborhoods, as well as how they believed others perceived them. Additionally, this data came from the codes unsafe neighborhoods, police activity, chaotic schools, positive and negative peer experience, and several codes related to family strategies and family loss.

Data quality was ensured by following criteria and strategies outlined by Guba's model of trustworthiness (as cited and discussed by Krefting [41]). They include: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. Guba's model also includes several methodological strategies to meet these criteria, including: time in the field, time sampling, reflexivity throughout the project, triangulation, member checking, and peer examination (as cited by Krefting [41]). Data was collected over 9 months in the field. Triangulation of investigators was achieved by conducting peer debriefing with two different, but overlapping teams throughout data collection and analysis. Debriefing on original findings was conducted with a research team, from the partner project with the Center for Adolescent Health at the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

For this paper, additional selective coding was developed and discussed with a research team focused on child and youth development at the University of the District of Columbia. Research team members focused on areas of expertise in youth development and education.

## 3. Results

The results in this paper focus on what young, low-income, African-American men report about living in high-violence neighborhoods, attending low-performing schools, utilizing traditional and intuitive family strategies, and the limits of those strategies.

1. Young men discussed the overall lack of safety in their neighborhoods from both unpredictable violence and aggressive police.
2. Young men spoke extensively on their schools, in which they often experienced: chaotic learning environments; disengaged teaching; and bullying and fighting.

3. Young men talked about strategies used by their families and themselves toward safety and success, including: messaging and role modeling; mobility and exiling; staying inside; and positive peer selection at school.
4. Young men spoke expansively on limits of unrecognized and unsupported strategies, including: mobility and school; disproportionate family loss; limited educational partnership; and their desire for more support.

### 3.1. *It Ain't Safe Nowhere—Unsafe Neighborhoods*

Young men did not talk a lot, but they were consistent about the overall lack of safety in their neighborhoods from both unpredictable violence and aggressive police. All young men knew to be alert outside, even if their neighborhood seemed quiet. Additionally, every young man interviewed had been picked up by or interacted significantly with the police at least once, and some had extensive history with the juveniles-justice and child-welfare systems.

#### 3.1.1. You've Gotta Look around—Unpredictable Violence

Neighborhoods and areas in which young men grew up and currently lived were consistently characterized by them according to safety and noise, generally thought of as unsafe, and required vigilance and monitoring. These ranged from quiet, low-crime neighborhoods to unpredictable and consistently dangerous parts of the city. Young men and fathers in this study talked about growing up in or moving to and from neighborhoods from all across Baltimore City and a few of the surrounding suburbs, including, but not limited to Baltimore County. At the time of the interviews, most of the participants in this study were currently living in the immediate area of the Get Ready program. Trent talked about the lack of safety all over the city, and how this meant that young men had to pay attention to their surroundings at all times.

It ain't safe nowhere . . . nowhere you're at . . . It's some feeling in you like . . . you've gotta look around sometimes right? So it's not safe.

Not only did young men know that their homes were not safe, they understood that a level of alertness was always necessary, no matter where they were. They did not identify areas that were safe and unsafe, or streets and blocks where you had to be more careful, but were clear that it was not a good idea to ever fully let your guard down.

Baltimore neighborhoods ranged from consistently dangerous to unpredictable. Vaughn, who lived in the same house with his brother, grandfather, and grandmother, around the corner from where his mother lived with her boyfriend, described his neighborhood as unpredictable, looking quiet one day and then breaking out in violence the next day.

Like you can drive down through the neighborhood—neighborhood is peaceful, quiet, you see kids playing around . . . that's like just a temp . . .

The peace and quiet of a neighborhood was often disrupted by the presence of violent individuals who were familiar to residents. These individuals were not necessarily going to cause problems, but they often brought violence with them, and that violence was not small or unplanned. Vaughn described this:

When certain people start coming around, that's when it's a chance of something big happening. That same time, that same day something may happen. You never know, no one says something's gonna happen, it just happens. It just . . . it don't happen every day but time to time it could. Sometimes it does. Sometimes it happens two days in a row in the same neighborhood . . .

Violence and crime in the neighborhood kept most youth on alert and some on edge. They thought about their environment and the best ways to keep themselves safe. Sometimes violence was associated with criminal activity, and other times there were non-criminal victims. Nathan talked about the impact of the robbery and murder of an older woman in his neighborhood.



‘Cause you . . . you didn’t see her doing anything bad. You didn’t see her have that type of violence where someone would want to kill her. She was just a lonely woman. She had a son who went to school. She went to work. She had a nice house than everybody so we was just like wow she’s gone because of somebody who wanted to rob her . . . but that scared me . . . it was like . . . that can happen to anybody.

He was both sad about what happened to her, and concerned that someone who also tried to stay away from violence and crime, like himself, could be murdered in his own neighborhood.

### 3.1.2. Police Jumping out on You—Aggressive Policing

High-crime levels in neighborhoods meant that there was also a high level of police activity, which young men also experienced as unpredictable and unavoidable. Every youth interviewed had contact with law enforcement, most had been detained at least once, and many had been arrested. However, very few of these youth revealed substantive criminal records, and most made a concerted effort to avoid police engagement to the extent that was possible for them. Young men had quite a lot of contact with law enforcement, but always as potential criminals, and never as members of the community, or potential allies in neighborhood safety and community policing.

Trent talked about how police activity has changed from driving through the neighborhood to jumping out of their cars and questioning young men hanging out, which has decreased social activity outside.

People used to be outside more . . . hang out on the corner. Police would just ride by. But now if you stand on the corner, police jumping out on you “Oh you’re selling drugs? What you doing on the corner?” So you can’t really stand on the corner no more...

This also meant that young men had all been questioned and detained by the police at least once by the time of the interview. Being questioned by law enforcement was frequent, and considered routine by most young men. Terrence, who had never been arrested, and was not involved in any criminal activity said, “Yeah, just like walking down the street and [the police will say] . . . ‘Where you going?’” Almost every one of the young men interviewed had been arrested at least once, and many had been arrested multiple times, sometimes just for minor infractions, such as a curfew violation.

Despite being accustomed to police activity, and even when making an effort to not get involved with crime, it was challenging, and took a toll on young men.

### 3.2. “Why Am I Here?” Chaotic Schools

Schools functioning in unsafe neighborhoods and serving primarily youth from families with expectations of and support for their success, but also disproportionate numbers of families in crisis and absent traditional coping strategies were perceived as largely disorganized, discouraging, and frequently unsafe as well. Young men spoke extensively At school, they found both dangerous and disruptive peers, and teachers and staff who struggled to manage classrooms and hallways. Some teachers were able to connect with youth, but often struggle to create effective learning environments, causing youth to further disengage.

Every day I wake up and I’m excited to go to school . . . because no matter what school you go to in Baltimore, something exciting is always going to happen. Whether it’s a fight, it’s a like a basketball game, something always going to happen every day. So you always . . . I always woke up ready to go to school. It’s just when I got to school, it was more so “Why are you here?” (Jayson)

School is where young people do most of their child and adolescent developmental work, through engagement with their peers, and with the support of their families at home. Young men in this study identified several areas in which they had difficulty engaging and connecting with others in

the school environment. Unfortunately, schools in Baltimore City also have historic low performance rates, indicating that in addition to having challenges connecting to others in the school environment, many school children have probably had difficulty achieving childhood developmental milestones, and have a shaky foundation for identity work in adolescence.

### 3.2.1. Chaotic, Noisy, and Boring Learning Environments

The environment in Baltimore City schools ranged from disorganized to chaotic, and young men did not feel connected to the academic curriculum. They reported chaotic environments both in the classroom and the hallways, as well as not feeling challenged by the coursework or certain about what the purpose of attending class was for them.

Young men were sensitive to what they perceived as disorganization, reflected in poor hallway management, and repetitive curriculums. Marcus, an 18-year-old young man who dropped out of high school and Job Corps, was often tired at school, but also distracted by noise in his classrooms.

Probably was tired too but like a lot of noise and distractions in the class . . . Distractions in the hallways. Um it was probably like a good five out of ten students that was in there doing their work and I was in there acting up.

Marcus felt that he and other students could do whatever they wanted without getting into trouble. Eventually, he was expelled, he thought for truancy, although he was not certain.

It's a nice school and all; just the organization was messed up . . . people be running in the halls and all of that. They got security in there, they'll just walk right passed the student in the school and won't say nothing. They just let the student just like do whatever they want but I guess they just let me do whatever I want and I guess they just put me out . . . I guess because I was missing too many days.

They frequently complained of being taught the same thing, which may have been due to disorganization, or it may have been that after chronic absenteeism, many of these young men got placed in remedial classes. Marcus was hoping that his specialized charter high school would provide him with academic challenges, but found the curriculum to be repetitive.

I just had stopped going after a while because it was the same old stuff every day. Like, they kept teaching the same stuff . . . like in our school, they're supposed to be teaching like more advanced stuff. Like they was teaching like in the middle between middle school and high school like it was right in between . . . and some of the stuff I already knew. And I just got sick and tired of it. But I know not to make that mistake again though.

He found some of the repetition to be tiresome, and often skipped classes, until he was expelled. However, he learned that he might have to be more patient with the curriculum to get his GED.

It was often difficult for students to re-engage in curriculum after being transferred from another school. After fighting with his mother, being removed from his home, and being put on probation, Jayson moved from a school with a college prep curriculum to a school with an emphasis on trade preparation. He found that he did not like the students, the teachers, or the classes, which he perceived to be repetitive and not challenging.

Once I came home from jail, I actually wanted to go back to school . . . I took up business and transportation 'cause they got those trades there or whatever . . . I don't know it was just different . . . The people I was in school with . . . like the students was different. They was doing more wild and dumb stuff than when I was in high school. The teachers was stupid. I don't know it's just . . . me I'm the type of person that if I'm gonna learn something, it's gotta be a challenge. It can't be "Oh I can tell you just as much as you can tell me." 'Cause then I'm not gonna care. I'm just gonna do other stuff and you know to something that interests me. And that's more like what it was. It was more so . . . but dang I learned this two years ago. Why are you still teaching this? So it wasn't interesting . . . :

Jayson was ready to start again after spending time in jail, and was disappointed in the lack of focus in the students at his new school.

These young men reported having no real sense of what they were learning and why they should be in school. Terrence was a 20-year-old young father who was on the football team when he was in high school, which he enjoyed, but outside of that, had no idea what his purpose in school might be.

... it was the same thing every year. Like the whole ninth grade year it was just the same thing. Football season ended and it was like "Why am I here?" Well I stopped going in the tenth grade in December which was ... like a month after football season ended. So that's what really had me going to school ... like you had to go to school to play on ... to be on the football team so then after that it was ... like that was the only reason I was going.

Ideally, participation in sports would help students to connect to school; it was not enough for Terrence. In the off season, he found his class repetitive and the environment tiring.

It was just like ... it was so much going on... Like every classroom, every child is just like ... like it was just the same thing all day every class it was just the same thing. You get the same results out of every teacher. I wouldn't say every teacher but most of the teachers.

### 3.2.2. They Won't Teach You Nothing—Disengaged Teaching

Very few of the young men in this study experience meaningful connections with their teachers, but disengagement was frequent and took various forms. Often young men thought that teachers did not care, effectively abandoning them in the classroom; some felt rejected, taking teachers' attempts to maintain order in their classrooms personally; and sometimes students were subject to negative judgments from their teachers.

Some instructors excelled at challenging students and keeping them on task, which helped the students form long-term, meaningful connections to the subject matter. Dontae was an 18-year-old young father, who said he was trying to change his life after being shot. Dontae had a long history of disconnection and disengagement with school, with one exception: a middle school math teacher who kept him so engaged with the work that this carried into high school. At one point math was the only class he would attend, skipping the rest of them.

I don't really like no classes for real but math ... 'Cause when I was in middle school, my math teacher used to always be on me ... and she was nice but she didn't play ... Like she didn't care what you do as long as you did your work she ain't care. So I just love math. She was always on me ... everybody for real ... if you didn't do your work, don't talk to her. You can't talk, you can't play, none of that.

She was able to get him to do the work, without judging him or saying anything negative; she just would not interact with students unless the work was finished. Dontae experienced criticism and rejection from other teachers, and this was ineffective in getting him engaged.

But the other teachers will be like "Oh you didn't do your work? Oh you don't care. Oh he don't care." But her, she stayed on us to make sure we did our work, our homework, and everything. So that's why I really like math.

He was unable to connect with teachers who seemed to judge him. By high school he was cutting classes and skipping school regularly, and teachers questioned him on his absence instead of trying to re-engage him in classroom work.

Like my teachers or something, "Why you didn't come to school today?" or "Why you come to school for only one period?" And I'd be like "I don't know." And I leave.

When instructors were ineffective teachers or managed their classrooms poorly, young men felt abandoned and alone in their academic pursuits. Marcus said that most of his teachers only skimmed

his homework for completion, not comprehension. He also remembered a math teacher working out a problem on the blackboard without explaining the work to the class.

Some of the teachers, well I'm not gonna say some but most of them . . . they'll just skim through the work. They won't teach you nothing . . . like say you put a problem on the board, like a hard problem . . . it's back when I didn't know fractions. They put an um . . . fraction problem on the board and I remember that he said, "Can anyone tell me how to do this?" Ain't nobody say nothing so he just went up there and did the problem. He just did it in his own head. He just did it like "That's how you do it."

Similarly, when instructors were unable to teach or engage students effectively, young men felt it was because they did not care. Terrence said that because students did not care, then teachers disengaged.

Yeah it was just like the students . . . they wouldn't care so the teachers wouldn't care. So they would just talk and do whatever they wanted to do. And then the teachers just sit back . . . I mean it wasn't like people was in there fighting and the teachers wouldn't do nothing but like they was just talking and leave out the classroom, come in the classroom. And the teachers would just sit there like "Oh well I still get paid."

Classroom management required quite a bit of skill on the part of the instructor. When young men felt they had gotten negative attention from a teacher, they often took it quite personally. For example, Jamaar was a young expectant father, with a tendency toward anxiety, who felt he was unable to make the same connections with teachers that he perceived other students were making.

Like my stress was . . . trying to like get along with certain teachers. 'Cause when I was in school, honestly teachers have got their pets, they've got their favorites . . . you feeling me? And then it was always like, I was always one of those types that always get pushed, that gets pushed off. I'm like, "Why are you always pushing me off? You help them out when they need help. You let them use the bathroom when they . . . " Like you feeling me?

Jamaar engaged in power struggles and passive-aggressive hostilities with his teachers, thinking that they made up lies about him to get him out of the classroom.

Some teachers had try to lie on you, say you're doing this, you're doing that, just to try to get you out of the room. Like me, if I get irritated . . . like say if like the teacher irritates me, or they throw a little slur, I start picking back. But I pick back in a way that they can't really say nothing, or they can't act towards it, so they get really irritated to the point that they'll probably be like, leave the room, or they'll wait until school is over and probably try to tell the principal that I did this, I did that, so I won't be able to go back to their class. But I'm like, they don't got proof. (Laughs) You know?

Jamaar even had a teacher once say to him, "You'll never be nothing," indicating that teacher had probably lost his or her temper in one of the previously describe exchanges.

Sometimes that level of confrontation with students was a part of the school culture. Jayson found that the instructor environment in his new school was more controlling, and less challenging than his old school:

At [former school], don't get me wrong, it was the same thing, it was just teachers "Oh you do you and I'm gonna do me." At [new school] it was more so with them, "You gonna do what I tell you to do." And no, I don't like that . . . I can't learn here 'cause I feel like . . . I don't feel smarter than the teachers but I feel I could compete with them. Even though I probably couldn't, that's just how I felt . . .

That type of control and confrontation with students caused Jayson to be defensive, and miss out on whatever it was instructors may have been trying to teach.

### 3.2.3. Bullying and Safety Issues at School

Negative peers at school were problematic among the young men in this study. Not only were young men disconnected from peers and any support they may have provided, peers often acted as barriers or obstacles to other connections that young men and fathers might have made while in high school. Peers blocked school connection through violence and safety threats, specifically, gang tension and conflict, bullying, and potential conflicts with specific peers. Young men who did not feel threatened on a personal level often found themselves fatigued by the high levels of violence and conflict overall.

Young men sometimes inadvertently got themselves into dangerous situations that were hard to manage. Nathan tried to be friends with everyone his freshman year of high school, and quickly found out this was a little naïve, and that there were students who were only there to fight each other.

Hanging with the wrong crowd . . . had a lot of people . . . like they try to fight me like and it really freaked me out. It was like gang members. Things like that and I was like “I didn’t do anything to you guys so why are you wanting to mess with me?”

Nathan really suffered from the experience of not choosing the right peers, and finding himself in confrontational situations that were over his head. He did not know how to handle it, and so, even though he had previously been a good student, he started skipping classes and entire days of school.

So I started school . . . I think I hooked a whole month . . . I used to get to the point where it was like my mother would come pick me up . . . this is after I got to the last high school which was my high school for the rest of my days of high school. Um . . . she would come pick me up when she got off of work but I didn’t go to school so I would . . . I would wait until the right time, catch a bus back to my school and when the bell ring I walk out like I was there all day . . . so she didn’t know . . .

Gang members in Nathan’s school acted as barrier between him and positive peers, his mother, and anyone who could help him with the situation.

Bullies in school preyed upon vulnerable peers. Due to Aaron’s history in the foster care system, he was vulnerable to bullies who made fun of him, and very sensitive to common school jokes about his mother. He had a long history of struggling with bullies and severe depression in high school. He was able to get as far as the 3rd quarter in his senior year, but felt he could not complete it:

The reason why I you know wasn’t able to finish high school is because bullying, pretty much in a nutshell. Peer pressure along with low self esteem and depression was just a terrible combination for me to be in school with people my age and younger who were immature.

Aaron felt like the students were running the school, more even than the principal, and that was when he gave up.

And that’s when I was like fuck this I’m done. I’m not coming back. The principal can’t even do nothing. The principal is scared to suspend the damn students ‘cause he thinks he’s gonna get his car shot up. So I’m like what’s the purpose of even going to school if you know there’s no protection, there’s no safety. I just felt . . . I felt uncomfortable, unsafe.

There was no safe place in the school for Aaron, not even the cafeteria, which he said was so unpredictable that he did not eat his lunch there. He eventually decided that the school was simply too unsafe for him, and dropped out three months before graduation.

It was too much. It was too much. It was too much. I was like fuck this I’m done. Like fuck it I’m done. I’m not going back. And that’s when I just never went back . . . I was in the 12th grade. I was three months away from graduating . . . I was so damn close. So damn close.



Aaron was not just intimidated by bullying peers, he was frustrated and tired with how much power they had in school, and that no one could control them.

Jayson found the overall levels of fighting in his new school as well as gang tension to be frustrating, although he was not personally threatened.

When I was at [former school], there was a little crowd . . . we all played . . . We had problems, we talked it out. That's what it was. But I went to [new school] and it was just fight, fight, fight, fight, fight. Every day. "Oh he stepped on my shoe, fight . . . Oh he took your answers, fight him. Why you looking at me? Fight them." No, that's young. "Oh the teacher's gone, go punch that dude. Didn't he say something about you yesterday?" Yeah that's what that was . . . They're all some dumb, retarded people. You all fight every day and for one day, they're doing good and you just want to fight to fight . . . Very disappointing. It made me angry. Like all these people you know? Coming here to do work and have fun or whatever and then just take one person to mess it up.

Gang tension often stemmed from rivalries between well-known gangs, such as the Bloods and the Crips [42]. Jayson realized that some of his fatigue of gang tension was heightened by his time in the group home, where he developed antagonism with a member of Blood gang, because most of his family members were in the Crip gang.

I think going to the group homes made me start to dislike certain people and the way people act . . . Like in the group home, it was this little Blood boy . . . first when I got there we wasn't cool . . . I wasn't really into it but most of my whole family is Crips so I ain't gonna say I disliked him . . . when he found out . . . when you found out that my family was Crips, he started the get similar type of hatred towards me . . . So yeah so that played a part when I got back to Baltimore and I went to school and started seeing them and it was more so like . . . "Them niggas some clowns." Especially if they act like that dude out there. And then when I went to school it was all these little gangbangers and you've gotta watch the way you gotta walk through the school.

Conflict and potential for conflict were tiresome for young men, but also dangerous. Jamaar had a difficult time engaging with any school he attended, and left the last one due to a perceived potential conflict with another student.

Like with a guy from New Orleans. And I just told him like I can't do it you know? . . . One of us has got to leave . . . 'cause I can't sit out here jeopardize myself and we get to a certain extent, somebody gets hurt, and somebody ends up locked up. Not trying to go there . . . So I'll be like, if I do that, that's going to happen, that's going to happen, that's going to happen. And then I just like . . . don't do it, won't put myself through it for real.

Jamaar tried to anticipate conflicts with his peers, but his only method for de-escalating a potentially violent situation was avoidance. He had no conflict resolution skills, and did not recruit any adults to assist him.

### 3.3. "People in My Life that Expose Me to More"—Family and Youth Strategies for Safety and Success

Although growing up in Baltimore City was very challenging for young men and their families, many families of young men employed multiple strategies to help young men not only navigate unsafe neighborhoods and police, but to also succeed in school, including modeling, messaging, matriarchs, and mobilizing. Young men tried to avoid trouble as much as possible, by staying inside when possible and doing the right thing when out. Young men were also careful to select a positive peer group.

#### 3.3.1. Families Model and Message

Similar to most families, parents of young men reinforced positive behavior and discouraged negative behavior with consistent messaging, and they tried to provide young men with positive role

models. Families reinforced their general positive regard for young men, the importance of hard work and a positive attitude.

For example, Charles was a bright and thoughtful young man, 20 years old, who attended one year at Morehouse College, but could not continue due to limited financial aid after his first year there. Charles talked at length about the support he has always gotten from his mother and the respect that he had for her.

I have a very positive outlook towards myself ... although I have ... faced some shortcomings ... my mother how she brought me up ... how she raised me ... and she leads by example, that I see hard work. It kinda trickled down to me and I emulate her by continuing to try to succeed or go ... push the boundary caps that I can achieve. So I guess I have a pretty positive outlook given the fact that I'm always trying to ... I'm not never ... content currently with how my life is.

Mothers were important both in demonstrating good life skills and a positive outlook, but also in connecting those things to family life in such a way that these young men appeared to internalize those things as a positive reflection of themselves and their family life. Martin, an 18-year-old father, with a 7-month-old baby, who was also a high school graduate, preparing to attend Morgan State in the fall, talked about what a happy person he is because of his mother. He attributed his positive outlook to his mother, and the way she let him and his siblings know that they were loved and modeled being happy with what they had to him, despite having troubles.

It came a lot from my mother. 'Cause like, we've been through a lot. Like a whole lot. And no matter what she was dealing with ... like she could be crying, but as soon as she sees us walk into the room, she'd be smiling. You know? I could know ... she'd tell me, like "Yeah I was just crying." But at the same time, when we're around, she's like "Okay, this is a family moment. Everybody be happy because we're together." You know like, take pride in the little stuff that we do there. Like everybody worries, but we don't ...

Mothers consistently praised positive behavior in young men. For example, Drew, a 22-year-old young man, who had a 5-year plan for getting his GED and then his bachelor's degree, discussed his family's appreciation for this:

My family looks at me like I'm a good kid, like I'm respectful, I have manners ... My mom always says I have a certain drive about me ... She says thank you for ... I was going to give her something for Christmas and she said "Don't give me nothing for Christmas 'cause you're giving me my present year round. Thank you for staying out of trouble" and she says "You've got a certain drive about you and I thank you for that."

He knew that his way of carrying himself and the choices that he made were not just good for him personally, but helpful to his mother and those around him.

However, mothers were more successful with positive messaging when young men also had positive role models. For example, Charles also had an older male cousin who has been both a mentor and a role model to him, and made other options a tangible reality.

I think 'cause I have certain people in my life that expose me to more ... I have a cousin on my father's side who graduated from Morehouse and he kind of played the big brother, the uncle, the father role in my life and because he exposed me to so many different things ... although he wasn't my father ... although he wasn't as much as you would expect a person who figure plays one of my parents ... he's my cousin ... I still was exposed to things so I kind of knew what was out there rather than what ... we all can find.

Charles's cousin was a role model on many levels, ranging from correcting his grammar to demonstrating that young black men can go to college.

Simple things . . . When I was younger I had bad grammar saying things like “You is” when it’s supposed to be “you are.” If no one around you is kind of correcting you on small things like that how would you ever know that you have bad grammar?... Small things and also given the fact that he had a college education to kind of explain that “Oh we *can* go to college.” And someone that actually has . . . it’s just showing me a path you can take rather than . . . if I had never had that vision . . . he presented as a role model . . . I had a positive role model . . . I was able to realize that there’s other things rather than what I was confined to.

Charles was fortunate to have an older man in his life that he knew, who taught him things he might not have learned otherwise. Despite feeling valued and learning about what was most important in life from his mother, Martin felt the absence of professional role models.

That side of life isn’t really shown to us. Like all the doctors and lawyers and teachers, stuff like that. They’re there, but you don’t really . . . growing up as a young, black boy you don’t really see them. You know? They’re not in the neighborhood; they’re not on the TV.

This made it very difficult for Martin to feel as though pursuing a professional career was an appropriate choice for him, and not turning his back on the neighborhood.

### 3.3.2. Family Mobility

Mobility took two major forms when it was used as a family strategy. The first was for the whole family to move, and the second was for the family to move only the young man. Due to high levels of crime in city neighborhoods, and multiple generations of extended families living in or around Baltimore City, it was not uncommon for families to move several times while young men were in school. In addition to a large amount of public housing in Baltimore City, some families owned their own homes or spent some time living in a central family home that was lived in at different times by different family configurations within the same extended family. Additionally, some families figured out ways to get youth out of Baltimore City schools and neighborhoods, while still living there.

Small family units within the extended family moved in and out of these central family homes at different times, for various reasons. For example, in Tony’s family, his mother moved out of the family home a few times, because she was not happy with the neighborhood, but ended up moving back in when she was unable to pay the rent elsewhere.

We moved from the house and moved back to the same house . . . We moved a few times . . . Different reasons . . . ‘cause of rent or whatever . . . just got tired of the house. Then we moved back cuz I think my mother just missed the house . . . We moved the last time and got, the house got robbed, broken into. So she didn’t really feel comfortable, but then time go past, she be like, “I miss my old house,” so she want to go back.

The family moved back and forth several times, and often in slightly different configurations, depending on which in-laws or extended family members were living with them at the time. Deon’s mother also did not like the crowd that he started hanging out with, and so they moved from Baltimore City to Owings Mills.

My mother had just gotten tired of that place. We moved from the city and we moved all the way to Owings Mills, so I would say it was just more to get away. You know I guess she really didn’t want me to be like the people I was growing up and seeing every day. She wanted me to see something different.

This was effective in helping him change crowds, but he found it difficult to fit in with the kids in his new school, and he was never able to become the student that he was before.

When I was in middle school, it was just like . . . like honestly a transformation . . . it was a different surrounding from where I came from. And you know my grades slipped a little bit.

They slipped a lot actually. And then when I moved again, you know I moved away from all of the people that I . . . my grades, they never got better. That's why I had started smoking and stuff like that. 'Cause before that I was honor roll every quarter. You know? All that stuff but until then, when I started smoking and all that stuff, it just changed everything.

Deon missed his old friends, started smoking more marijuana, and getting into as much trouble in the county as he had just started to get into in the city.

Charles grew up in a housing project across the street from the Get Ready program, but his mother got him out of neighborhood schools and programs early and into a magnet school with its own after-school programs.

When I was in elementary school I just was a wreck, another normal kid . . . once I got into middle school and teachers was telling me "Oh he's a smart kid, he does his work" and not that I was smart, I just did my work . . . that's when I started to realize that maybe there is a difference . . . the teachers started telling my mother that, and my mother was signing me for programs and having me be around different people . . . the more I got involved in other things, the less I became involved in my neighborhood.

Charles gradually moved not just his academic life out of the neighborhood, but his social life too, replacing local pick-up basketball with games at the school recreational center, and hang-out time in the neighborhood with after-school programs.

### 3.3.3. Young Men Avoid Trouble

Young men talked about a range of approaches that they took to assess and maintain safety from both violence and the police, including: not staying out late, assessing danger, staying inside, staying out of trouble, and just leaving.

Young men frequently identified staying inside, or coming inside early as a strategy to stay safe, either from neighborhood or police violence. Random and unpredictable neighborhood violence taught young men to be anxious about leaving the house, because they knew that the violence would happen, but they were not certain when it would happen. After the murder of the older woman in his neighborhood, Nathan was anxious about leaving his house.

It made me kind of nervous to go outside . . . Like, "I hope nothing else happens while I'm outside but I hope it doesn't happen at all but at least not while I'm outside . . . "

They tried to determine when violence and police activity were more likely to happen, such as later in the evening. After his cousin was shot to death, Marcus made a rule to not stay out late.

Like I was never out like twelve or one in the morning. 'Cause my cousin . . . he had . . . passed away . . . in the morning, and I had learned from that not to go out because I wouldn't want to experience that like right now. So I just told myself like being out like at a certain time, like eleven o'clock, eleven thirty or something . . . like trouble and plus the police and all that, they be outside like jumping on anybody. So I just try to prevent that from happening.

Marcus was careful to get himself inside early in the evenings for his own safety, and to keep his family from losing another young man.

Neighborhoods that were not safe for young men were not safe for their children either. Young fathers were aware of how dangerous the neighborhoods were for their children, and the importance of a general level of cautiousness when taking their children out. Trent had to both check the activity on the street before he could take his child outside to play, and also assess the probability of violence breaking out at various events around town before taking his family.

'Cause you . . . like say you let your kids go out and play with them. You'll have to see how the neighborhood is first to see what's the things that'll happen. You'll have to pick up a

paper and read the guide and see what's going on around there and stuff like that but just knowing Baltimore, you know it's not safe. Nowhere in Baltimore. Anything can happen any time.

Staying out of trouble was a strategy most young men tried to use, but found difficult due to the volume and proximity of problems in the neighborhood. Vaughn talked about how difficult this was living in a high-crime neighborhood:

I'm like a good person, like a good boy. Like I try to stay out of trouble. I try to stay as far away from trouble as possible. But it's just like when you live in a neighborhood that has so much trouble, it's just hard . . . like it's hard to stay away from it. That's why.

Just as young men benefited from positive role models, they often felt overwhelmed and outnumbered. Martin talked about how difficult it was to make good choices in a city that continued to be damaged by years of poverty and drug addiction.

So like me coming up, I always knew right from wrong and my mother, she trusted me and my brothers 'cause she could tell we were responsible but at the same time, the crowds . . . it was too overwhelming.

Like, you really can't escape it. It's like . . . it's crazy to say, but it's really like you're against the world because Baltimore's so small in the way that everybody's so out of their minds. It's like everywhere you go, that's the life that everybody's living. Grandma's . . . like who do you look to?

Martin was close with his mother and knew that she was counting on him, but that was not enough to offset the constant pressure that he felt to engage in Baltimore City street life. The general consensus was that trouble would find you, even if you were not looking for it, and the police were often there when that happened.

Young men tried to move out through success in school, but were discouraged. Vaughn himself had been mugged in this neighborhood, and it made him angry, because he tried hard to stay away from trouble, "Wish I could move out . . . pack my bags and move out. Move to a better place, me and my family, my best friends. But it's not gonna really happen."

### 3.3.4. "My Friends Are on the Same Level"—Young Men Develop Peer Support

Consistent with the literature, peer connection and support were important to young men. They were useful for both getting through school, and getting needed emotional support when young men were unhappy. A few young men were fortunate enough to have a core group of friends that provided both positive peer pressure to achieve goals, such as graduating from high school, and emotional support in general.

Michael was one of the few young men interviewed who had a high school diploma as well as an energetic presentation. He got into a little bit of trouble in high school, but not much, which he attributed to having a group of friends who had the same goals, including being able to move out of the neighborhood in which they grew up.

Well my friends they're on the same level . . . same page trying to do something with their life. You know we all came . . . like we all tired of living around in neighborhoods like . . . you know that we have to . . . and going to the city and get more.

However, it is not always easy to find the right peers, and these young men often had just a few friends or just a small circle of friends. Drew, who was focused on his plan, found it was important to choose his friends carefully.



I really watch who I hang around with. I pick my friends wisely and if I feel as though I'm gonna be around trouble, I try not to get into it or be around the person . . . I have two friends, well now I call them brothers 'cause that's how close we've gotten over the years. And they've been my two friends for like . . . I believe like eight or nine years and I usually say it's too late to make friends by the spot I put them in.

Charles found he had more in common with his friends at his Baltimore magnet school, populated primarily by kids from the county, not in the city:

You can call it a magnet school. It's predominantly black, but my friends there . . . they were from Baltimore County, so they kinda . . . already had a different outlook towards . . . everyone would view me as though I wasn't from the city just because of how I carried myself so . . . so my peers at the time just always assumed that I was middle class, good upbringing, suburban kind of kid . . . whereas my neighborhood friends . . . I just was the guy that just was never around. They'd see me going to school . . . coming from school . . . going to the after school program, coming from the after school program. And I never quite fit in in my neighborhood . . . I guess I just was the stoop kid . . . never involved too much in the neighborhood . . .

Being pulled from the neighborhood, and doing different things did not always lead to people saying positive things about Charles, but he learned to filter the things that he heard. Although many of the young men in neighborhood were not friends of Charles, he found that having no peers in a dangerous neighborhood actually kept him safer.

Say I'm in day to day life and I see a guy and I'm angry and we almost get into that, I know the type of environment I'm in. Nothing ever ends around here . . . nothing ever ends. So if we get into a fight, I may lose . . . I could actually lose the fight. I could come back around here and we could have another altercation, maybe worse and maybe him and couple of his friends, or maybe him and a weapon . . . and I guess since none of these people are my peers I don't have that peer pressure to actually be . . . I could walk away from it.

Positive peers were important for school focus and safety, but also for emotional support. Not many of the young men were fortunate enough to have peers who supported them or helped them to stay focused, but those who did, understood their value.

Families sometimes combined parent, kin, and peer support. Terrence's aunt and father stepped in after he had a baby and provided him with a place to stay and some money so that he could focus.

The last three and a half years I've been procrastinating this G.E.D . . . it's just trying to work and take care of my son and like just trying not to have other people help me out with things and now it's just like . . . like my aunt and my father they won't take "No" for an answer. Like "No we're gonna help you out" and so now it's just like I can just like take some pressure off and focus on some things that I need to do.

In addition to the support he received from moving in with his aunt and father two months prior to the interview, he got peer support from his cousin, who also attended the Get Ready program.

Like the motivation is the same between both my parents and my aunt but like on my mother's side I really don't have nobody around my age that I look at them and my situation. Like on my father's side my cousin, he actually goes here too so it's like . . . it's just like I'm trying to be better than him and he trying to be better than me so it's just like we pushing each other.

It helped that his father and aunt told him to go to the Get Ready program, and that he already has a cousin in the program.

### 3.4. “Never Been Back to School”—Limits of Unrecognized and Unsupported Strategies

Parents and other adult caregivers tried to keep young men safe and in school, but family and youth strategies were limited by the strength and extent of kin and peer networks. Family safety strategies such as mobility negatively shaped school engagement and positive peer retention when families were unable to sustain a move for the duration of high school, get youth to a safer neighborhood, or experienced bureaucratic challenges. Families also experienced disproportionate levels of loss that shaped youth experiences of safety and success. Finally, families also often tried to message and model success, but had limited educational partnership, particularly when youth were contending with disengaged teaching and chaotic learning environments. Young men talked about wishing they had gotten more support, and about how to provide it for their own children.

#### 3.4.1. Mobility and School

When families moved, youth had to transfer schools, make new friends, and sometimes adjust to a different commute. Antoine’s mother moved a few times, and although he liked the different schools, he did not adjust well when his new school was further from his home than his old school.

I went to a lot of schools, two more schools . . . I went to one school for a year and then transferred when we moved, we moved to somewhere else, so I went to a school closer to my house . . . I liked the school . . . Like it’s a far ride that’s why I probably won’t going there . . . A far ride, a far- it was a long way, that’s why I probably wasn’t get to school and all that . . . I had to catch the light rail and all that . . . it wasn’t near my house . . .

At the same time that he started staying out late with his friends, he found it difficult to get up as early as he needed to get to school on time.

Oh, I got kicked out . . . I got too many D’s . . . Cause my mother and then lived in the county and I was always late and stuff like that. [Staying out late] hanging out with my homeboys. Yeah I come I come, but I missed too many days. I missed a lot of days, when they dropped me off . . . That’s how they dropped me off because my grades were low, school, I missed a lot of days, I came, I use to come to school but I missed too many days . . . I was in 11th grade . . .

Antoine stayed out late with his friends from his old neighborhood in the city, could not get to school on time at the county school, and ended up being “dropped off” the roles at his new school during his 11th grade year of high school.

Moving between the county and the city school systems was more complicated than staying within the city system due to varying course requirements. When Drew’s grandmother got sick, his family moved to be closer to her, and he was unable to get the classes and credits that he needed to graduate.

I went to school in the county . . . and at the time I was taking classes that in the city, I would’ve been taking in a different year. So when I transferred, the classes they couldn’t put me in the same classes I was taking so it’d be basically . . . half of the classes I was in out the county, they basically cancelled those classes and started me in a different . . . it’s hard to explain . . . they basically had to wait for a certain time period for me to have the classes that I was taking. So they cancelled those classes and basically when I had gotten to the twelfth grade . . . I had basically graduated but they forgot all about the three classes I was in . . . so I had to retake those . . .

Drew ended up not being able to take his three classes, and was unable to graduate from high school. That is why he created his five-year plan for getting his GED and then going to college.

Sometimes when young men started getting in trouble in their city schools, moving to live with a relative in Baltimore County was a family strategy to keep them focused. However, some young men

struggled with that transition. Powell moved back and forth between his mother's house in the city, and his sister's house in the county, but eventually had the same problems, and ultimately dropped out in the final transition back to the city.

I was staying my mother and then I was going to school down here [Baltimore City]. I was doing good but . . . back then like my attitude and all was real low and everything . . . when I was in the county I was doing better than I was out here . . . So when I went out there I decided to just stay out there and continue school out there. I was doing good out there getting all mainly As and Bs . . . honor roll and all that.

Powell was more successful academically at the county school, but he got bored, and moved back into the city. Unfortunately, he did not re-enroll in school when he moved back into the city.

I ain't never been back to school since I came back here . . . I mean I tried [to get re-enrolled in school] a couple times but it was always something . . . It was always something that's why I was like I'm gonna go ahead and get my GED instead of not doing nothing at all.

Many of these young men have lived in Baltimore City their whole lives, but few in the same house or neighborhood, and often they have moved back and forth from the surrounding suburbs at certain points. For a number of reasons, including crime, family, and jobs, they experience a fair amount of transition. Most of the young men in this study had attended several schools, including two or three high schools. Sometimes they changed schools due to a family move, and sometimes due to a disciplinary procedure. In most circumstances, young men talked about encountering a fair amount of red tape, and being, overall, disconnected and fatigued by the process of transferring schools, making new friends, and transitioning to a new neighborhood.

### 3.4.2. Disproportionate Family Loss

Family was very important to young men, and although some challenges are common among families, such as divorce, single parenting, and loss of a grandparent, these challenges were often felt acutely by young men. Possibly because messaging and role modeling were important safety and success strategies for these families, or because young men were sensitized to loss [43] or both, each young man talked about their unique experience and often intensive sadness when faced with a common family loss.

For example, divorce is a common family challenge, but children often experience it differently. Andre was a 20-year-old young father with a 10-month-old baby, whose parents divorced when he was young. Although the school tried to support him, he struggled with the loss of being with his parents at the same time, and had a difficult time adjusting and focusing on school after that.

'Cause when they was together, I was an A student, an A+. I was ruling the school. My father was taking me to school. I was finishing all of my work in class, staying every class and I stayed in school until school was over, until the bell ring. Probably stayed even a couple minutes later until my father and mother came and got me from the school. And then when they started breaking apart, that's when I started messing up in school. 'Cause I was having problems like my mother and father let me go so I was . . . I'd go to school and I'd be thinking . . . that'd be on my mind so much I'd just go to class and don't do nothing. But just a week ago I was coming to class doing all my work and all of that.

Although the school did attempt to keep him engaged, and Andre did some family therapy with his family that was useful, it was still quite difficult for him, and Andre eventually dropped out of school.

So the teacher knew something was wrong with me and he told the principal and the principal got me some help or whatever and then I went and started seeing a therapist . . .

when I was going there for a nice minute, my father would come and my mother would come in there and talk to me . . . my mother and father would come and I'd get a chance to spend time with my mother and father... But it still was kinda stressful 'cause on me . . . 'cause I was used to seeing them together . . . I was used to coming home and being with my mother and father. Used to coming home every day from school . . . used to leave at home seeing my mother and father together. Taking me to school, coming home, we'd go out to eat or something. And then start our day over again . . .

The school intervention and therapy was helpful for Andre, but when it stopped, he was still quite sad about the loss of the family with which he grew up.

Similarly, Deon's mother was a single parent, which is common, but his father was completely absent from his life, which is much less common and he felt that absence acutely. Although non-residential co-parenting is a common form of parenting, total parent absence may impact children differently, and contrasted with children who either live with or see both of their parents frequently.

Most of [my friends] did [see their dads]. The ones that I rolled with, most of them did. You know you've got the couple that were in my situation but a good majority of them if they didn't know or at least live with him, they talked to him or at least seeing him. I haven't seen him like . . . he moved to Ohio when I was like one . . . I didn't talk to him until I was like ten or thirteen. Didn't see him or anything. So I mean but most of my friends they grew up with mother and father. Some of us didn't but the majority of them did . . .

Deon and his mother also experienced additional hardships, such as being homeless and living in a shelter for a while, and felt like he did not have anyone to talk to about these things.

My friend Eric, he had his mother and father there. Yeah they were just around. They didn't have to be together. They didn't even have to live in the same house. It was just more that they was around. If they had a problem that they wanted to talk to that they could only talk to their father, they had somebody to talk to. You know I only had my mother to talk to and I couldn't talk to my mother about everything . . . Yeah so you know I just had to find somebody else to talk to. But yeah most of my friends, they know their fathers or he's been around to see them.

Interestingly, one of the things that did help Deon was guidance from his grandmother, particularly when he got himself into trouble in high school. Deon had a really difficult time, and made some bad choices that got him kicked out of school. However, as he struggled with the consequences of his actions, his grandmother intervened and helped him to see some of the mistakes he was making during a troubling time for him.

I mean she just really convinced me that it wasn't nothing good I was doing. 'Cause I was doing a lot of fighting, I was smoking, I would skip school. And she just you know she just told me if I want to rise above, I hate to say it again but if I want to rise above, you know the typical stereotype then this is what I need to be doing. And this is how I need to be doing it. I just really took all my advice from her. Everything she told me I do as far as school, jobs, girls, anything. I listen to my grandmother for it.

Deon may not have been able to talk to his grandmother about some of the things that were troubling him, but he was able to feel her concern for him, and think about making better choices than his peers.

Grandmothers often play such a central and important role in African-American families, as respected transmitters of positive messaging and modeling, that their deaths, although again, a common loss, are experienced with particular sadness and struggle. Most of the young men talked about the loss of at least one family member, most often either a young male or an older matriarchal figure, to whom young men were often quite close. Some young men talked about these experiences

extensively, the pain that they experienced around the event, and subsequent fallout. Sometimes deaths were mourned as a sad but normal event. However, sometimes it was much harder for young men to handle, either because the death was particularly tragic, such as a homicide, or because it was someone they were very close to and the young men felt their absence for a long time.

Deandre was an 18-year-old young man who lived with his grandmother during his younger years, because his mother was an undercover narcotics police officer and unable to spend much time at home. Deandre was very sad about the loss of his grandmother, and was embarrassed because he still got emotional about it.

Now don't laugh at me. Like I saw her picture and I started crying . . . I just I don't know I miss her so much. It still feels like she ain't gone because you know we were so close. Like I was her favorite. She had so many grandkids, so many great-grandkids but it was at the point whereas though as . . . I was her heart.

Deandre missed his grandmother because of how much she loved him and made him feel special. In contrast, Powell, a 22-year-old young man who struggled with many of his family members, also missed his grandmother, but because of the role she played in keeping the family together. He did not just grieve her loss, but her role and presence, and the ongoing impact of that on the family dynamic.

When my grandmother died 'cause it was like the whole family had changed over. Like before . . . before my grandmother died everybody was like real close. Like I said we wasn't really arguing or none of that. Like everybody gets together, stick and everything. Everything was just right but when my grandmother died it's like the whole family just started falling apart.

His family members started fighting, stopped maintaining care of their homes, and generally, did not act as well as they did when Powell's grandmother was alive, so not only did he grieve for her, but he missed the way that his family used to be.

I still be thinking about that sometimes. If she was still here, they wouldn't be acting like that 'cause my grandmother kept the family together. I mean she'll come in the house and we'll all be together in a three story house. She'll come in the house, we're all in there. She'll look around like it ain't really dirty but it just look like junky, messy, stuff out of place and all. She'll just come in, look around there, next thing you know, all of us upstairs going from the top floor downstairs cleaning up . . . couldn't eat, couldn't go nowhere, couldn't do nothing until it was done. My grandmother ain't play that. I miss her so much.

He was sad and somewhat depressed around her loss, because of the role that she played in the family, and the implication for change that her passing had.

### 3.4.3. Limited Educational Partnership

Family members tried to support young men's school attendance, but had limited educational partnership with teachers and the school itself. When teachers and schools were unable to engage young men, families were either unable to enforce attendance or sympathetic to challenges that adolescents faced at low-performing schools. Family methods of discipline such as withholding games and using physical punishment became less effective as young boys got older. Edward was an 18-year-old expectant father who started having problems with school engagement at an early age, and dropped out after the 9th grade. He got in trouble from his grandmother for not going to school in elementary school.

I used to not go to school . . . I just didn't think I should've went to school . . . I used to think when I was little I used to . . . like think about like not going and get a beating.



And sometimes I wouldn't even go home until like seven o'clock. My grandmother asked me where I've been at and I just tell her I had to stay there for detention. And she'd be like "Stop lying. I called your school and they say you weren't there." And I just tell her the truth like "I didn't go to school." She take my games and stuff from me.

Edward's father also used to try and keep him in school as well, asking about it, and was more effective when he had time to follow up on him.

I go back to the house and my father probably ask me why I'm not in school. I'll tell him I ain't go... And then he like "Are you going to school tomorrow? 'Cause I'll take you." And he'll wake up in the morning and take me to school and I'll be in school . . . Then I come home from school. He'll ask me, "Did you stay in school all day?" And I'll tell him "Yeah." And he'll be like "Alright. I'm gonna go see if you were in school all day too." Go up and see if I was in school, they'll tell him I was in school all day and then he'll be like . . . keep going to school and stuff.

Lamont's mother also tried to keep him in school, but she worked and was unable to keep close tabs on him.

My mother would go to work in the morning . . . she didn't really know what was going on. I just be outside doing what I wanted to do. So she didn't really know. So this went on about two years.

Lamont's mother was reliant upon him to do what was expected of him, when Lamont was ready for this level of responsibility.

Family members were sometimes uncertain how to balance being an ally with a disciplinarian. Monte was a young father, inspired by his 2-year-old daughter, but had also smoked marijuana frequently until 4 months prior to the interview. He was living with his father when he stopped going to school, and did not get in any type of trouble for that decision.

Yeah I was living with my father from the time I got abused up until I was about eighteen . . . He ain't care. He ain't really say nothing . . . Well he did sit down and talk to me one time and said that's his fault for being a best friend to me instead of a father. And I think about that every day like what do that really mean? . . . I think he was meaning he was just too cool with me. We were more of best friends than father and son.

Terrence's mother also did not disagree with his decision to drop out of school, agreeing with him that he was not learning anything at his school, so he might as well stop going and get a GED instead.

I was living with my mother . . . she knew I was not going to school and then I actually talking to her about I didn't want to go to school, and I was gonna get my GED at that time, but I was just procrastinating . . . She wasn't happy about it, but . . . she knew about the school and how the teachers wouldn't care and so she was just, "I mean if you . . . you not learning nothing in there anyway, like, basically everything you doing is on your own so." . . . I wouldn't say she supported it but she wasn't 100% against it.

Some family members had misinformation about the value of a high school diploma versus a GED, and supported young men's decisions to get a GED. Eric was a daily marijuana smoker, who had dropped out of high school just two weeks prior to the interview, and was probably still eligible for graduation in a few months, but thought the Get Ready program might be a better alternative for him. He said that many of his family members thought it was a good idea for him to get a GED instead.

They said there really is nothing different no more. They said it's the same thing. My parents. My cousins. Everybody. That's what I heard from just about everybody that's telling me to go here.

#### 3.4.4. Wishing for More Support

In hindsight, some young men wished they had or could have gotten more support at home. Andre talked about his own young son, and how he would help him to stay in school.

Just study with him. Put more time in like . . . and teach him to do all the right things. It's not all about outside. Just get the work done first and then outside comes later. And instead of outside and then come back in and then now you're all tired and . . . you don't want to do your work. Now you're sleeping on top of your homework.

He wished his own parents could have done that for him, but he thought they were so distracted by their divorce that they missed the opportunity to help him. Terrence reflected on what he would tell his son, if he ever went through some of these problems:

I'm praying that he don't. Then if he do I'm just talk to him and let him know like once I did it . . . I did it and I look back like . . . like still to this day and I still look back and I still wish I would've just stayed in school and just went to a different school and like it's not a good decision at all.

He thought it would have been helpful to him if either someone in his family or someone that he knew had tried to get him to stay in school.

Just like try to motivate me to stay in school . . . Well like if some people would've just like . . . "You need to do this and you need to do that." And I actually know people who were older than me that had dropped out of school, and if they would've told me like it's not easy then I probably would've went back . . . Like they just didn't say anything like it was just like "Oh well I did it so why can't you do it?"

He thought he would have done things differently if he had gotten better information about his choices from a credible source.

#### 3.5. Summary

Overall, young men found Baltimore neighborhoods to be unsafe and unpredictable all the time due to violence, aggressive policing, and sometimes unsafe interventions. Young men and families both had strategies for dealing with this. Young men's primary strategy was to stay inside. Family strategies included messaging, role modeling, and moving. Youth were vulnerable to common family challenges and losses, such as divorce and loss of a grandparent, particularly a grandmother. Youth were highly vulnerable to uncommon and traumatic loss, such as total parent absence. Most youth then brought a fairly high level of stress and anxiety either from neighborhood, home, or both into low-performing schools that were described as chaotic, noisy, and boring in the classroom. Youth identified their primary strategy as positive peer selection and support. Other youth struggled with challenging messaging from teachers and families, with youth reflecting they had gotten more support for finishing school from their families.

#### 4. Discussion

This study advances knowledge of the experience of young, African-American men growing up in unsafe neighborhoods and attending low-performing schools. Much, if not most, of the literature focuses on multiple causes and complex pathways between environment and outcomes, in order to identify effective points of intervention and improve outcomes for all youth. Youth in this study were able to identify specific areas that were critical from their perspective, their experience of interventions in those areas, and strategies developed by their families and themselves that could be supported. It tells us much more about how the young men themselves experience and understand these spaces, specifically:

1. the lack of safety that the young men themselves identified in their neighborhoods from violence and police;
2. chaotic school environments that require better common space and classroom management, as well as better learning environments for all youth; and protection from bullying and fighting;
3. family use of messaging, role modeling, and mobility to keep young men safe and hopefully successful; and young's men's strategic use of danger avoidance in the neighborhoods and positive peer selection at school;
4. and limits of safety and success strategies in the face of institutionalized and systemic oppression.

#### 4.1. Connection between Neighborhood Violence and High School Dropout

We add to a growing body of work on specific connections between young men's experience of neighborhood violence and high school dropout, telling us more about their experience of violence as unpredictable, requiring them to be on the lookout all the time, and police as aggressive and not safe. These findings further the work of Cunningham, who found that not only are youth aware of drugs and violence in their neighborhoods, but talked to adults when confronted with bad experiences [43]. This suggests that aggressive policing in violent neighborhoods is not just damaging to youth, but a missed opportunity for police hoping to solve crimes, as youth are looking for safety and adults in whom to confide. This adds to Rich's comprehensive work on the inescapable nature of violence experienced by young, African-American men that they have growing up in high-crime neighborhoods [44], by layering in young men's reaction to indirect exposure to violence. Finally, this builds on both Smith Lee's findings of PTSD symptoms such as hypervigilance in young men who have lost a family member to homicide and Burdick-Wills findings on peer effects of exposure to violence on school achievement, by suggesting that young men who live in high-violence neighborhoods are either ever or hypervigilant due to the lack of safety around them, with no respite from police [6,45]. This implies that, at minimum, schools serving youth from high-violence neighborhoods need to create safe spaces where young men can let their guard down in order for those youth to focus on learning.

This study adds to the findings that many young men are anxious, stressed, and wishing for more effective assistance from adults [46]. Recent work on men's fear of crime indicates that higher levels of fear are associated with poor health and stress [47]. In order to address findings in the areas of danger that young men identified in their environment, previously developed best practices should be utilized consistently, implemented with fidelity, and reinforced where necessary. For example, a recent report released by the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that Baltimore City has successfully implemented the gun violence intervention known as the Ceasefire model, outlined by David Kennedy in his book *Don't Shoot: One Man, A Street Fellowship, and the End of Violence in Inner-City America*, and the complimentary public health program, *SafeStreets* [17].

#### 4.2. Youth Experience in Low-Performing Schools

This study builds upon what is known about low-income, African-American, male youth experience in low-performing schools by specifying three areas that were important to them: chaotic environments, teacher negativity, and bullying and victimization. Interestingly, although teacher negativity and victimization have been written about before, young men were resounding in their identification of the chaotic school environment as most bothersome (even when they acknowledged sometimes contributing to that environment), and their biggest complaint about teacher negativity was that it hindered their ability to learn new material.

This study builds upon multiple studies indicating the importance of teacher beliefs and skills, particularly in middle and high school. For example, attachment theory has been extended to include middle childhood teacher-child relationships [48]. Additionally, internalizing and externalizing behaviors are related to teacher closeness [49]. Secure teacher-student relationships have also been found to predict fewer externalizing behaviors in students with learning disabilities [50].

For African-American youth, gaps in discipline equity predict Black student perception of school equity, less school belonging, and greater adjustment problems, but this is not the case for White students [51].

Despite knowledge of the critical nature of teacher–child relationships in middle and high school, this study builds on work highlighting teacher need for more understanding of this relationship and more support for building it. A recent qualitative study, finding that in a low-performing, majority Black high school, not only did teachers and school administrators blame students, families, and community for the academic achievement gap between Black and White students, the school itself was not a safe place for school personnel who cared about and were committed to the success of African-American male students [52]. However, when teachers do receive training in efficacious interventions, their perceptions of student capacity for learning may be improved. A qualitative study of three teachers who worked at Reading First Schools and were trained in that initiative found that those teachers believed that students could and would learn, and that this was a direct reflection of their teaching [53].

Our results on chaotic environments are consistent with recent studies of complex connections across school climate, teacher attitude, and discipline equity. For example, better discipline and stronger school attachment are associated with decreased likelihood of dropout, but perceptions of academic climate and disciplinary fairness predicted school attachment [54]. However, this same study found that the associations between school attachment and dropout were stronger in suburban schools with fewer disciplinary problems than urban schools, even controlling for individual risk factors. Similarly, a recent study of authoritative school climate found that high academic expectations predict lower dropout rates when teachers are perceived as supportive [55].

Schools in high-crime neighborhoods should offer a structured, safe space for students to participate in the academic learning process. Teachers, staff, and the school community need to collaborate as a team to prepare students for graduation. Teachers and all front-line staff need support and coaching toward best practices in the classroom and other arenas that help them connect with and engage challenging youth without compromising quality of education and the learning environment. Working with middle school students and older youth may require more training to de-escalate situations of frustration and possible violence without alienating youth, and will probably require continued reductions in teacher-to-student ratios, as well as academic and behavioral specialists in the classroom for vulnerable students.

#### *4.3. Systemic Constraints on Traditional Family and Youth Strategies of Success*

This study adds to our understanding of African-American family use of internal resources and kin networks for assistance with youth success in navigating ecological challenges by highlighting the systemic sabotage and constraint of these strategies by law enforcement and education [32,56]. Families used kin networks to provide role models and success messages for youth, although the type of guidance and support that young men experienced in their homes was varied. Young men from households with more social capital readily identified the ways that their parents and adult family members helped them build solid developmental foundations, and continued to offer firm but supportive guidance through challenges that presented during adolescence and transition to young adulthood. In other families, parents were less successful in protecting their children from adult and environmental stressors.

For example, both Charles and Deon were raised by single mothers, with minimal contact with their fathers, but this impacted them in different ways. Charles' mother was able to create a secure and nurturing environment, in which Charles recognized how she always managed to always pay the bills, exposed him to positive male role models, got him enrolled in a magnet school as early as possible, and taught him how to be resilient in the face of setbacks. Deon, on the other hand, experienced extreme insecurity reflected through his memories of having to move into a homeless shelter during the vulnerable period of transition to adolescence, being transferred to a county middle school with

none of his friends, and feeling as though he had no one to talk to at home about these challenges who really understood them from his perspective.

Mobility was another strategy used in different ways with mixed success by families. Some families got children out of the neighborhood through the education system, even though they still lived there. Others used their family networks to move to another family home either temporarily or permanently for many reasons, including youth safety and elderly care-giving. It is not possible to know if these strategies kept youth safe, but it is clear that they often compromised young men's education. This builds on our understanding of mobility, which is known to be linked to academic challenges and delinquency, but these outcomes have also been linked with factors associated with mobility, such as poverty (for a full review, see [57]). It is also not the only cause of mobility, which is often coerced by the justice and education systems [58].

This study also built upon our understanding of how African-American youth experience is disproportionate to family loss, contributing to an emerging body of work on the lower life expectancy, and higher incidence of loss in African-American families [59], and the high rates of traumatic loss of a peer [45]. Systems and institutions that serve African-American youth should continue to develop their capacity for supporting youth through family stress and loss. A recent examination of social capital found that more than half the variance in social capital is unrelated to social class, and that social capital itself significantly predicted school membership [60].

#### *4.4. Better Support for Family and Youth Safety and Success Strategies*

Given support, youth were effective in selecting positive peers with similar goals. Youth struggled with this strategy when positive peers were limited, or they could not stay safe from gang-involved or bullying peers. This suggests that youth are going to meet similar struggles when routed to alternative and charter schools with high concentrations of similarly disconnected peers. In order for youth to be successful, families, schools, and the justice system should be working together to minimize youth mobility and help them to develop and stay connected to positive and supportive peer groups.

Children and youth need to be supported in developing like-minded peer groups focused on positive development. One of the better areas for this may be after-school programs, which are rarely staffed with lead teachers trained in classroom management or specialized instructors in areas outside of academic development, but could be. After-school programming could be developed that targeted children's natural desire to learn specialized skills in music, arts, and athletics, that traditional school days do not often include in-depth.

#### *4.5. Limitations of the Study*

One limitation of this study was that it was a single interview, and at a specific moment in these young men's lives—during their first week at the Get Ready program. This sometimes did not leave enough time for young men to detail everything that was brought up or may have been relevant. Young men often had very complex living situations, school histories, and criminal justice histories, and there was often only enough time to discuss a small portion of this and to probe for clarity. This also meant that the interview was sometimes centered on what was most pressing for young men in the moment.

This is a qualitative study with a specific subpopulation, which means that findings are meant to generate testable theory and hypotheses for young men of a similar age and circumstance, specifically those participating in a program designed to help them get a general education diploma, reconnect them with secondary education, connect them with employment, or more than one of those items. Also, these young men had emerged from primarily low-performing schools, which may mean that they faced different challenges than those who graduate from high-performing schools. This was a group of low-income African-American men, all of whom had some contact with the criminal justice system, most of whom had been arrested, but few of whom had records. These young men all needed



assistance with finding a job, and most needed to start by getting their GEDs in order to become more employable.

## 5. Conclusions

Concentrated safety and school issues continue to be a particular concern for Baltimore City residents, as homicide rates continue to increase and proficiency remains low [41,42]. However, this study advances general knowledge of how unsafe neighborhoods and low-performing schools are experienced by young, low-income African-American men and their families, strategies that young men and their families develop toward safety and success in those environments, and some of the relevant mesosystem processes. Best practices have been developed within multiple areas that address many of the findings in this study, but in most instances those practices have not been consistently implemented with fidelity as part of an integrated, comprehensive system of service delivery targeting optimal development for vulnerable children, families, and communities.

Policy needs to consider young people's ongoing stress, anxiety, and response to trauma, and not exacerbate these issues with systemic approaches such as "corner sweeping" police tactics and pushing students out of school. Policy should be enacted to better support smart community policing, focused on safe neighborhoods; enhancing teacher sensitivity to high-needs youth; supporting family and youth strategies of positive messaging and role modeling, as well as positive peer connection. Additionally, agencies need to continue working together to partner with youth and families, and identify and intervene effectively with vulnerable youth and families. Policy should connect communities to protect across education, child welfare, and juvenile services, possibly using block grants to encourage cooperation across systems. Young men in this study came into contact with multiple systems that could intervene more effectively or better support traditional family and youth strategies for success of kin networking and positive peer selection.

**Author Contributions:** Authors met regularly to discuss broad themes related to the findings. The team also convened around overall reflections and interpretations of the data. All authors provided pedagogical and theory-based thinking about how to frame the context of the findings including introducing ecological theory for levels-of-analysis and as a reference for understanding ambient stressors including neighborhood violence and compromised school safety. Further, co-authors offered assistance with reading subsequent drafts of the document often taking specific sections to review. Each author contributed expertise and writing across the manuscript, and with concentrations in the following areas: S.L. concentrated on neighborhoods, A.D.M. focused on schools, and M.E.F. led on families.

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## Appendix A. Interview Protocol

### *Identity & Looking Glass Self*

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? How would you describe yourself to someone who didn't know you? Use as many descriptors as you can. Prompts: man, young man, kid, black man, student, worker, brother, son, father?
2. What does it mean to you to be a \_\_\_\_\_? Does it depend on the situation?
3. How do you feel about yourself as a \_\_\_\_\_?
4. What do you think other people think of you? Prompts: friends, romantic partners, family, instructors, employers, strangers?

### *Stressors & Hopes*

5. What brings you to Program \*\*\*\*\*?
6. Why did you leave school? Tell me about that. In your opinion, was the experience fair, unfair, or both?
7. How has been your experience here so far? How are things going outside of here?

8. Have you had any experience with the criminal justice system? Prompts: been convicted for a crime, arrested and let go, just hassled by the police?
9. How did you feel about it?
10. Did it change the way you see the world? Yourself? Tell me how.

#### *Symptoms of Depression & Masking*

11. Have there ever been times in your life when you have felt hopeless or depressed? Tell me about that: Do you remember what caused it?
12. Stressed out? The blues?
13. Do you ever feel hopeless or depressed now? Can you tell me about that?
14. What do you do when you feel that way?
15. Do you ever have a hard time getting out of bed in the morning or getting where you need to go?
16. What do you do when you feel that way?
17. Do you ever get or feel angry? What sets you off or gets on your nerves? How do you handle it? Can you tell me about what happens when you lose it? Can you tell me about what happens when you keep it to yourself?

#### *Possible Selves*

18. What are you hoping to get out of the program?
19. What are your goals for yourself? Short term? Long term?
20. What is going to help you succeed in achieving those goals?

#### *Fathers*

21. Having a child is a big event, can you tell me about it? Did you plan it? What did you think when you found out you were going to have a baby? What was it like when you had your baby?
22. How is the relationship between you and your child's mother?
23. What kind of a father do you think you are? What role do you have in parenting your child?
24. How do you think others see you as a father? Prompts: co-parent, intimate partner, family, instructors, doctors, strangers?
25. What are you worried you will be like as a father in the future?
26. What do you hope you will be like as a father in the future?
27. What might get in your way?
28. What will help you be the best father you can be?

### **Appendix B. Sample**

The following are brief descriptors of the young men who participated in this research project. These descriptors are meant to serve a quick reference and are not meant to summarize how young men represented themselves throughout the interview.

**Michael** is a high-energy young man, attending community college for nursing, and looking for a job. He has a supportive family and a positive peer group that helped him focus on graduating from high school.

**Martin** is 18 years old, and the father of an 18-month-old little girl, with his girlfriend of a few years. They do not live together, but are still romantic, and will both be attending Morgan State in the fall. He is very high energy, but struggles with a dual consciousness of race and class.

**Drew** is a 20-year-old young man, who is very focused and positive. He has a 5-year plan for getting his GED and then his bachelor's degree. Although he had some challenges, he was not worried about it, as long as he can pursue college.

**Dominic** is a 21-year-old young father with a 2-year-old daughter, but is on and off with the mother of his child. He is trying to get his GED and get a job, but gets a lot of support from his own mother. He fought with his girlfriend, so after the baby was born, she moved out. However, she still brings his daughter over almost every day.

**Charles** is 20 years old, and attended one year at Morehouse College, but could not continue due to limited financial aid after his first year there. Charles' dad struggled for years with drug addiction, but he was raised by his mom, who taught him how to be resilient, and made sure that he attended magnet middle and high schools.

**Sean** is an 18-year-old young man, who was raised formally by his aunt since he was 6. Sean graduated from high school, but did not want to go to college, and went to trade school instead. He is currently trying to find work as a carpenter. He talked about being harassed and "jumped out on" by the police frequently.

**Lamont** is a 21-year-old young man, who recently moved in with his grandparents, to help them out. He suffered from lead poisoning as a child. He went to Job Corps, but was recently dismissed for fighting with another student.

**Powell** moved between family in the county and the city a few times during adolescence, and did not get re-enrolled in school after the last transition. He was successfully struggling quite a bit to outgrow negativity from his family.

**Deandre** was diagnosed with ADD in grade school and repeated both the 3rd and 4th grades. Although his mother was a police officer, he lived with his grandmother, and learned how to hustle and sell drugs from his father's side of the family.

**Marcus** is an 18-year-old young man, who lost a cousin to homicide, and made it a point to not stay out too late at night. He had a lot of fatigue in high school. He tried Job Corps, but became frustrated, so he decided to pursue his GED.

**Jamaar** is a 20-year-old expectant father, who did not live with his pregnant girlfriend, but hoped to be able to take care of her. He is a social father to her 2-year-old son with a previous boyfriend. Jamaar had positive disposition, but tendency toward anxiety, and a history of conflict in both school and Job Corps.

**Ramon** is a 21-year-old young father, and is no longer with the mother of his child, but is in love with his current girlfriend, who has been with him through a lot. He is focused on getting his GED. Ramon is energetic, thinks that he made a bad choice in high school to hang with the wrong crowd, but is trying to make better choices now.

**Darius** called himself a king in training, because his stepfather called him that. He grew up with both the example of his hard working stepfather who went to work every day, and his biological father who struggled with drugs and employment.

**Antoine** was a 20-year-old young father with discernible fatigue and flat affect during the interview. Antoine had similar fatigue during high school, and dropped out but felt that he would be more successful with his GED.

**Terrence** is a 20-year-old father with a three-year-old son. He was in a relationship with the mother of his son, but they have been on and off. Although he played football, Terrence had a difficult time connecting with his teachers, found his school environment to be chaotic, and dropped out of school.

**Jordan** is a 19-year-old young father, who lives in his mother's house with his own 8-month-old child and her mother. He struggled to get to class in high school, and his mother called him a "hall kid."

He dropped out of high school, but is clear that he wants to get his GED and be able to support his partner and child.

**Monte** is a 22-year-old young father, who got in with the wrong crowd in high school, but was motivated to get his GED, inspired to change his life by his 2-year-old daughter. Monte lived in a tough neighborhood, and worried that he might be killed for a jacket or sneakers before his daughter got to know him.

**Edward** is a young expectant father, who dropped out of school early, in the 9th grade. Edward said that he had been close to his family, and had gotten good grades in school, but both of those things changed when he started getting involved with drugs and the criminal justice system.

**Tyler** is a proud young father, and trying to take care of his daughter, but did not always agree with the mother of his child about who should be taking care of the family financially, and who should carry the primary caretaking responsibilities. Currently, his baby's mother has a job, and she would like him to do more childcare.

**Trent** dropped out of high school to take care of his girlfriend when she got pregnant and was not feeling well. However, he also had a history of drug dealing and hustling. He felt that he handled himself well but that, in general, the streets of Baltimore City were unsafe for him and his family.

**Tony** is 21-year-old young man who was waiting for sentencing for drug dealing at the time of the interview. Tony expressed symptoms of major depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress syndrome. He also had Crohn's disease. Tony grew up well taken care of by his mother and stepfather, but was more attracted to the street scene.

**Aaron** is one of the most expressive of the young men. Aaron grew up in a series of foster care homes, and alluded to significant trauma as a child and adolescent. He struggled to fit in at school, was bullied, and used to go into destructive rages to keep himself safe at school.

**Robert** is a 21-year-old young man, with a long history of avoidance, fatigue, and possible depression. He stopped going to school, because there were many days when he did not feel like going or have the energy to go. He enrolled in classes at the Get Ready program over a year prior to our interview, and attended for a while.

**Deon** is 21 years old, and trying to make better choices for himself. Deon went through tough times in middle school when he lived in a homeless shelter with his mom for a while. He never knew his father, and felt that absence acutely; he was often angry and defensive.

**Eric** is a daily marijuana smoker, who had dropped out of high school just two weeks prior to the interview. He was probably still eligible for graduation, but had such a difficult time getting to school that he thought the Get Ready program might be a better alternative for him.

**Maurice** is a 19-year-old quiet young man. He struggled with avoidance during his school years, and ended up dropping out. He had a hard time keeping a regular job, but is happiest when he is able to give his mother some money.

**Cristofer** is a 22-year-old young father, with a history of major depression, who was actually being treated for major depression at the time of the interview. He was a high school graduate, who had just completed his 2nd semester at community college.

**Dontae** is a young father with a history of violence and drug dealing, who was recently shot, and wanted to make changes. He had a difficult time getting to school, but thought he would be able to get his GED, because it was closer and more flexible.

**Jayson** is a young father, with a history of conflict with his mother, and was sent to a juvenile detention center when he was 14 after a fight with her. Jayson was in detention centers and group homes until he was 18. He was hoping to get his GED.

**Kadim** is a young father of 2, with a complicated relationship with the mother of his children. Kadim is HIV positive, and went through depression related to his original diagnosis, but has since then become more positive.

**Demetrius** is a 20-year-old man with a history of childhood abuse and neglect, and the criminal justice system. He has been in a gang since middle school. He appeared depressed and to have PTSD, but was going to try the Get Ready program.

**Nathen** is a 19-year-old young man with a history of major depression. Nathen tried to be positive, but referred to himself as a quitter, when he actually just did not have great problem-solving skills.

**Vaughen** is an 18-year-old young man who lived with his grandparents, and was trying to get his GED. Vaughn was a janitor at his high school, and dropped out when it became too much for him to keep up with his coursework.

**Dean** lost his mom in 2005, and met his father, who is from Nigeria, at her funeral. He moved in with his aunt and that was okay for a few years, but is not a good situation for him now that her adult children have moved back into the home.

**Andre** is a young father, trying to take care of his son. Andre's parents divorced when he was young, and he did not adjust well. He had a difficult time getting motivating and attending school after the divorce, so he was trying to get his GED at the Get Ready program in order to take care of his son.

**Tariq** is a mature young father, whose daughter has cerebral palsy. He was raised by his grandmother, but moved to a group home in early adolescence. He is very focused on the care of his child and her progress, and wants to marry her mother.

**Elon** was very conscious of race and social class. He is hoping to be a carpenter, but struggling to find a job. He also had a difficult time finding a program that he could complete to get his GED.

**Malik** is a young man with a very positive attitude. His goal is to figure out a way to make money, so that he can retire early. However, he was unable to say exactly how he was going to do that, given his lack of GED.

**Taye** was in kinship care with his aunt until he was 14 years old, when he moved into a group home, because his aunt did not spend all of the money she received on his needs, he regretted moving out. He often slept in the street, was depressed and on medication, and frequently grieved the absence of his biological family.

**Tyrone** was a young expectant father, living in the basement of his mother's house with his baby's mother. He wanted to move out, particularly because his mom and his sister come down to smoke in the basement. He felt he had a problem with anger.

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