

VOICE AND ADVOCACY IN THE URBAN GHETTO

by

JEAN PHELPS

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

William Kornblum

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Philip Kasinitz

Date

Executive Officer

William Kornblum

Philip Kasinitz

Mitch Duneier

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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By

Jean Phelps

Advisor: Professor William Kornblum

This study was conducted to ascertain whether poor and powerless urban dwellers could develop the skills to speak out on their own behalf when dealing with institutions of power. The research explored the conditions and processes, which facilitate or hamper the development of self-advocacy skills. The subjects of this study were observed, over an extended period of time, struggling under the domination of institutions that use methods of control to keep the poor in inferior positions in society.

This study has showed that poor individuals can develop the voice to speak out on their own behalf, effecting positive outcomes in situations that heretofore were beyond their power and scope to change. It also indicates that the urban poor may not necessarily step out on their own against a system that has oppressed and exploited them. They may require encouragement from people who are in positions of influence.

The study concludes that newly learned and acquired self advocacy skills can lead to self-empowerment, if performed regularly.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Voice and Efficacy Among the Urban Poor

This research explores the conditions and processes, which facilitate or hamper the development of self-advocacy and efficacy skills among the urban poor. It asks whether the acquisition of such skills leads poor and powerless ghetto dwellers to speak out on their own behalf in local gatherings and to enter into political participation in their neighborhoods and communities. This study will delineate and analyze the actions and reactions of the subjects of this study as they deal with the institutions that exhibit overt power over their lives; institutions such as, welfare, criminal justice, New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) management, and the public school system. It will compare and analyze the interactions and relations of the individuals and the institutions, before and after they employ self-advocacy techniques to accomplish their goals.

For years the research literature on urban poverty has demonstrated that most impoverished people feel powerless to alter their conditions and have learned through socialization to accept their lot in life (Piven and Cloward 2000a; Sampson 1992). The participants in this study share that negative sense of powerlessness. They live in a public housing development in Southeast Queens, New York and are second and third generation public assistance recipients. This research will highlight the extreme difficulties these residents of a large public housing development in Southeast Queens encounter as they manage their family lives in a society that effectively marginalizes them. It will describe and analyze how they are socialized into effectively accepting conditions that tie them to their environment and limit their horizons. It will delineate the implications of their entry into efforts to find their own voices and to change the social

structure and the institutions that constrain their fortunes. Using the actor's frame of reference and perspective, it will describe how poor individuals can learn to operate more effectively as citizens, despite living in an environment marked by police brutality and insensitivity, substandard health care, poor quality education, lack of jobs, and extremely limited opportunities for upward mobility. It will describe how poor urban individuals contend with public institutions of power over an extended period of time and whether their relations and methods change. Emphasis on the development of self advocacy skills among the poor and marginalized does not absolve the larger society of its moral obligation to change the structural conditions associated with urban poverty. But the research finds that empowerment of the poor can help convince local and other political leaders to fight harder on behalf of all their constituents.

The top twenty percent of U.S. households own 48.2 percent of national income, while the bottom twenty percent gets only 3.6% (Statistics on Poverty and Inequality by Jeff Gates, May 1999). The economic structure of our society is determined and maintained by the few who command economic and social resources. The population that owns the resources controls the power that in turn allocates and/or reallocates the resources. Without resources and power, those living below the poverty line are often doomed to generational poverty, "and unless voting by lower-stratum people can be expanded, they will be the ones to bear the costs of the economic transformation that the U. S. is now undergoing" (Piven and Cloward, 1988). The problem then is how can the urban poor realize their own power and not relinquish that power to others but, instead, employ it for their own benefit? In 2006, for example, the U.S. Internal Revenue Service accused some 1.6 million impoverished tax filers of fraudulently filing for Earned

Income Tax Credits. At the same time, the Bush administration advocated for further tax reductions on the wealthiest Americans. Suppose, as Frances Piven asked in a famous article, the poor demanded all the benefits they were actually due, including E.I.T.C. credits? (Piven 1972). This research recognizes that the poor typically do not and cannot suddenly become vocal advocates for their own rights. It therefore examines through what processes a few residents of public housing can successfully advocate for themselves and their neighbors.

How do the urban poor deal with institutions of power? How do the relations between the urban poor and these institutions affect their interactions? What specific conditions and situations block the upward mobility of families in this study? Can poor people become empowered within these institutions and can self-empowerment be transferred from one area to another?

Urban Racial Inequality, Structure or Culture?

Two main bodies of theorizing about America's poor, liberal and conservative, disagree about the causes and the cures of poverty. The politically more liberal literature focuses on inequality and the consequences of social structure and is represented by works such as: American Apartheid by Massey and Denton (1993), The Truly Disadvantaged and When Work Disappears by William J. Wilson (1996), Poverty and Place by Paul Jargowsky, et. al. (1997). It proposes policy initiatives that increase government aid to alleviate the deleterious conditions the poor experience. Conservative theories tend to emphasize a culture of poverty as the main cause of the predicament of the poor. Works in this vein include: The Culture of Poverty by Oscar Lewis (1968)

Losing Ground by Charles Murray (1984); and Soulside by Ulf Hannerz (1969). This literature suggests changes in the value system and norms of the poor as a way to overcome poverty.

In Hustling and Other Hard Work (1978), Bettylou Valentine concludes that no amount of effort by the urban poor on their own behalf will change their quality of life. The major sources of poverty are structural. In order to survive in a society that does not provide opportunities for the poor to garner resources, the urban poor combine hustling, welfare, and work.

Valentine recommends “massive change in society”. Although changes in the social structure *are* needed to alleviate the causes of poverty, this study will observe poor individuals advocating on their own behalf with institutions of power and will then ascertain the results of these overt actions.

In All Our Kin (1997), Carol Stack shows that the income-poor women of “the flats” depend for many aspects of their survival on a well-organized network of kin and non-kin who support each other through cooperative relationships based on reciprocal exchange. Together, this extended group has limited resources, but enough to survive in a society that does not provide for them. Therefore, for their own safety and security, they stay together and deal with the deleterious effects of poverty.

This study as well will observe, record, and analyze a network of kin and non-kin living in a public housing development with an emphasis on how those in the network deal with the emotional and psychological effects of living near a community of middle to upper-class families, who have more resources and live a better quality of life.

In Flat Broke with Children (2003), Sharon Hays offers recommendations for improving quality of life outcomes under welfare reform by adding adequate childcare, raising the minimum wage, fully subsidizing job-training programs, and funding public works employment. The most important point that Hays makes is that welfare recipients must be involved in the decision making processes that shape their lives. Building on this key point, this research involves the active participation of its subjects in dealing with the various levels of government that control the institutions that have a direct impact on their quality of life.

This study will assess the outcomes of active self-advocacy as a method for the urban poor that may, through conventionally accepted means, garner them power. “Political scientists, in particular, have neglected the one area that could lead to the empowerment and involvement of poor individuals in struggles and strategies to change their status, namely, politics (as distinguished from policy formation).” Cohen and Dawson, 1993. (P286)

Books abound about the plight of the urban poor, and this discussion has hardly exhausted the list. Many capture quite well the structural and cultural antecedents of urban poverty, but few of them focus on what happens when poor people are stimulated to take action in their local neighborhoods around the immediate issues that affect their lives. This project applies knowledge developed in previous research to test a grass roots strategy to motivate and encourage the individuals in this study to become their own advocates. The story will best be told “out of the mouths” of the individuals affected by massive changes in the welfare system, changes that have affected their family fortunes and relations with agents of society’s larger institutions.

Studies of citizen participation invariably find that low-income citizens do not have the financial resources, free time, civic skills, or levels of engagement necessary to participate effectively or be recruited for political action by public officials (Piven and Cloward, 1979; Lawless and Fox, 2001; Cohen and Dawson, 1993; Verba, et. al, 1993a). Robert Putnam, for example, notes that “People in high-poverty neighborhoods feel cut off from their political representatives and see political and community engagement as futile. “ (Putnam 2000, p.343) This research draws on such previous research on the obstacles to political activity among the poor, but it also departs somewhat from the reigning social capital approach of these studies in that this dissertation seeks to move beyond descriptions that highlight the vicious cycle of poverty and non-participation, at least in a few instructive cases. By looking at the experience of women who learn some of the skills of self advocacy, it will establish methods for encouraging involvement at the local level. At the micro level of particular families in a dense ghetto neighborhood, it will also develop means of assessing the impact of active participation in government and community organizations among people who were formerly incapable of raising their voices and asserting their own viewpoints.

Previous research discusses the implications and consequences of poor individuals’ largely negative and disempowering experiences with government and political institutions (Verba, et. al 1993b). It further discusses how those experiences of powerlessness influence their self confidence, shape their perceptions of powerlessness, and lead to resignation or self destructive behavior. According to Verba, the urban poor do not take an assertive role in dealing with government because their frame of reference of the government reflects the institutions that they have contact with, most often it is the

welfare system and the police. If their experiences with government representatives are negative they will judge the rest of government as negative and exemplars of the holders of power over their very lives. Utilizing an advocacy ethnography approach, this study will identify and explore local conditions and experiences that encourage individuals to become actively involved in the political and social world so that they can leverage power and effect positive change in their own neighborhoods and social settings

Federal policies and initiatives aimed at encouraging community activism to assist with developing and implementing initiatives to deal with poverty on a local level involved more African Americans in the political and governmental actions in their communities (Pecorella 1994). However, the individuals from the African American community were mostly members of the middle and upper classes. “Behaviorally, African Americans who live in poor neighborhoods are less likely to participate than other African Americans” Cohen, Dawson 1993 p 298).

The Site and Subjects

This research has been conducted over a period of fourteen years with several families who live in a public housing development in Southeast Queens. They have been on public assistance most of their lives and are second and third generation recipients of welfare. They are unwed mothers with inadequate education and very low job skills. They are unwed fathers who have been in jail and are typically unemployed or vastly underemployed. Their status dictates that their lives are under the control of public institutions. “The institutions which affect the poor—education, welfare, recreation, business, labor—are huge complex structures operating far outside their control. They

plan programs for the poor, not with them. Part of the sense of helplessness comes from the feelings of powerlessness to affect the operations of these organizations” (U. S. House of Representatives 1964, 305) from (Pecorella, Robert F. 1994) p78.

Welfare - This research spanned the massive changes in the welfare system that occurred during the late 1990s and early years of the new century. The lives of individual subjects in this study have been dramatically affected by these changes. While touted as a success by its proponents, as they boast of the dramatic decline in welfare roles, Hays (2003) discusses the deleterious effects felt by former recipients who struggle to survive on wages that are inadequate or those who lose jobs after a few months, “Nationwide, approximately 60 percent of all the adults who left welfare since reform were working at least part of the time, in 2002. On the other hand, only half of the former welfare recipients who found work were actually making sufficient money to raise their families out of poverty. 40 percent of former welfare recipients had neither work nor welfare.” Some are without jobs and have exceeded the time limit for welfare assistance. Others, who are working, are worse off than they were before. In his thorough review of Jason DeParle’s 2006 book on the experience of welfare reform for low income families in the Chicago-Milwaukee area, Christopher Jencks concludes: “After spending eight years observing the effects of welfare reform, DeParle concludes that it moved a good many single mothers off the welfare rolls but that nearly all are still struggling to live on meager incomes. Every study I have seen supports that view.” (Jencks, Christopher, “Review of American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation’s Drive to End Welfare, by Jason DeParle, NYRB, 12/15 2005, p.86).

The current economic crisis exacerbates the already deplorable conditions under which many poor single mothers try to provide for their families. Each day, many jobs are lost to the crisis; many more people are forced to work at reduced wages. Whatever jobs are available, individuals with training and education will be vying for them as well as the untrained and unskilled poor. Only time will tell whether the job training promised under the American Recovery and Investment Act of 2009 signed into law by President Barack Obama will reach the urban poor. In the past, job training programs have trained individuals, but not placed them in long-term employment or placed them in jobs at all. Also, individuals who have access to information will be the first to know and take advantage of the individual spaces available for job training. Generally, urban poor welfare mothers are not part of networks that have access to knowledge of opportunities and thus have been forced because of welfare reform to accept unskilled low paying jobs.

My own experience over many years in the low-income area in this study shows that welfare reform has only made life more difficult for parents, while doing nothing to assist them in their often contentious and frustrating dealings with other public agencies. The agencies examined within this study include those which are most likely to intervene in the lives of the families reported on here. While they are mandated to address the welfare of poor citizens, their clients tend to see them negatively, through the lens of their own personal experiences and frustrations.

Administration for Children Services (ACS) makes threatening visits to the poor families living in this housing development. Social workers come at any time and remove children from the home for real or false accusations. Mothers feel intimidated

and threatened whenever there is a knock on the door by an ACS worker. ACS workers come to the homes unannounced and question the mother and/or child. They go to the child's school and question the child with or without an adult present. In so doing, ACS demonstrates their unchallengeable power, a power that the poor perceive as unchallengeable because despite ACS guidelines that prohibit a caseworker from questioning a child without the parent or a representative of the school present, parents can do little to assert their authority. Parents are frequently unaware of this rule, and some school administrators do not enforce it.

Education has a direct correlation with success and most neighborhood demographics illustrate this. Even as Mayor Bloomberg is touting some success of his education reform (math scores went up for third, sixth, and seventh graders and reading scores went up for third, sixth, and eighth grades), the school aged children of the families in this study attend Public School 140, Middle School 8 and Intermediate School 72, schools which still rank below the average in reading and mathematics (New York City Department of Education Web Site). In this community, many individuals, who manage to finish school or receive a GED are sorely underprepared for college. For the individuals who do gain admission, City University of New York (CUNY) Senior Colleges no longer offer remedial courses. In addition, CUNY instituted in Fall 2003 the CUNY Proficiency Exam (CPE). All CUNY students must take and pass the CPE before obtaining 60 credits. Students who do not pass the test in three attempts "may not continue to register as a matriculated students" – in any of the CUNY senior or community colleges

Under the new configuration of the Department of Education, Community School Boards have been replaced by Community Education Councils, with a majority of the representatives being parents. The Councils were purportedly set-up so that parents could have greater decision making power in the selection of services and to encourage more parent participation in the overall quality of services delivered to their children. How effective is this new arrangement? How well are the parents informed and/or encouraged to participate? Who selects the parent representatives and how are they trained? Does this new system really give more power to the parents?

Police attempts to protect residents and fight crime are often experienced as brutality, a real concern in poor African American neighborhoods. This research was conducted in a housing development located in the 113th precinct, the closest neighboring precinct is the 103rd Pct. The following statistics are from the *New York City Civilian Complaint Review Board Status Report Jan – Dec 2004*: Table 16B (p 69) “Command Rankings: Complaints per Uniformed Officers 2004” Patrol Borough Queens South Anti-Crime Unit, which covers the district of the housing development, ranked #1 (highest) out of 122 Commands in complaints and listed the highest Percent Complaint per Uniformed Officer at 0.5714 per officer; Table 13D (p 54) “Where Incidents that Led to a Complaint Took Place by Precinct – Queens 2000 – 2004” 103rd Pct had the highest total of 426 complaints and 113th Pct came in 3rd with 374 (114th in Queens North came in 2nd). There are sixteen precincts in Queens. In the “Attributions of Complaints to Patrol Borough Queens South 2000 – 2004” category (p 59), 113th Pct. had the highest and 103rd came in with the second highest.

Each New York City Precinct has a Community Advisory Council, whose purpose is to improve community and police relations. The Council is made up of community residents, and there are monthly meetings to discuss relationships and to develop activities to promote a better understanding and improved relationships. Who sits on these Boards, and how are the community representatives selected? Certainly not the residents of Baisley Houses, but perhaps that situation will change as the disempowered find their voices and assert their needs and rights.

Health statistics show that Southeast Queens has extremely high rates of high-blood pressure, diabetes, and the fastest growing rate of new AIDS cases in the city. According to Michael Carter, director of the Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, there is a marked distinction in the medical response to people from minority groups and people from the Caucasian community. "There are often differences in diagnosis, prognosis and recovery when two people — black and white present with the same symptoms," said Carter. According to Carter, the disparity starts in infancy and continues throughout the life of the individual. "In Southeast Queens, the infant mortality rate is twice that of the rest of the borough," he said. "There is a certain lack of understanding and lack of commitment." According to the most recent figures, Southeast Queens has the highest infant mortality rate in the borough and the second highest in the city. Fort Greene, in Brooklyn, has the highest rate. The 2003 figures from the Department of Health show that citywide, 6.5 out of every 1,000 children do not survive, but in Southeast Queens that number hit 10.3 out of every 1,000 children.

The Sharon Jones Family: Generations in Public Housing

The primary subjects in this study, members of the Sharon Jones family, live in Baisley Houses, a New York City public housing development located in southeast Queens County. This public housing neighborhood includes five 8-story buildings, each with ten apartments per floor. Baisley is divided by Guy R. Brewer Boulevard, a major bus route and traffic artery. On the east side of Guy R. Brewer Blvd., two buildings, #1 and #2, face each other. In between the buildings is a children's recreational area that has a three-foot high wrought iron fence. On the west side of the boulevard are buildings #3, #4, and #5. Behind building #3, which is on the northwest corner, are a basketball court and a sitting area. On the southwest corner are a liquor store and a bodega. On the southeast corner a new laundromat and several small stores have replaced an old gas station. Further south on the same block are a Chinese take-out, a soul-food take-out, a deli, laundromat, and bodega. The neighborhood public grammar school, P.S. 140, is three blocks away; middle school, M.S. 8, is one mile north; and junior high school, I.S. 72 is about one-half mile south on Guy. R. Brewer Boulevard.

Baisley Houses is surrounded by a middle-class African American community. Less than a mile away is Addisleigh Park, one of the richest per-capita African-American communities in the United States. In a society where some people from the majority group have historically seen the majority of the members of the minority group, in this case African Americans, through a single lens, it is important to note that there are different social, political, and economic statuses within the minority group. In the Southeast Queens area depicted in this study, we can observe and analyze these

differences as they affect each other. Despite that some people's negative perceptions of African Americans have gradually and minimally changed as limited numbers of blacks have broken through the barriers of discrimination and prejudice, the epitome of which has been the election of the first African American president of the United States, President Barack Obama, many African Americans are still seen through the socialized eye of prejudice. That view still perceives African Americans as the authors of their own fate, portraying them as recipients of the same opportunities as other Americans but without the work ethic to realize their own potential.

It is important to compare the economic, political power, and social differences of people from the same ethnic group but different class levels that live side by side in order to understand the basis for the disparity in their lifestyles and abilities to access opportunities purportedly available to all. Observers blame poor urban blacks for their low class positions rather than acknowledge that opportunities for advancement of minorities are limited and only a few are able to navigate successfully through a system that is socially structured to advantage those economically better off. Families living side-by-side in two distinctly different neighborhoods rarely venture onto the others' landscape and are aware of each other's existence mostly through the media.

The Sharon Jones Family consists of four siblings: Ben 43 years; Beverly, 39; Billy, 37; and Bobbie, 31; and their fourteen children. Sharon Jones, the matriarch of the family, died in 1996. She had been ill for about seven years. She had used crack cocaine from 1985 to around 1993. During that time she lost a lot of weight, developed kidney problems, heart problems, respiratory problems and cancer. Ms. Jones was on public assistance most of her adult life and raised her children on welfare under the old system

of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The father of the three youngest Jones children lives with his wife and their children in a nearby public housing development. Ben's father is unknown. The Jones family has lived in Baisley Houses since February of 1977.

The two Jones sisters and their children occupy two apartments in Building #2. Beverly Jones lives with her five children; eighteen-year old Eric, sixteen-year old Naila, twelve-year old Anthony, eight-year old Cheyenne, and five-year old Dionne; Tony, the father of the three youngest children; and generally one or two houseguests in a three-bedroom apartment on the 5th floor. The father of her two oldest children lives, periodically, with his mother and sometimes with another woman. He does not contribute to the children's care and rarely visits them. Tony is unemployed. Bev has been working steadily for the past seven years.

Bobbie Jones lives with her two children and her male friend in the same two-bedroom apartment on the third floor that her mother, and the rest of the family, has occupied since 1977. Bobbie was allowed to keep the apartment after her mother's death. She, like her sister, has intermittent houseguests. The father of her oldest child, fifteen-year old Ieasha, is in an upstate prison, and the father of her four-year old son, Jaquan, lives in Brooklyn. Social Services pays Bobbie for babysitting Bev's children while she is at work. Bev helps Bobbie's pay her rent.

Ben Jones is a former crack addict. He has spent most of his adult life in prison on drug related crimes – possession of or selling drugs. He recently lived on the third floor in the same building as his sisters with his girlfriend, their four year-old son, Malik, and his girlfriend's eleven year old daughter. His younger brother, Billy Jones, was a

drug dealer and spent most of his life on the run from the law, living in other states. He, too, has been incarcerated for drug-related crimes. Billy has five children; four by a former girlfriend, who is living in a shelter in Brooklyn, and one by another former girlfriend who now lives with another man in Queens.

For over twenty years, I have been working with and advocating for The Jones' and similar families who live in Baisley Houses. We have developed a close and unique relationship. As my previous work moves from friend/advocate to that of ethnographer, I have already completed one of the first steps of ethnography – getting in. I am already a part of the lives of these individuals; therefore my presence will not change the setting. The families in this study know me as a friend and advocate and trust my motives and sincerity. This will help to facilitate my work. I have been an activist and community leader for many years, serving on political clubs, community based organizations, and as a civil rights activist. I also served as the president of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). I have used my positions and knowledge of the public institutions to effect positive change in the lives of some of the individuals in this study. I have been called upon to intercede on their behalf on many occasions, with the criminal justice system, the welfare system, the schools, and with the management of their housing development. This research project will change my current advocacy role into that of researcher/ethnographer. I will incorporate the notes that I have kept on the families. Some of these notes will be used as background information for this project.

Since 1994, I have been documenting and analyzing instances where members of the Jones family, especially the adult women, began to develop and apply new skills at self- and group-advocacy. My home visits and attendance at public meetings focused on the processes whereby members of the Jones family continued to develop their abilities to act as their own advocates. I have observed them gradually apply new skills in dealing with NYCHA management in Baisley Houses, the local police department, and with welfare caseworkers. In one such instance, for example, Bev, was unable to get the Baisley management to respond to her urgent requests to make immediate repairs to a leak and flood in her apartment. She called the NYCHA central office, made a formal complaint, and informed the authorities that she would take the complaint higher and possibly make it public, if it were not resolved. Elated, she called me and said, “You will be real proud of me. I didn’t go down and cuss nobody out. I handled it the right way, and the next day the guys from maintenance, and the manager, came. And the manager stayed the whole time until it was fixed. That was the first time they ever did that. I feel real good...” My field research explores whether this learned self-advocacy and self-empowerment can be transferred from one institutional arena to another? What will happen, for example, if Baisley parents utilize this approach when seeking to have power and control in the local public schools system?

Conclusion: Why Speaking Out Matters

In summary, this research will analyze and delineate the quality of interactions and relations of power between the urban poor and public institutions: welfare; police; schools; health facilities; etc. It will further discuss and bring to light the ramifications

of unequal relations of power between the urban poor and a surrounding community of middle-class politically powerful African Americans. However, it will focus on the more subtle relations of power endemic in the public education system. The history and development of the institutions will be discussed with the subjects. I propose that when individuals learn their roles in keeping institutions operating, sometimes to their own detriment, and they have unknowingly been maneuvered and maintained in a position of powerlessness, it is possible for them through overt actions to make these institutions work for them. What will be the outcome, if the subjects become knowledgeable of their own passive role in the perpetuation of their status within the hierarchy of society? Will this knowledge help to motivate them into being active participants in society? This study develops an innovative mode of research that incorporates its subjects into the methodology employed. This approach, in contrast to the canon of sociological investigations, actually foments the changes necessary to alter social conditions for the better. Policy change affects administrators and the administrated. So our work should be concerned with both aspects of change.

This study will help us understand the effects of direct intervention by poor individuals on their own behalf. It will ascertain whether the urban poor can effect positive outcomes through self-advocacy and transfer self-empowerment from one arena to another. This research will contribute to our knowledge of the relations of power and will determine if those relations can be altered. I propose that if the subjects are allowed, nay encouraged, to be active participants in the development of their own lives and to have real power in making decisions, then they will become truly empowered and can be left alone at the end of this research to advocate for themselves and by example show

their peers that it is possible to be in charge of their own fate. At the conclusion of this project, will the subjects reject the old cliché “it’s not what you know, but whom you know, that’s important” and adopt an action mode of thinking that emphasizes “it’s not whom you know, but who knows you, that’s important”?

Chapter 2: The Baisley Houses in its Surrounding Community

Baisley Houses is a New York City public housing development surrounded by private homes and apartment complexes that house middle-and upper-middle-class families. The residents of Baisley are typical of most urban public housing. They are poor. Both the residents of Baisley and its surrounding community are African Americans. Although they are of the same ethnicity, they have different socioeconomic statuses. In this chapter, I will discuss the implications of poor minority people with no power or resources being surrounded by people of the same ethnicity who have resources and power. Even though the physical distance is minimal, the social distance is vast. I will compare the lifestyles and resources of the poor and non-poor residents of this community utilizing information from census reports and direct observations. Does the power, political and financial, of the surrounding community benefit or hurt the residents of Baisley? Previous research that has addressed voting practices, power and participation (Verba, et. al., 1995, Piven and Cloward, 2000b) will establish a background on which this study will base its discussion about the ability (or inability) of the poor to develop a voice and self-advocacy skills.

Other than race, Baisley residents share very little in common with their neighbors. The majority of Baisley residents live well below the poverty line - working at low paying jobs, off the books, receiving some form of public assistance or unemployed. Their neighbors are economically better off. It is not only economics that separates the residents of Baisley from their neighbors; it is the educated – uneducated, powerful – powerless, access – non-access dichotomies that separate them as well.

Conservatives may ask, if they all live in the same area with the same schools, services, and amenities, then why don't more of the poor families achieve upward mobility? Is it the consequences of living in a neighborhood of "concentrated poverty" that holds the poor back? Social as well as economic and educational background can make a difference in a person's lifestyle and have an effect on one's ability to take advantage of opportunities for advancement; however, race combined with poverty plays a prominent role in limiting opportunity because race further limits access to resources, i.e. employment or finances needed for upward mobility. Many of the residents of Baisley are living in cyclical poverty; many have been residents of public housing for decades. Many want to move up and out. They want to own their own homes, and they want their children to go to better schools. But they are locked out of opportunities because of race. Many of the African Americans who live in the surrounding neighborhoods moved into the community as members of the middle-class, thus, bringing resources of education, money, influence, and connections. Their children will benefit from being born into a family with some money, power, and prestige. Although their positions are not at the top of America's class structure, they are at a higher point on the class hierarchy than most African Americans. According to Max Weber's theory of life chances, a person's position at birth has a direct influence on her station throughout the life-cycle. Individuals who are born into poverty will remain in the lower class. There may be some elevation in the next generation, but for many that upward move, if at all, will be minimal. Thus, for many of the residents of Baisley born into poverty, their

station will remain the same. For those born into middle- and upper-class statuses they too will remain in the same position.

Neighborhood Comparisons and Correlations

In this section, Census Tracts (CT) from the 2000 Census Count will be used to identify and compare the residents of Baisley Houses with the residents living in the surrounding areas (TABLE. 1.1, p. 24 and MAP 1.1, p.25). Baisley Houses is located in CT #278. The statistics compiled on CT #278 include the private houses immediately surrounding Baisley. It can be assumed that the information from CT #278 includes data about the middle class residents from the surrounding neighborhood, as well as from Baisley Houses. However, even with that skewed information, CT #278 is lower in income, education, and employment than any of the areas surrounding it.

CT #278 has the lowest median household income in the area, \$22,528; CT # 276 has the next lowest, \$34,926. A few blocks to the east CTs 422 & 420 have \$74,167 and \$63,750 median household incomes, respectively. Directly correlated with income is educational level. This holds true when comparing the above referenced CTs. In CT #278, 67.5 percent are high school graduates or higher and 6.1 percent are college graduates or higher. CT # 276 has 77.6 percent high school graduates or higher and 12.3 percent college graduates or higher. This represents low educational levels when compared with the neighboring communities. The two CTs in the area with the highest median household income also have the highest high school and college rates. CT 422 has 83.7 percent high school graduates or higher and 31.8 percent college graduates or higher, while in CT # 420 the percentages are 88 percent for high school graduates or higher and 30.5 percent for college graduates or higher. For the other CTs in the area,

274, 284, 288, 282, 280 and 432, the median household income shows the same correlation between income and education. Along the lines of the income/education dimensions are the status/power dimensions. In the area where people's income and educational level are the highest so are the statuses and power of the people; this area is known as Addesleigh Park. Where the income and educational level are the lowest, the power of the people is weakest; this is Baisley Houses. As the statistics from the CTs indicate, the poor, undereducated residents of Baisley are surrounded by a community that is much better off, both financially and educationally.

TABLE. 1.1 Income and Education by Census Tract, 2000

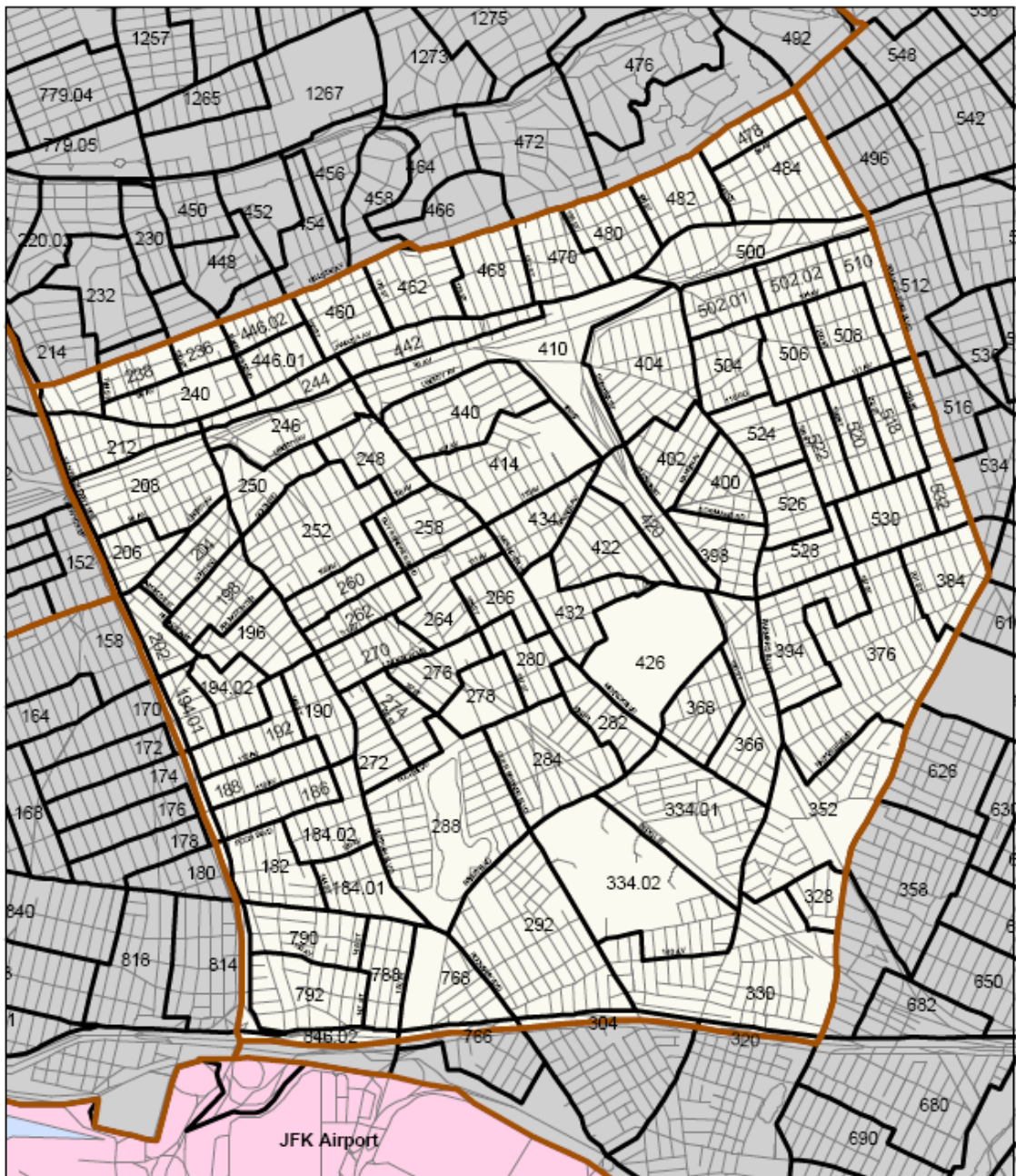
Census Tract	Community	Median Household Income	% Persons Below Poverty	% Families Below Poverty	% High School Graduates or Higher	% College Graduates or Higher
278	Baisley Houses	\$22,528	29.6	26.7	67.5	6.1
276	Jamaica	\$34,926	26.7	26.3	77.6	12.3
274	Jamaica	\$41,270	13.1	7.0	71.6	8.0
288	Jamaica	\$44,348	13.3	10.0	73.0	14.6
280	Jamaica	\$47,596	7.3	6.7	79.2	14.3
282	Jamaica	\$51,714	15.3	11.7	81.1	14.7
284	Jamaica	\$55,114	6.7	6.1	82.0	14.6
432	Jamaica	\$61,875	12.5	9.7	90.0	22.3
422	Addesleigh Park	\$63,750	2.5	2.0	83.7	31.8
420	Addesleigh Park	\$74,167	4.1	3.6	88.0	30.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census PL File (Dec 2002)

NYC Department of City Planning

MAP #1 – Census Tracts for Baisley Houses and Surrounding Community

CENSUS 2000: QUEENS COMMUNITY DISTRICT 12



LEGEND	4	CENSUS TRACT NUMBER	—	STREET	—	COMMUNITY DISTRICT BOUNDARY
	—	CENSUS TRACT BOUNDARY	READ ST.	STREET NAME		

Department of City Planning, New York City

Baisley Houses and the Surrounding Area

Baisley Houses “Baisley”, as it is called by the locals, is comprised of five 8-story buildings. It has 377 apartments with a total population of 952. Baisley is divided by Guy R. Brewer Boulevard, a major bus route and traffic artery. It is bounded on the south by Foch Boulevard. On the east side of Guy R. Brewer Blvd., two buildings, #1 and #2, face each other. In between the buildings is a children’s recreational area that has a three-foot high wrought iron fence. It has a cement surface and is approximately 100 feet by 50 feet. At one end, it has a slide, a jungle gym, parallel bars, and a sprinkler. At the other end, there is a sitting area with two cement tables. In warm weather, the adult residents of Baisley congregate in this area for many hours. They usually start to congregate around three or four in the afternoon and are joined in the evening by people returning home from work. They will sit on the cement stools and benches, playing cards or drinking until one or two in the morning. The small children will play in the area until around ten, before being sent upstairs to bed or to watch TV. The teens and young adults will generally hang until about midnight. Behind Building #1 is an area about 100 square feet of dirt and grass where the residents have bar-b-ques and the young adults often hangout.

On the west side of the boulevard are buildings #3, #4, and #5. Behind building #3, which is on the northwest corner, are a basketball court and a sitting area. On the southwest corner is a bodega. On the southeast corner a new retail shopping center is going up. Further south on the same block are a Chinese take-out, a soul-food take-out, a deli, Laundromat, and several stores.

In the summer, the play area is often filled with children playing. When the weather is hot, the sprinkler is on. Children ride their bikes and scooters up and down the long walkway from the street to the play area. The adults play cards on the cement tables. A young lady sells candy and cold sodas, while a young man sells bootleg cigarettes. At the bottom of the walkway, usually five or six young men ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-five congregate.

As the weather grows cold, you see fewer and fewer people in the courtyard. The children move inside, sometimes playing in the hallways at other times playing in each other's apartments. The young men will continue to hang out at the bottom of the walkway until it gets uncomfortably cold. The young women who usually play cards have long since ceased their outside games and occasionally play cards in each other's apartments. They do not have resources to be able to enjoy the "finer things in life" - a Broadway musical, a vacation overseas or to another part of the country, dinner at a fancy restaurant, boating, etc. They have learned to enjoy themselves on the premises of their buildings, in each other's homes, or in the courtyard. The children seldom, if ever, go farther than their schools or the local mall. Without money to afford the finer things, they make themselves content with what is available in their small world.

Addesleigh Park is a small community of wealthy and politically powerful well-connected African Americans. It is located eight blocks northeast of Baisley Houses in CT 420 and 422. Middle-class and upper-middle-class African Americans started moving into Addesleigh Park in the mid-1940s. Denied access to the affluent Manhattan communities of their famous white counterparts, black celebrities, including Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, and James Brown moved to this community. It was then, and remains

today, a neighborhood of affluent African Americans. It is a beautiful well kept suburban neighborhood with manicured lawns, large colonial houses with high ceilings and big fireplaces, and luxury automobiles in the driveways.

Comparisons between the educational level, income and status (power) of the residents of Addesleigh Park and those of Baisley reveal large disparities on all fronts. On the status/power dimension, within the small community of Addesleigh Park, there is a state Senator, a NYS Assemblyman, the former Deputy Majority leader of the NYC Council, several district leaders, and the Vice Chair of the County Democratic machine, as well as many other notable community leaders. Baisley Houses has no elected officials among its tenants.

Rochdale Village is a co-operative housing development comprised of twenty fourteen- story buildings. It was built in 1963 in the middle of an African American community. Its first residents were 85 percent white and 15 percent minority (Harvey Swados, 1966). Swados wrote, "...its white majority moved in of their own free will," and he concluded, "...because the apartments represented such an unusual bargain that the pressing need for economical housing overcame fear and uneasiness". Over the years, its white population has dwindled, and now there are only a few white families left. Today, the residents of Rochdale are mostly working- or middle-class African American professionals.

Rochdale Village has two shopping malls, a small mall on the 137th Avenue side and a large mall on the Baisley side, closest to Baisley Houses. The large mall contains a substantial supermarket, complete with fresh fish and a deli; several small restaurants; two drug stores; several small clothing stores, a barbershop; a big 99 cent store, a florist;

a bank, a locksmith; and a jewelry store. It houses professional offices: including a dentist, a photography shop, and several Community Based Organization offices. Originally, it also had its own movie house. The residents of Baisley are frequent visitors to Rochdale. Being within walking distance of Baisley, the Rochdale big mall is convenient to Baisley residents.

In between Addesleigh Park, Rochdale Village, and Baisley houses are the private homes of the working middle class. They are not as affluent as the residents of Addesleigh Park, but they are much better off than the residents of Baisley. They have higher incomes and educational levels. They moved here from Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Harlem. For them this was the suburbs, their upwardly mobile move. They established themselves in an area that was predominantly white. And as they moved in, the white population moved out. Many of the black families have lived here for over forty years. This area has not had the exodus of middle-class blacks that Wilson (1987a) concluded happened in many black communities. They have not abandoned their neighborhoods for life in the suburbs. Instead, they have dug deep and anchored themselves in a community of which they are proud. Currently, the area is made up of professionals and working middle-class African Americans, many of whom belong to community-based organizations that work to maintain or improve the quality of life in the area.

Community Board #12, which encompasses this area, has a Board of Directors whose majority African American membership comes from the community surrounding Baisley. None of its members live in Baisley. NYC Community Boards are largely responsible for recommendations to the NYC Council for improvements to the community. Forty years ago, the United Democratic Club, considered by many to be one

of the most powerful political clubs in Queens, had its office across the street from Baisley. Even given its proximity to Baisley, its board of directors lived in the area surrounding Baisley. The residents of Baisley do not readily see any benefit from belonging to these organizations. They see the individuals that belong to the organizations and that live in the surrounding communities as a part of a world that places them on the outside. It costs money to belong in an effective way, and with little education and social skills, they feel alienated from participating in most activities, political and social, that are organized by their neighbors.

According to the results of a recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2007), African Americans see a difference in the values of the middle class and poor, and well-educated blacks believe that those values are diverging. The residents of Baisley have different educational levels, income and lifestyles than the residents of the surrounding community. They have a different view of opportunities available for upward mobility. Some of the residents who live in the private houses surrounding Baisley believe that although the system is unfair in its allocation of jobs and resources to African Americans, it is still possible for individuals to improve their quality of life through hard work and saving money. The residents of Baisley, however, believe that the system is stacked against the poor and that no amount of hard work will improve their quality of life. They work hard just to acquire life's bare necessities.

The residents of the surrounding community have assimilated the larger society's middle- and upper-class values and believe that because they share these values, they are the legitimate representatives of the black community. The elected officials and civic leaders of Addeleigh Park and the surrounding area are the 'middlemen' that Mary

Pattillo refers to in *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City* (2007). Their power comes from an unbalanced and uneasy relationship with powerful white elites. The black middlemen have an inferior status in relation to the white elites, while holding a superior status in relation to their poor black neighbors. They use their superior status to determine what is acceptable in the community.

Baisley's residents, because of their lower economic and social status, are locked out of participating in the economic and social world of the upper classes. They are alienated from the larger society and do not see a connection between themselves and their upper-class neighbors. While their upper-class neighbors have the power and voice to speak on behalf of all the constituents, Baisley residents feel powerless and therefore do not demand resources or services that could improve their quality of life.

Access to Resources: Making a Difference

Prestige and money afford any individual an advantage over individuals who have less prestige and money. It is interesting to note that in this community of middle-class families, some of the public schools in the area have dismal records. Yet, the educational level of the individuals in the areas surrounding Baisley is higher than that of the residents of Baisley. How do the children of the area surrounding Baisley flourish within this inferior educational system? One answer is that many of the children's parents have the money to send their children to private schools, or they have connections with officials that allow their children to transfer to better schools. The children of Baisley are at a disadvantage when compared to the children of the surrounding area. The residents of Baisley have little power to leverage and do not have the connections to get

their children transferred out of failing schools. In addition, the parents in the area surrounding Baisley are better educated and therefore are better equipped to help their children succeed in school than children whose parents have little or no formal education. Educational level and income have a direct correlation. Having a better education than their neighbors in Baisley, and better paying jobs, the individuals outside Baisley can afford to live a better quality life.

Even when the government sets aside race-specific jobs and other opportunities for minorities, it is the better educated and socially connected African Americans who are first privy to the information and better prepared to take advantage of opportunities purportedly available to all, yet which are less available to the lower class. (Wilson 1987b). The employment rate for the individuals living outside of Baisley is higher than for the residents of Baisley. A recent study by Devah Pager (2007) shows that even with a college degree, an African American male is less likely to be hired for the same job as a white man without an education and with a criminal record. It is even worse for the uneducated individuals who live in Baisley. With limited options for gainful employment in the legal economy, individuals may choose non-traditional or unacceptable means to increase their income and improve their chances for a better life. The use of unacceptable means further stigmatizes and marginalizes them from mainstream society. Being on the periphery and feeling alienated, they do not believe that any effort on their part will be heard or make a difference.

Power through Politics

According to Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), blacks and Latinos are less active in politics because they have fewer of the resources that foster participation -

“education, family income, and skills exercised on the job and in organizations”. However, Piven and Cloward (2000c) argue that it is political institutions that marginalize the poor and uneducated by encouraging the efforts of the well-off and well educated to participate in elections. One can surmise that African Americans with a higher level of education and income will participate in the political sphere at a higher rate than poor African Americans. Elected officials in any given area listen to and respond to constituents who vote and demand services. Areas that have higher rates of voting tend to receive more resources for their community.

Guy R. Brewer, the first African American New York State Assemblyman from Queens County, lived in Addesleigh Park. He was a founding member of the United Democratic Club, later renamed the Guy R. Brewer (GRB) United Democratic Club. The club was originally located across from Baisley Houses on Foch Boulevard and what was then called New York Boulevard. In 1979, the political club moved to its current location in St. Albans, and in 1982, the powerful members of the club had New York Boulevard renamed Guy R. Brewer Boulevard.

The club lists as its current members: Archie Spigner, former Deputy Majority Leader of the NYC Council; Malcolm Smith, Majority Leader of the New York State Senate; Leroy Comrie Majority Leader of the NYC Council; NYS Assemblyman William Scarborough; NYS Senator Shirley Huntley; Dora Young who is the Vice Chair of the Queens County Democrats and a district leader; and two members of the NYS Democratic Committee. Many of these aforementioned club members are residents of Addesleigh Park and they use their collective power to secure favors for their small community. They successfully keep out unwanted builders that are destroying other

communities with four- and six-family homes. Several years ago, when they felt that excessive traffic and trucks were coming through their streets, they used their power to turn all the streets into one-way streets, virtually cutting off and rerouting traffic. Most individuals running for local elected office will contact the leaders of this club for support before embarking on a campaign. The members of the club work very closely with the Democratic machine. Many major political campaigns, local and national, will have their local campaign headquarters at the GRB Clubhouse. This club leverages its power to bring resources into the community. Some of those resources reach most of the community, but very few affect the quality of life for Baisley residents .

Local elected officials are aware of the needs of Baisley but until recently residents rarely demanded services or resources from local officials . The new Tenant Association President is more vocal than his predecessor and is starting to get more positive attention from the elected officials and the police.

New Voice and Advocacy in Baisley

When Robert Hogan, a.k.a. AU, was elected as president of Baisley's Tenants Association in 2005, he knew that he was going to make changes in the way the TA operated. According to him, the previous council was "doing absolutely nothing" for the residents. As the new official representative of the residents, he would speak out on their behalf for improvements in the quality of life at Baisley. In AU's first election he ran as an independent and won. The second time he ran, in 2008, he formed a slate of individuals whom he believed would work hard to help him improve conditions. Because of his demonstrated tenacity at getting things accomplished during his first term, his slate

won all five seats on the TA – president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary and sergeant-at-arms. AU currently serves as the First Vice-Chair to the Citywide Council of Presidents (CCOP). He was elected to this position by the other TA presidents in his CCOP district - there are nine districts in the city.

As the current president of the Baisley Houses Tenants Association (TA), he has successfully advocated for his constituents and is making improvements in the conditions at the housing development. Additionally he has made significant inroads in developing positive relationships with the heads of institutions in the community. He has already started to make an impact and is demonstrating to the tenants the benefits of mobilization and advocacy. For example, he has established and nurtured a relationship of mutual respect between himself and the head of the local police precinct. For many years, distrust and fear defined the relationship of many Baisley residents to the local police. There were often unjustified raids and police harassment and brutality directed at residents. The current TA president is working diligently to develop and nurture an atmosphere of mutual respect. He knows that “it will not happen over night”; he has fostered, positive changes already. “We now have a relationship with the police; we have found common ground with the precinct.” AU has developed a working relationship with the head of the 113th precinct that they hope will be mutually beneficial. Through dialogue, they have a better understanding of one another’s position. Both agree that the police are here to protect and serve all of the people. However, some of the officers come to the community with a preconceived notion of the character and actions of African Americans. The stigma that is attached to urban black youth motivates some of the negative actions on the part of some police officers. AU hopes to enlighten them about

who his constituents are: not all of whom are the drug addict thugs depicted in the media. And with the help of the police chief and through positive interactions with the police department he hopes to show his constituents that all police officers are not bigots with a propensity toward “beating up” blacks. AU believes that the new relationship of mutual respect between himself and the head of the precinct will have a positive trickle-down effect and counter the negative perceptions of both parties. According to AU, with a new commander in charge, “You have a better police department. You don’t get better police; you get the same young recruits, who judge us before they know us.” The new police chief, though, responds quickly to incidents that can undermine the development of a positive working relationship between the police and the community. AU recalled an incident that happened during Baisley’s annual community day gathering. Dozens of residents of all ages were enjoying the festivities. A DJ was playing music and people were playing basketball and eating. The police-issued block party permit authorized the music to go on until 6:00 p.m. Right at 6:00, the police descended on the group and demanded they stop the music immediately. When AU asked if they would allow him to speak with the people in order to get them to calm down and leave the area, the officer in charge responded loudly and rudely. AU called the police chief and left a message on her cell phone. Even though she was on vacation, she called back immediately. AU explained the situation. She spoke to the officer in charge, and he backed off and allowed AU to calmly start dispersing the people. A few minutes later, the chief showed up on the scene. “The police had given us a hard time. But the chief was pleased that I had handled the situation, and she let us stay for another hour.” The residents were proud to see the respect afforded their leader.

AU knows all of the local elected officials. Growing up in Baisley, he remembers when the United Democratic Club was located on the corner. He met many of the members of the club who have gone on to become the community's legislators and leaders. Since he has been in office, he has reached out to many of them in an official capacity. Even though he had spoken with them before about conditions at Baisley and sought their assistance in improving the place, it is only now in his new position as TA President that he can speak with the authority that his position affords him. He speaks at forums and meetings. He delivers the message about Baisley to audiences. He has raised the level of the outer community's awareness of the deplorable conditions at Baisley and mistreatment of tenants at the hands of police and NYCHA management. Now that he has the authority to speak on behalf of his constituents, he wants people to "See all the suffering that Baisley has gone through." He has been able to get more resources for Baisley than his predecessor by speaking directly with elected officials. He has successfully raised money for extra programs to benefit the residents of Baisley

He is currently working on a major initiative which he calls "Reconstructing the village". Collaborating with "the Fatherhood Program", he is planning sessions for the young men at Baisley. The meetings will afford the men opportunities to have conversations and dialogues about men and family. The men will receive assistance in resume writing and enroll in a structured sensitivity program for men and fathers. In addition, he wants to "bring back the 'old heads' (Anderson 1990, Duneier 1992) putting men back as role models". Working collaboratively with the local Educational Opportunity Center, he is returning a GED program to Baisley. The gym was revamped

with new equipment. He is advocating for positive changes in the structure of life at Baisley.

Another of his initiatives did not fare so well. He wanted Baisley parents to register as foster parents. After witnessing children being torn away from their families and communities by ACS (Administration for Children Services), he believed that if there were foster homes within the development, some of those children would be able to be placed within a familiar environment. AU went through extensive training in order to be able to certify adults to become foster care parents. However, he could not convince residents of Baisley to become foster parents. They do not trust ACS. Too many of them have had negative encounters with ACS workers and have either been victimized or know someone who was victimized by unscrupulous ACS workers.

On April 4, 2008, NYCHA closed Baisley's Community Center. It was one of the first of 19 NYCHA Community Centers to close because of a 20 million dollar deficit in NYCHA funding. The month before the closing, AU held a meeting with Hugh Spence who had authority to choose which NYCHA Community Centers would close. Spence informed the group that it would take \$750,000 to operate Baisley's Community Center and the money was just not there. AU told Spence that his group was willing to volunteer in order to keep the Center open, but Spence told him that there would still be too big of a deficit to keep it operating. The Center closed, and Baisley lost many of its programs, including its reading, fitness, and dance programs and the fees that were collected from renting the Center for parties and gatherings – money that supplemented the buses for summer get-a-ways and games. AU turned the TA's small office space

into an area to conduct scaled down activities for residents, further demonstrating to constituents that he will provide all that is within his power to give.

In regards to the NYCHA management at Baisley, tenants know that their TA president will stand up to Baisley management, as well as fight downtown for their rights as tenants. He has intervened on the tenants' behalf when management has attempted to use illegal and unethical methods to get the tenants to give up their rights. An example that he used to illustrate this point follows:

Baisley management failed a HUD inspection because the brackets holding up air conditioners in the apartments had been improperly installed by NYCHA maintenance workers. Letters were sent to the tenants informing them that, the brackets were incorrectly mounted and must be replaced immediately or the tenant would be in violation. When the tenants contacted management to discuss the situation they were told that it would be best for them to come downstairs [to the management office] and address the violation or they might be in jeopardy of losing their apartments. At the December 2007 meeting, several seniors spoke about the threatening letters and responses they received. The next day, AU went to the management office and confronted the manager, "Do not threaten old people." I asked her "suppose I send one to your mother." As the leader, it was my responsibility to address these things. I informed her that I would report to NYCHA central what had transpired, that it was negligence on Baisley management's part and now they wanted to shift the blame to the tenants. I would not allow it. She asked what she could do to rectify the situation. I told her to fix the brackets and apologize to everyone who had received the letter. She did. We sat down and discussed other areas in which she needed to show respect and tolerance. I will represent the people with NYCHA management and they [NYCHA management] will respect me.

In a short period of time, the TA president has shown that speaking out on behalf of oneself and one's constituency can elicit positive outcomes. However, this and other examples of successfully employed advocacy methods do not by themselves stimulate more direct empowerment of residents. Many do not believe that their efforts will be fruitful. Even though they witness the positive changes brought about by their TA president, the residents of Baisley have little belief that their own efforts will elicit the same response. Negative responses to tenant demands for better services from housing management have undermined their confidence. They have spoken out against the police harassment and brutality when they see one of their neighbors being harassed or brutalized

but have either been ignored or been harassed themselves. Some have tried in vain to get decent treatment from persons of authority, yet to little avail. After you have hit your head against a brick wall a number of times, you will stop before you knock yourself out. That is the predicament that many urban poor blacks find themselves in – trying to demand respect in a class-based society that due to their lack of power does not respond. However, when they witness one of their own successfully advocating on behalf of his constituents, they feel proud and excited. Yet, they are frustrated and fear rejection and/or reprisals for speaking out too loud

Conclusion

The residents of Baisley are separated from their neighbors by social class: they are the urban poor; their neighbors are middle and upper class. Differences in lifestyles and treatment by the larger society are determined by their position in the class structure of society. The urban poor do not believe that they have the power or resources to demand a better quality of life. They must contend with accepting the status and role that society has placed them in. They have been socialized into accepting their lot in life. The upper classes are aware of their power to demand better housing, services, and quality of life. One individual, if aware of the ability to foster positive changes, can speak out on behalf of others and force the systems to acknowledge their responsibilities to afford everyone a better quality of living, even if in a small way,

However, how does that individual acquire an awareness of her ability to speak out and demand equal resources? In the case of Baisley, it was one resident who had made contacts early on in life with people who had power and later achieved a position to use that knowledge and power to advocate for others. If the urban poor can learn from

one of their own that power resides in the ability to get attention and the knowledge to demand their rights, can they learn to become their own advocates?

Chapter 3

The Sharon Jones Family –

an Extended African American Family in the Baisley Houses

An extended family consists of individuals that are connected or related by blood or marriage. Aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, grandparents, in-laws are all part of an extended family. In *All Our Kin*, Stack (1974) defines family as “the smallest, organized durable network of kin and non-kin who interact daily” and Shipler (2004a) refers to “kinship in its broadest meaning, extending further than blood and tribe...”. I have found that non-kin members who make up part of a familial type network can be more stable than kin. They have close and supportive relationships that last a lifetime. Together, these individuals provide a “safety net” for each other (Shipler, 2004).

In this chapter, I will give brief descriptions of the kin members of the Sharon Jones network as well as non-kin members who perform the duties and obligations generally reserved for, and expected by, other traditional members of the familial unit. Incorporating the intimate knowledge I’ve garnered during many years of close friendship, and utilizing observations and conversations that I have had with the Joneses and their friends, I will give the reader a comprehensive view of the Jones family and their network of friends.

Sharon Jones, family matriarch

It was 1967 when I first met Sharon Jones at a small nightclub in Southeast Queens. At the time, she shared a two-bedroom apartment with two male friends. Shortly after meeting Sharon, I was evicted from my apartment. Even though she had known me for only a few weeks, she invited me to stay with her in Queens. I quickly

learned of her generous nature. Sharon gave shelter to people who needed a place to stay, and she fed people who needed something to eat. They lived alongside her and her children like members of the family. The children came to know them as aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. She never demanded remuneration for lodging or food. She did, however, expect you to participate anyway you could. For instance, you were expected, like any family member would be, to help with the household chores, cook, or take care of the children. If you received money, you were expected to add something to the household coffers. Although she did not have much for herself or her family, she believed in helping those who had even less. This practice of giving and sharing continued throughout her lifetime, and her grown children continue this legacy today.

At the time I met Sharon, she was a single parent receiving public assistance. Her two-year old son, Ben, lived with her mother and father in a modest one-family home in Jamaica, Queens. (I never learned the identity of Ben's father.) Sharon's mother was a sophisticated woman who prided herself on her cultured manners. Her father was a self-employed gardener and handyman. They had five children. Sharon was the youngest by fifteen years. Her oldest sister was deceased. Her brother Don was married and had two children. Her other two sisters were married with children and lived in single-family homes in middle-class neighborhoods on Long Island. Sharon's sisters had the sophisticated, articulate self-presentation of their mother. Sharon, on the other hand, was uncouth and profanity her vocabulary of choice. She smoked marijuana and drank liquor. She and several of her friends engaged in shoplifting and burglarizing stores. Sharon's siblings and her mother ostracized her for her lifestyle. I often wondered what made her so different from her siblings. My sense is that birth order and especially the fifteen

years separating Sharon from her siblings was crucial. Society's norms and values changed significantly between the period during which her siblings were nurtured and socialized and the period during which she was nurtured and socialized. Adolescents and young adults in the 1960s and 1970s were exercising more freedom from authority and Sharon became a product of that new found freedom. Birth order may not be the paramount reason for such a difference in the attitudes and mannerisms between her and her sisters and mother; but I believe that it was an important variable.

By the end of 1967, Sharon started dating George, a man seventeen years her senior. He was living with his common-law wife, Linda, and their three children. He also had two children by his estranged wife and another grown child by a former girlfriend. In 1968, Sharon gave birth to Bev, the first of her three children fathered by George. Sharon and her newborn baby moved into a one-bedroom apartment in Jamaica. Even though George was employed and received an adequate salary, he did not help her out financially. She stayed in this apartment for about two years, until she was evicted for nonpayment of rent. In 1971, Sharon gave birth to Billy. A few months later she and her two children moved into a one-bedroom apartment in a private house in Hollis, Queens. In 1973, Sharon moved into a two-bedroom apartment in an apartment complex in Flushing. Shortly after moving to Flushing, Sharon brought Ben home to live with her and his siblings.

In 1976, Sharon served two months in jail for shoplifting. During her absence, I moved into the apartment to take care of the children who were then 11, 7, and 4 years old. Her welfare caseworker made arrangements for her rent to be paid and for food stamps to be issued in my name. This arrangement forestalled the necessity of putting the

children into the foster care system. No one in Sharon's family was able (or willing) to take care of the children while she was incarcerated, even if it meant that the children would be split up and placed in different foster homes until she was released from jail. Once a child is placed in the foster care system, it becomes difficult for the natural parents to have the child returned to the home. For parents to regain custody of their child, parents had to show a change in lifestyle, a requirement essentially based upon the culture of poverty thesis that makes parents personally responsible for their predicament. Most often poor parents do not have the resources or support to change the conditions which brought them to their current lifestyle. Changing those conditions would necessitate changing the social structure.

Changing Environments – The Move to Public Housing

Sharon was seven months pregnant when she moved into the Baisley Houses in January 1977. Her last child, Bobbie, was born two months later. Sharon had been on the waiting list for an apartment in public housing for years. She talked about moving into "the projects" as though it were a dream home, "That's all I want, is an apartment in the projects". She felt an apartment in the projects would provide her and her family with stability and security. She had been legally evicted or illegally kicked-out of every apartment or rented room that she had lived in. Finally getting an apartment in a public housing complex meant that her rent would be paid with her welfare check and, if she was ever removed from the welfare rolls, either voluntarily or involuntarily, she could afford to pay the rent on her own.

Upon moving into Baisley, Sharon immediately became friends with Marsha who lived in a three-bedroom apartment at the end of the hall. Marsha was a single mother on

public assistance who had five children ranging in age from six to fifteen. Marsha, like Sharon, was an avid shoplifter. They started shoplifting together, at times taking their children along on the shoplifting excursions. Marsha and Sharon developed a close familial relationship. The similarities in their lifestyles, family construction, and their similar perspectives on life facilitated a bond between them that was based on similar values, and norms. Sharon and Marsha would enter one another's apartment unannounced and walk from room to room as if they were at home. Indeed, the other's apartment became an extension of their own home. Each could walk into the kitchen and get whatever was needed to complete a meal at home. No need to ask for an item but out of courtesy inform the other that a particular item was taken, just say "I took some chicken out the freezer" or "I got some of your bread". It was understood that at some point this scene would be played out in the other's apartment. Anytime, day or night, these two "sisters" could depend on one another for food, borrowed clothing, or companionship.

Sharon's next door neighbor, Gwen, was a single mother with three children. The household consisted of Gwen's children, the children's father (who spent some time in the apartment, but most of his time in-and-out of prison for petty crimes), and her maternal grandmother. Sharon and Gwen had a tumultuous relationship. They constantly professed a dislike for each other. They complained about each other's "noisy kids", "dirty apartments", or "dirt in the hallway" (Sharon and Gwen had the only two apartments in the alcove by the elevator and incinerator). Yet, they were supportive of each other when it came to sharing food; providing phone usage, when the other's phone

was disconnected; or babysitting. Even though a mutual distrust existed in Sharon's and Gwen's relationship, the necessity of shared resources outweighed that distrust.

Daphne was a single parent who lived in a two bedroom apartment on the same floor as Sharon. She had a thirteen year old son. Daphne was a heavy drinker. She, Sharon and Marsha would visit each other's apartments daily to drink, gossip, and watch TV together. Daphne, too, shared what little she had with the others.

Sharon, Marsha, Gwen, and Daphne developed an association which became more than just neighbors helping each other. Even though they had friends or acquaintances on other floors, the proximity of their domiciles facilitated some of their immediate needs. Although they might have been able to procure items that they needed elsewhere, the convenience of practically walking from one room to the next to get your needs satisfied created a bond that was different from other relationships. They considered *their floor their home*". Their small children played in the hallway. This group of non-family members developed a familial like relationship that provided support for each other that was similar to what one would expect from the members of an extended biological family. For all intents and purposes they *were* an extended family.

As you can see, the poor, whether because of physical or emotional needs, will form bonds with non-kin that are as durable or more durable than bonds of kinship. Whether the networks are created out of necessity or friendship, they are lasting. Sharing becomes a way of life for the urban poor. It acts like cement that holds kin and non-kin members together. It develops in them a feeling of family ties that must constantly be nurtured for each unit's survival in a society that does not provide them with the means for subsistence. In their own society, they do not look down on each

other; they are of the same thread, woven together to make a strong swath of material that can hold out the cold of a society that keeps them marginalized. Together they have each other to be able to bear the inhumane world stacked up against them, while each has their own individual battle to deal with.

Changing Identities

During the late seventies and early eighties, Sharon was reported several times to the Bureau of Child Welfare (BCW) for child neglect and abuse. On several occasions, she had left the children unattended while she went out at night. According to George, he reported her to BCW because of his concern for his children's safety. A caseworker was assigned to monitor the household and Sharon was enrolled in parenting classes at BCW. She attended the parenting program and eventually became involved as a parent volunteer with BCW. She organized and planned summer activities for the children and parents. She became somewhat of a hero at Baisley because she made sure the parents and children of Baisley had first dibs on the best trips. She loved her new role as an organizer of programs. She had discovered her strengths at organizing and providing for people who could not provide for themselves. She became an advocate not only for her own children but for the children of other Baisley residents. In her new found role as advocate, she began to speak out to obtain resources. By observing BCW workers, she learned how they controlled resources that had been meant for the poor but did not always reach the intended target. She developed a new sense of self-worth and accomplishment. She found herself in an environment that allowed her creative and organizational skills to

come to the fore, and with the resources of the department she turned her ideas into realities.

Here is an instance where structural and cultural forces interact. Sharon had the desire and ability to successfully plan and organize the activities for her own family, but she also had to have resources to fulfill her ideas. Most people have the desire to improve the quality of life for themselves and their families, but not everyone has opportunities to turn their dreams into realities. Even when those opportunities are available, the urban poor are unaware or ill-prepared to take advantage of them. Most often people who are already in more advantageous positions have quicker access and knowledge of the opportunities (Wilson, 1987c). Several variables came together at the right time which facilitated Sharon's change in the means she employed to obtain her desired goals. Resources that other people have in order to accomplish their goals became available to Sharon through her involvement at the BCW, and her belief in her ability to improve the quality of life for her family and others gave power to her voice and actions.

With this belief in her ability to change the course of her life, Sharon enrolled in a medical assistant training program in 1982. She finished the program in nine months and immediately got a job at a doctor's office. For the first time in her life she had a job where the IRS took out taxes. She was 'legitimate'. She got off of welfare. Even though there was not a marked increase in her financial situation, she did not have to make the periodic personally invasive denigrating meetings with a welfare case worker. She still received food stamps and Medicaid benefits and continued to work off-the-books to supplement her legitimate income. To my knowledge, she even stopped shoplifting.

(Previously, Sharon had been arrested and on at least three occasions incarcerated for shoplifting.) She felt personally better about herself. Her mother and siblings no longer ostracized her but, instead, praised her accomplishments.

Then the unforeseen occurred, drastically changing the course of her life. In the midst of the celebrations of success and planning for the future, Sharon was in a car accident. The steering wheel had jammed into her chest and her knee had gone into the dashboard. Her leg was badly hurt, and she could not walk for several weeks. She had to use a walker for several months and lost her job. As noted in Newman in the Missing Class (2007) and Shipler in the Working Poor (2004), one unfortunate incident can sink a striving person from the poor working class into the depths of abject poverty. Although she had been working, Sharon's low salary left no savings for a rainy day. She had been living from paycheck to paycheck and had to sell her car to pay the bills. Confined at home all day every day brought about the most tragic outcome of the accident. Bored and with nothing to do but hang with friends, it wasn't long before she started smoking crack with Marsha and Daphne, who had both become crack cocaine users.

The transformation was quick. I don't even remember how it happened. Sharon was a crackhead. Her home became a hangout for other crackheads. It was a terrible time in Baisley, as elsewhere in urban America. Drugs proliferated in the buildings at Baisley. Several apartments on the third floor, including Sharon's, Marsha's, and Daphne's became drug dens (Venkatesh 2002). The apartments were used for selling drugs, making drugs, and in some instances as areas to punish individuals who did not follow orders or who stole from the drug gangs. Sharon's son, Billy, and Marsha's sons became involved in the drug trade. The apartments of Sharon and Marsha became

targets of rival drug gangs and drug addicts looking to steal money and drugs. Marsha told me of an incident that occurred when she and her two daughters were in the house and masked men carrying guns came in demanding that she hand over her sons' stash of drugs. The gunmen herded them all into the back bedroom where they were tied up with rope. The gunmen searched the apartment but found no drugs. No one was harmed and the gunmen left empty-handed. Sharon told me of the time that a man holding a rifle to Billy's neck walked into her apartment and down the hallway to her bedroom where she sat on the edge of the bed. The gunman demanded that she hand over drugs and money. She gave him what she had, and he left. Marion and Sharon recounted these stories very matter-of-factly. They appeared to have become desensitized to the escalating violence which accompanied the increase in drug use and the illegal drug trade happening in their immediate surroundings. By the mid-nineties, the drug epidemic had subsided with many of the dangerous individuals in jail or dead - victims of the illegal drug business.

The Matriarch Dies:

By 1996, Sharon's health had deteriorated; Bobbie and her two-year old daughter lived in the apartment with Sharon; Bev and her two children lived on the sixth floor in the same building; Ben was in a correctional facility in upstate New York, serving time for selling drugs; and Billy, with an outstanding warrant for drug possession and violating parole, was moving from state to state to evade capture by the police.

It was May, 14, 1996, when I received a frantic call from Bobbie at 4:45 PM. "Bev threw me out. Her and Tony [Bev's live-in boyfriend] beat me up and threw me out." This was the first time I had known Bobbie and Bev actually to fight. They had

the usual sibling disagreements and altercations but never to this extent. I picked up Bobbie and her daughter and took them over to my house. Within a few minutes of our arrival, Bobbie received a call from her brother, Billy, who was staying in Indiana with friends. He had fled New York because the police had a warrant for his arrest for breaking parole. Billy had received a call from his ex-girlfriend, Donna, who was living in Georgia with their four children. The tight-knit community of Baisley Houses had sent word from New York via Georgia to the brother in Indiana that there was trouble in the family. They were not able to make Bev or Bobbie resolve their severed relationship, but perhaps Billy could, if he knew that intervention was needed. It is interesting to observe how this community without resources is able to operate like a well-oiled network, expediting forces and accomplishing advocating for each other like other communities which are supposedly more sophisticated, nurturing, and competent.

After explaining to Billy what had transpired earlier between her and her sister, Bobbie gave me the phone. Billy started the conversation by telling me, "I was supposed to be in New York, anyway. I told Mommy I was coming last Saturday to visit for a few days, but didn't get enough money for the trip. How's Mommy doing?" (Sharon had been taken to the hospital three days previously) While I talked with Billy, two of Bobbie's friends showed up at my front door informing me that a nurse from the hospital had called to tell the family to come to the hospital right away. It took about ten minutes to get to the hospital. By the time we arrived, Sharon had expired.

Billy felt guilty that he had not seen his mother before she died. He had promised her that he was coming. Bobbie was despondent over the fact that she refused to visit her mother that day, which was the reason for her fight with Bev. Bev was the only family

member who knew that their mother's condition was grave, yet she was unable to convince her sister to visit. . Ben felt responsible for his mother's relapse. Four days before she was admitted into the hospital, and just three hours after he was released from prison, he stole money out of his mother's purse and disappeared into the streets. Death has a way of making people reflect on all of the things they could have done for or said to the loved one that they lost. With their mother gone and no real family to turn to, the Jones children depended on their life-long friends from Baisley for consolation and moral support.

Ben: Caught in the Drug-Prison Cycle

Ben, Sharon's oldest child, is 43 years old. For the first nine years of his life, he was raised by his maternal grandparents. In 1974, Sharon brought him home to live with her and his siblings in an apartment in Flushing. It is interesting to note that Ben's mannerisms and attitudes in general are quite different from his siblings. He tends towards the sophisticated, articulate mannerisms displayed by his grandmother. His sisters and brother have the streetwise mannerisms, attitudes, and smarts exhibited by Sharon. Curiously, Ben has spent most of his adult life in prisons because of his crack addiction and related illegal activities. . A question can be posed here: Was Ben not prepared to fend off the deleterious effects of poverty, crime and drugs? In spite of his early training?

In 1984, Ben finished high school and joined the navy. About a year and a half later, he was discharged. He told me it was for health reasons. It wasn't long after returning home, that he started smoking crack. Ben has been in and out of upstate prisons, drug rehabilitation programs and local jails on drug related convictions ever

since. Whenever Ben was released from jail, he would recidivate within a matter of months. On May 7, 1996, Ben was released from prison and returned home to his mother's apartment. Three hours after his return, he stole that money out of her purse and disappeared into the streets. Four days later, on Saturday May 11th Sharon went into the hospital and died on May 14. Ben did not attend his mother's funeral. He later told me that he believed that his siblings blamed him for triggering their mother's relapse by stealing her money.

Six months after his mother's death, I ran into Ben at the Crown Fried Chicken store on the corner of Sutphin Boulevard and Archer Avenue. As I approached the counter, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a thin frail man hunched over a newspaper. As I got closer, I saw that it was Ben. I sat down across from him in the booth and playfully grabbed the newspaper. He slowly looked up. He didn't appear surprised to see me. He had a dirty green cap pulled over his hair. You could tell that his hair was long by the way the cap bulged. He wore a brown jacket that he later told me 'some lady' had given him. He had on dirty sweat pants that looked like they might have been off-white, but it was hard to tell because of the dirt that covered them. "How are you" I opened the conversation. "I'm fine", he replied. "Are you hungry? Can I get you something to eat?" "No I just had a piece of chicken and a soda." "So what's up?", I inquired. "Nothing". He had a beard which didn't look too bad, but his face had gotten very dark and somewhat discolored. His cheeks were starting to get a sunken-in appearance, though his teeth shone white through it all. The hand that I held was very dark. "Why's your skin getting black? You're not this dark." I was concerned about his skin discoloration. "It's dirt," he answered. "I'll be all right. I'll get it together."

I had spoken with Ben about his drug addiction on numerous occasions. He had tried to kick this addiction many times. He had talked about changing his life and settling down to start a family. Most of all, Ben wanted a child. All of his siblings had children and as the oldest one, he felt inadequate without a child. He then asked about his family, "How's everybody?" I told him that they were doing all right. He shook his head, "They don't care about me, you know. They really hate me." I tried to reassure him, "No. They hate this person that's sitting in front of me, but they love their brother". I told him that Billy was in jail. Ben said that he knew. He said that "out on the street you hear everything that's going on all over the place." I went up to the counter, brought chicken for myself and a soda for Ben. We said our goodbyes and I left. Three months later he was back in jail for a drug related incident. During the next few years, Ben spent most of his time in prison.

In 2003, Ben was released and placed in a residential drug rehabilitation center in the Bronx. He was allowed out during the day to go to work. January 5, 2003 was his first birthday since 1986 that Ben was not incarcerated. It was during this time that he had a conversation with his brother, Billy.

It was the first time we ever spoke that long. We talked about everything. I told him I wanted my little brother back. It was the first time we talked about Mom's funeral. The first time he asked me to my face why I didn't go. He said he couldn't get over that. I told him how messed up I was. That I thought everybody blamed me. I couldn't go. We never got a chance to speak before. When he was out; I was in. When I was out; he was in. Just like now. He's in jail. But I'm staying out.

Ben happily informed me that he was "seeing a woman". Monica is 33 years old and lives in the same building as his sisters. She is the single mother of an eleven year-old

daughter. She works off-the-books to supplement her welfare. Sometime in late July 2003, Ben was arrested and sent to a special accelerated drug program. Shortly thereafter, we got the news that his girlfriend was pregnant. At 38 years-old, Ben would finally become a father. In late January, Ben was released and came home. He moved in with Monica and his newborn son. Several times, when he referred to his “son” he stopped and happily reflected on the words.

Did you hear that? Wow! I can say “my son”. See I told you that I would have a child before I was forty. Well, I just made it. I’m 39. Me and Monica, we doing real good. We stopped smoking [crack]. I really love her. And now with the baby. I’m going to be all right. People are going to try to mess us up because they going to be jealous.

Ben and Monica appeared to live contentedly for the next year and a half. They both stopped using drugs. Ben worked two jobs to support his new family. However, by the end of 2005, he and Monica had separated. He cited her hanging out with the wrong people, people who were still using drugs, as the reason for the breakup. She said it was because he was jealous of some of her male friends. No matter what the reason, both of them had started smoking crack again. Monica had a female drug addict sleeping in her living room and Ben ended up back in another drug program.

Unless some intervention happens in Ben’s child’s life, he will grow up in a poor home, in a poor neighborhood under the same social conditions that Ben and his siblings and many of their friends were raised and nurtured in. Generation after generation of black families have been raised under these conditions, not allowing for the families to participate fully in a society that places a premium on the nuclear family. In Dr. Martin Luther King’s response to the Moynihan Report (Rainwater, 1967, p407) he states that “In the United States, it [the Negro Family] has lived in a man-made social and

psychological jungle which it could not subdue.” The social structure of our society continues its deleterious effects on subsequent generations of black families and diminishes the chances of black males of becoming active, productive citizens. In all likelihood, Ben’s son will grow up in a single parent family headed by a female and surrounded by the female-headed families of his two aunts.

Bev: The New Matriarch

Bev, Sharon’s second child, is a 39-year old single mother of five children. They live in a three-bedroom apartment in the same building that her mother moved into in 1977. Tony, the father of Bev’s youngest three children, lives with them. The two oldest children’s father, Paul, currently lives with a woman on Long Island. Also staying in Bev’s home is a 25 year-old male friend who sleeps on the couch in the living room and a twelve-year-old girl whose mother succumbed to AIDS. The girl shares the bedroom with Bev’s children. Bev is currently trying to obtain the grandmother’s official permission to keep the young girl temporarily until the state or other family members decide on the girl’s fate.

Bev, like her mother, has non-family members living with her and her children. Sometimes it is a friend in need of a place to stay. Often that friend may have children. At other times, it may be a young niece or nephew who prefers staying with Bev because of the freedom they enjoy while being a part of this household. Something is always going on at Baisley, especially in the summer: a party; a cookout in the back; basketball games on the court; and lots and lots of other young people. There are seldom curfews for the children because adults are generally outside in the courtyard or on the street in front of the building until three or four o’clock in the morning and adult eyes are always

watching out for the children. Whatever the case regarding houseguests, Bev learned early in life that your home was to be shared with non-family members. She and her siblings were socialized into believing that sharing one's home was the norm. The culture that predominated in their world was not necessarily that of the larger society, which, through some of its beliefs, professed sharing as a virtue, but through some of its actions inconsistently practiced what it preached. There are not many people who will invite outsiders to share their beds and bread. Individuals with the least for themselves often understand the importance of sharing with others who are even less fortunate. Is it possible that they realize that they are so close to the predicament of the person on the next rung down the ladder that the precariousness of them falling down a rung precipitates their assisting the lower individual as a way of self-preservation, in case they should find themselves in that predicament and needing assistance from above? Or are they truly believers in sharing as a virtue?

Bev was eight years old when her family moved into Baisley. She attended the local public schools and dropped out of Queens Vocational High School in the 11th grade. In 1989, she gave birth to her first child and went on public assistance. After her second child was born, she moved into her own two-bedroom apartment in the same building as her mother. Paul, her two oldest children's father, lived with Bev and their children until 1994, when she put him out. He had not held a steady job since she met him and what little money he made hustling, he drank up in liquor and beer.

Bev took the GED test and passed on her first try. At my strong suggestion, she applied for admission to York College and started her first semester as a matriculated student in the fall of 1994. She did not do well and was placed on probation her first

semester and then was dismissed after she failed her second semester. She submitted a petition for readmission and was approved. However, she never returned to college. She stated that her failure in college was caused by her new found freedom. For the first time in her life, she did not have to answer to anyone for anything. She had her own apartment. Her sister Bobbie became her built-in baby-sitter. She went out every night, even if only outside in the courtyard, although most evenings, she would go to a club or party. At first, Bev would get to her classes at York, even if she was so tired she could hardly keep her eyes open. But soon, she started missing classes. Eventually, Bev stopped coming to school altogether. Bev was the first in her immediate family to go to college. None of her friends had gone to college. In fact, most of the people she knew had dropped out of high school. There were very few role models in her environment that could have shown her the benefits of obtaining a degree. While a degree would not necessarily have promised a dramatic improvement in her lifestyle, it would have opened up more possibilities for employment. Without an education or skills it was improbable she could improve her life chances.

In 1995, I told Bev that I was writing a paper about her mother and the rest of the family. I asked her if she would help me put together a portrait of the family, neighbors, and friends. I informed her that I hoped to enlighten individuals about the plight and conditions of poor people in an urban environment and that I wanted to tell the story using their own words and perceptions of their realities. Bev agreed to the interviews.

My first interview with Bev took place in her living room in the summer of 1995. I arrived on a Saturday at 6:00 PM. I picked up a pizza on the way. After the children finished eating pizza, Bev asked Naila and Ieasha (her sister's daughter) to go downstairs

to ask Bobbie for some clean underwear for Ieasha. I started to say something regarding my concern for the children, ages two and three years old, navigating the elevator and/or stairs (3 flights down and up) in this eight-story building by themselves. Then I realized this is little different than a child going from upstairs to downstairs in a private dwelling - - virtually this entire building is their home and particularly so since they have access to the two apartments of the family whose doors are rarely locked. It was unthinkable that anyone would harm any child. Mothers, fathers, teachers, drug dealers all looked out for the children. Eyes are everywhere in this public housing complex and the residents looked after and cared for the children as if they were all family members. Many of the residents have lived in Baisley for over 20 and 30 years and have watched the children grow up along with their own children.

As Bev and I finished off the rest of the pizza, a young girl entered the apartment and told Bev that Pam, the young girl's mother, would be ready to go to work at 12:30 AM. Bev takes Pam to work every night. She has a car which she purchased at an auction with money she received as a result of being injured in a car accident. Owning a car means having access to an important item - transportation. Very few of her friends have their own mode of transportation, yet they all know that they can depend on Bev for a ride. Even though the car had been purchased by Bev, it was a communal vehicle for the benefit of many. Bev chauffeured many individuals to the store, to pick up their children, or to work. Like many of her neighbors, different individuals had different assets that they shared with all. With few of the resources necessary for subsistence, this group of individuals divided and shared their meager belongings so that most everyone had access to items that they could not afford on their own.

Bev and I sat in the living room to start our conversation about life at Baisley. “Tell me what it is like living in your housing development: the general atmosphere; the attitudes of the people: the conditions of the buildings?” Bev retorted quickly,

I don’t like the people. They don’t mind their business. I hate this place. I’m going to leave soon. It sucks; you see the same buildings every day. When you try to get out, but you got to come back. So you stay in and watch TV. I go out early before the people come out. At least you don’t hear gun shots anymore – like you used to. That’s why my son can stay out till twelve at night.

She thought for a moment, and then went on:

They should put police in every building. We need police in every building because the reefer heads take over the floors. They spit on the floors and the kids can’t play there. If there were police chasing out the reefer heads, then the kids could play in the hallway. They can’t even play because of all the reefer heads who hang out on my floor...They [the police] were moved to the other building. It got more crime now than ours. Most of the drug dealers and users moved, got shot, or are in jail.

Bev was not concerned that the “reefer heads” posed any threat of danger to the children, her concern was over the unhealthy and unsanitary conditions their presence created.

I asked her why she did not ask to have police patrol her building to which she answered, “I don’t want to get beat up.”

When I asked Bev about her future plans, she replied that she would probably be here (in Baisley) for the rest of her life. She would probably never work. . She couldn’t make enough money and besides “why go to work, I got my rent paid and I get food stamps”. However, with the change in public assistance policies during the 1990s, many were forced to work.

From Welfare to Work

Bev has been working steadily for the past six years. She is proud of the fact that she finally got off of welfare. This was a turn around from the previous conversation. Bev's friend Pam got her a job with REGIS, a company that does inventories for major stores in the tri-state area. Although, the hours were not regular, a person could work a lot of overtime to earn extra money. After she was hired, Bev got a job for her sister. Then when Tony was released from prison, he was hired also. It was not easy to survive on the low salaries that they earned. In order to make ends meet, Bev, Bobbie, and Tony each worked in excess of 60 hours per week. They rotated shifts so that someone would be at home to watch the children.

Bev was able to get jobs for several other friends. Having a friend or an acquaintance who is already employed is an asset in any environment, but it becomes an indispensable resource for the urban poor. Wilson (1996) and Newman (2000) both found that connections were invaluable to poor blacks seeking employment. Bev, like her mother, became an advocate for her friends and neighbors. She was able to help others and in turn her self-esteem improved. There was a visible change in Bev's outlook on life. She opened up a bank account and started to save money. She stated emphatically, "I will never go back on welfare. I don't need those people anymore."

After about a year, Bev was promoted to manager. However, her new position was short lived. Bev and Bobbie were fired from their jobs on the same day for not showing up at their worksite. Bev gave the following account of what caused the terminations:

We was talking bout the projects. And someone said that it was inappropriate conversation. Someone told me that the head Supervisor, Dave, said I was

starting trouble again. I told my manager that I was not going to the assigned site the next morning because I wanted to go see Dave. The next day I received a call that I was fired for not showing up at the site. Bobbie got her job back because she had a doctor's note for not showing up at the site. I told Dave that I had informed my manager that I was not coming in; she claims that I didn't tell her. I was fired for not showing up and not informing anyone. So it boils down to my word against hers.

It wasn't long before Bev got another job. Pam had recently started working as a manager at a delivery company at JFK airport. She immediately hired Bev as one of the supervisors. Bev now makes \$14.00 an hour with the possibility of a promotion. She is still among the working poor (Shipler 2004) and qualifies for some of the programs created for families living below the poverty line. However, if her salary rises and puts her just a few dollars over the limit, she will join the ranks of the "missing class"(Newman 2007), those who have moved above the poverty line and no longer qualify for government assistance yet survive from paycheck to paycheck.

Still Bev feels that she is better off than some of her friends, many of whom are unemployed. They may work off-the-books, so they will not be included in official Census statistics on employment. Many male residents of Baisley are unable to find employment because of criminal records; others have little or no formal education, a prerequisite to most jobs. A few local businesses employ some of the residents of Baisley. For instance, the local soul food restaurant employs four of Baisley's black male residents. A few others sweep, mop floors, or stock shelves in the local bodega. Still others continue to hustle in order to make ends meet. A few Baisley adolescents find employment in local Wendy's and McDonalds. The lives of these urban poor have not yet been affected by the current economic crisis because their employment

opportunities were limited before the “crisis.” As for Bev and two of her friends, they are still employed at JFK airport, working with cargo companies.

Bev is the sole breadwinner of her family and looks out for her sister as well. She has successfully learned how to advocate in different areas in their lives. For instance, in 2005 when water was leaking from a broken sink in the bathroom and management at Baisley would not fix it, Bev contacted NYCHA.

Four years ago, Bev ran for a position on the Tenants Association. Although she lost by a few votes, she now believes that you can effect change by being a vocal, active participant in your surroundings. Not only does Bev speak out for her immediate family and her sister’s family, she advocates for her younger brother’s children as well. Over the years, Billy’s children and their mother have been frequent houseguests of the Jones sisters.

Billy:

Billy is 37 years old and resides with his current girlfriend, Chastity, in a two-bedroom apartment in Virginia, having relocated there from New York in 2006. Billy has five children: Tina 14, Trina 13, Nancy 10, Billy, Jr. 8, and Daquan 6. The four oldest children live with their mother, Donna, in Queens, and Daquan lives with his mother, Keisha, in Brooklyn.

Billy was five when his mother moved the family to Baisley. He attended the local public schools, dropping out in the eleventh grade. He later obtained his GED while incarcerated in an upstate prison. Billy, and his sister Bev, learned as young children, that you had to be able to protect yourself. If it became known that you could

not or would not fight, you became a target of bullies. And there were plenty of bullies in Baisley. You either had a reputation for being an easy target, one who could be ridiculed and picked on or you earned a reputation for being able to fight and stand up to anyone. Billy and Bev earned reputations for being tough; no one messed with them.

I remember one particular incident when Billy was in the second grade. Sharon was serving a four month sentence for shoplifting, and I was caring for the children. Billy's teacher called me informing me that I must immediately come to school to pick him up. He had been placed on suspension for bringing a knife to class. When I questioned him, he said he needed it for protection; a boy had threatened to beat him up after school. To say the least, I was shocked that a 7 year-old would resort to taking a knife to school for protection. But I was even more shocked at his mother's response to the incident. She said that he had a right to protect himself, and if that meant carrying a knife, then it was all right with her. As young as seven, Billy was being socialized into believing and using violent behavior as an approved method for dealing with situations. He also had learned that he could not rely on adults in position of authority to protect him against danger.

After that I began to notice that Billy exhibited aggressive behavior. He was ruthless and fought hard. He would punish his opponent to the point that the individual would be afraid to retaliate. This reputation later earned him a role within one of Baisley's drug gangs. To my knowledge, he never used drugs. Instead, because of his serious demeanor and no nonsense fearless attitude, he became involved in the business

aspect of the drug enterprise. He was dependable and accountable and would protect the interests of the business.

Billy was drawn into the illegal drug scene as were so many other young black males who saw this as opportunity to get a piece of the American Dream (Williams, 1989). Like anyone else they wanted the luxuries that they constantly saw before them and worked hard at the opportunities available to earn enough money to afford those alluring lifestyles. Billy rose up in the ranks quickly and garnered for himself the money and prestige that went along with his new role. He became very popular and respected among the young people of Baisley.

Billy moved from state to state to evade capture by the police but always kept in touch with his family. Several times, he was able to come to New York for a few days and avoid capture by the police. He was so bold, that in 1995, while he was staying in Indiana with his girlfriend, Natalie, he returned to New York with her and her brother to appear on one of the daytime talk shows. Flown to New York and put up in a hotel in Manhattan for three days, all expenses paid for by the show's producers, they had concocted a story about themselves that had the usual daytime drama appeal. Billy claimed that his girlfriend was cheating on him with his best friend, when in actuality, his best friend was Natalie's brother. Billy took advantage of the producer's gullibility to see his family and hang out with friends for a day before returning to Indiana. It was the last time he saw his mother. She died six months later.

On October 6, 1996, the police arrested Billy at his mother's apartment. That date would have been his mother's fiftieth birthday and the police correctly assumed that he

would come home. Billy served the remainder of his sentence and returned to Baisley. Then in May 1998, Billy was arrested in the big drug bust (see chapter 4). He was let go but subsequently was picked up on a technicality and served one year at an accelerated drug program. During this stay at the drug rehab, he started helping out as a counselor and transporter, ferrying clients from one facility to another. He liked being a counselor. He felt that it gave purpose to his life. He believed that his experiences in the illegal drug business gave him an insight that was invaluable to helping others avoid the mistakes that he had made with his own life. He effectively communicated to young people the pitfalls of getting involved in this very lucrative but dangerous business. He graphically told them about the death and destruction that he personally witnessed.

Upon being released from the drug rehab program, Billy moved back to Bobbie's apartment in Baisley. Before long, Billy was arrested for breaking probation; he had been observed by the police hanging with convicted felons. He opted for a newly created accelerated drug program that would fulfill his sentence and release him in six months if he could endure its intense boot-camp like atmosphere. This was doable and much less time than the two years in prison that he faced.

After successfully completing the six-month intense program, Billy was released without any pending probation or parole conditions. He decided that he had to leave New York if he wanted a positive change in his life. If he stayed in New York, the temptation of rejoining the fast and exciting life of the streets would surely lure him back to prison. He and his new girlfriend, Chastity, moved to Virginia, where he resides today.

Currently, Billie is a counselor in a high school in Virginia and extremely proud that he is helping others, especially young people. He uses his own life as an example of situations to avoid.

Honestly, I really believe that this is my calling. Old man once told me 'find a job that you love and you'll never work a day'. I went thru all that back then, so that I can show the kids that they can do the right thing. It's never too late to turn your life around. I turned mine around.

Billy is right to be optimistic about his life. He has beaten the odds. Most of his friends are dead or in jail. Not only has he survived, he has become an advocate for himself and other young black males who live in a society that places them on the periphery; out of reach of opportunities that would enable them to live the American Dream

Why did Billy beat the odds, when so many others did not? He does not know why but feels that because he *did* survive, he is obligated to save others from the fate that took so many and that his life's story can be used to keep other young men from taking a path of destruction - and this has become "his mission".

Bobbie, The Communal Traditions Continue

Bobbie was born in March of 1977, two months after her mother had moved the family to Baisley. She was born a resident of Baisley Houses and remains one today. She lives in the same apartment that her mother moved into 30 years ago. NYCHA allowed her to keep it after her mother died in 1996. Bobbie has two children: fourteen-year old Ieasha, whose father has spent most of the child's life in prison and four-year old Jaquan, whose father, Toss, also has been incarcerated numerous times. However, Jaquan's paternal grandparents adore him and quite often send for him and Bobbie to visit them in their home in South Carolina.

Bobbie attended the local public schools and dropped out in the 10th grade. When she was 28, however, she attended GED classes at the Educational Opportunity Center (EOC) at York College and, on her second try, passed the exam and received her GED. Currently, Bobbie does not work. She has held jobs in the past, but only briefly. Since she has a young child, she receives food stamps and assistance from social services. The small allotment she receives is not nearly enough to cover rent, food, clothing, and incidentals. Her sister, Bev, helps her make ends meet.

Bobbie has several very close friends that she grew up with in Baisley. For many years, they shared the same hallways and apartments as play areas; they slept over at each other's apartments, sharing bedrooms and beds; they ate meals together and went to the same schools. Bobbie and her friends developed a tight bond that has lasted for many years. Bobbie refers to them as "my girls" or "my sisters". Her closest and dearest 'sister' is Red, who moved to Baisley in 1983 with her mother, father, and older sister. She is the same age as Bobbie. They immediately became friends and have been friends ever since. For the past twenty-five years, they have developed a bond that has the closeness and familiarity of natural sisters. They were in the same classes and dropped out of school together. They have always hung out together and stayed inside together. When they dated boys, they usually made sure that they guys were friends so that they could all go out on dates together. They are inseparable. Red is currently unemployed. But, like her friend Bobbie, she has worked sporadically at several low-wage jobs in the past. She has two children by two different men. She and her children live with Red's mother and father in an apartment on the seventh floor.

Several of Bobbie's other friends periodically stay with her in her apartment on the third floor. After her mother died and Bobbie was allowed to keep the apartment, two of her friends immediately moved in. One was Rodney, he had periodically slept over when Ms. Jones was alive. The other was Amanda, her friend from the adjacent apartment, whose mother threw her out of the house. Several other friends would periodically spend a night or two. They slept on the couch and loveseat in the living room or in the bed in the back bedroom. Bobbie and her daughter occupied her mother's bedroom. Bev complained bitterly about Bobbie's living arrangements. She wanted her to get rid of the "freeloaders." One of the "freeloaders" was Billy's ex-girlfriend, Donna, along with their four children. However, after four or five months, Bobbie threw Donna and the children out of the apartment. They had argued constantly about cooking, cleaning the apartment and the amount of money each had to spend on food. But, more important, according to Bobbie, she wanted them out of the apartment before Billy was released from prison. Bobbie felt that if Donna and the children were still living in the apartment it would be difficult to prevent him from moving in to live with his children. She had been warned on several occasions by NYCHA management that if they discover either of her brothers living in the apartment, she would be evicted. Both brothers had been convicted of selling and/or possession of illegal drugs in Baisley and therefore, in accordance with NYCHA rules, were not permitted to reside in Baisley ever again. Donna and her children moved to a shelter in Brooklyn.

Bobbie now has the same type of frequent houseguests that her mother took in. There seems to be a pattern of socialization that influenced the next generation of Joneses to offer assistance to people in need. At least this pattern was observed in the lifestyles

of the Jones sisters. Since the Jones brothers were most often either in jail or running from the law, it is difficult to ascertain what they would have done had they had their own apartments.

Life was not easy for Bobbie and Bev. Bobbie's biggest advocate is Bev. On several occasions, Bev has had to intervene for Bobbie with the management of Baisley, and she successfully acted on Bobbie's behalf at NYCHA headquarters to fend off an eviction notice. More recently, when the school district did not want to grant a transfer for Bobbie's daughter (see Chapter 6), Bev took up the gauntlet. Bobbie is thirty-one years-old. At what point she will become her own advocate, remains to be seen. In the succeeding chapters, it is Bev who develops a powerful voice that effects positive change not only for herself but for her family and friends - a voice borne out of necessity.

Sharon Jones is gone. Her children, now grown with children of their own, have no "real" extended family to reach out to. Their maternal grandparents are deceased. Their mother's siblings rarely contact them. Their father, who lives less than a mile away with his wife and family, ignores their calls. Yet, they do have "sisters", whom they grew up with in Baisley, individuals that have been an integral part of their lives, filling in places usually reserved for family members. This is indeed, the Jones's extended family, primarily based in the Baisley Houses, their urban village.

Chapter 4: Police Sweeps and Parental Protests

According to a special report by the U. S. Department of Justice, (August 2003), thirty-three percent of black males and less than six percent of white males will go to state or federal prison during their lifetimes. In another study conducted by the U. S. Department of Justice (May 2006), the results showed that twelve percent of black males and 1.7 percent of white males in their twenties were incarcerated in the middle of 2005. It would be difficult to exaggerate the lasting impact of arrest and imprisonment on black males in the inner city ghettos of American cities. Recent studies (Garland 2001 and Pager 2007) document the extent to which police and prison records mar the life chances of young black males, while others emphasize the continued importance of criminal and gang activities in the "off the books" economies that predominate in poor, segregated minority communities (Venkatesh 2006).

In this chapter, we shall see that the stigmatizing effects of past gang activity in the neighborhood and the lasting impact of prisonization are facts of life for Baisley residents and, in particular, for the families we have followed . This chapter will also show that Baisley residents are finding new ways to contend with these negative conditions by politically mobilizing, at least at the informal neighborhood level, to speak out to police agents and others in authority. This new assertiveness is the product of explicit political discussion at the local level, as well as reactions against obvious cases of police harassment and violence in the larger Jamaica community, most notably what residents perceive as the police murder of Sean Bell, a young man who was on his way to marriage and upward mobility when he was gunned down in a police action, in 2006

The deleterious effects of having a prison record are felt by the individual, the family and the community. Already marginalized by living in urban poverty, black males with prison records are further removed from participating in and benefiting from opportunities purportedly available for upward mobility. The stigma attached to their “ex-convict” status diminishes their already low chances of gaining employment. Federal financial aid guidelines deny felons financial aid for higher education¹, and public housing developments can deny residency to convicted individuals². Because prisoners in upstate prisons are counted as part of the population of the prison’s district, resources and additional legislative power are assigned to that district. Thus, the district to which the prisoner will return has fewer resources to provide for the influx of returning prisoners and the neighborhood becomes even more devastated. Additionally, because they have been in prison, this large group of the African American males have lost the right to vote, lessening the political power of the community. People living in adjoining communities readily stigmatize the entire neighborhood, labeling it dangerous and undeserving of attention.

Baisley, a Stigmatized Neighborhood

Baisley residents felt they were under siege during the drug epidemic that lasted during much of the 1980s and in the early 1990s. Murders, beatings and rapes committed by gang members who essentially controlled the streets and hallways of the buildings

¹ The 1998 Amendment to the U.S. Higher Education Act of 1965 states that any individual who has been convicted of possession or sale of drugs is ineligible to receive federal aid for college related costs.

² The New York City Housing Authority, in its handbook for its residents, “*A Home to be Proud Of*” includes the following criteria ‘any violent or drug related activity on or off NYCHA grounds, any criminal activity that results in a felony conviction,...’ as reason for eviction from NYC public housing.

were common occurrences. No wonder that the police were a constant presence, one that was mainly welcomed by the majority of Baisley residents.

During that time, Baisley Houses was home to one of the most notorious and dangerous drug gangs in New York City – the Supreme Team. According to the local precinct, the Supreme Team operated out of a number of apartments in Baisley, including several on the same floor where Ms. Jones and her family resided. Although hers was not a primary lair of the drug dealers, she allowed drug dealers and crack addicts to use her apartment for the purpose of selling drugs or getting high. The drug business was lucrative, and it was fast money.

In Baisley, as in other poor urban areas, young men and women observe their parents struggling to try to make ends meet. Whether receiving public assistance or working at low-paying jobs, there is little or no money left after paying for rent, food, and clothing. To provide for necessities or something extra, such as nicer clothing, entertainment, or extra food, individuals found off-the-book jobs, for example, as cab drivers or handymen. Our society does not provide opportunities or access to better paying jobs to individuals with little or no formal training or education. Many of the young men and women in this community have not finished high school, and the young men carry the added burden of having criminal records, thus making it all but impossible to obtain employment. It was apparent to the young men that selling drugs was a quicker and surer way to make more money than any legitimate or legal off-the-books job would pay.

By the mid- nineties, however, Baisley was no longer a major haven for drug dealing and its related violence. Even though a drug market still existed at Baisley, it

functioned at a diminished level due to the decline in crack cocaine as the drug of choice. Today, although some drug activity remains in the neighborhood, it is much less overt and far less active than during the last drug epidemic. But the legacy of the earlier gang and drug activity contributes to what seems to be a permanent level of individual and neighborhood stigma.

Many in our society believe that criminals in general, and black male criminals in particular, cannot be rehabilitated, and releasing them from jail is a waste of time and resources. Police officers feel this sentiment more directly, for it is their direct time and energy that put criminals behind bars in the first place, only to have them released to be picked up again and again. The recidivism rate of black males is higher than other groups; the recidivism rate for black males is 73 percent, for Hispanics 65 percent, and for whites 63 percent. Unfortunately, these statistics add to the negative perception of all black males who have ever been incarcerated. In addition, when a black man finishes his sentence in jail and returns home, the odds of him finding employment are very low. With no job and no money, most of these men have nothing to do but hang around on the hill or the corner, making them appear menacing or lazy and adding to the stigma already associated with their ex-convict status.

Young black males in this neighborhood feel, with good reason that they are under surveillance, harassed and intimidated by the local police on a regular basis, not unlike males of color in other poor urban settings. The majority of males who reside in Baisley have been in prison or jail. It can be a regular outing for the young female residents of Baisley to take trips upstate to visit boyfriends in prison, and it is not seen as an out-of-the-ordinary occurrence for them to make a group outing of it, sometimes

taking along the children of the incarcerated men. One of the traveling visitors very proudly said to me, “You’re going to approve of my new boyfriend; he’s only been in jail once”. I have been told by several young females who live in Baisley, when I asked why each of them had a boyfriend that was or had been in jail, “Are you kidding? You can’t find a man who has not been to jail.”

While their prison records often date to an earlier period of crime and drug epidemic in the area, that so many are “known to the police” for one reason or another contributes enormously to the stigma that they and others feel on a daily basis. Unlike neighborhoods where residents are presumed innocent when they are out in public, the residents of Baisley know that the police can pounce on them at any moment. It is relatively easy for the police to arrest anyone residing in or visiting Baisley Houses. For instance, anyone, even a resident of Baisley, can be arrested for trespassing by simply being in a Baisley Houses building in which they are not a registered tenant. There is a little known law that states that an individual who has been convicted of selling drugs in a public housing development may, at the discretion of the police officer, be arrested for trespassing, i.e., for being in a building in which that individual does not reside³. Since most people are unaware of the stipulations regarding who may be arrested, this law allows the police to arrest arbitrarily, fingerprint and hold almost anyone. Once arrested and fingerprinted, an individual will have a record that can be used against him for any reason. It then becomes simpler to arrest an individual and hold him on suspicion of having committed a crime by virtue that he already has a criminal record. Many black

³ New York City Housing Association’s (NYCHA) Trespass Policy for Felony Drug Arrests states that any individual who has been arrested on felony drug charges on NYCHA property or on property adjacent to NYCHA is subject to arrest for trespassing. If the person is a resident of NYCHA, they are subject to arrest if they are found outside of their apartment or building’s common area.

men are arrested for actions for which a white man would not be arrested, further exacerbating the racial disparity in prisons and adding to the stigma associated with young black males living in the urban ghetto.

The sense Baisley residents had of being caught between the criminals and the police, and being stigmatized, second class citizens with lesser rights before the law, stems in large part from a massive police action in the neighborhood in 1998.

The Big Sweep, Origins of Collective Stigma

On April 4, 1998, the 113th and 105th precincts conducted an extensive drug raid at Baisley Houses. The police imprisoned 24 people in an action called “a sweep”. In a sweep, the police can arrest everyone on the premises. This particular raid was supposed to be one of the biggest drug busts of the year, a political victory for New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. One of his “greatest accomplishments” in his first term was reduction in crime; this was accomplished in part by locking up record numbers of individuals and taking large amounts of drugs off the streets.

Acting on a tip from an informant that an arsenal of weapons, large amounts of cash, and top drug dealers could be found in four identified apartments, the police descended on Baisley. There were scores of police, helicopters, police vans, a mobile command center and dozens of police cars surrounding the two buildings that face each other on Foch Boulevard. It was about 10:00 pm when I received a frantic call from Bev, “You got to get over here right now, the police just locked up everybody and took Bobbie and Billy, and Bobbie’s friends”. One of the main targets of the raid was Billy. Later on, the police officers of the 113th would report to the newspapers that Billy was the head of

a major drug ring. He had been released from jail about three months previously, having served a sentence for drug possession, and was a likely candidate for vilification.

I parked a block away from the building and walked over to the Police Command Mobile Center. I still had on my business suit from a meeting earlier in the day. A briefcase and eyeglasses finished my “professional” look. Previous experience has shown me that police and other authority figures will respond to a person according to that person’s perceived status. Therefore in situations like this, I receive more cooperation from people if they perceive that I am of equal or preferably higher social status. The sergeant on duty gave me the following information: two precincts, the 105 and 113, had staked out four apartments in the two buildings for the past four months. The police officers had arrested a “notorious” drug ring and captured two of its leaders as well as 22 other members of the gang. All of the arrested individuals were taken to the 113th Precinct.

The four apartments, referred to by the sergeant, included Bobbie’s. The police rammed open the front door to Bobbie’s apartment and arrested everyone in the apartment, except Bobbie’s five-year old daughter, Ieasha. The four arrested individuals consisted of three of Bobbie’s friends; Red, Shorty, and Shakema, plus one of Billy’s friends, George. Bobbie was not in the apartment. She had gone upstairs to Bev’s to get something to eat. She had left her friends in the living room watching a video. George was in the small bedroom in the back of the apartment. Billy was outside. When the police broke in the door, the girls ran into Bobbie’s bedroom in the back, unaware that George was in the other bedroom. George then ran into the bedroom where the girls had gone. Ieasha was hysterical and cowering behind the broken front door.

Informed of what was going on in her apartment, Bobbie ran down the stairs from her sister's sixth floor apartment, rushed in and grabbed her child. The police had let her back out into the hallway before they had realized that she was the owner of the apartment and the sister of one of the prime suspects that they wanted to capture. They retrieved Bobbie from the hallway and put her in handcuffs. Meanwhile, Billy, who was outside watching the commotion with everyone else, decided that it was safe for him to go upstairs to the apartment. After all, he had not been in the apartment when the police had burst in. He, too, was arrested. For the next two and a half months, 23 people were held in jail. The one person whose family obtained a paid lawyer was released within two days of the arrests. All of the other arrested individuals were assigned Legal Aid lawyers.

What was supposed to be a major drug bust netted only \$120 in cash, 4 ounces of cocaine, a small amount of marijuana, and two guns. To garner support for this big blunder, the police announced the raid a success. Playing to the fears of a return to the days when people were frightened to leave their homes, the police department released reports to the press identifying the arrested individuals and linking them to the infamous "Supreme Team". In the mid-eighties and early-nineties there had been a high level of drug activity and violence in Baisley, most of it perpetrated by the Supreme Team. The gang controlled Baisley and much of the area in the surrounding neighborhood. That particular gang, however, had long disbanded – most of its members were dead or in jail. And now, in each newspaper article about the drug raid conducted on Baisley, Billy was identified as the leader of the "New Supreme Team".

People unfamiliar with the arrested individuals readily believed the police account. The young males had criminal records, and the young females were single parents on public assistance. Who in our society will run to the aid of the arrested individuals, people who are believed to be guilty by virtue of the stigma attached to their current statuses – the males with criminal records and the females, unemployed recipients of public assistance? After all, the media account of the drug bust and the people arrested was believable. Readers and viewers accepted the reported actions and allegations to be true, given the public's expectations of the status/roles of these individuals.

After the arrested individuals had been in jail for over a month and a half, Bev and several of their relatives contacted me and asked for my assistance. Knowing that I was acquainted with, and worked with, community leaders and elected officials and that I had previously arranged for some of the elected officials to attend events and programs at Baisley in the past, Bev and the others felt that I could influence elected officials to intervene on behalf of their incarcerated relatives and friends. In addition, at the time, I was the vice president of the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and this position afforded me entrée to many local community leaders. The arrested individuals had already been in jail for almost two months and had not been brought to trial. The incarcerated individuals and their relatives felt that if they could have afforded to hire lawyers, then they too might have been released. One of the relatives said, "If we had money, we could get them out. At least the ones we know ain't done nothing". In addition, Bobbie told me that she and her friends were constantly harassed by the prison guards at Rikers Island and were told if they wanted to get out, all they had to do was say that they knew about the drugs and that

the drugs belonged to Billy. The guards mocked the girls, calling them “Supreme Teamettes” and told them that if the males did not admit guilt, the females were going to be in jail a long time. The girls were terrified of what might happen to them, if they remained in jail. Their fear added to the urgency of getting them released.

I called local elected officials. A congressman, two state senators, two state assembly members, and two city council members agreed to meet with the families. After meeting with the families, the elected officials contacted the Queens District Attorney and arranged for a meeting between them, a local clergyman, and the representative of the local chapter of the NAACP. The DA told the group that he would look into the matter but couldn’t say what the outcome would be. It was a very serious issue and that charges would be forthcoming against some of the individuals. The Assistant District Attorney (ADA) inadvertently told the group that he knew that most of the incarcerated individuals were innocent, but they (members of the DA’s office) were hoping that the three ‘guilty’ individuals originally sought by the police would confess and agree to a prearranged plea which would definitely send them to jail. Their innocent relatives and friends would then be released. When one of the community leaders asked why innocent people were knowingly kept behind bars, the DA interrupted and spoke up for his ADA, “that’s not what he meant”. That is what he said, however. After telling the DA that they believed in law and order and in the integrity of his office as well as in the police department, the group of community leaders expressed their confidence that this situation would be thoroughly investigated by the DA’s office and that the individuals who were not charged with a crime would be released. The DA informed the

group that he would not make any promises, but that he would carefully scrutinize what had occurred and assured the group that justice would be carried out.

Billy had finally decided to plead guilty and accept the eight-to-ten years in jail so that his sister and her friends could be released, when miraculously he was released along with all the others. After all, he had been one of the main targets of the police. Yet, there was no direct evidence linking him with the drugs found in Bobbie's apartment. All of the arrested individuals were freed, except George. George had run into the bedroom where the girls had hid and when the police arrested him, he had traces of cocaine powder on him. The police had discovered cocaine powder in the back bedroom. George received a ten-year sentence for possession of crack cocaine with intent to sell. There was not enough evidence on any of the others to charge them with a crime. Even though drugs were found in Bobbie's apartment, she was not in the premises at the time.

Bobbie was told to stay out of trouble for one year and her case would be closed. Seventy-five days after the raid, 18 of the original 24 arrested individuals were released and came home (five others had been released earlier). Billy and Bobbie's Legal Aid lawyer told me that the police did not have enough evidence to charge any of them, except George. Upon his release, Billy's lawyer took him to her office, where her colleagues were as amazed as she, that Billy had been released. He had been a prime target of the police raid and had a criminal record for possession of drugs.

Although it didn't happen immediately after the community leaders met with the DA, I am convinced that knowing the leaders of this community were monitoring the situation influenced the DA to release the prisoners. There had been no formal charges,

and they had been kept in jail illegally. The elected officials had the power to cut through red tape, facilitating a meeting with the Queens District Attorney.

The stories about the “big drug raid” dropped out of the papers. Several months later, Billy was back in jail. He had been closely followed and harassed by the police. He had asked me to help him by making another call to elected officials or anyone who had power to stop the harassment. I told him the best advice I could give him would be to stay inside the apartment or leave town. Unfortunately for him, the police were angry that they were unable to keep him in jail. This time, they arrested him on a technicality. Billy was on parole. He violated his parole by being arrested by the police. Even though they found nothing on him, he violated parole anyway by being arrested. Did the police violate Billy’s rights? The system is designed so that many rules governing probation or parole can be so ambiguous that a minor action by the parolee or person on probation can be interpreted as an infraction and can therefore be utilized to reincarcerate the individual. Many poor urban black men do not have the resources to hire an attorney to protect their rights and therefore are at the mercy of a system that denies them the rights that are guaranteed all citizens.

“I Didn’t Know That I Got Rights”: Bobbie Gains a Voice

In May of 2004, two men were shot and killed in separate incidents on the corner of Guy R. Brewer and Foch Boulevards. Toss, Bobbie’s live-in boyfriend and the father of their expectant child was a suspect in one of the murders and had been arrested. Bobbie received a phone call from a police officer from the 103rd precinct requesting that she come to the police station for questioning as a witness to the murder. The police

officer told her that nothing would happen to her if she voluntarily came down and told them what she knew of the murder. Bev admonished her sister to stay out of it, fearful that if anyone in the neighborhood found that her sister had been questioned by the police, her sister would be in trouble with whoever did the shooting, as well as would be seen as a “rat” by others in the ‘hood. There is a strict code of silence when it comes to giving any information to the police. There are serious ramifications that can range from being censured to being seriously injured or even killed. Bev was concerned for her sister, not only afraid of someone discovering that Bobbie had gone to the police station, but also because she knew that the police officers would employ methods that would frighten her sister into saying or signing whatever statement was needed to make a case against Toss. Bobbie wanted to do what she could to get Toss out of jail. She went to the station against her sister’s strong warnings.

The following account of what happened is from a taped interview that I conducted with Bobbie.

The guy that got killed, they called him Dove - that was his street name. They locked Toss up, talking bout he did the murder. And they called me in because he had the same address as me. They called and told me they was gonna lock me up if I didn’t come down [to the police station], something bout I had information.

I asked Bobbie why had she not listened to her sister who warned her that the police could do nothing to her and pleaded with her not to go to the station. Bobbie explained that by the time her sister found out and called her on the cell phone, she was already on her way to the station, having been told by the police that if she voluntarily came in that nothing would happen to her and if she didn’t, they would arrest her for withholding information. She was terrified about what could happen to her, or Toss, if she did not go to the station, she said:

I didn’t know that I got no rights. You know what I’m saying, it scared me. I told them that I didn’t know nothing. But they was like your window is right there, so you had to see something. I told them ‘no’ and I was eight and half months pregnant. I told them I

was in my house when it happened. I was on the phone when that happened. I was on the phone with Toss when it happened, I was talking to him in jail. He was locked up, so how could he have anything to do with it? What they was trying to say was that he called somebody [from jail] and had them do it. ...They said 'didn't you get locked up in '98 [the big drug bust in 1998 referred to previously] and don't ACS [Administration for Children Services] have a case on you. I don't think you want to go to jail or have your kids taken away from you'. I said 'what's that got to do with this'.

The mere mention of ACS to many poor mothers who live in NYC can bring on feelings of anxiety and fear. They know, all too well, that ACS has the authority and power to remove children from their homes. Granted, there must be a complaint filed charging child neglect or abuse, but ACS has removed children from homes without charges being substantiated. It is this real fear that parents experience when the threat of ACS is presented to them that causes them to acquiesce to the demands of people in positions of authority - a fear tactic that is employed by the police to force compliance. The following continuation of the taped interview, with Bobbie, demonstrates the power of the use of this method:

They drilled it into my head that my kids was gonna be taken away from me if I didn't tell them what they wanted...They said 'if you sign this piece of paper, you can leave'. They made me sign a paper...I didn't care about nothing else, I didn't want them to take my kids. Then they kept pointing at this picture saying 'this is the person [that committed the murder], you know it, ain't it?' I said 'I don't know what you talking about'. I just kept asking 'Can I leave?'

But my name got dropped out of it, because Sherry, [the girlfriend of the young man that was in the picture, who ultimately was arrested for the murder], told me that when she went down there [to the police station], she saw the paper with my name on it... she told me, '...the lawyer said that all you have to do is write a statement saying that the police threatened you into signing that paper and they will drop your name.' I haven't written it yet. He [the lawyer] said when he needs it he will let me know and I can get it notarized...

Toss was released from jail. Bobbie said that he was upset that they had called her in for questioning and had frightened her, "I told him it was not his fault; this is what the police do anyway. They gonna do what they want to do."

The story that Bobbie told me is plausible. I have spoken with other individuals who have told me of similar police tactics . Some police officers have coerced information from frightened individuals, who have been terrified and threatened into signing false documents that were written by the police. The police and other individuals in authoritative positions in public institutions are privy to personal information about individuals that they use to control them, information about previous run-ins with the law or issues dealing with children and ACS. How can poor people with no resources or power learn to speak out against a system that uses these tactics to silence them? As of the writing of this chapter, the case against the young man accused of murder has not been resolved. Bobbie believes that she is “out of it” because, according to Sherrie, her boyfriend will be released from jail soon. The police do not have enough evidence to hold him.

Not Gonna Take It No More: Baisley Residents Speak Out

June 2, 2007, while Bobbie and I sat in my car in front of her building discussing her daughter’s upcoming graduation from I.S. 72, I observed two police officers sitting in an unmarked car in front of the bodega on the southeast corner of Foch and Guy R. Brewer Boulevards. I asked Bobbie about the current perceptions and actions on the part of the residents of Baisley toward the police. Describing an event in which she felt that the residents of Baisley had stood up to the police, Bobbie gave me the following account:

The other day everybody was outside having fun. You know, a little BBQ. The police came up and they seen them with the bottle and the police didn’t say nothing. They said to drink up and have fun and left. They came back about hour and half later and started harassing everybody and they grabbed up Tim, [a young resident of Baisley, whose father is the president of the Tenants Association] but he [Tim] got away from them but they

caught him ...When the police brought him out of the building, he was covered in blood and had a broken leg. His father went down to the police station and got his son and took him to the hospital...Now they [Tim and his father] got a lawsuit against the police. Anyway, everybody got mad and started surrounding the police. .. They [the police officers] got so scared they jumped in the car [with Tim] and left.

Why the police singled out Tim remains unanswered. AU, Tim's father, believes that it could be because he has been "a thorn in their side" for many years. AU has always been vocal regarding police abuse, and now in his current position as president of the TA, he is able to voice his concerns directly to the deputy director of the 113th Precinct.

Many of the residents of Jamaica and the larger surrounding community believe that the 113th precinct does a fairly good job. The precinct, however, has not been without its critics. After all, it receives numerous complaints about police misconduct and brutality. For the most part, though, people believe that the power and authority of the police department will keep their streets safe and most police officers do good policing. However, many people in the South Jamaica community were feeling betrayed by the police and outraged by the recent actions of the local police that left Sean Bell, a young black male, dead. Less than six months had passed since Sean and two of his friends were shot by police officers in downtown Jamaica, Queens. Although the community at large still had trust in the judicial system, that trust had waned. The police had lost some of the community residents' previous support. This reduction in support for the police led the residents of Baisley to believe that without that level of support the police would be vulnerable to criticism, even if that criticism came from the very individuals that heretofore the community stigmatized and thought to be of lesser worth. .

So it is in this light that the residents of Baisley confronted the police as they witnessed one of their own being beaten and abused by the police. If there was ever a time that they could speak out against this type of injustice and not be criticized, it was

now when the people of the surrounding community were distrustful of the police. The residents of Baisley felt empowered because the larger southeast Queens community's perception of the police had changed. This might be the time that these individuals that heretofore were shunned and not trusted by the larger society, whites as well as middle class blacks, might garner support for their efforts to change how young black males of Baisley were treated by abusive police officers. They surrounded the police car, that day, and shouted at the police "Long live Sean Bell. Long live Sean Bell" The officers hurriedly put Tim in their car and left the scene. For the time being, the residents of Baisley felt a small victory. For once they had forced the police to leave.

"Why do you think the people aren't scared of the police and are standing up to them?" I inquired of Bobbie. She responded:

I think everybody starting to get the point that we can do stuff now. Cause you know the cops be telling them to do stuff and they say "No, we live here". Everybody starting to get there now saying y'all can't do this to us. The police don't even mess with people like that around here no more cause everybody's standing up to them now. Everybody like look, we not doing nothing, leave us alone. Go head do what y'all get paid for. They got scared that day we chased them off.

Bobbie then told me with pride in her voice and her head held high, portraying her obvious self-pride at speaking up for herself,

Yeah, and the other day, I was standing on the hill. (The ramp that leads from the street to the courtyard and to the front door of the building) and this cop tells me I got to move. I told him I wasn't moving, I was waiting for my daughter. He told me to get off "his hill". I said "whose hill? I pay rent here. You get off my hill." He just looked at me and left. Yeah we ain't scared of them no more. Things are changing around here. Folks ain't doing like they used to.

According to the Deputy Director of 113th Precinct (the first African American female head of the 113th and only the second in NYC), accusations of police abuse and misconduct have decreased. She also stated that many of the complaints that are filed

are unfounded - with little or no basis for the complaint being submitted in the first place. However, her conclusion does not take into account the individuals who are harassed or abused by the police but do not file complaints for fear of retribution. Complaints alleging harassment or misconduct by police are filed with the Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB); a process which starts with picking up the CCRB form at the local precinct – the locale which is most intimidating to individuals who want to file a complaint. Even when the local branch of the NAACP instituted a program whereby forms and assistance with completing and filing the forms would be facilitated by NAACP volunteers, only a few individuals took advantage of the offer. Many individuals were still afraid of the repercussions that might follow. They were afraid that if the police found out about them filing a CCRB complaint, then harassment would surely follow and possibly worsen, they would be arrested or abused by the police. Therefore, this is a new phenomenon for some of the previously disenfranchised residents of Baisley to now speak out for themselves, when dealing with the police.

The Aftermath of the Sean Bell Shooting: One Cause for Baisley's New Voice

The Sean Bell case captured the attention of the nation. People were divided by race and by socio-economic status about the merits of the case. Outsiders paid close attention, as they ponder what could have happened here. Insiders pay attention and have doubt whether justice will prevail. Following is a brief account of the shooting and subsequent actions of the local community:

On November 25, 2006, just hours before he was to be married, Sean Bell, a 23-year old black man was killed in a barrage of 50 shots fired by five police detectives. Two of his friends were critically wounded. The three had been in attending Sean Bell's bachelor's party in a strip club in downtown, Jamaica. They left the club and got into a grey Saturn. The police approached the vehicle. The facts about

the case are not certain, differing accounts coming from different witnesses. According to the police, they thought there was a gun in the vehicle. However, no gun was ever found.

Immediately after the shooting, the community, elected officials, and civil rights activists called for justice. The police departments and unions claimed that the actions of the detectives were justified and legal. The residents of Baisley, many of whom knew Sean Bell, did not believe that the Police Officers would be brought to trial. No police officer has ever been convicted of killing a black man in Queens and the fact that 50 bullets were shot at unarmed young black men does not lead them to believe that this case will be any different. I spoke with several of the residents of Baisley about the incident. These were some of the responses, "It's gonna be the same as usual. They killed a black man. Nobody's going to jail" "The only reason they talking bout it is so many shots was fired." "I hope they do something this time". "I'm gonna march with Al Sharpton and Sean Bell's mother. It's about time we stuck together" There were several marches down Jamaica Avenue from the 103rd precinct to the strip club where the shootings took place. There was a 24 hour a day 50 day vigil conducted by Sean Bell's mother, family and supporters in front of the 103rd precinct. The New Black Panther party, the NAACP, and several other organizations marched alone, or with Rev. Al Sharpton and other activists, including a few local elected official. Three detectives were indicted on various charges stemming from the shooting. On April 25, 2008, all three were found not guilty on all charges.

In the past, the residents of Baisley were afraid to speak out against the police harassment and brutality that were regular occurrences in their lives. They knew all too well that the police would return their complaints with renewed aggression. Additionally, they did not have confidence that others would come to their defense in case of

retribution by the police. However, now, with many notable civil rights leaders, local elected officials and community organizations vocally calling for justice in the Southeast Queens community, some Baisley residents briefly found the voice to speak out for themselves.

It would appear that individuals may find the courage to speak out for justice for themselves if they believe that they may get support from individuals or groups that have the power to shield them from the negative consequences that may ensue because of their unlikely protest. It is incumbent upon individuals who possess power and voice to speak out for justice to offer guidance to those who need to learn how advocate for themselves.

It is important for other classes' members to understand the plight of the poor, perhaps walk a mile in their shoes to understand the pain that they endure as they live under a system that uses inhumane means that subjugate the poor to living under constant fear from institutions that have power to brutalize them physically or wreck havoc upon their families.

Chapter 5

The Local Politics of Child Protection

Statistics on reported cases of child abuse and neglect show that more than twice as many reports are found unsubstantiated than are substantiated. Nationally, the average percentages for unsubstantiated and substantiated reported cases of child abuse and neglect for the period from 2002 – 2006 were 56.4 percent and 22.8 percent respectively (see TABLE. 5.1, p114). Many families under investigation are subjected to traumatic invasions of privacy and suffer long term effects of disrupted family life. Children and parents become victims of a system of overworked, overzealous, underpaid and under-trained child protective case workers. In *Wounded Innocents: The Real Victims of the War Against Child Abuse* (1990), Richard Wexler recounts many cases of children taken away from their parents with little or no evidence of abuse. He found that case workers have “none of the education, training, or support” needed to protect the children that they have been hired to protect. According to Wexler, the New York City “Child Protective Services Academy” is a good example of the training programs nationwide that do not adequately train the very individuals who make decisions that can change people’s lives forever.

Most of the families reported to child protective services are poor, and a disproportionate number are minorities. Researcher Vernon Brooks Carter (2003) finds that African American families are more likely than Caucasian families to have child abuse and neglect reports substantiated, yet they receive fewer resources to ameliorate conditions that may lead to neglect. In *Shattered Bonds* (2002), Dorothy Roberts found that African American children are more likely to be mistakenly or falsely reported as

being abused than white children. She discovered that when physicians examined children who had head trauma, they misdiagnosed possible child abuse more often in black children. She concluded that, since it is the black community that is disproportionately negatively affected by Child Protective Services, “Americans have tolerated its [child protective services] destructiveness”. America has not come to the aid of its fellow citizens whose families are literally torn apart. Instead, when they hear about the “mistakes” made by Child Protective Services, many believe that if one child is saved then the “inconvenience” experienced by many is merely an inconvenience. Poor parents are left on their own to fight a powerful system that further ostracizes and stigmatizes their existence.

Accused parents are afraid to speak out on their own behalf for fear of reprisals by caseworkers. Parents feel that their only hope of not having their children taken away, or of having them returned home, is to be submissive and agree to any and all conditions meted out by child case workers. The law and courts will back up the opinions and decisions of these case workers entrusted with acting in the best interests of America’s children. In most instances, poor parents’ only defense against the system is court appointed lawyers, who are also overworked and underpaid.

The Authority and the Power Over Children and Families

Federal and state governments have given enormous power to child protective services and its case workers. Lawmakers and the general public react to horrendous cases of child abuse by calling for stricter regulations and more punitive laws to deal with child abusers, such as in the cases of Eliza Izquierdo and Lisa Steinberg, both six-year

old children who died at the hands of abusive guardians. Shortly after the cases were exposed, the public outcry helped to bring about a closer scrutiny of child protective services and changes in its monitoring system. In both cases, ACS had been called on several times to investigate possible child abuse, yet case workers deemed it unnecessary to follow-up. More recently, Queens County District Attorney Richard Brown wrote an article in the North Country Gazette (2006) entitled, “Child Abuse – Tough New Laws Needed” in response to the death of seven-year-old Nixmary Brown, who was tortured and beaten to death by her stepfather. Few will dare say that children protective services are unfairly carried out for fear of appearing soft on child abusers and molesters. At the same time, very few individuals pay close attention to the harm that is done to children and to the parents unjustly accused and unfairly treated.

Federal legislation established broad guidelines which gave local child protective services more power and latitude to investigate reports of child abuse or neglect and the authority and incentives to immediately remove children from their biological homes. Each state incorporates into its definition of child abuse and neglect the minimum standards as defined by the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). CAPTA defines child abuse and neglect as:

Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.

The New York State definition of child abuse and neglect (Soc. Serv. Law § 371) is as follows:

Abused child means a child less than age 18 whose parent or other person legally responsible for his or her care:

Inflicts or allows to be inflicted upon such child physical injury by other than accidental means that causes or creates a substantial risk of death, serious or protracted

disfigurement, protracted impairment of physical or emotional health, or protracted loss or impairment of the function of any bodily organ

Creates or allows to be created a substantial risk of physical injury to such child by other than accidental means that would be likely to cause death, serious or protracted disfigurement, protracted impairment of physical or emotional health, or protracted loss or impairment of the function of any bodily organ

Neglected child means a child less than age 18 whose physical, mental, or emotional condition has been impaired or is in imminent danger of becoming impaired as a result of the failure of his or her parent or other person legally responsible for his or her care to exercise a minimum degree of care:

In supplying the child with adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, or medical or surgical care, although financially able to do so or offered financial or other reasonable means to do so

In providing the child with proper supervision or guardianship

By unreasonably inflicting or allowing harm to be inflicted, or a substantial risk thereof, including the infliction of excessive corporal punishment

By misusing drugs or alcoholic beverages to the extent that he or she loses self-control of his or her actions

By any other acts of a similarly serious nature requiring the aid of the court

The New York State statute mandates the following professionals report all incidents where they have “reasonable cause” to suspect child abuse or neglect:

physicians, physician assistants, surgeons, medical examiners, coroners, dentists, dental hygienists, osteopaths, optometrists, chiropractors, podiatrists, residents, interns, nurses, hospital personnel, emergency medical technicians, or Christian Science practitioners, school officials, social workers, social services workers, daycare center workers, providers of family or group family daycare, employees or volunteers in a residential care facility, or any other childcare or foster care worker, psychologists, therapists, mental health professionals, substance abuse counselors, or alcoholism counselors, police officers, district attorneys or assistant district attorneys, investigators employed in the office of a district attorney, or other law enforcement official

In addition, any other person who has reasonable cause to suspect that a child is abused or maltreated may report it.

If a mandatory reporter “willfully fails to report,” she/he is guilty of a class A misdemeanor and “civilly liable,” if that failure to report resulted in harm to the child.

Based upon the above mandates and definitions it is reasonable to assume that mandated

reporters will err on the side of caution and immediately report any real or imaginary semblance of abuse, hence, some of the over reporting of suspected abuse and neglect.

The statute also states that anyone who knowingly makes a false report may be found guilty of a class A misdemeanor. This has serious ramifications for some of the residents of Baisley who deliberately make false reports against their neighbors with whom they have had a disagreement or confrontation. I doubt that they are aware that they can be charged with a crime. Some of the false reports of child abuse and neglect against parents at Baisley come from angry or jealous neighbors. Reports can be used as vindictive weapons against an adversary. They are a formidable weapon because they can cause more harm to your adversary than a physical altercation or mean-spirited gossip. These false reports have very real consequences that can cause lasting damage to a family. Even though the reporter is not named in the report, often times the accused is aware of the identity of the reporter. Quite often the accuser wants his victim to know that they were the one to throw the knockdown punch. Whether it is a mandatory reporter or a vindictive neighbor, child protective workers move swiftly into action. They are trained to immediately investigate every allegation and, if in their judgment the child is in harms way, to remove the child from the home. Ms. Bothis, who is a volunteer with the NAACP and a former employee of ACS, stated “they [the child care workers] don’t really like taking the children from their homes; they are just doing their jobs. They have no way of knowing what is real or false, so they can’t take any chances”. It would seem that giving this tremendous power to remove children from their biological families to an individual would necessitate serious training to enable an individual to have a better capacity to discern what is “real or false”. So many

unsubstantiated cases of child neglect and abuse should indicate that something is drastically wrong with how and why the system operates, thusly.

Adding to the power granted to child protective agencies to remove children from their homes are the incentives to increase the state treasury. The federally funded Title IV-E and Title IV-B bills formulate how money will be dispersed to the states. The Title IV-E program reimburses states up to \$6,000 for children that are adopted or placed in foster care or group homes. The title IV-B program, which has less funding than the Title IV-E program, dispenses funds for preventive, reunification, and permanency services. It is therefore more lucrative for the states to remove children from their homes than it is to provide services that would help families stay together. In the end, what you have is a system that gives rewards for an increased number of children taken from their homes. CPS removes children from their homes for reasons that might otherwise merely require social assistance from public agencies. The majority of the children removed from their biological homes are removed for reported cases of neglect. In these cases, neglect is most often the manifestation of poverty – not enough food or clothing, inadequate healthcare, unsupervised children (some working poor parents are forced to leave their children at home, unattended, while they work). These cases could be addressed by an increase in funds or services to poor people. Yet, it appears that it may be more prudent to remove the children from their homes rather than provide them with adequate resources necessary for parents to properly care for their children.

Parents and Child Protective Agencies

It is a real and terrifying threat when an ACS case worker knocks on an apartment door at Baisley. On a Saturday afternoon in May of 2002, Bev answered a knock at her

door. It was an ACS case worker who was looking for a fifteen year-old boy named Terron. Bev informed the worker that she was at the wrong apartment; Terron and his Aunt lived across the hall. The worker turned and went across the hall and knocked on the door. Bev closed her door. A few minutes later the worker returned to Bev's apartment and informed her that Terron had moved away. However, since she was in the building anyway, she wanted to come in to inspect Bev's apartment and children. Knowing that she had nothing to hide, Bev allowed the worker to come in. Bev's children were outside playing. After inspecting the premises, the worker told Bev that everything appeared to be OK and left. The next day, Bev received a call from the worker informing her that since she [the worker] had visited the home, she was required to open a case and that Bev would have to report to the ACS center with her children. Distraught, angry, and scared, Bev called to ask for my intervention. I called an acquaintance of mine, who is an administrator at ACS. He gave me the name of the worker's supervisor and advised me to call him. The supervisor after hearing the details of the incident, said that he would speak with the worker and call me back. After verifying the story, the supervisor first called me and then Bev to apologize for what had transpired and indicated that the worker had acted improperly. He said that the case would be closed. I insisted that the worker call Bev and apologize. Bev received a call the next day from the worker.

Why did Bev allow the worker into her home, since she was not the intended target of the investigation? "I had nothing to hide. I knew my house was OK," Bev later told me. Indeed, her children were well fed and clothed, even though Bev had little money. To my knowledge, Bev has never hit any of her children. Yet, she has had

several cases with ACS in the past. In each instance, it was a neighbor who was angry with her that reported child abuse or neglect. In each instance, Bev was vindicated. Yet, because she has been investigated in the past, ACS has her listed in their files making her vulnerable to future unannounced ACS visits. ACS is able to exploit poor people who do not understand their rights under the law. These individuals have been victims of a system that operates freely because of ignorance of the law. That ignorance is borne of lack of responsibility on the part of institutions of power to adequately explain legal processes, procedures, and rights to their clients. (Case workers may not be fully aware of all of the guidelines and procedures because of lack of proper and thorough training.) It is this lack of knowledge and education regarding parents' rights that enables this system to operate with impunity.

Why do these neighbors make false reports against each other? This author believes that power over another person's life may be one motivation. Poor people have very little or no power over their own lives. They are subject to actions of strangers who are authorized by the government to make decisions that affect their very being. That feeling of powerlessness must have overwhelming consequences for feelings of inadequacy, feelings that may be abated only if and when an individual can exercise some form of power that has serious ramifications. It allows them to feel powerful, if not over their own existence, then over another's, in this case, another poor individual similarly situated within the realm of powerlessness. By making a report to child protective services, one can effectuate a drastic change in another human's life – that is power.

In addition to illegally invading people's homes, ACS workers gain easy entrée into schools. In the fall of 2002, Bobbie's nine-year old daughter, Ieasha, was interrogated by an ACS worker in the lobby of the main office at her school. Ieasha's teacher told her that she was wanted in the principal's office and sent her with a hall pass. As she sat in the public waiting area not knowing why she had been summoned to the office, Ieasha must have pondered what had she done wrong. An ACS worker approached her and started asking her questions about her home life. She asked Ieasha if her mother ever had men come over to the house and if the men slept in the room with her mother. She asked if her mother did any drugs. She then lifted up the little girl's shirt and examined her in front of several other children that were in the waiting area. She was looking for scars or welts. The case worker commented about Ieasha's slim body and asked if she ate regularly. Ieasha was terrified, yet none of the office staff intervened in the interrogation. No calls were ever made home to Bobbie about the incident. Upon arriving home after school, Ieasha went to her room. She did not tell her mother about the incident, thinking that she would be in trouble. The next morning, she told her mother that she wasn't feeling well and did not want to go to school. After Bobbie insisted that she was going to school, Ieasha told what had happened.

Infuriated, Bobbie called me and asked for my assistance. She was angry about what had happened to her daughter, yet she was too afraid to speak with ACS even though she believed that her daughter's rights had been violated. It is difficult to fathom the absolute fear that poor people experience when they know they must confront an authority figure. The average person who has not experienced trauma at the hands of

official representatives of the government does not understand the kind of pervasive fear I write about.

I told Bobbie that the first stop should be to see the principal at the school. I believed that ACS had acted improperly, and we needed to find out on what authority the school had permitted this act of abuse against her daughter. The principal, Ms. Brown, met with Bobbie and me. After hearing the story of what had happened in the waiting area of the office, Ms. Brown stated that she was not in school when the incident occurred, and until now, no one had informed her of the incident. She was extremely upset that this had happened in her school and that none of her staff had brought it to her attention. She also stated that regulations require a school staff person to be with the child when being questioned by a case worker. Under no circumstances should a child be questioned in an open area. According to the principal, the case worker had violated many guidelines and procedures. Ms. Brown called ACS and spoke directly with the worker's supervisor, who agreed that the questioning of the child was improperly conducted and said that he would reprimand the case worker. I then spoke with the supervisor as Bobbie's "legal" representative, and even though I was unable to force the worker to apologize for the incident, the supervisor promised the case would be closed. How does one know, if the case is truly closed? You don't.

Finding Their Voices, Protecting Their Families

Shortly after this incident, Bobbie, Bev, and two other female residents of Baisley asked for a meeting with the local NAACP and other elected officials to discuss the actions of ACS. They were trying to gather support from the community for what they

correctly perceived as violations of their rights. They wanted direction. They needed help. They were finally fed up with the overly aggressive and demeaning tactics employed by ACS and its workers. After hearing how the experiences traumatized the parents, community leaders, led by Mr. Gadsden from the local branch of the NAACP, decided to help the parents expose ACS by holding a town hall meeting. Mr. Gadsden chose Bethesda Missionary Baptist Church as the venue because, “the pastor [Rev. Charles Norris] was powerful enough as a man of God to comfort and help those who were enraged with emotions, as well as hold ACS accountable in the event they tried to intimidate the people or dominate the hearings”. He wanted an arena where the parents could feel comfortable enough to voice their true feelings without being fearful of retaliation. There was no guarantee, however, that reprisals would not be taken after the meeting, when these parents would have to face case workers alone. Mr. Gadsden made it clear that he would monitor future interactions between the families that came forth and the ACS workers.

Mr. Gadsden organized and planned the meeting. He invited representative of ACS administration. Two ACS case workers and one supervisor were sent to the meeting. ACS was currently the defendant in a class action law suit filed in Brooklyn about illegal tactics used to remove children from their homes. I believe that the ACS administration thought, or hoped, that by having an open dialogue with the community and parents, they would appear to be transparent and not hiding any wrongdoings.

The hearing was held in an open format. Parents talked about their experiences with ACS. One of the rules of the meeting was that participants did not have to reveal their names to talk of their experience. They described how ACS case workers came to

homes, accompanied by police officers, and dragged screaming children away from their families. Some children were removed based upon anonymous phone calls alleging child abuse or neglect. The workers were taking the children without even conducting an investigation into the merit of the allegation. One parent said you were automatically guilty of gross child abuse or neglect based on one telephone complaint. Several parents testified as to how powerless and demoralized they felt to have their children taken for months and months without any proof of neglect or abuse. The only time they could see their children was under ACS approved and supervised conditions. During the testimony, several mothers broke down and cried when they described the process of leaving their children after ACS supervised visits. They revealed their grief and pain at being unable to answer their children's question about when they could come back home.

Many parents were instructed to complete a series of parenting classes in order to get custody of their children. Even though they knew they had not committed the acts that they were accused of, they understood clearly that they must attend the classes and comply with any other directives issued by ACS in order to get their children returned home. In addition, ACS would schedule home visits and parenting skills workshops without regards to work schedules or day-to-day routines. One male parent became angry to the point of having to leave the room in order to calm down as he described the process of getting his child back after ACS removed his son due to an anonymous telephone call. He stated that every time he completed one set of ACS parenting skill requirements, he was required to complete another one. This continued for four months until ACS returned his child home.

Numerous audience members and parents broke down and cried as parents explained their nightmares within the ACS system. During the meeting one of the ACS workers broke down and started crying uncontrollably. She had to be removed from the meeting and taken into the back area until she regained her composure. She stated that she never thought she was part of the problem. She hadn't really thought about what her actions on behalf of the institution were actually doing to human beings. She would inform parents that their children were being removed just until the report could be investigated and resolved. Now, here she was, in the midst of human beings crying out for justice and fairness, trying to protect their families against a system that was powerful and uncaring. The worker was visibly shaken, more so because she realized that she was a part of a system that wreaked havoc on innocent people. ACS was given an opportunity to respond to the issues brought up by the participants. Another worker said that her job was to protect children, and she always followed written procedures and guidelines.

At the end of the meeting, the ACS supervisor agreed to provide his office number as a backup for any parent experiencing problems with ACS staff. He also agreed to look into the practice of workers taking children on anonymous tips without investigation. Rev. Norris advised the parents that they were free to contact his church and clergy organization, if they experienced problems with the ACS system and that he and the clergy organization would follow up as an advocate on their behalf.

Red, one of the parents at the meeting, told me that it felt good to ask questions of the workers, instead of having to answer questions. She felt empowered. For once, the parents were in control of the dialogue between worker and client. After the meeting,

the group of young women talked about holding another meeting. This time, it would be held in the Community Center at Baisley. They said it was the fear of confronting ACS that had kept many parents from attending the town hall meeting. They hoped that more people would be willing to come if the venue were a familiar setting. The ACS Supervisor agreed to attend a meeting with all of the parents in the housing complex. Mr. Gadsden said that he would help organize the meeting, but that the ownership of the meeting must belong to the parents. Yet, over the coming months the parents failed to organize another meeting and eventually stopped talking about it.

What happened to their feelings of empowerment? Their newly found ability to speak out? I wanted to step in to help the parents in planning the next meeting. I hoped that they would organize themselves into a group of individuals fighting for their rights. They knew, however, that ACS came to the meeting not because they wanted to dialogue with parents but because community leaders compelled them. The parents were unsure if ACS would give them the same courtesy and respect. Urban poor people do not get the same response as the articulate educated middle class. Poor uneducated individuals have neither the skills nor resources to galvanize groups of other poor individuals to demand services, resources, or even their rights. Additionally, they are intimidated by the power of the institutions which, as they are well aware, are backed by the law. It is difficult for them to believe that they, too, have rights that are backed by law, when most often they become victims of these powerful institutions.

The organizer of the first meeting, Mr. Gadsden, had indicated that he would assist the parents, but it was their responsibility to start the process of planning the next meeting. Even though some of the parents have organized and planned events at

Baisley, they were unsure of their own ability to conduct a meeting of this magnitude. They do not have the confidence that their efforts will elicit the same results. They were doubtful that the individuals from the larger community who had promised to help them would do so. After all, these are the neighbors who often shun them, the same individuals who seem to drive faster when passing through Baisley.

Once the Baisley parents were out of sight their issues fell off the radar screen of the larger society. They had the brief attention of the community, and the local newspaper even highlighted their issues. People who had befriended them and helped them establish a voice had gone back to their own world across the street. Even though they were neighbors, they were also strangers. They had come together for the purpose of discussing the plight of the poor at the hands of ACS. The black middle class seemed concerned about their poor neighbors, but from a distance. Socially and economically, they live in different worlds. Believing they know what is best for their poor neighbors, black middle-class residents often provide programs and services that uplift their poor neighbors culturally as well as academically. Many belong to volunteer community based organizations that provide quality of life services for their neighbors and community, services that include educational scholarships, mentoring programs, and the arts. If their poor black neighbors ask for assistance and intervention in dealing with powerful institutions in the community, the middle class will listen and offer advice. Poor blacks, however, are leery of their more educated and socio-economically better off neighbors and will not readily venture into the other world, even if to ask for help. Community leaders had gone to the meeting and listened to the problems that these poor parents faced. If there was another meeting, they would come. But for now, they were

engrossed in other issues that affected the larger community: an increase in new housing developments, a rising water table, police brutality, failing schools, etc.

December 2007: Bobbie's children were taken from her, and she was placed under arrest charged with endangering the welfare of a minor. After receiving a call from the teacher of Bobbie's three-year old son, Jaquan, police officers picked up the child from the day care center and took him to the 113th precinct. The teacher, Ms. Pratt, informed the officers that she found fourteen bags of marijuana and twenty dollars in Jaquan's jacket pocket. She had discovered the drugs when she went to investigate a commotion in the corner of the classroom. Jaquan was yelling at two other children as they played in the corner, "Give me back my stuff". After the police officers had brought Jaquan to the precinct, they went to the home looking for Bobbie. Finding her fifteen-year-old daughter, Ieasha, at home, the officers took the teenager to the precinct to "be with your baby brother". Bobbie was on her way home from her new job at Macy's when she received a call from her sister, Bev. Bev, who was enroute to the precinct, told Bobbie what had transpired and that she should go straight home. Officers from the precinct informed Bev that they were taking Jaquan to the hospital to be examined for any signs of abuse or drug consumption. Bev then picked up Bobbie, and they went to the hospital. Bobbie was arrested at the hospital on child endangerment charges. Although Bev pleaded with the police and ACS workers to allow the children to go home with her, they took the children away. They told Bev that they would visit her home to check out the suitability of the children staying with her, and if her home checked out, the children would be returned to her in a few days. In the meantime, the children were split up. Ieasha pleaded with the authorities to allow her to stay with her baby brother, who

was screaming as the worker took him away, but they carried him away, anyway. Jaquan was placed in a foster home and Ieasha was sent to a group home.

Bobbie was immediately locked up and transported to Queens County jail for arraignment on child endangerment charges. Bail was set at \$2,500. It took Bev and several of her friends and neighbors to raise enough money for a bail bondsman to secure Bobbie's release two days later on a Friday.

The family court case to determine the fate of her children was held the following Monday. I arrived at family court at 9:00 a.m., as requested by Bev. The new family court building was erected just three years previously, in 2004. It is nestled in between Queens Police headquarters and the Social Services building. To gain entrance, you pass through metal detectors and an x-ray machine. Once inside, it is empty and cold. Everything is painted beige and appears to be made of cement. There are several police and security officers walking about. The courtroom was on the third floor. Bobbie, Ieasha, Bev, Naila, Toss (Jaquan's father), and several of Bobbie's friends were in the waiting area when I arrived. Ieasha was brought to the courthouse by an ACS worker but might have to return to the group home, depending upon the judge's decision. Jaquan's whereabouts were unknown by the family. Shortly after, two young lawyers came out of the courtroom and stood in the corner conversing. I was informed that they were the ACS lawyers for the children. Each child had its own lawyer, as did Bobbie. Bobbie's lawyer, however, did not meet with her until her case was called.

Next to arrive was Mr. Hunter, the ACS worker assigned to arrange for placement of the children. He had visited Bev's home and declared it to be suitable for the children's return. Even though he told Bev that she would probably get the children on

Monday, she was not so optimistic and was fervently trying to find someone else, a relative or friend that would be willing to take the children in case the judge's ruling was not in her favor. Toss could not take Jaquan because he had an extensive criminal record and was on probation. His grandmother, who lived in Brooklyn, agreed to take Jaquan. Ieasha's fate was not so easily determined. Her father was not around.

The judge placed an order of protection for Jaquan against Bobbie. Since Bev lived in the same building as Bobbie, her home was disqualified for placement because of its proximity. The lawyers for ACS argued that Bev would be unfit to care for either of the children because, according to them, she had an extensive criminal record having been arrested several times in the past. When the judge, however, asked to see the verifying documentation to support their claim, they could not produce it. Bev told the judge that she had never been in jail and that the lawyers were fabricating the story to keep her from getting her niece and nephew. The judge postponed the decision until Wednesday and told the lawyers that they must produce the documents backing up their assertions against Bev.

Bev, hoping to best the ACS lawyers, returned to the courtroom on Wednesday with the documents on each of the incidents related to her problems with the law that the judge requested. Through her newly acquired self-advocacy skills, she utilized tactics that were proactive. She had been successful in employing acceptable methods in other arenas and learned that knowing your rights and speaking could get better results than acting out of ignorance. She applied that knowledge and went to the appropriate agencies to get the requested documents that would explain the incidents. One incident was a fight that she had with her boyfriend; this case was thrown out. One was for disorderly

conduct, a fight with a neighbor; this one was also thrown out; and the third was for a traffic violation which was dismissed. Against the arguments presented by the ACS lawyers, the judge's decision was to place Ieasha with her Aunt Bev and Jaquan with his great grandmother in Brooklyn. The order of protection remained, however.

There were so many inconsistencies in the teacher's story; no drug related charges were filed against Bobbie. At first the teacher had said that the drugs were found in Jaquan's jacket pocket; then, the children were playing with the drugs on the table; and finally, the drugs were found in the corner near the children. Even though criminal charges against Bobbie were not filed, she was told that she must complete three classes in order to have a chance at getting her children back: (1) a class on anger management ,because she became 'disrespectful' and 'belligerent' when her children were taken from her – she did not handle the situation like a "responsible adult"; (2) drug abuse counseling, since she had pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor of possession of a bag of marijuana to secure her release after the drug bust of 1998; and (3) parenting classes.

Learning How to Speak Out

Several weeks after Bobbie's children were removed from her home, she attended a meeting organized by Parents in Action (PIA), a non-profit organization that dealt with parents' rights. The purpose of the meeting was to bring together parents whose children had been removed from the home by ACS and placed in foster care and group homes. These parents were fighting to get their children back and brought together a group of parents, lawyers, and community activists. Several PIA representatives spoke on the following topics: instant removal without verification of charges; children being

physically abused in group homes and foster homes; inadequate legal services afforded poor parents. Then the floor was open for the public attendees to share their experiences. One woman showed pictures of her daughter before and after she had been taken from her home and placed in foster care – in the after picture the girl had a black eye and a gash in her forehead. Another man told how he had gone to school to pick up his nine-year-old son only to find out that his child had been taken by ACS workers. It turned out that school officials had reported child neglect when the father had not taken his son to the optometrist. It took the father two years to get his son back. After listening to the plight of these parents at the hands of ACS, Bobbie spoke about her own dilemma and offered to join the group the next week at a demonstration in front of the Brooklyn courthouse where the group was going to protest on behalf of one of its members whose daughter had been taken and placed in foster care for over two years. According to Bobbie, she felt strengthened by the passion of the individuals and wanted to join the group. She exchanged phone numbers with several of the members of PIA. She believes “there is strength in numbers”. With support from some of the individuals that she met at the workshop and with the new knowledge about her own rights under the law, Bobbie believed that she would have some control over her own situation.

After learning about the rules and procedural violations conducted by ACS workers from the members of PIA, Bobbie decided that she wanted to hold a meeting in Baisley to inform and educate her friends and neighbors about their rights. At this time, however, she is a little reluctant to go full-steam ahead; after all, ACS still has her children and family court must determine when they will be returned. According to Bobbie, once her case is settled and her children are home, she will have that meeting.

Six months later, Bobbie's children were returned home. The meeting that she proposed never materialized. It seems that people will galvanize immediately after a situation. Over time, initial enthusiasm dissipates.

The question seems to be how you sustain the feeling of efficacy after the initial momentum diminishes. Several years ago, this group of parents felt their muscle and relished that for once they were the ones asking the questions and that they had put ACS and its workers on the hot seat. Here they are back again. Bobbie feels empowered by networking with others who are in the same predicament. For now, Bobbie appears to be poised to organize her neighbors and friends to speak out against the abusive, exploitative tactics used by some ACS workers. Only time will tell if this time she follows through, but at least it is a start.

If one looks at the prison system and the child protective system one can see similarities in the makeup of the system's populations. The prison system population is overwhelmingly African American and poor. Poor black Americans are arrested and jailed more often than whites. The child welfare system population is overwhelmingly African American and poor. Poor black children are removed from their biological families for unsubstantiated cases of neglect and abuse more often than whites. If one looks closely, one can see remnants of slavery. Children are taken from poor powerless families and placed in foster homes and institutions that profit from this process. Of course, there are many foster homes that care for the children and children who are removed for their own safety, but I speak not of them. I speak of the children and their parents who are victims of a patriarchal society that believes it has the moral right to

enforce its values and norms on others. Child Protective Services, as it is known in many states, is the governmental entity that is entrusted with the power and authority to carry out the edicts set forth by society.

TABLE. 5.1

**Nationwide Percentage of Children Subjects of a CPS Investigation
or Assessment by Disposition**

Year	Substantiated	Indicated	Alternative Response Victim	Alternative Response Non-Victim	Unsubstantiated	Intentionally False	Closed with no finding	No alleged Maltreatment	Other	Unknown or missing
2006	22.1	2.7	0.4	5.5	55.3	0.0	1.5	9.5	2.4	0.5
2005	22.1	2.6	0.3	5.2	55.3	0.1	2.0	9.6	2.3	0.5
2004	22.3	2.7	0.1	4.6	55.6	0.0	1.4	8.1	4.7	0.5
2003	23.1	3.7	0.1	5.5	54.6	0.3	1.4	6.2	4.1	0.9
2002	24.7	3.2	0.1	4.5	61.4	0.3	1.1	*	3.8	0.9

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Administration for Children Services, Statistics and Research, Child and Abuse Research <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs>

* The figure for the No alleged maltreatment was added to the figure in the Unsubstantiated column.

Chapter 6

Confronting Failing Schools, Failing Children

As agencies of socialization, schools help nurture and develop a child's capacity to function within society. A school can have a beneficial or detrimental effect on the ability of the child to be a conforming or nonconforming member of society. Children's perception of their position and status as well as their role is partially determined by the school's attitude toward them as they experience positive and negative interactions within the school environment.

This newest generation of Baisley children attends the same schools that contributed to their parents' social disconnect. Education can be an unsuccessful, unrewarding, and sometimes painful experience. Such an experience can warp the poor's expectations towards the potential of education and the promise of society.

Consider entering a public school in a typical poor New York City neighborhood. Its unpleasant facilities hardly motivate you to send your child to such an uninviting, uncaring place. You have the feeling of entering a prison. The first thing you encounter is not the warm and inviting face of a teacher or school counselor but a uniformed security officer. In many of these schools, students must empty their backpacks as they pass through metal detectors.

At M.S. 8, the school attended by many young Baisley children, students no longer move from room to room to attend assigned classes. Instead, the teachers move from room to room to teach. This measure was taken to address increased violence at the school. Like the movements of a prisoner, the children are monitored by a program

ostensibly designed for safety. The program confines students to a single classroom for the better part of the school day.

The adult subjects of this study vividly remember the conditions under which they attended school. According to Bobbie, the current atmosphere at M.S. 8 is reminiscent of her own junior high days at I.S. 72, where students remained inside all day in a building that had plaster falling from the ceilings, electrical wires exposed, and offered food in a cafeteria that was filthy. Bobbie's school experiences still affect her feelings and actions today. She sympathizes with her daughter and excuses her daughter's negative unproductive behavior, attributing it to some of the same experiences that structured her negative attitude towards school. When Ieasha, Bobbie's daughter, failed eighth grade and could not graduate from junior high, Bobbie had her put on the new dress she had bought for the graduation ceremony. Instead, she took her to Red Lobster. Ieasha had not passed her classes, but Bobbie painfully remembered her own days in junior high and transferred her painful memories onto the unfair treatment her daughter had to endure. She decided that she would not penalize Ieasha for failing under circumstances that were out of her control.

Aspects of the public schools in poor sections of Southeast Queens have improved since Bobbie and Bev attended public school, but the schools are still not on par with those in the better sections of Queens. Nor do these inferior schools elicit feelings of high self-esteem among poor urban children when they compare them to the schools they see on TV shows such as *Gossip Girl* or *Degrassi High*. Although fictional, the TV schools form a frame of reference for their children's lives and life-styles. The schools in these shows have modern science and computer labs, auditoriums with state-of-the-art

technical equipment, and the students have their own parking lot. The halls are pristine, and no one lacks funding for musical or artistic endeavors. The students walk freely among their friends in the school corridors when not in class. Freedom to socialize and interact in a warm and friendly environment adds to an individual's learned ability to fit in at any level of society.

Interactions in school partially develop and structure students' perceptions of the world at large and their position/status in that world. So, to be confined, like a prisoner to one room for most of the day, to have your limited movements monitored by uniformed guards, and to know that you are not given modern materials to be able to compete in a world that is constantly evolving technologically has to have an effect on your self-perception and worth. As the child compares the unfavorable conditions under which she is forced to spend most of the day with the favorable conditions that the privileged have access to, she comes to expect less from society and less from herself.

Unequal Resources – Unequal Access

Educational level is positively correlated with income level/social status. The education provided Baisley residents is inferior and inadequate and does not develop the well-grounded education required for success. They enter the job market underprepared which ensures them the same low place in society that they, and in all probability, their children will occupy.

Many of the children of Baisley attend the same schools that their parents attended: P.S. 140, M.S. 8, and I.S.72, the zoned schools for the area. Over the years there have been changes in the administration, teaching staff, regulations and guidelines.

Yet, for years, these schools have consistently ranked lower than other schools in School District 28.

The failure of these schools to prepare adequately their students to move forward in society can be traced to several causes. Segregated schools and socioeconomic status are two causes of inequity that have direct effects on the quality of services delivered by individual schools. This chapter will focus on the impact that these two variables have and how self-advocacy can determine the level of response by the system.

In *The Shame of the Nation* (2005), Jonathan Kozol argues that minority children in poor inner city schools are programmed at an early age to limit their horizons to specific job markets. They are not given the tools or opportunity to think outside the box created for them by school administrators, who defend this practice by stating that it is better to produce ‘robots’ that will “never burglarize your home...never snatch your pocket books...” but instead will become “tax payers”, terminology that would never be used to describe children in white middle-class suburbia.

The elementary and secondary schools attended by the children of Baisley, like other schools in the southern area of school district 28, are predominantly black. Many schools in the northern section of the same school district are predominantly white. Here, in New York City, the Department of Education declares that all the city’s children shall receive a quality education. But this has not been the case. In some sectors of our city, children have been deprived of the quality education that our nation’s forefathers foresaw as crucial to the country’s survival and ultimate pre-eminence—free quality education that has been mandated throughout the nation. In spite of all this, there are and continue

to be many inequities in the city's school system. When we look at the various school districts of our city and the ethnic population boundaries that make up the areas, we need only wonder what in fact causes the significant disparities in the services and goods that those schools receive.

Education for blacks and Hispanics is generally inadequate, beginning in the elementary schools and continuing through the high schools. Actually, by the time minority children have entered junior high school they are already at a distinct disadvantage and cannot successfully compete with their counterparts from other schools. Beginning in elementary school, the scholastic scores of minority students are drastically lower than white students, and the disparity continues with each successive year of education, as evidenced by U. S. Department of Education statistics on national reading and mathematics scores (see TABLE. 6.1, p. 137; TABLE. 6.2, p. 138). Table 6.1 clearly shows that from 1975 to 2004, at all age levels, white students consistently outperformed black and Hispanic students in reading. Table 6.2 indicates the same trend in mathematics: whites outscored blacks and Hispanics in each successive year. Although each group of students' scores increased during this period, neither black nor Hispanic students ever came close to parity with white students.

Not all schools in predominantly black areas are low performing schools. Bordering school district 28 is school district 29, with a predominantly black student population. Some of the schools in the district rank high on the New York City's Department of Education's (DOE) school list. School district 29 is located in the 29th Assembly district which is a middle- and upper- middle-class African American neighborhood. As mentioned in previous chapters, it has political power – two NYS

senators, a NYS assemblyman, NYC councilman - and a plethora of community based organizations that work collaboratively to improve the quality of life in its neighborhoods. It is no wonder that its schools do well. This African American community has the voice and power to demand the best for its students.

According to Mr. Timothy James, the former Chairperson of Community School Board 29, he fought against the powers in the Community School Board 28 to prevent them from moving some high performing schools from 29 into the adjacent high performing District 26. This move would have made room in District 29 for failing schools from District 28 to be brought into that district. The end result was to remove the failing predominantly black schools from District 28 and add more high performing white schools into that district. According to Mr. James, the white-run school board of District 28 did not want blacks coming to the Kew Gardens headquarters making demands for resources and money to equalize the delivery of goods and services to the black section of the district. Mr. James and the members of District 29 were successful in preventing these changes. The district with political clout was able to fend off the transfer of low performing schools into their district, while most parents of the schools in question were not even aware that a discussion about the fate of their children's schools was happening.

Another manifestation of local community voice and power was the reinstatement of Dr. Antonio K'Tori as a principal within the NYC Public School System. Dr. K'Tori, a beloved principal, who is credited with increasing the scholastic performance of his previous school, I.S. 59, also in District 29, was removed from his position as principal of newly created P.S. 268. He was threatened with termination by the Department of Education after being charged with insubordination and favoritism in accepting students

into P.S. 268. Dr. K'Tori is a member of several local community organizations, including the powerful Guy R. Brewer Democratic Club. Local elected officials, clergy, and parents of the students rallied and held protests and public meetings to have Dr. K'Tori reinstated. Although, a new principal was appointed to P.S. 268, and Dr. K'Tori was placed on administrative duty while the case was tried in court, he was eventually exonerated and is currently the principal at P.S. 15 in Southeast Queens.

It appears a combination of factors causes the disparity in the public school system: clearly race plays a significant part in determining access to a quality education, but as indicated, socioeconomic power/status also plays a role on the responses received from institutions of power.

Unsafe Conditions

All our children should receive a quality education in environments that will foster the development of their minds, skills, and talents to the fullest. It is this aspect of the educational process, the presentation of quality instruction in a milieu conducive to quality learning that should also be a major concern of the DOE. Students who attend public schools in the urban ghetto have an increased chance of being the victim of a violence related crime. Children go to school everyday not knowing whether they will be the next victim. The stress of getting to school and back home safe has to have a negative effect on their ability to concentrate and learn.

Even though violence related crimes in the schools are on the rise, incidents have been underreported. According to NYC Comptroller William Thompson, (NY Times, September 20, 2007) schools have underreported incidents of violence and have exhibited

a “lax attitude” that “paints an artificial and illusory picture of what’s actually going on,” when, in actuality, schools can receive additional funding for programs to address violence related incidents. Over the years, several programs have been instituted to protect students. Those programs include stationing police and metal detectors in the schools. In addressing the need for more collective and proactive action to address the rising violence (New York Post, April 22, 2008), Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers, stated “these are difficult problems, not solved simply by considering more metal detectors...Art, music, civics and science education – as well as after-school tutoring, extracurricular activities and sports programs – are also essential as productive outlets for students”. Budget cuts have reduced or eliminated cultural programs and after-school activities that were designed to engage and occupy young people, while broadening their minds and horizons. While schools wait for needed funding for programs or for action plans designed to protect its students, poor parents must step forward to defend their children.

According to the policies and procedures of the Department of Education, parents can obtain a “safety transfer” for their child if they believe the child is in danger at school. Many poor parents, however, are not aware of their rights. Instead, for years, parents have been told by school administrators that their children must attend the school in their school zone. For poor urban children this most often means schools that are underperforming or unsafe.

M.S. 8 is one of those unsafe schools that are notorious in the community for having fights almost every day. There are gang fights, and there are fights among individual students. Either way, children have been hurt while inside the school and

going to and from the school. On the surface, it appeared that the school was working hard to deal with the situation. According to Timothy James, who also manages an after-school program at M.S. 8, the principal held meetings with the teachers, whom he asked to stay later so that students could be let out at different times. Parents had been called and notified if their child was directly involved in violence. There was an increased police presence at the school. The violence continues in and around the school, though.

One recent afternoon, while I was driving near M.S. 8, I noticed a large group of young people on Liberty Avenue about five blocks from the school. I could not ascertain which school or schools the children were from. All of a sudden, a group of about forty teens came running around the corner. In the front of the running teens were three girls, who appeared to be running from the larger group of teens. As the girls were running just along side my car, one of the girls went down on the ground. I did not notice whether the girl had tripped or been pushed. But what happened next shocked me. Several girls, from the larger group of teens, started punching and kicking the girl on the ground. Somehow, the young girl managed to get up and as she ran past my car I opened the door and yelled at her to get in my car, but she ran past me with the other girls in hot pursuit. I spoke about this incident with Savogolie, a teen who lives in Baisley. She informed me that this is a “part of life. Everyday, someone is going to get beat up.”

When Bobbie’s daughter, Ieasha, and her friends from Baisley started attending M.S. 8, they walked to school together in a group and stayed together as much as possible - Mainly because they were friends, but also because there was strength in numbers as they had to pass groups of girls who lived in the neighborhood surrounding M.S. 8. The girls from the neighborhood started taunting and fighting Ieasha almost everyday. One

of these girls had lived with Ieasha and her mother for about one year. The girl, Shanice, had moved in with them because her mother felt that she could not protect her at home. According to Bev, “Her [Shanice’s] father was abusing her. He would beat her all the time”. And since her mother and Bobbie were friends, at the mother’s request, Bobbie took Shanice in to live with her and Ieasha . During this time, Ieasha and Shanice became good friends and because they lived together, they called each other “cousin”. After about a year the mother thought it would be safe for Shanice to come home.

Shanice returned home and near the friends that she played with before moving temporarily to Baisley. The girl who lived next door to Shanice, Pickles, started picking fights with Ieasha, and it escalated into nearly a fight every day. Eventually it became a “neighborhood” fight. The girls who lived in the neighborhood nearest M.S. 8 (and therefore neighbors of Pickles) joined in the fight, and Shanice also joined in with her next door neighbor Pickles. It became a fight where the sides were grouped by neighborhoods, with Ieasha and Pickles at the center of the fight. These girls were not held together with the allegiance and commitment of street gangs. They were groups of neighbors and friends. So when the fighting occurred regularly between Pickles and Ieasha, some of Ieasha’s friends, being outnumbered by the neighborhood girls, started drifting away from the fights. However, two of Ieasha’s friends continued to walk with her to school. The fighting continued and Ieasha started missing many days from school.

Bobbie went to the school on several occasions and spoke with the principal. She asked for a “safety transfer” to change her daughter’s school. The principal denied the request. He assured her that he would protect Ieasha while she was in school. Even though a police presence was in the school, once the teens were outside, they had to fend

for themselves. Finally, Bev “got tired of the bullshit”. It was painfully apparent to her that the school did not care about the safety and welfare of the kids, and therefore she had to act on her niece’s behalf. She spoke with several of her friends and neighbors from Baisley regarding the danger that their girls were in and that the school was not doing an adequate job of protecting them.

The other parents either did not have the time or the inkling to get involved. As one parent said to me, “As long as they are not beating up my daughter, I’m not gonna say anything. I feel sorry for Ieasha, but she got to fight her own battles. I told my daughter to stay out of it”. One parent just kept her daughter at home. Bev finally gave up trying to get the other parents involved in order to make the school protect their kids, “the other parents don’t care. Well if they don’t care, I don’t care. Let their kids get beat up. I’m going to take Ieasha out of that school and put her in IS 72”

Bev met with the principal who would not give her the necessary authorization to transfer Ieasha from M.S. 8 to I.S. 72. Bev called me from the principal’s office so that he would hear her conversation. She deftly articulated her conversation so that the principal would believe that she had called someone of importance and authority. “Ms. Phelps, I am here at M.S. 8 with Principal Murphy, who refuses to sign the safety transfer for my niece. I have filed the necessary forms and by his own admission there have been problems at his school in regards to children’s safety, but he says that it is under control now and that Ieasha will be safe here.” Bev was obviously using a tactic that had been successful for her in the past. By convincing the individual with power and authority to grant her request of her legal rights that she was knowledgeable of those rights and the steps that could be taken to enforce them, Bev was able to convince the authority figure

to accede her claim. She continued in a calm but forceful voice, “everyone knows that this school [M.S. 8] continues to have serious fights, and I do not want my niece to get hurt.” There was silence on her end as she pretended that I was replying to her concern and demands. She continued as if answering a question, “all he has to do is sign the transfer, but he is refusing. My niece has been jumped and beaten up by girls at this school, and it is not safe for her. I had to take off from work today to come here.” Even though I did not respond, she pretended that I did and continued her one-sided conversation for the benefit of the principal. “If I have to, I will take off tomorrow and go down to the Department of Education and file a complaint, and if necessary, I will call the local press. OK Ms Phelps I will keep you posted”. She hung up. About 30 minutes passed when Bev called again. “He signed it. He knew I wasn’t playing” she was elated at her success.

Again Bev has shown that speaking up for oneself can bring about desired results. Had she given up when the principal told her that he would not sign the transfer, had she believed that he alone had power over the situation, she would have given up, as so often happens in cases of poor uneducated individuals who have been socialized into believing that these institutions have unchallengeable power. Yet, Bev has learned through past interactions that knowledge of one’s rights coupled with voicing that knowledge can diminish the seemingly unchallengeable power and increase the power over the situation by the individual. Bev has learned how to use her voice to effect positive results for her family and friends, and as discussed in previous chapters regarding the police and ACS, she has successfully used that voice to advocate for change.

Bev was also able to facilitate the change in her daughter's class schedule that will allow her to graduate from high school in June 2009. Bev's oldest daughter Naila is a senior at John Adams High School. At the beginning of her senior year, Naila was scheduled for classes that she already had taken instead of classes that she needed in order to graduate. According to Bev, many of the students, including some of Naila's friends, have to stay an extra six months in order to complete the required academics needed for a high school diploma. Student's complaints generally fall on deaf ears when they challenge the accuracy of their class schedules. If a parent goes to the school and inquires about the "mistakes" in their child's schedule, the school will investigate and change the students class schedule, and if in time, the student will be able to complete the necessary program to graduate with her class in the four-year time frame. People in authority will not necessarily rectify incorrect decisions. They may need to know that someone with the right to demand justice has been made aware of the error and is requiring that the decision be corrected.

Unhealthy Environments

In addition to the aforementioned violence-related, crime-manifesting unsafe conditions, schools in poor physical condition also pose unhealthy, unsafe environments. Some schools in poor sections of the city are physically inferior to schools in more affluent sections of the city. They are eyesores and pose health dangers. In addition, they do not encourage student's self-esteem. If the school system does not feel that you are worth at least an environment that is clean and healthy, or if you do not feel safe and protected, then an individual could think that the system does not function as if their well-being was worth as much as the students that receive quality services. The women in

this study attended I.S. 72. They recalled the time they spent at school as unhappy and demeaning. It was neither a sanctuary nor a place of learning. According to Bobbie, “We were not allowed outside at all. The doors were locked to keep us in and the drug dealers out. But it was terrible inside. It stunk and was dirty. Indeed an investigation of the school by local community leaders, led by Reverend Charles Norris of Bethesda Missionary Baptist Church, gave a graphic account of the poor condition of the school. They included, electrical wires hanging from the ceilings, windows broken, classroom door windows covered with cardboard, and desks so ragged that students were cut or their cloths torn. Red told me that she still remembers vividly how horrible it was. “The school didn’t care about us. The place was dirty and nothing ever got fixed”.

We can easily see that under these physically and psychologically deplorable conditions a day of classes here was not very pleasant or productive for students or teachers. If the Department of Education does not think enough of the students and teachers to remedy the conditions under which they must function for a significant portion of their day, then what can be expected of the students who must attempt to gain an education under such conditions? No one can be expected to function properly no matter how dedicated, if the surroundings evidence apathy and neglect for the safety and well being of students and teachers alike – and such were the conditions in which IS 72 students were expected to learn and sometimes encouraged to excel. These conditions, to the contrary, put off the students and teachers, preventing them from taking advantage of and producing the “quality education” the DOE states that all students are entitled to. The physical conditions have improved over the years, but they are still not on par with

schools in middle-class neighborhoods where parents can demand and receive better services.

But P.S. 140 and I.S. 72 parents are not overly concerned about the physical conditions; they were socialized at an early age into accepting inferior conditions and learned how to cope and function in an unsafe neighborhood. Even though minority students are underperforming nationally and locally, some of the parents I spoke with were impressed with their children's scholastic performances. After all, some grades have improved – at least, in English and mathematics. Beverly and other parents of Baisley told me that they were proud of their children, who are “doing much better in school”. Schools appear to be doing a much better job at teaching the students because some of their children's report cards improved. If this is the case, then kudos to the schools. However, are the students learning more? Have their chances for a better education leading to a better job increased? That would be wonderful, but as you will see in the next section, higher grades can be misleading.

Deficiency in Test Taking Accountability

The test scores of children have risen over the past few years. Unfortunately, these better test scores do not mean that the children are learning more. Because of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), children are being taught to pass specific tests and improve their scores so that their schools will retain funding. NCLB is a federally mandated program that holds schools accountable for students' scholastic progress. Schools that do not exhibit yearly academic progress (YAP) are not eligible for funding or may be taken over by the state. Given the severe consequences faced by schools, they have

implemented programs that focus heavily on passing tests that demonstrate scholastic improvement. Schools may be winning, but children are the losers. The student has become a means to an end: money to maintain the school. They are not being taught even the basics needed to adequately move up to the next grade level. They are no longer being taught writing, culture, civics, nor are they being prepared to be viable participants in the global community. The children who most need a well rounded education are receiving the least. They are learning nothing about the world outside of their small community. They are not learning how to think critically or how to apply strategies needed in an ever growing world dependent more and more on the capacity of people to manage varied tasks. Without the necessary and promised resources to help schools provide a quality education, schools are forced to structure classes and lessons to teach students to pass tests that show improvement. Teachers are now being trained how to incorporate test taking skills into the curriculum. Most people go into the career of teaching because of a commitment to the craft and to be life-long teachers and agents of positive influence. Now that calling has changed and teachers may lose that impetus. To survive in their career they must adapt to being a part of the system. Teachers who want to teach have a voice in their union; here in New York City it is the UFT, which has fought against many provisions of NCLB but to little avail. Educators participate in a system that places emphasis on increasing grades rather than offering a well-rounded education . Most teachers want to use their talents to educate their students, but their hands are tied. They are forced to comply with the policies and guidelines set down by the federal government and the states.

A professional acquaintance of mine, who has a working relationship with the principal of P.S. 140, spoke with the principal on my behalf. The principal arranged for me to meet with several teachers. I promised the principal and teachers that the teachers would remain anonymous. The first teacher I spoke with grew up in this neighborhood and after several years of teaching in a neighboring school district that was flourishing and had plenty of resources decided that she wanted to return to her own neighborhood to teach. The school that she transferred from “had more resources that they used and wasted”. Here she would give her time and talent to students in need. NCLB is “a joke”, she said. “It does not allow for adequate time to teach the children even the basics.” The amount of time spent on reading and math test preparation prohibits students from “being well-rounded”. In addition, the extended day’s extra time is used for “test prep and not for helping the students”. NCLB “Does not look at the whole child – our kids *do* get left behind”.

The second teacher expressed her opinion of NCLB with an interesting analogy: NCLB time is spent “weighing the pig *not* fattening the pig”. No intellectual nourishment is given the student, yet the student is “over assessed”. According to this teacher, NCLB is disruptive, it stops the “normal activities” of a classroom, such as interaction and dialogue and it puts undo stress on the students. The approach necessary for the desired results is “not balanced enough to develop life-long readers”. Students will always be behind. According to this teacher, there is no way for students to be academically prepared to handle school work at the next level.

NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg, however, has praised the success of the NCLB by proudly reporting the increase in reading and math scores of students in public

schools. The mayor, who has total control over the NYC public school system, hired a chancellor who is also a business man, not an educator. Success for them is the improved school grades. The grades “don’t lie”.

The Fallacy of School Report Cards

NYC public schools receive a report card with a grade of A, B, C, D or F (A = 65.2 – 93.6; B = 50.5 – 65.2; C = 38.8 – 50.5; D = 30.9 – 38.8; F = -0.4 – 30.9). The grade each school receives determines its current status within the NCLB program, which has serious ramifications on the level of school funding. Schools receiving As and Bs are eligible for rewards while schools receiving lower grades “face consequences”. A school that does not show improvement over the previous year is labeled “in need of improvement”. That school will have a chance to improve its status by increasing its scores.

The report card, officially named a “Progress Report” receives a score determined by the total percentage of three variables: *student progress*, with a maximum of 55 percent, has the greatest impact on the total percentage and is the sum of the percentages of students making one year of progress in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics; *student performance*, with a maximum of 30 percent, is the total percentage of students at proficiency level in ELA and Mathematics; and *student environment*, with a maximum of 15 percent, is based on five areas: Safety and Respect; Academic Expectations; Engagement; Communication; and Attendance. Thus, a school’s grade depends more heavily on the level of student progress from one year to the next than it does on the level of scholastic performance (see TABLE. 6.3, p. 139).

Students can be performing poorly or even failing and a school can get a passing grade. Only thirty-six point three percent of P.S. 40's students were proficient in English Language Arts (ELA), and sixty point five percent of its students were proficient in mathematics. However, P.S. 40 received a "B" grade because of its relatively high scores in the progress variable; 60 percent of its students made at least one year's progress in ELA and 60.8 percent in mathematics. On the other hand, although P.S. 30's students were more proficient in both ELA and mathematics: forty-four point five percent of its students were proficient in ELA, and 63.7 percent were proficient in mathematics, P.S. 30 received a "D" grade because fifty-one point nine percent of its students made at least one year's progress in ELA and only 39.1 percent made progress in mathematics.

Even though schools may be underperforming, they may receive grades that give the perception that their students are performing well, when in reality they are failing their children. Students are not adequately being prepared to function academically. Attention to areas other than reading and mathematics is necessary for the future readiness of the child. Without proper funding the best efforts of educators is akin to applying a Band-Aid to a major laceration.

Timothy James currently runs the A+ Beacon program at M.S. 8. The A+ program is for students that have aged out of junior high school. It enrolls students aged 14 – 17 who, because of their age, have little chance of graduation. The program is drastically under-funded, and even his best efforts are not enough to improve adequately the chances of its students. According to Mr. James, trying to make gains in students' educational level with a small staff and budget that are stretched to the limit is like fighting an uphill battle. While in other areas of the city the challenge is to educate, he

must first undo some of the social damage that has ruined this community's ability to move forward.

Referring to the crack epidemic of the 1980s and 90s which "destroyed this community", he lamented that many of the children currently in school are the products of the deleterious effects wrought by social dislocation: parents still dealing with the after effects of bad health and ruined lives -; and parents still in prison, unemployable because of prison records, or dead. Mr. James believes that these issues are one cause of the lack of parental response to a system that is failing their children. The greatest difficulty, besides under funding, is getting parents to come to the school to discuss ways to help their children. "Only two out of twelve parents will come to a meeting about their child. But, when it is time to register for the free summer camp, 300 out of 300 will show if threatened to lose free camp status". There is the belief among some that it is the parents' fault when children do not succeed. Most parents want their children to be successful. Many poor uneducated parents do not have the financial or educational resources to assist their children at the same level as better educated individuals. Many of these parents that do not "participate" at the same level as other parents, most probably fell through the same cracks in the system that their children are now falling in.

Can Parental Advocacy Make a Difference?

Evita Belmonte, the former Queens County appointee to the citywide Panel for Educational Policy and member of the Parents Advisory Council, also indicated that to make positive changes in the quality of education in this community, parents must be motivated to become an integral part of the machine that is running the schools. "The

stakeholders in the community can demand more; they need to get involved”. Many poor parents have a defeated mentality and do not believe that their actions will cause the system to change. There are poor parents, however, who stand up against many odds to challenge the powerful public education system.

In 2003, Linda Glover, president of the Parents Association of a school in District 28, defeated a lawsuit in which she was sued by the principal for allegations of slander. After listening to many complaints from parents and directly observing the principal demean students and teachers, she wrote a 20 page document to the chancellor listing specific details. The chancellor dismissed the allegations, and the principal filed a five million dollar lawsuit against Ms. Glover. Ms. Glover was devastated. She had spoken up for parents and now, in addition to being banned from the school by the principal, she faced a lawsuit that could ruin her family. Some local leaders thought that she was being used as an example to warn other parents against speaking out for change in an unfair, inadequate system. It almost worked. Ms. Glover had nowhere to turn and no money to fight the suit. However, two lawyers, working pro-bono, won the case for Ms. Glover but not before she questioned her own vulnerability at the hands of a powerful system. There is a mechanism in place for parents to have a voice, the PTA. That voice, however, can be compromised by the inner workings of a system designed not to relinquish its power. In the end, the principal was removed from the school; most likely, he is still employed by the Department of Education and working somewhere within the public education system.

In neighborhoods with limited resources, students are not privy to scientific, civic, and social curricula that prepare them to develop skills needed to become active

participants in the ever growing global market. Budget cuts have reduced or eliminated cultural and after-school programs that enlighten and entertain students' minds and bodies. Parents, black and white, who have financial resources are able to provide funding to supplement their school's budget or they have the power to demand better services for their children. Lacking financial resources, voice and advocacy are tools that poor parents can use to fight an unfair system.

TABLE. 6.1 Average Reading Scale Score By Age And Ethnicity

1975 – 2004

	1975	1980	1984	1990	1994	1999	2004
9 year-old white students	217	221	218	217	218	221	226
9 year-old black students	181	189	186	182	185	186	200
9 year-old Hispanic students	183	190	187	189	186	193	205
13-year old white students	262	264	263	262	265	267	266
13-year old black students	226	233	236	241	234	238	244
13-year old Hispanic students	232	237	240	238	235	244	242
17-year old white students	293	293	295	297	296	295	293
17-year old black students	241	243	264	267	266	264	264
17-year old Hispanic students	252	261	268	275	263	271	264

NOTE: The NAEP reading scores have been evaluated at certain performance levels. Scale ranges from 0 - 500. Students scoring 150 (or higher) are able to follow brief written directions and carry out simple, discrete reading tasks. Students scoring 200 are able to understand, combine ideas, and make inferences based on short uncomplicated passages about specific sequentially related information. Students scoring 250 are able to search for specific information, interrelated ideas, and make generalizations about literature, science, and social studies materials. Students scoring 300 are able to find, summarize, and explain relatively complicated literary and informational material. Data include public and private schools but excludes persons not enrolled in school and those who were unable to be tested due to limited proficiency in English or a disability.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics,

Digest of Education Statistics 2007, table 112

<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/index.asp>

TABLE. 6.2 Average Mathematics Scale Score By Age And Ethnicity

1973 – 2004

	1973	1978	1982	1986	1990	1994	1999	2004
9 year-old white students	225	224	224	227	235	237	239	247
9 year-old black students	190	192	195	202	208	212	211	224
9 year-old Hispanic students	202	203	204	205	214	210	213	230
13-year old white students	274	272	274	274	276	281	283	288
13-year old black students	228	230	240	249	249	252	251	262
13-year old Hispanic students	239	238	252	254	255	256	259	265
17-year old white students	310	306	304	308	309	312	315	313
17-year old black students	270	268	272	279	289	286	283	285
17-year old Hispanic students	277	276	277	283	284	291	293	289

NOTE: Scale ranges from 0 to 500. A score of 150 implies the knowledge of some basic addition and subtraction facts, and most students at this level can add two-digit numbers without regrouping. They recognize simple situations in which addition and subtraction apply. A score of 200 implies considerable understanding of two-digit numbers and knowledge of some basic multiplication and division facts. A score of 250 implies an initial understanding of the four basic operations. Students at this level can also compare information from graphs and charts and are developing an ability to analyze simple logical relations. A score of 300 implies an ability to compute decimals, simple fractions, and percents. Students at this level can identify geometric figures, measure lengths and angles, and calculate areas of rectangles. They are developing the skills to operate with signed numbers, exponents, and square roots. A score of 350 implies an ability to apply a range of reasoning skills to solve multistep problems. Students at this level can solve routine problems involving fractions and percents, recognize properties of basic geometric figures, and work with exponents and square roots. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Totals include other racial/ethnic groups not shown separately. Data exclude persons not enrolled in school and those who were unable to be tested due to limited proficiency in English or a disability. Data include public and private schools.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics,

Digest of Education Statistics 2007, table 125

<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/index.asp>

TABLE. 6.3 Selected Schools from the Southeastern Section of School District 28

School	Grade	% proficient in ELA	% proficient in Mathematics	% progress in ELA	% progress in Mathematics	School Environment
PS 30	D	44.5	63.7	51.9	39.1	4.7
PS 40	B	36.3	60.5	60.0	60.8	5.3
PS 140	B	50.0	67.3	63.3	Not listed	6.4
PS 176	A	64.4	84.4	54.7	59.9	12.5
JHS 8	D	30.2	31.0	55.2	33.0	3.0
JHS 72	B	44.7	52.1	57.1	49.7	2.8
IS 192	B	35.6	38.8	55.5	50.9	6.5

Source: New York City Department of Education, Student Performance and Accountability, School Reports. <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/SchoolReports>

TABLE 6.4 Ethnic Makeup of the Schools Listed in Table 6.3

School	American Indian	Asian/Pacific Islander	Hispanic	Black	White
PS 30	.52	2.61	7.65	85.22	4.0
PS 40	.59	3.91	16.63	76.52	1.96
PS 140	.67	1.34	12.15	84.38	1.47
PS 176	.16	.81	2.9	95.01	1.13
JHS 8	.77	14.43	17.92	65.36	.98
JHS 72	.52	20.39	14.16	64.16	.78
IS 192	.16	1.3	5.04	93.33	.16

Source: New York City Department of Education. <http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals>

Chapter 7

Conclusion: Strengths and Limits of Self-empowerment in Poverty Neighborhoods

This study has showed that poor individuals can develop the voice to speak out on their own behalf, effecting positive outcomes in situations that heretofore were beyond their power and scope to change – life situations that were under the control of institutions that dominated their world. It also indicates that the urban poor may not necessarily step out on their own against a system that has oppressed and exploited them. They may require encouragement from people who are in positions of influence, without which self-empowerment of the urban poor may be fleeting.

In this study we have observed individuals struggling under the domination of institutions that use methods of control to keep the poor in inferior positions in society. Different institutions use different methods: threats of eviction or reduction in services; removal of children from the home or mandated enrollment in programs; incarceration; and more. Whatever methods employed, they have been successful in subjecting the poor to those in power. Very little is done to ensure that the urban poor are treated fairly and with respect. Representatives of those institutions have the power and authority to correct unjust situations; yet, their actions seem to be directed at keeping the status-quo. How, then, do the urban poor develop the skills and voice to demand justice and equality?

Learning Self-Empowerment

Without the tactical knowledge or resources needed to organize against a society that keeps them marginalized, the urban poor have been unable to make significant movement towards achieving the American Dream. To achieve a desired goal, an

individual must know which actions will result in obtaining the goal. Goal obtaining actions are learned actions and are reinforced through direct observation of the successful act. In the case of the urban poor, they are infrequently privy to actions that elicit positive responses from institutions of power, e.g. criminal courts and police; education; and welfare. Too often their attempts at fighting a system that has oppressed and exploited them have resulted in negative consequences. Anyone having experienced the painful retributions of power may eventually make a conscious decision to accept their lot in life rather than face a worse fate. On the other hand, when an action perpetrated against them has severe ramifications that have a drastic negative impact upon their life, they may make a desperate attempt to rectify the situation, this time seeking assistance from the outside. It is important, that at this juncture, they receive help from individuals who can demonstrate effective methods for dealing with institutions of power.

By emulating successful advocacy techniques that she had witnessed, Bev got positive results. In the past, frustrated and humiliated by worker representatives of public institutions, she would respond to their insults and demeaning demands for unnecessary paperwork or documentation in an inappropriately hostile manner that further exacerbated the situation. Frustrated by a lack of aid and frustrated by a lack of access to authority figures who would make positive decisions, it is understandable that an individual would lose her temper and ability to be effective. An individual will finally give up trying because no one does anything to rectify the situation. If the poor remain silent, as the powerful hope they will, they receive very little.

Bev learned that by emulating successful actions she, too, could make individuals in authority listen and agree to her demands for just treatment. Knowledgeable of her

rights and the obligations of the institutions she encountered, she spoke out for herself with an authority that made the institution's representatives respond to her requests in a positive manner. Bev utilized her newly found tactics when dealing with NYCHA. Threatening to go to NYCHA headquarters and the local media about the negligence of Baisley management pushed authorities to acquiesce to her demands. Learning from her success with NYCHA management, she utilized these new tactics in other arenas - the public education system and the family court. Once learned and effectively used, however, a question remains. What would happen to her newfound advocacy skills, if they were not fruitful?

Institutional Responses to Poor People's Self-advocacy

The institutions of power may more readily and positively respond to a poor powerless individual, if they believe that the individual has a powerful advocate behind her. In each instance that Bev successfully advocated for herself or others, the institution's representative believed that not only was Bev knowledgeable of her rights but was acquainted with people in powerful positions. When the principal of M.S. 8 believed that Bev knew people of power and authority, he immediately reversed his decision and authorized her niece's transfer. The management of Baisley responded to Bev's self-advocacy methods once they realized that she was aware of her rights and was ready to put them into practice. The powerful ACS came to the meeting called by community leaders to answer concerns and address some of the inhumane tactics employed by its workers. In an unprecedented move, ACS workers were forced to answer the questions of poor parents instead of demanding that the poor humble

themselves to receive aid. The institution appeared at the meeting because of the intervention of community leaders. The implication is that in situations where the urban poor appear to have no outside support, they may not receive the same positive response as someone with power. However, the institutions generally will respond more quickly and effectively, if someone of influence and power initiates the call.

Powerful Neighbors Helping the Powerless

This research has showed that in certain situations, urban poor minorities can benefit by living near affluent members of the same ethnic group. Even though some of their upper-class neighbors feel that poor urban blacks need to “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps”, they also believe that we live in a society that does not treat all of its members equally. They are aware of unequal treatment that blacks endure at the hands of representatives of governmental institutions and may step in to use their power in situations that show extreme examples of prejudicial treatment, such as in the case of the “Big Bust” (chapter 4) or when they learned of the horrific cases of child maltreatment and families being torn apart at the hands of ACS workers (Chapter 5). In addition, because Baisley Houses residents personally requested they step in and right a terrible wrong, their neighbors could not turn away from their obligation to help. In these instances, influential blacks, knowing that they have the means to help their black neighbors, will become directly involved righting a situation that is beyond their neighbors’ control and clearly racist.

Living near an area of wealth and power does not mean that that power will affect the status or improve the quality of living for poor neighbors. The powerful voices of the community surrounding an impoverished area do not necessarily exert their power for

the poor. As shown, if asked to intervene, powerful elites seeing that an injustice is being perpetrated in their community, quickly move to intervene on their neighbors' behalf and demand justice. But the poor do not readily ask for assistance from their neighbors. They feel alienated from the people whom they believe shun them because of their predicament. It is difficult for them to feel that they may have to ask for assistance that may not come. Yet in a crisis, they asked for help and community leaders responded. After intervening on behalf of their neighbors, some community leaders incorrectly assumed that the poor should automatically be able to "pick themselves up" and learn how to speak up for themselves. It is difficult for people of means and power to fathom how other humans cannot speak out for themselves in a society that declares its equality of opportunities and choices. Using their frame of reference, some upper-class African Americans see open doors to opportunities that are closed to most blacks. Poor urban blacks do not have the tools needed to take advantage of opportunities nor have they had experiences that can prepare them to use successful methods when dealing with powerful institutions.

How Do You Sustain Feelings of Empowerment?

The satisfaction of finally having power over a situation in which one was previously powerless can be fleeting. At that time when the powerless becomes powerful, they own the moment. But, as we have seen in previous chapters, individuals may not always follow up on promises to keep their powerful self-advocacy active. When Bobbie attended the Parents In Action (PIA) meeting she vowed to join the group and fight for the rights of parents to keep their children and to fight against the tactics used by ACS. She felt empowered as long as she was at the meeting among the other

parents, indicating that a feeling of empowerment is sustained during contact with others undergoing the same motivation and drive. According to Bobbie, she missed PIA's next meeting because of the cold weather. It wasn't long before she stopped talking about the group. Several times, individuals made inroads into powerful institutions, as when the residents of Baisley attended the meeting to discuss the actions of ACS workers. Individuals left the meeting feeling upbeat and powerful; however, they failed to follow through on their own promises to hold another meeting. It is as if that one time victorious feeling was enough to sustain them through additional acts of wrongdoing.

It will take more than one attempt at exercising successful self advocacy methods for the urban poor to develop a voice – one that many powerful individuals inherited at birth or learned through their position/status in society. Our society is structured such that the lower class will remain in its position without the means to lift itself up. According to Valentine (2003), the major sources of poverty are structural. However, this author disagrees with the theory that no amount of effort by the urban poor on their own behalf will change their quality of life. To the contrary, this research proves that a poor urban individual can employ learned methods of dealing with individuals of authority and power that will succeed in positive results. The newly learned and acquired methods will lead to self-empowerment, if performed regularly.

If the poor are to achieve a better quality of life they must learn how to exercise their power through their knowledge and voice. In the past, programs aimed at improving conditions for the urban poor created policies that address poverty and its consequences of inequality from a macro level, policies that may not adequately improve the plight of individual families. While it is necessary to develop meaningful national

programs to help the poor, it is also necessary to help them become self-empowered enough to demand their share of the resources coming out of these programs. To teach the urban poor how to successfully advocate we must approach encouraging them from the micro level. We must demonstrate to them successful advocacy tactics and the development of self empowerment either individually or in small groups.

Some individuals in this study have discovered that if you know your rights and the manner in which to voice your knowledge of your rights, you can demand and get some remedy for the ills of inequality. It becomes an issue of knowing how to use your voice to demand your share. You must be able to demonstrate that not only do you know your rights, but that you also know to whom you must direct your voice. We have learned that individuals who have successfully employed self advocacy will use the successful method again. It is important to provide the urban poor with tools of self-empowerment, with tangible evidence of successful advocacy methods so that they may believe in their own power to foster and influence positive reactions and responses from institutions of power.

I do not by any means place the sole responsibility for change upon poor urban blacks; they are the victims of the damaging affects of discrimination. As Dr. King indicated African Americans have been socialized into being disconnected from the larger society. Generation after generation they faced the manifestations of poverty, while they watched their families torn apart by the ravages of a society structured to maintain a lower class. There have been few opportunities for the urban poor to participate as equals on this playing field of “democracy” with liberty and justice for all.

It is unfortunate that those few blacks who have risen to the top or near to the top do not see the difference in the access they had to opportunities that enabled them to rise. Some can probably point to a figure in their lives that prepared them for upward mobility. Some of us, even if we grew up poor; can remember words of encouragement or belief in our abilities to succeed. But many of the urban poor have never received encouragement nor been given sincere opportunities to nurture their talents. Instead, their dreams have been suppressed and access to upward mobility denied.

Certainly, governmental policies should address the ills with which poor people must contend. Community based organizations and groups should reach out to help those in need: economically, educationally, and socially. However, those of us who have researched and studied the urban poor are well aware of the deleterious conditions which created and maintained this group in their inferior position. Some researchers have provided government and others with statistics and theories that assist in drafting programs to help the urban poor. All of these referenced activities should continue. But, it has become apparent that the poor need something else. They must become self-empowered. They can learn by way of example that they can develop an effective voice. They will need encouragement and support as they venture into this new territory. Many of them have tried to speak up in the past only to face dire consequences. If they are to develop self-advocacy skills, they will need our support and commitment. With our assistance, I believe that we can help them become their own advocates moving closer to self-empowerment and the realization of the American Dream.

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