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The Severely-Distressed African American Family in the Crack Era: Empowerment is not Enough

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Abstract

Numerous African American families have struggled for generations with persistent poverty, especially in the inner city. These conditions were further strained during the 1980s and 1990s by the widespread use of crack cocaine. For many, crack use became an obsession, dominated their lives, and superseded family responsibilities. This behavior placed additional pressure on already stressed kin support networks. This paper explores the processes prevailing in two households during this period. In the 2000s, children born to members of the Crack Generation are avoiding use of crack but face major deficits from their difficult childhoods. This presents both challenges and opportunities. The discussion considers initiatives from both a social problems and a strengths perspective that could help these families and help these families help themselves to advance their economic circumstances.

Keywords

family; crack; black; foster care; kin networks; poverty; inner-city

Introduction

Poverty can be much more than a lack of money or work or even motivation. For many, it is the circumstances resulting from a trans-generational social history filled with struggle against harsh conditions, structural impediments and limited opportunities as well as the continuation and evolution of cultural traditions, and the emergence of new subcultural norms in the face of these conditions. In this regard, elevating large percentages (if not all) of an impoverished group means creating (or helping them to create) a positive next chapter in their collective experience. To this end, a rich appreciation of a group's recent history provides insight into the prevailing circumstances, the complex array of associated problem, and the resources and capacities available to them. This information provides social workers and other helping professionals with a strong start on understanding the individual narratives of potential clients from the group, especially those less able to articulate their stories such as young children. This information also illuminates the ecological context in which these personal narratives are based. In doing so, the information provides social policy analysts with potential justification for larger policy initiatives that may involve changes in laws and procedures as well as require the allocation of significant effort and funding.

This paper looks at a recent chapter in the story of the African-American family, the devastation of crack cocaine on already distressed inner-city families. As an analytic vehicle, this paper

presents the experiences of two households that were identified and followed in the course of an extended ethnographic study of drug use and violence in the inner-city. Their experiences are presented as sharing many characteristics common within the population of interest. Their stories provide detailed insights into the lived experience in context.

There has been a controversy raging in the social work literature between advocates of a strengths- versus a problem-focused practice (McMillen, Morris & Sherraden, 2004; Saleebey, 1996, 2004; Utesch, 2005). A similar and ongoing controversy has prevailed in the historical and public policy literatures on the African American family described later in this paper (for excellent reviews see Dodson, 1997, and Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2005). Saleebey (1996) disparages problem-focused practice as demoralizing clients by reducing their concerns to a label, as opposed to the strengths perspective, which emphasizes individual competencies that can facilitate resilience. On the other hand, McMillen, Morris and Sherraden (2004) suggest that the distinction between the problems- and strengths-based approaches is artificial, unnatural and potentially counterproductive in their article, "Ending Social Works Grudge Match: Problems Versus Strengths". They contend that the difference in approaches is merely emphasis and that the enlightened practice of either approach should consider both problems and strengths. We concur with their call to employ both frames in social work practice as well as in reading history and performing social policy analysis. The narratives presented describe both problems endured during the crack era and illustrate some of the historical strengths of the African American family.

To illuminate the complex dynamics of the crack era on distressed African American families, this paper takes a life-course approach (Elder, 1999; Mortimer, & Shanahan, 2003). This perspective explores how each family's experiences depend on prevailing conditions, social structures and norms that are historically rooted; historical events; the family's position relative to these macro-phenomena; and the personal capacities and agency of family members. Thus, each family's narrative illustrates the nature of the times as well as the dynamics at work in their lives. The remainder of this introduction reviews the severely-distressed conditions faced by many African American families during the 1980s and 1990s, the historical tradition of extended family among African Americans, and the Crack Era as a defining historical event for many. The discussion examines the implications of the findings for both problems- and strengths-based social work practice and social policy development.

Severely-Distressed Conditions

Entering the 1980s, many African American families were facing tremendous structural challenges in poor inner-city areas. Massey & Denton (1993) provided a comprehensive analysis of the increasing hypersegregation of African Americans and the historical forces behind this phenomenon. After World War I and continuing into the 1960s, a massive wave of African Americans migrated to cities in pursuit of industrial jobs. They were forced into a few increasingly crowded, dilapidated neighborhoods through violence, restrictive covenants (from 1900 until a 1948 Supreme Court decision), and discriminatory practices by real estate agents. Meanwhile, white families were moving to segregated suburban areas, especially following World War II. Wilson (1987, 1996) contended the civil rights movement in the 1960s had a perverse unintended impact on the inner city. Successful African Americans moved their families to newly-integrated communities leaving an even higher concentration of poverty in the predominately African American inner city.

Based on an extensive literature review, Small & Newman (2001) identified the increasing concentration of poverty during the 1970s and into the 1980s, particularly among African Americans, as primarily the result of three phenomena: black middle-class flight, continued residential discrimination (especially against less wealthy African Americans), and the departure of low-skilled jobs from Northeast and Midwest cities. Economically, the 1970s was

a particularly difficult period for inner-city families (Kasarda, 1993; Small & Newman, 2001; Sullivan, 1989): there was a recession, manufacturing plants moved to the sunbelt and abroad, many of the employers that remained in the North moved to suburban areas placing them out of the range of public-transportation for inner-city residents, and the new economy emphasized advanced education and computer literacy. Many African Americans were left unemployed and unqualified for emerging opportunities.

Poverty and long-term joblessness have been associated with a constellation of other negative consequences (Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 1995; Currie, 1993; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Kasarda, 1992; Kozol, 1996; Wilson, 1987, 1996): overcrowded housing, poor physical and mental health, despair, post-traumatic stress disorder, family dissolution, teen pregnancy, school dropout, interpersonal violence, crime, and drug and alcohol abuse, among others. These factors help perpetuate disadvantage across generations. Some of these factors are the direct consequences of structural disadvantage. Others involve personal volition, particular those regarding sexuality, relationships, violence, and illicit drug use. Hence, there appears to be a clear cultural (or subcultural) basis to these behaviors.

The meaning and role of culture has been at the center of much controversy in research and public policy dialogues about the African American family. Dodson (1997) divided this contentious literature into two primary camps: ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. A number of prominent ethnocentric studies presumed the two-parent nuclear-family structure of white middle-class America represents a cultural ideal (see DuBois, 1899; Frazier, 1939; and especially Moynihan, 1965). Accordingly, this perspective maintains that female-headed households are central to a *tangle of pathology* that constrained African American families within a *culture of poverty*. Stevenson (1995) described how the civil rights movement and the larger sociopolitical sensitivities led to a revisionist perspective that celebrates the female-headed household, extended family, and fictive kin traditions as cultural adaptations indicating the strength of the African American family (see particularly Billingsley, 1992; Gutman, 1976; Hill, 1971; Stack, 1974). Moreover, much of this cultural relativism holds that these family forms are rooted in African tribal beliefs and practices regarding the central importance of extended family (Herskovits, 1938; Nobles, 1978; Sudarkasa, 1997).

This paper takes a less all-encompassing view of the nature of culture than either the ethnocentric or cultural relativism perspectives. Rather, culture is viewed as a *toolkit* specifying a range of behaviors as well as values, symbols, and norms from which persons construct narratives that give meaning to their lives (Jacobs, 2002; Saleebey, 1994; Swidler, 1986). This perspective dovetails with the life course approach by allowing that individuals select from a range of historically-situated cultural elements adopting or adapting them to their own purposes. For African American families these influences may include among other African traditions, conventional American (Eurocentric) expectations, popular culture movements, and subcultures of illicit drug use.

Several studies of impoverished communities have documented interconnected behaviors, norms, symbols, and values that differ from conventional expectations (Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 1995; Crocket, 1997; Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2003). We refer to these frameworks as non-conventional subcultures as opposed to various near synonyms that imply a value judgment including oppositional culture, cultural deviance (Akers, 1998), and code of the street (versus code of decency; Anderson, 1999). Non-conventional subcultures prescribe and attach significance to dress, musical preference, attitude, interpersonal interactions, carrying weapons, violence, childcare, sexuality, crime, and drug use. Adherence to non-conventional subcultures can hinder a person's ability to develop a healthy and prosperous lifestyle through the conventional paths of education and employment. Moreover, subcultural participants frequently indoctrinate their children and serve as possible role models to youths

in the community. In this manner, non-conventional subcultures further isolate the inner city from conventional society beyond the effects of discrimination and other structural disadvantages, which in turn contributes to the spread and persistence of severely-distressed conditions.

Extended Family Tradition

Historically, African American children have been less likely to live in a two-parent household. Since emancipation and up until 1960, the percentage had been roughly stable at about 70%, continually below the steady 90% level recorded for white children (Ruggles, 1994). The cultural relativism camp maintains that these household structures are not by themselves necessarily problematic. Stack (1974, p. 122) contended that, “[C]ensus statistics on female-headed households ... do not accurately reveal patterns of residence or domestic organization.” During the late 1960s, Stack (1974) embedded herself among poor African American families living in a midwestern city and observed their daily activities. She found single mothers employed mutual-support networks of relatives and close friends who came to be defined as kin (*fictive kin*) providing the basis to various survival techniques: single-mothers often lived in multi-generational households; female kin frequently adopted the child of a young mother and served as the child's *mama*; non-resident fathers provided money, supplies, emotional support and child care to various degrees; current boyfriends provided similar support; single mothers continually traded goods and services (especially childcare); more fortunate network members shared monetary windfalls; more stable households performed child-keeping, raising children whose household dissolved from changing relationships, eviction, and economic circumstances; and, more stable households took in boarders and allowed families with nowhere else to go to double up.

Jarrett & Burton (1999) confirmed the use of extended kin networks among low-income African American households in the late 1980s. They found many single mothers had very active extended kin (and fictive kin) networks. They also found that many of the households were characterized by continual changes in family composition due to new relationships, births, and deaths. One child noted, “So many things keep happening all at one time. My mother gets married. My real father gets a divorce for the fifth time. My youngest sister (age 18) has her third baby. My oldest sister leaves to go live with her boyfriend. One of my brothers dies. My grandpop is dying. Another woman says she is having a baby by my father. ... Too many changes all the time. Who is my family anyway?” (p. 182).

Since 1960, the percentage of African American children living in two-parent households plummeted from two-thirds to a low of one-third in the mid-1990s (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004). Conversely, the prevalence of African American children living with their mother only increased from 20% in 1960 to over 50% in the 1980s and 1990s. The prevalence of white children in mother-only households also increased from its historically steady level of 6% (Ruggles, 1994), but by 2002 still comprised less than 20% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004).

This decline of African American children in two-parent households reflects a general decline in marriage among African Americans. The percentage of African American women age 15 and above that were married declined from 62% in 1950 down to 36% in 1998 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004). Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan (1995) reported that African American women were facing lower prospects for marriage due to an ever-declining ratio of eligible African American men to women, especially due to death and imprisonment. Additionally, the increasing economic marginality of black men rendered even more of them undesirable as long-term household partners (also see Wilson, 1996). Social policy may have inadvertently contributed to the decline in marriage (also see Jewell, 1988). During the 1960s, many States denied AFDC payments (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) to single mothers suspected of living with a man. These types of eligibility requirements were struck down by

the Supreme Court in 1968. However, even under the revised welfare policy, poor couples had an incentive to cohabit instead of marry, in order to maintain welfare eligibility.

Several recent studies have looked at the role of men in single-mother households. Jayakody & Kalil (2002) examined survey responses collected 1992–93 from 749 African American single mothers participating in a welfare-to-work program in Fulton County, Georgia. They found that few of the children had contact with their non-resident biological fathers but that the majority had a *social father* they saw regularly, often daily. They found that children who had a mother's romantic partner as a social father displayed higher levels of school readiness but, interestingly, lower levels of personal maturity. Jayakody & Kalil speculated that this immaturity might be a product of children competing with social fathers for mothers' attention. Alternatively, they suggested a possible reverse causation, that mothers may have introduced social fathers to help stabilize less well-adjusted children. An ethnographic study of inner-city New York indicated that single-mothers' romantic partners were often a destabilizing factor. Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson (2004) found that social fathers tended to practice an authoritarian parenting style sustained by severe violence, and that they often sexually assaulted the girls in the household.

McDonald & Armstrong (2001) raised questions about whether African American kin networks were being overstressed in the face of increased teenage childbearing, illicit drug use, a menacing teen culture, persistent poverty, and welfare reform. Several studies have called attention to the growth in grandmother care during the 1990s and increasing receipt of kin foster care payments by grandparents and other extended family members (Dunlap, Tourigny, & Johnson, 2000; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2000; Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996). The U.S. Bureau of the Census (2004) identified a substantial jump in African American children living in no-parent households from 7% in 1993 to 11% in 1995. However, historically this is a fairly short-term trend. The prevalence of no-parent households had been 10% and above from 1880 through 1980 (Ruggles, 1994). The prevalence had only first dipped below 10% in 1982. Summaries of the literature noted that various social factors contributed to the rise in grandparent-headed households including teenage pregnancy, divorce, persistent poverty, youth unemployment, HIV/AIDS and other illnesses, a six-fold increase in women's incarceration 1980–1995, and especially the crack epidemic (Anderson, 1999; Burton, Dilworth-Anderson, & Merriwether-deVries, 1995; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2000).

The Crack Era

The life course perspective maintains that persons are differently affected by major historical events depending on their social position at the time (Alwin & McCammon, 2003; Elder, 1999; Newman, 1996). Sweeping events like a major war or depression can define circumstances, shape attitudes, and effect behaviors. We contend the Crack Era had this type of an impact, especially in the inner city.

Various illegal drugs have tended to rise and fall in popularity over time (Golub, Johnson & Dunlap, 2005; Johnson & Golub, 2004). Heroin had been broadly popular in the inner city during the 1960s and early 1970s. Snorting cocaine became popular during the 1970s, but mostly among wealthier populations. During the early 1980s, some cocaine users (especially drug dealers) started to smoke freebase, a costly and challenging process involving mixing powder cocaine with ether over an open flame (Hamid, 1992). Crack cocaine represented an innovation that allowed users to conveniently smoke cocaine vapors on a low cost-per-dose basis. During the mid-1980s, the use of crack spread widely, especially in inner-city New York. Use was quite common in other American cities, although the timing of the crack era and prevalence varied across locations (Golub & Johnson, 1997).

For many, continual crack use became an obsession that dominated their lives. Many crack users organized their lives around their drug habits and their extended binges (Johnson, Golub & Dunlap, 2000; Ratner, 1992; Williams, 1992). Dedicated crack users sold drugs, committed various hustles, and stole from family members to support their habits. Crack markets emerged in the inner city to serve users 24/7 (Bourgois, 1995; Jacobs, 1999; Johnson, Dunlap & Tourigny, 2000; Williams, 1989). Wealthier customers would come to these markets bringing much needed cash into impoverished communities and providing illegal jobs for many inner-city residents as dealers and in other drug distribution roles. These growing crack markets were associated with increased levels of violence in the inner city. Unfortunately, most low-level dealers and operatives ended up consuming their profits through their own growing drug habits without having saved any of their money.

The subcultural behaviors associated with crack use also led to much interpersonal violence, duplicity in relationships, increased prostitution, child neglect and abuse, and family dissolution (Johnson, Golub & Dunlap, 2000). Crack users placed a heavy burden on families of orientation, extended kin, and community members who sought to support these persons. Crack users also greatly disappointed their offspring who might otherwise have depended upon them, thereby placing additional burdens on family, kin, and community.

Since 1989, the crack era in New York City has been drawing to a close. All across the U.S., the prevalence of crack use has been declining, especially among youths. In a related shift, inner-city violence has also decreased dramatically (Johnson, Golub & Dunlap, 2000). Moreover, this appears to be a conscious choice. Since the early 1990s, inner-city youths have been purposefully avoiding crack and heroin, having seen the devastation these drugs brought into the lives of older community members (Curtis, 1998; Furst et al., 1999). Marijuana supplanted crack as the drug of choice among inner-city youths, especially when smoked as a blunt—an inexpensive cigar in which the tobacco has been replaced with marijuana (Golub and Johnson, 2001; Golub et al., 2004). However, many existing crack users persisted with their habits throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. Davis et al. (2003) estimated that as of 1998–99 that 10% of nearly 100,000 residents of one inner-city section of New York (Central Harlem) were still actively using crack.

Methods

Data for this project came from a series of intensive ethno-graphic projects on drug use and violence in poor inner-city households that spanned the 1990s and has continued into the 2000s. Field staff followed key informant procedures to recruit focal subjects from severely-distressed (predominately African American) households located in inner-city New York neighborhoods, primarily Central Harlem, South Bronx, and the Browns-ville and East New York sections of Brooklyn (Dunlap & Johnson, 1999). Focal subjects purposefully represented multiple social networks as well as a range of family compositions and experiences typical of the inner city. Parents were asked to give informed consent to participate and for researchers to talk to their children (who also assented to participation). The sample included 178 subjects of varying ages from approximately 72 households. A precise count of households was complicated by factors such as eviction, relationships ending, families splitting up, families broken up by child protection services, and persons moving out and moving back.

Staff regularly visited each household (and as of 2006 were still making visits) to interview subjects and make direct observations. Most households were followed for three to five years and interviewed at least quarterly over that period. As many as ten years of field notes were available for some subjects who had participated in previous studies. With time, the interviewers developed personal empathic connections into subjects' lives. Staff also spent a great deal of time participating in the life of the neighborhood, learning about its peer groups,

its informal organization, and its social structures. Staff members took careful measures to assure their safety in locations where violence was commonplace (Williams, Dunlap, Johnson & Hamid, 1992). Interviews were tape recorded, transcribed verbatim, and stored in an electronic database. Field notes of interpersonal interactions and conversations observed were also stored in the database.

This paper presents syntheses of the extensive qualitative data regarding Ricochet Strutter and Island Bersini's households. (All names used in this paper are pseudonyms chosen by the subjects.) Based on our field work and knowledge of the inner-city, we present these experiences as typical of the inner-city at the time. These narratives illustrate the dynamic nature of distressed African American households during the crack era. This paper uses the term African American family because these experiences were typical of those faced by many persons of African descent in the United States. This designation emphasizes the connection with other literature on this topic. However, the term is somewhat inaccurate. Some of the study participants identified as neither African (some traced their most recent non-American ancestry to the Caribbean) nor American (some did not have U.S. citizenship). Moreover, there is great diversity in African American family experiences. Clearly, these experiences are not representative of all African American families, especially wealthier families.

Findings

Ricochet's Family

The interviewer reported, "I was introduced to Ricochet on one of those calm clear winter days when a bright sun mocks the bitter-cold temperature. She was very large, well over 300 pounds. She wore an oversized dress with spandex pants underneath and slip-on shoes. Her hair was short and brushed back. She had a slight scar on her lip. She came across as friendly and outgoing, but there was a clear undertone of despair."

Ricochet was born in 1961 in Brooklyn, New York, the last of 10 living children. Unlike most of the children, Ricochet knew her father, Tom, who lived with them while she was growing up. Ricochet's mother, Joyce, hated Tom's drinking. She took out her anger on Ricochet, because Ricochet resembled him. She would force Ricochet to eat excessively and then beat her for being fat. Joyce would often tell her, "Get off your fat stinking ass." Joyce generally left the care of her children to the oldest child living at home. Ricochet reported, "My mother was into parties and stuff. Everything I ask her, 'Go ask your sister.' My father, he was like messing with everybody, everybody, [he was always at] somebody's mother's house. ... So, he wasn't there either. ... [My sister Denise] was more like my mother. You know, come to school with me and stuff."

At age 18, Ricochet dropped out of school. She started dating a man she met while he was installing new doorbells in her apartment building. They had a daughter together, Tushay, but the relationship did not last long. He had said that he was in his twenties. However, he was actually almost 40 and already married. Ricochet would leave care of the child to her mother.

Ricochet had emerged. At 19, she was in the prime of life. She had a large circle of friends. She knew what was happening. She attended parties, drank alcohol, smoked marijuana and started to smoke cocaine freebase. It was 1980, and her life was fun and carefree. In contrast, Joyce was greatly displeased with this turn of events and would routinely fight with Ricochet, verbally and physically.

At 21, Ricochet became romantically involved with John, who had just returned from jail to live with his mother in the apartment above Joyce's. Ricochet and John had a daughter together, Fruitloops. John was a heroin addict and mostly hustled to support his habit. He was also very

violent. To protect herself, Ricochet would call the police, "I kept him locked up. [To keep him] from beating me all the time.... So, he's back in there, [in prison,] doing another seven. So, he rather be in there. It's his second home. That's what his mother said."

Joyce got an apartment in a senior citizen building, which left Ricochet and her children homeless. They spent nine months in a shelter, until they were placed in one of Harlem's high-rise, low-income projects. Many homeless women with children turned to the shelter system for temporary housing. In conjunction with this emergency service, the New York Department of Housing attempted to place all homeless families in apartments. However, given housing shortages the demand for these placements out-stripped the supply. Families often waited for months and even years for run-down apartments, most often in housing projects. Given their lack of income and lack of discipline in paying rent and bills, many families did not remain in their units for long.

Once Ricochet set up her own household, there was a steady parade of boyfriends and other shorter-term relationships. Ricochet was spending even less time with her children and more time with her crack habit. Ricochet reported, "I used to smoke up all my money. I was getting like \$311 cash in the projects. But the stamps, I used to always, you know, take the stamps and buy food. I always bought food." Tushay, who was effectively in charge, disagreed. Tushay recalled, "I call the BCW [Bureau of Child Welfare] on my mother, when she didn't buy me no school clothes.... She didn't even feed me. She didn't feed me for like two days." Indeed, Ricochet's mother, Joyce, as well as her two children Tushay and Fruitloops all called BCW at different times to complain about Ricochet's inattentive parenting.

After a few years, Ricochet lost the apartment for not paying the rent and the family moved back in with Joyce. At the height of the Crack Era in 1988, Ricochet began to support her habit through prostitution. The father of her next daughter, Shena, was a one-night stand. Two years later, Ricochet obtained an apartment in the projects. There, she met Bill. He was a very violent man. Like Ricochet, he was heavily involved with crack. Bill was living with his mother at that time. When Bill came to the house, everyone was afraid. He stole money from Tushay and Fruitloops whenever he could. Bill and Ricochet had a son, Timothy. Then the housing cycle continued. Ricochet was evicted from her apartment again, moved her family into a shelter, and eventually obtained another apartment.

Tushay resented her mother's boyfriends continually invading her home and her private life. Some tried to act like a father. Many threatened her with violence. Some wanted to have sex with her. In response, Tushay learned to run away from home and stay with a friend for a while as a reprieve from her mother, the boyfriends and school. Far from protecting her daughters from sexual advances, Ricochet would encourage her daughters to prostitute. Ricochet explained, "A lotta times my vic didn't come and I didn't wanna fuck 'em, and they [Tushay or Fruitloops] used to bust them off.... I'm sayin' I didn't make them prostitute. But when they did, I wanted some of the money for the drugs, and I know that. I had to talk about that [years later while in drug treatment]. I said that's how fucked I was." At ages 14 and 12, Tushay and Fruitloops were hospitalized with a venereal disease. BCW removed them from the household and placed them in foster care. Ricochet was able to get them back by pleading that they were wild and she was trying to control them. However, she quickly lost custody of them again.

In 1995, Ricochet met George. Like so many of her previous boyfriends, George was intensely violent. As a young man, George had shot a man while robbing a supermarket, and served 13 years for the offense. Ricochet met him soon after he got out. Crack cocaine was their common interest and shared passion. Ricochet was soon pregnant, but George beat her so badly that she had a miscarriage. After another particularly violent domestic incident, George was arrested and returned to prison. Meanwhile, Ricochet was pregnant again. Ricochet said that one time

while having sex early in their relationship, George told her, “Daddy die, mama die.” This cryptic avowal seemed romantic at the time. Later, she realized that George had knowingly infected her with HIV. When the next baby, Zena, was born, she was HIV positive. The hospital would not release her into Ricochet's custody. Ricochet had Zena placed in kin foster care with one of her mother's nieces, Willie Mae. In 1998, Ricochet also placed her next son, Vernon Jr., with Willie Mae.

By the end of 1998, all of Ricochet's children had been removed from her household, including her two oldest daughters. However, Tushay and Fruitloops continually ran away from the foster homes and institutions in which they were placed. Eventually, BCW grew tired of continually searching for them, and they returned home to Ricochet's apartment. In due course, Ricochet was again evicted from her apartment. This time, however she did not have any children in her care so she was not eligible for subsidized housing. Instead of living in one place, she shuttled between the apartments maintained by Tushay, Fruitloops, Joyce, and Victor, a senior citizen in Joyce's apartment building with whom she smoked crack.

As of 2003, Fruitloops was maintaining an apartment provided by welfare. This household served as the primary residence for 15 people, Fruitloops, her four children, her long-term boyfriend Patrick (who stayed about half time and was legally married to someone else), Ricochet and her current boyfriend Brian, Tushay and her five children.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Ricochet was primarily a crack-using sex worker. Most of the time, her family did not have an apartment of its own. According to Census Bureau definitions, her family would be variously categorized over time as a multi-generational single household (with varying household heads), as members of multiple households, or as members of no household. Ricochet's experiences illustrate the devastation that prevails when the responsible parent is caught up in her own personal concerns. Men regularly circulated through Ricochet's household between periods of jail and prison. Children attended school sporadically, if at all. Food was often not available. Lights and water went off regularly because of unpaid bills. In a sense, Ricochet's household can be viewed as caught in a whirlwind, moving about, bumping up against hard circumstances and sending children off in various directions. In contrast, Willie Mae's household seemed like a relatively safe haven. In the inner city, however, stable residence does not alone ensure a wholesome environment for child development as illustrated by Island's story.

Island's Family

Island Bersini chose her pseudonym because she was born in the Islands. This label also conveniently describes her family role, as an island, a possible haven in stormy times. Like Willie Mae, she accepted care of numerous children. As a kin foster care provider, She held legal and personal responsibility for them. Her home provided a constant address, food, and a place to sleep. However, it did not shield children from the hardships of poverty nor the broader ravages of the Crack Era. Crack-related problems had a wide reach in the inner city. Originally, field staff selected some poor households in inner-city neighborhoods as a comparison group because the household heads reported that no one in the family used drugs. However, in-depth interviewing eventually revealed significant drug use, especially crack, in virtually all the households included in the study.

It was a quiet day in the neighborhood. Usually, there were people hanging out near Island's apartment building day and night, mostly teenagers, most of them involved in some type of hustle. This activity flowed like a stream from the street into the lobby of the building. They used the lobby for dice games and drug selling. Young prostitutes used the scene as a convenient spot to turn a quick trick. Essentially, the activities of the park, street, and lobby continued its flow right into Island's apartment. Island tolerated high levels of drug use and violence in her

household. It became a favorite place for drug-using family members to visit. Island's apartment usually teemed with people, their lives and their noises. Today it was serene, eerily calm as if we were in the eye of a storm. Everyone was out except Island. Even still, the apartment felt crowded with boxes and furniture and everyone's things. Amidst the clutter, Island Bersini, age 62, sat cross-legged with a cup of tea in her hand.

Island reported that, "Growing up, I was always kind-hearted and loved to take care of other people's children and I guess that has followed me all my life." Island was born in 1930 in the Caribbean. Her biological parents were never married and their relationship didn't last. Island never knew her mother, never knew the circumstances of her birth, never knew why her mother abandoned her and disappeared from her life. Island's father had a common-law relationship with another woman who became Island's stepmother and the leading influence in her early life. The stepmother already had five children of her own. So, Island became the youngest of six. When she was four, her father died. Within a year, Island's stepmother decided to move the family to New York in search of a better life. As a temporary measure, they moved in with the stepmother's sister, who was raising five children of her own. The arrangement became permanent and the 11 kids grew up together. Island remembered how her stepmother worked long hours as a domestic. Island dutifully did most of the daily housework, washing clothes, washing dishes and overall cleaning.

As a child, Island felt no one really cared for her and yearned for the day she would have her own family. At age 18, she was introduced to Jim, who had just gotten out of prison. After a short courtship, they married. In 1953, they had a daughter, Sonya, and in 1956, their son, Ross, was born. Jim worked hard delivering coal during the week. However, on the weekend he drank heavily, argued, and physically abused Island. No matter the strain, Island vowed, "I was willing to live with him because he was my husband and I wanted to stick by him." Until, one day she came home and found Jim trying to have sex with Sonya, then age seven. She had Jim arrested and established her own household. Two years later, Jim was hit by a car and killed.

After Jim's death, Island took responsibility for everyone in the family who needed help. Many of Island's siblings or in-laws fell into criminal activity or drug addiction. As a result, their children needed to be raised by others, sometimes only temporarily but often permanently, as one thing led to another. In time, Island became the prominent caregiver of the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of her generation, sometimes with foster care support and often without such support. Alas, Island's love of family, apartment space, and food were not enough. These children did not receive much of an education, and they failed to develop the type of social capital needed for participating in the modern economy. They did, however, receive a good introduction into street life and an education in the prevailing inner-city subcultures.

Sonya reached age 17 in 1970, during the peak years of the Heroin Era. After her initial introduction to the drug, Sonya quickly became addicted, as did many of her cousins, uncles, and aunts. She left high school and married a heroin addict and dealer. She and her husband lived in shooting galleries. Sonya raised additional money as a prostitute. After a few years, they separated and he moved to Florida. Soon afterward, Sonya was arrested and sent to prison for participating in the robbery of a jewelry store with a friend. After release, Sonya returned to live with Island. While imprisoned, she had gotten clean from heroin.

In the 1980s, Sonya started using crack and again quickly became dependent. Her life revolved around her habit. Whenever she had any money, she would smoke crack. Her main income came from prostitution. As soon as she would turn a trick and make a few dollars, she would find a dealer, buy some crack, and smoke. Sometimes she would directly exchange sex-for-crack, avoiding dealing with the money and having to find a dealer.

Island's second child, Ross, also became part of the street scene. As a child, he always hated being poor and felt stigmatized by public assistance. At age 16, he dropped out of school to try to support the family by selling PCP. Ross married at age 18. Soon afterwards, he was arrested for dealing and sent to prison for two years. Upon release, he returned to Island's household, rather than to his wife, and returned to selling marijuana and PCP. In 1975, he started selling heroin but hated the drug because of what had happened to his sister. Heroin had become known as one of the worst if not the worst drug on the street. When the police increased their pressure on dealers, Ross was arrested and sent to prison for another two years. After release, he was shot during a robbery. As a result, he was paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. His condition, however, did not stop him from dealing drugs. Even though he was still legally married, Ross began living with another woman, Gladys, who bore three children by him. Eventually, however, Ross moved back in with Island.

In the mid-1980s, Ross' business practice was well established. He had his territory, his client base, and his connections with dealers. He learned how to cook-up crack and set up a thriving business. Crack dealing evolved into the family business. When young men came to live in Island's household, they become involved in drug dealing through Ross. The family and extended family resident in the household lived in style, at least by Harlem standards. That money was never invested (no one in the family ever had a bank account) and the household returned to poverty in the 1990s as Ross' discipline gave way and he became his own best customer.

In 2003, Island's household was no longer as active as it had been in either drugs or childcare. Island had heart problems and received a pacemaker to keep her going. Sonya was hit by a car and spent several months in the hospital. Ross became progressively more sick from AIDS and passed away. Island reported, "[having] done raised 89 kids. Not one is employed at a legal job. They are all alcoholics, heroin and crack addicts, drug sellers, and what not." When asked if any came to see her, she was taken aback and replied quickly, "I don't want no drug addict around me. I'm tired of that."

Discussion

These life histories identify how the Crack Era added to the miseries facing many inner-city African American families in the 1980s and 1990s. Crack represented a major distraction contributing to child abuse, neglect, and abandonment of parental responsibilities. Children born to crack users like Ricochet had a challenging home life. The African American tradition of extended family served as only a modest stopgap for Ricochet's family. The children received some support from their maternal grandmother and from Aunt Willie Mae, Ricochet's sister, who had stepped up as a member of a broader kin support network. Even stable inner-city households were greatly affected by the Crack Era. Island held onto her apartment and her children and provided refuge for a continual flow of children from kin who were unable to support them. However, children growing up in Island's household did not fare much better with the extensive crack use, sales, and other street activities taking place in their home.

From a problems perspective, the challenges faced by distressed African American families as they emerge from the crack era are profound and complex. Children from households like these have been becoming the parents of the next generation of African Americans in the inner city. Many of these young adults inherited from their parents structural disadvantages, poor preparation for a conventional lifestyle, and counterproductive behaviors based in non-conventional subcultures (also see Dunlap, Golub & Johnson, 2003; Dunlap, Golub, Johnson, & Wesley, 2000; Dunlap, Johnson, & Rath, 1996; Johnson, Dunlap & Maher, 1998). Moreover, the legacy of the Crack Era has left profound deficits in kin support networks. Many of the older relatives who might have otherwise helped are unavailable due to persistent drug use,

poor health, imprisonment, and death stemming from crack use and sales. These young parents face major challenges in obtaining and maintaining jobs that could lift them and their families out of poverty. Welfare reform has set a goal of moving families from dependence on government aid to economic independence through employment at legitimate jobs. However, many African American families are still feeling the effects of a long history of structural disadvantages (Feagin, 2000) as well as the residual consequences of the Crack Era.

It will take a wealth of services and comprehensive case management to elevate a large percentage of the distressed African American families. Many parents and responsible adults do not have the human and social capital necessary to pull together a healthy and productive lifestyle for themselves and their dependent children, let alone other unfortunate children stranded by the collapse of inner-city households. Consequently, young children in these households are at great risk of never rising above the persistent poverty dogging their family histories. There are strengths in these families and communities. However, from the problems perspective, we conclude that it is hopelessly optimistic and even immoral to applaud the strengths of the African American family and leave these distressed households to struggle or more likely wallow in their problems. These families that are embedded within the larger American experience deserve and should be entitled to greater opportunity, especially the young children that have not yet become engulfed in self-destructive behaviors and who have all of their lives and potential ahead of them. We further contend that aggressive social service agencies should be established within distressed communities to assure that every child receives these opportunities. No child should go hungry, have medical needs untreated, endure physical or sexual abuse, or fail to receive an education because they are poor.

Helping these families, and helping them to help themselves, can be well served by drawing upon traditional strengths and emerging capacities. The African American experience has a powerful tradition of support through family, extended family and fictive kin. Strengthening and supporting these resources should be a major initiative, especially those extended/fictive families like Willie Mae and Island that have continued to serve the next generation. This post-crack era presents an opportune time to initiate these and other human services that support distressed African American families. In the inner-city, young persons are not impeding their life chances with heavy illicit drug use as much as their predecessors. Consequently, more of them could be available to rebuild kin networks, to amass family resources and to help elevate persistently distressed African American families.

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