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Hidden America: The Ripple Effects Black Women and Families Face When Living with and Responding to Structural Inequality and Violence

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Abstract Informed by a cumulative disadvantage thesis and Black Feminist thought, this essay examines structural inequality and violence in urban neighborhoods and their implications for the lived experiences and quality of life of African American mothers and their families. The authors consider life in Hidden America, in general, and urban Chicago locales, in particular, as largely unexamined but chronic phenomena, the ripple effects of violence as part of the cumulative disadvantage these mothers and their families face, and solutions to end structural violence in such areas.

KEYWORDS • URBAN VIOLENCE, AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE EXPERIENCES, STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

"We dedicate this article to Katrina Percy, mother of Kimon Wheeler, a son taken too soon by gun violence."

INTRODUCTION

America continues to struggle with high levels of violence (Freking 2013; Gergi and Breland 2012). Individual and collective acts of daily violence are displayed nightly on local and national television news. According to reports, the United States (U.S.) suffers far more deaths due to gun violence than any other wealthy nation due, in part, to the widespread possession of firearms (Freking 2013). For example, a 2013 study found that the U.S.

as 10 gun-related deaths per 100,000 people – more than any of the other 27 developed countries in the study (Lupkin 2013). Moreover, large metropolitan areas account for more than two-thirds of deaths by gun violence each year, with inner cities being the most affected. The majority of victims are young African Americans ranging in age from their early teens to mid-20s (Gergi and Breland 2012).

Despite declining firearm homicide rates in most large metropolitan areas, many Americans continue to live under warlike conditions in communities with high levels of homicide and violence (Bauder 2012; Ford 2012; NBC News 2013a). For example, there are urban neighborhoods in cities such as Chicago, where gun violence and gun-related homicide are so concentrated that some scholars have described them as “bordering on epidemic health and safety proportions” (Hagler 2013:1; see also Garbarino 2000). Although the number of homicides in Chicago fell below the 419 recorded in 2013 to 377 in 2014, the threat of or actual gun violence continues to be a major issue for many Chicagoans (Sanburn 2014; Swartz 2015). For instance, in 2014 and the first 6 months of 2015, Chicago led the country in homicide rates (Madhuni 2015). Moreover, September 2015 was described as the deadliest September in Chicago in 13 years as a result of the 351 shootings in that period, including 57 fatalities (Bentle and Epton 2015). By mid-October 2015, there had been 2,229 shootings in that same city for the year and 391 related deaths (DNAinfo Chicago 2015; Talk Radio News Service 2015).

Urban sociologists such as Robert Sampson (2012) argue that understanding the context of urban neighborhoods can help us understand and document the visible and invisible consequences of living in environments shaped by structural oppression and violence. We argue that these invisible processes create what David Ford (2012) describes as “Hidden America” – an America in which violence experienced by families, mostly those headed by single African American women, is unfathomable to most of the country. One aspect of this Hidden America is the day-to-day experiences of struggle and hope as well as resistance and resilience of people who live in communities where parents and children are directly and indirectly exposed to robberies, physical assaults, drive-by shootings, and murders (Hill et al. 1995; Horn and Trickett 1998; Osofsky 1995; Veenema 2001). Low-income African American mothers in such communities often perceive their neighborhoods to be challenging and even life-threatening places to raise their children (Dahl et al. 2010). According to scholarship, mothers who raise their children in poor, high risk and violent neighborhoods face a multitude of unique obstacles that mothers who live in wealthier and safer neighborhoods do not have to contend with” (Dahl et al. 2010:1-2). Moreover, African Americans, particularly males, are exposed to disproportionate rates of community violence (Voisin et al. 2011). Elliott and Asetline (2013) use

the term “hostile environments” to capture the antagonistic social contexts in which individuals who are segregated and/or marginalized by race, class, gender, sexuality, and/or age often live daily. Hostile environments can be viewed as yet another aspect of Hidden America because social structures that reinforce marginality make it difficult for residents to thrive and fully participate in society.

Informed by a lens of structural inequality and violence in Chicago neighborhoods, this essay describes the often hidden lived experiences of low-income African American mothers who reside in these segregated, violent neighborhoods that are shaped by structural oppression of white institutions and the consequences of U.S. inequality (Mendenhall 2010). Our goal is to discuss (1) how the lived experiences of African American mothers in Hidden America remain unexamined despite the excessive reporting of daily violent crimes; (2) the ripple effects of violence as part of the cumulative disadvantage these mothers and their families face; and, (3) solutions to end structural violence and the Hidden America of which it is a part.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES: CUMULATIVE DISADVANTAGE AND BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Individuals living in U.S. neighborhoods with high levels of violence experience life within the context of structural oppression and accumulated disadvantage characterized by multiple risk factors that impact parenting, work life, ability to exercise, travel, and overall well-being. These multiple risk factors include the intersection of race, class, gender disadvantage; community violence; bureaucratic inertia; and, high levels of stress due to an intense need for residents to protect themselves and their children from neighborhood violence. Cumulative Disadvantage theory highlights the implications and consequences of sequential stresses and challenges for human social development. It provides a framework that highlights the process of cumulative disadvantage in which earlier disadvantages, difficulties, and setbacks build upon and amplify challenges to an individual’s development (Hagen 1991; Hagen and Foster 2003; Sampson and Laub 1997). This theory suggests that: (1) social systems generate inequality, which is manifested over the life course via demographic and developmental processes; (2) disadvantage increases exposure to risk while advantage increases exposure to opportunity; (3) life course trajectories are shaped by the accumulation of risk, available resources, and human agency; and, (4) cumulative inequality may lead to premature mortality (California Newsreel 2008; Ferraro and Shippee 2009; Hagen and Foster 2003). Although this framework is typically employed in social gerontology, sociologists and

Other social sciences have found it useful in understanding and explaining life course outcomes associated with inequality, systemic oppression and disadvantage (Dannefer 2003).

We use a cumulative disadvantage lens to frame a discussion of links between sequential stresses and challenges experienced by residents (particularly mothers) in communities with high levels of structural inequality, violence, maternal distress, and the ripple effects of violence. Although cumulative disadvantage and the intersection of race, class and gender oppression in the lives of African American women and their families are key features of the theoretical and conceptual models used in this essay, in the tradition of previous scholars, we also highlight agency, strengths and resilience of these mothers (Barnes 2005; Billingsley 1992; Hill 1998; Hopkins-Williams 2007; Jarrett 1994; Jarrett 2013; Jarrett, Jefferson, and Kelly 2010; McAdoo 1997, 2007). Mechanisms related to resiliency include desire and commitment to meet their children's overall needs relative to physical survival, emotional security, and preparation for successful adult roles.

Moreover, we frame this essay using a Black Feminist theoretical and conceptual framework because it is essential for understanding the lived experiences of black women. In this regard, Patricia Hill Collins' (1990, 2000, 2009) seminal epistemology can highlight and center the experiences of low-income single African American mothers and their families living in Hidden America. Collins' concepts of matrix of domination and intersectionality, which explain systems of domination and oppression in black women's lives, are especially useful. She posits that race, class, and gender oppression cannot be understood in isolation. Rather, they intersect and mutually reinforce and shape one another. According to Collins, this dynamic is the most salient feature of many black women's lives. A Black Feminist perspective allows us to understand black women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, class, and related oppression. In addition, this thesis highlights the importance of black women's reactions to oppression and the logic of their actions toward empowerment.

Collins' articulation of a self-defined black woman's standpoint is also useful for examining mothering strategies and practices in Hidden America which are mediated by a myriad of factors related to their particular position in the socio-historical landscape. This perspective gives voice to black women and centers their perspectives and experiences; it also makes visible power structures that affect the daily practices of mothers. Thus a Black Feminist lens allows us to unpack black mothers' reactions to chronic neighborhood violence in terms of transformative behaviors (Collins 2000, 2009; Feagin 2006). It also enables us to understand mothering, not only as caring for and nurturing children, but also as a context for consciously, and

sometimes fastidiously, socializing children to avoid life-threatening local violence while simultaneously maintaining their childhood innocence.

HIDDEN AMERICA: THE CASE OF CHICAGO AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

Over 56 years ago, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1959) declared Chicago the most segregated city in the country. By most economic and social measures, very little has changed (Bogira 2011; Cromidas 2015). Chicago communities continue to be decisively divided by race and the city continues to rank at or near the top of annual lists of the most racially or residentially segregated cities in the nation (Bogira 2011; Cromidas 2015). For example, the majority of Chicago's African Americans live in the same areas of the city that they have occupied for the past 100 years (Bargo 2012). Most of the city's African Americans are still segregated primarily into two areas of the city: a large geographic area on the south and southwest side, and a smaller one on the west side. These two areas combined include 21 contiguous Chicago community areas, each with African American populations of at least 90 percent (Bogira 2011). Many of these hypersegregated neighborhoods also continue to have the highest indices of poverty, welfare dependency and unemployment as well as the lowest per capita income and median income in the city (Dodge 2014; Main 2013). Although African Americans comprise approximately 32 percent of the city's population, they accounted for 77 percent of homicide victims in the first six months of 2014 (Crepeau 2015; Suburban Stats N.d.). With one exception, African Americans have made up more than 70 percent of homicide victims in Chicago every year for the last two decades (Main 2013). These figures highlight the historical and current structural inequality that created and maintains aspects of Hidden America.

HIDDEN AMERICA: LIVING WITH THE DEVASTATION OF COMMUNITY VIOLENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Most of the attention in the media and research on community violence focuses on adults. However, children are not immune to gun violence. For example, in 2013 gun violence claimed the life of a 15-year old African American Chicagoan named Hadiya Pendleton. She was killed shortly after performing with her drill team at President Obama's second inauguration. That same year, a total of 29 former or current students at Hadiya's high school were shot, eight of them fatally (NBC News 2013b). She was the 329th homicide victim in Chicago, the hometown of President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama. The first lady attended her funeral. A month after the funeral, the president and first lady invited Hadiya's

family to Washington, DC as the president delivered his State of the Union address to call for a national push to end gun violence (Cowley-Pendleton and Pendleton 2014). In 2015, 52 children under 15 years of age were shot and 504 young people between the ages of 15 and 19 years of age were shot in Chicago (Bentle and Epton 2015).

Although children are not usually the intended victims of such gun-violence and homicide, they are often caught in the crossfire. Thus although violence affects all Chicagoans, it is particularly devastating for its youth. For example, over the six-year period of 2008-2014, nearly one-half of the city's homicide victims were aged 18 years or younger; one victim was only six months old (NBC News 2013a). Moreover, eight out of ten of those children of school age were killed in the African American and latina/o communities where they lived. Moreover, research suggests that these statistics do not reflect the thousands more youth who have been shot; shot it; witnessed shootings; observed a crime scene (sometimes in the presence of a deceased person) or a memorial for a victim of violence; or who have been devastated psychologically and/or economically by the sudden loss of individuals who provided them with emotional and/or material support (Babwin 2014; Caputo 2014).

Another side of the devastation of community violence is captured by the activism and resilience of mothers and others in these communities who are committed to trying to make their neighborhoods safe for their own children and other residents. For example, on June 23, 2015, 34-year-old Lucille Barnes was shot and killed in the Englewood neighborhood on the southside of Chicago after a man walked past and shot into a group (Garcia 2015). Two other women were also shot. In response to this specific act of violence as well as in an overall effort to combat ongoing neighborhood violence, a cadre of mothers formed a group called Mothers Against Senseless Killings (MASK). Tamar Manasseh, the group's founder, and her peers set up camp across the street from where Barnes was murdered. The mothers committed to patrolling the streets of Englewood over one of the deadliest weekends historically in Chicago – the 2015 Fourth of July weekend. They spent at least four hours every day patrolling the community the entire summer until Labor Day with the hope that their presence on the streets in pink tee shirts that read “Moms on Patrol” would help prevent more shootings and deter the kind of violence that claimed the life of Lucille Barnes (Garcia 2015). Their belief that violence will not occur under the watchful eyes of mothers is encapsulated by one mother: “A mother’s love is selfless, annoying and always there.... This is what mothers do best, get it the way” (Cholke 2015:3). Perhaps the mantra and proactive behavior of these mothers to end the violence was expressed by another mother who said: “If you’re trying to shoot someone and we’re out here, you’re not

getting off the block” (Cholke 2015:2).

Another MASK mother made perhaps one of the most profound comments about guns, violence, and children as victims: “It has to be a change in mindset; it can’t just be taking the guns away.... What is the alternative? What does it look like if it gets worse? A bulletproof vest in 2T [2 toddler] at Target for your 2-year-old?” (Cholke 2015:3). The seriousness of the problem in Hidden America is not lost in the sarcasm of this mother’s statement. However, such deleterious effects remain largely hidden from the day-to-day reality of most white Americans (and other groups) and more affluent African Americans. As Black Feminist scholars, we endeavor to situate the physical conditions and psychological reality of African American mothers and their families who live in Hidden America.

INVISIBLE IN PLAIN SIGHT: FILLING IN THE GENDER GAP ABOUT VIOLENCE

In Hidden America, African American girls and women as well as social and political narratives about structural inequality, violence, and social justice can be considered invisible in plain sight (Scott 2015; Yu 2011). Discussions about violence and the associated statistics about the victims of violence in African American communities often focus on African American boys and men while overlooking their female counterparts. According to bell hooks: “No other group in this country has so had their identity socialized out of existence as has African American women.... When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men” (Brown 2013:1). Black girls and women often navigate American spaces unheard of and unseen in Hidden America. They are made invisible by the weight of racism, sexism and the myth of the strong black woman that suggests that they are “alright” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Woods-Giscombé 2010). Yet statistics show that African American girls and women, like their male counterparts, are all too often victims of community and state-sanctioned violence. For example, according to the African American Policy Forum (2014), such girls and women between the ages of 10 and 24 years die from gun violence at a rate nearly 6.5 times that of white females in the same age group, 3.5 times higher than Latinas, and 9 times higher than their Asian and Pacific Islander peers. In addition, African American girls and women between the ages of 10 and 24 years die from gun violence at higher rates than white and Asian men. Furthermore, Cooper (2015) reports that once every 19 hours an African American woman is killed by a man. Yet the typical or dominant dialogue on guns and violence is androcentric and makes these crimes and their victims invisible.

More specifically, in Chicago, as is the case in many U.S. cities, male

victims of street violence are most often publicized. However, the death rates of African American girls and women highlight the reality that such groups are also victimized, terrorized, and traumatized by community violence (Cooper 2013). For example, in September 2015, while preparing to attend a family gathering, a Chicago grandmother, her 23-year-old pregnant daughter, her 11-month-old grandson, and two male relatives were shot when a gunman in a passing car opened fire. The grandmother and her daughter died; the infant and two male relatives survived (Rhodes et al. 2015). Although African American and Latino males experience fatal firearm violence at higher rates than other segments of the population, the invisibility of female homicide victims is also problematic. African American girls and women are also marginalized and made invisible in reports of state initiated and sanctioned violence against African American people. And African American motherhood is not a protection against this or other forms of violence. For example, in one among many reported cases of police violence, her one-year-old son was injured when police killed Tanika Wilson during a drug raid. She was unarmed and holding her child at the time of the shooting (Maag 2008). Additionally, a few weeks after Eric Garner (an African American man) died in an illegal chokehold by a New York City policeman, another New York officer put seven-month pregnant African American woman, Rosan Miller, in a chokehold after a dispute over illegal grilling (Collman 2014).

This invisibility prompted Kimberlé Crenshaw (2015) to initiate the #Say Her Name, a national campaign to make visible and mark police initiated violence, murders and abuse of African American girls and women. So although the public is often outraged by the murders of young African American males such as Trayvon Martin, Kimani Gray, Michael Brown and Aquan McDonald, and rightfully so, there is often a lack of outrage about similar experiences among African American girls and women. The call for including African American girls and women in the narrative on violence advances the discourse about a racial and gendered reality that is not singular but interconnected and inseparable. Many of the circumstances that appear to justify exclusive focus on boys and men are in fact directly related to the social-economic challenges facing their mothers, and in turn, other females (Crenshaw, cited in Murphy 2015). According to Gross (2015), at the end of the day, because of the vulnerable position of African Americans in American society, if biases against African American girls and women were mediated it would have a liberatory effect for everyone. The discourse around vulnerability, victimization, and neighborhood violence should include African American boys and men as well as African American girls and women.

LIVING THE UNIMAGINABLE IN HIDDEN AMERICA: RIPPLE EFFECTS OF CHRONIC VIOLENCE

To better understand the structural violence involved in the creation of Hidden America, urban sociologist Patrick Sharkey (2013) describes how political decisions and social policies have led to severe disinvestment from African American neighborhoods, persistent segregation, declining economic opportunities, and a growing link between such locales and the criminal justice system (Alexander 2010; Wilson 2007). As a result, Sharkey (2013) argues that the neighborhood inequality and structural oppression that existed in low-income, high-violence neighborhoods 35 or 40 years ago have been passed down to the current generation of African Americans (i.e., an accumulation of disadvantage). Moreover, predatory lending has disproportionately impacted these neighborhoods, resulting in significant numbers of abandoned and boarded-up buildings (Mendenhall 2010).

Thus policy makers and the larger society create social patterns in the lives of many low-income African American mothers that expose them to neighborhood conditions such as boarded-up storefronts; foreclosed homes; vacant trash-filled lots; heavy security gates on homes and businesses; bulletproof partitions separating customers from store cashiers; police surveillance at schools; frequent gunshots and murders; R.I.P. memorials; and, exposure to deceased bodies of children and adults on streets (Babwin 2014; Ford 2012; Nickeas 2014). It is not unusual for adults and youth to display wooden and other makeshift signs such as "Stop the Killing," "Stop the Violence," "We Want to Live," and "Save Our Children." The accumulation of disadvantage and inequality highlights the cost of interlocking structural oppression and the mental and physical toll that it takes on the daily experiences of both mothers and children.

Fox News reporter Lisa Chavarria (2014) visited communities with high levels of gun violence on the south side of Chicago and reported that many residents feared going outside because of the uncertainty of violence and its threat to the safety of their children. According to Chavarria (2014), mothers suggested: "We've got to protect our kids. It's very dangerous out here... I feel like they need to bring in the National Guard, somebody to get this right. I mean, it's going to keep on happening if they don't" (p. 1). In addition, individuals are routinely shot and killed in their own homes. For example, on July 18, 2014, 11-year-old Shamiya Adams was killed in Chicago by a stray bullet as she played at a friend's house. Similarly, on August 20, 2015, 9-year-old Jamlya Bolden was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, by a stray bullet as she sat on her mother's bed doing homework. Many African American mothers fear for their children's lives as they sit inside their homes, lie asleep in their beds, ride in family cars, or play outside. However, such fear often

remains hidden. Such mothers in Hidden America live each day knowing that their parental diligence may not be enough to save their children's lives from gun violence. These desperate conditions often create a sense of hypervigilance¹ among mothers to ensure their children's survival. Yet this type of concentrated violence is rarely experienced by whites due to social structures associated with all-white neighborhoods that do not experience concentrated poverty or chronic unemployment and gun violence (Feagin 1996; Mendenhall 2010).

Escaping Hidden America can be difficult for such mothers and their families (Feagin 2006). Sharkey (2013) describes such urban residents as "Stuck in Place." Given structural constraints linked to racism, sexism, and classism as well as political decisions and policies, it is often difficult to move out of these challenging environments. However, continued life in such areas and the resulting emotions of exasperation, anger, and terror often take their toll. These daily lived experiences also remain largely hidden from the wider society. Moreover, although these experiences are typically manifested in low-income African American neighborhoods, the impact tends to influence the broader African American community (Pattillo 2013). The following section highlights the ripple effects of living in violent neighborhoods that are often hidden from the American public.

Ripple Effects of Violence and Their Physical and Mental Health Consequences

Although Americans are inundated with reports of shootings and murders in cities like Chicago, Baltimore, and Cleveland, there is less discussion about the effects of continuous exposure to violence, such as hypervigilance, chronic stress, and depression. On December 31, 2013, WBAL-TV 11 News conducted an interview with Baltimore Police Commissioner Anthony Batts during which he noted that violence in Baltimore is often localized within certain communities and impacts 80 to 85 percent of the victims who are African American men in the drug trade, but not "everyday citizens." Statements such as these reinforce the idea that African American men are the primary victims of violence and that such outcomes are largely self-induced. Commissioner Batts faced a public backlash from members of the African American community and others who expressed concern about the implications of his statement. For example, residents resist the idea that community violence and its repercussions are experienced primarily by African American men and that such males cannot be upstanding members of the community. Responding to Commissioner Batts, Tessa Hill-Aston, President of Baltimore's chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP),

explains the far-reaching ripple effects of community violence: "Most of it [community violence] is drug-related, but there's a lot more to all that." Moreover, for her, "everyday people" affected by gun violence include the "mothers, wives, siblings and children of gun violence victims" (WBAL-TV 11 News 2013).

Residents in the overall neighborhood grieve for victims of violence, share personal stories, and wonder whether their daughter, son, partner, mother or father will be the next victim of gun violence. So even if the violence does not directly affect a particular individual, violence and violent deaths in the community often have a ripple effect and diminish the well-being of the entire community. Outpouring of emotions as well as expressions of outrage and anger over the deaths of Hadiya Pendleton and LaQuan McDonald in Chicago are classic examples of community ripple effects. Outward expressions in the form of regular displays of balloons, stuffed animals, cards and R.I.P. signs convey community-level attempts to express grief and concern. When studying the lives of these African American mothers in particular, scholars must recognize how their particular social location creates lived experiences and social processes that can be hidden, ignored, or even denied because the associated trauma, injustice, and pain can be overwhelming for such mothers, the news media, and scholars who try to document such phenomena as structural violence (for exceptions see Alexander 2004; Quashie 2011).

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. implicated the government in centuries of structural violence during an August 1967 speech at the 11th annual Southern Christian Leadership Conference Convention called "Where Do We Go from Here?": "The plantation and the ghetto were created by those who had power, both to confine those who had no power and to perpetuate their powerlessness" (Williams 2004:211). A year later on May 12, 1968, Coretta Scott King forcefully unveiled the power dynamics associated with structural violence at a Mother's Day march of welfare recipients, even as she inwardly grieved her murdered husband:

[Nonviolence is] not an easy way, particularly in this day when violence is almost fashionable in this society, where violence against poor people and minority groups is routine. I must remind you that starving a child is violence. Suppressing a culture is violence. Neglecting school children is violence. Punishing a mother and her family is violence.... Ignoring medical needs is violence. Contempt for poverty is violence. Even the lack of will power to help humanity is a sick and sinister form of violence. (Williams 2004:211)

African American women's historical and current battles with interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression are linked to

deleterious neighborhood ripple effects of violence that are often manifested as grief, anger, continuous traumatic stress, hypervigilance, and chronic stress that can lead to chronic diseases and depression (Chen and Miller 2012; Williams and Collins 2001).

As they cope with adversity, African American women are often praised for being strong (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Collins 1990). However, according to the former scholar, investment in the myth of the strong African American woman injures such women and exacerbates racist divisions between women. Moreover, for Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) the function of the idea of the strong African American woman is to “defend and maintain a stratified social order by obscuring African American women’s experiences of suffering, acts of desperation, and anger” (p. 2). African American women’s experiences must be documented and addressed through structural changes in U.S. society.

It is also important to consider continuous exposure to trauma and hypervigilance. According to Chen and Miller (2012), some individuals in low-income contexts are able to protect their health by engaging in “shift-and-persist” strategies that involve shifting or “acceptance of stressors” and persisting which can involve “holding oneself steady” and finding meaning (p. 139). Extending this premise, many mothers in high-violence communities are compelled to “shift-and-persist” and make calculated decisions to deal with frequent threats to their well-being and that of their children. They often choose to restrict their children’s movements throughout the neighborhood, which limits physical activities such as playing in a local park or playground. They must also socialize their children to navigate the neighborhood, including which streets to avoid as well as how to interact with both police and other individuals who pose a threat. Such responses are protective coping measures that minimize the risk of experiencing physical violence (Shorter-Gooden 2004). However, such parenting requires hypervigilance and increases mental stress which will likely impact their physiological and physical health (California Newsreel 2008; Halpern 1995).

In the documentary *The Raising of America* (the episode entitled “Wounded Places”), the narrator John Rich states: “For the young people in the inner city, we actually see the full-blown syndrome of post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD, every bit the same syndrome that we see in combat veterans returning from places like Iraq and Afghanistan” (California Newsreel 2008). According to this same source, PTSD estimates among low-income residents in Philadelphia may be as high as 40 percent.² Scholars now believe that the term PTSD does not adequately describe the mental health consequences of constant exposure to neighborhood violence and related trauma; some suggest that Continuous Traumatic Stress Syndrome better reflects the phenomenon.

Chronic Stress, Poor Sleep, Diseases, and Depression

For decades, researchers have hypothesized that chronic stress is a critical mechanism by which the social environment fosters poor health and health disparities. Studies provide information on the biological mechanisms that link social adversity, chronic stress, and health. One of these mechanisms is poor quality of sleep which has been linked to increased risk of mortality and chronic conditions such as obesity, diabetes, depression and cardiovascular disease (Cappuccio et al. 2010; Knutson and Van Cauter 2008; Mallon et al. 2002; Phillips and Mannino 2007). In addition, research suggests that chronic life stressors compromise the immune system and can foster stress-related diseases (Sapolsky 2002). When persons encounter short-term physical stress, or anything that alters physiological balance, the HPA axis (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis) initiates the stress response in an effort to allow the body to react to and overcome the stressor and return to equilibrium. The stress response involves the mobilization of energy to various parts of the body to help the individual “fight or flee.” At the same time, various nonessential physiological processes are inhibited or suppressed: digestion, reproductive physiology and behavior, growth and tissue repair, inflammation and pain perception (Sapolsky 2002). This well-tuned adaptation process associated with surviving threats has paradoxical components (Sapolsky 2002; see also Robinson, Grozinger, and Whitfield 2005). Under chronic conditions of activation, it may foster disease.

Sapolsky (2002:419, 421) details this paradox and concludes that prolonged stress puts individuals at a higher risk for sickness and diseases: “The problem is that with sustained stress, the stress-response can eventually be as damaging as the stressor... Most features of the stress-response are damaging, inefficient, and even dangerous. If the body constantly decides it is an emergency and activates the stress response, disease eventually emerges”.³ Other possible negative biological outcomes of chronic stress include gastrointestinal disorders, ulcers, and compromised reproduction physiology (MacDorman 2011; Sapolsky 2002; Sims and Rainge 2002).

Researchers have sought to better understand how changes in the body’s stress response systems may be a key pathway between individuals’ psychological and physical outcomes. Theoretical models suggest extreme and chronic stress may dramatically influence depression. Several empirical studies examine this relationship (Adam et al. 2010; Goodyer et al. 2000; Halligan et al. 2007; Selye 1950). When neighborhood violence obstructs the ability of families to complete the daily round, it can also increase parental emotional stress and shape coping mechanisms used to deal with stressors (Barnes 2005; Jarrett 1997). These stressors are compounded when mothers also fear for the safety of their children. As a result, such parents

may experience depression, anxiety, denial, and reduced feelings of self-efficacy (Garbarino, Kostelny, and Dubrow 1991; Lorion and Salzman 1993; Osofsky et al. 1993).

Of particular interest here is research that examines the relationship between psychosocial environments and depression among African American women. Stressful psychosocial environments are considered a major factor for depression in this demographic (Barbee 1992; Brown, Brody, and Stoneman 2000; Geronimus et al. 1996). Thus as African American women attempt to survive economically and negotiate mainstream society for themselves and their families, stressful life events (e.g., poverty and violence) and limited resources have been associated with stress and depressive symptoms (Hunn and Craig 2009; Jones 2008; Jones and Ford 2008; Oakley et al. 2005; Waite and Killian 2008; Ward et al. 2009; Woods-Giscombe 2010). Although psychosocial risk factors increase the risk of psychological distress for all women, they are particularly salient for African American women due to their unique social position (Warren 1994). Yet many African American women may be reticent to seek mental health counselling due to the lack of attention to or recognition of their specific ethnic, cultural, and gender needs (CDC 2010). In fact, African American women are among the most undertreated groups for depression, which can have serious consequences for themselves, their families, and the African American community as a whole.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? INVESTMENTS IN NEIGHBORHOODS, EDUCATION, AND ECONOMIC SOLUTIONS

Tailored Neighborhood Programs

Systemic and structural changes are needed to combat the neighborhood-related challenges detailed in this essay. We consider two models here, DREAM and Cease Fire, as well as broader governmental efforts. One example of a holistic and comprehensive program is the DREAM project (Developing Responses to Poverty through Education and Meaning) under development by the authors in the Chicago neighborhood of Englewood. DREAM is an innovative interdisciplinary program of research, community education, and outreach designed to provide educational, financial and cultural resources to enhance the daily lives of African American mothers. DREAM is specifically designed to address the interlocking systems of oppression that many low-income African American mothers living in neighborhoods with high levels of violence face both individually and structurally. At the individual-level, the program includes resources designed to decrease the

negative consequences of social inequality (e.g., stress reduction activities, health prevention, and access to scholarships at the major universities). At the structural-level, the DREAM program encourages mothers and other community members to advocate for structural change around issues of race, gender, and economic marginalization.

The DREAM initiative aims to create change oriented programs that can be sustained by African American mothers, their daughters, and other community partners such as extension educators, school teachers, researchers, policy analysts, journalists, and theologians. Through the use of community and faculty research collaborations, the initiative aims to inspire the daughters and mothers to “DREAM” of many possible futures, including careers in academia and industry where they can produce scholarship and engage in activism that transforms their neighborhoods and addresses social inequality in the larger society. Another program with a community focus and that seeks to build on the strengths of residents is Cease Fire.

Violence prevention programs such as Cease Fire (or Cure Violence) have also proven successful in reducing shootings and other acts of retaliatory violence in high-crime neighborhoods. Cease Fire uses an epidemiological model of violence that posits violence spreads like a virus and can be prevented by changing behaviors and interrupting the retaliatory behavior linked to previous acts of violence or disrespect. Models of neighborhood violence are created and potential victims are identified by police who utilize community interrupters – typically former gang members who have been incarcerated. The interrupters interact with potential victims and perpetrators to prevent another act of neighborhood violence (Hartnett et al. 2008). From 1999 to 2005, Cease Fire initiatives significantly reduced rates of shootings in several Chicago neighborhoods (Hartnett et al. 2008). Moreover, this program has been adopted in several cities such as Baltimore, New York, and Boston, all with significant reductions in shootings (The Cure Violence Health Model 2015). However, funding for such programs has often depended on state legislators. Despite its success, the Illinois budget crisis has prevented continued use of Cease Fire (Hartnett et al. 2008; Torphy 2015). In addition to tailored programs, broader redress is crucial.

Federal and State Subsidized Jobs Programs: Let the Past Inform the Present

Research has long documented the relationship between violence and unemployment in urban communities (Wilson 2001). Therefore, increasing employment opportunities within these communities would go a long way in reducing the violence, chronic unemployment and economic insecurity in these neighborhoods. One way to meet this need might be to create a broad jobs program to combat the high levels of unemployment particularly

in inner-city communities. Partisan tensions have made such change that would benefit Hidden America sluggish (The White House 2011). We posit that President Obama and the U.S. Congress should create a new Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to combat the high levels of unemployment particularly in inner-city communities and those plagued by high levels of violence and structural inequality. These two programs were part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal Recovery programs of the 1930s and created long-term job opportunities for the millions of Americans who were unemployed and/or on relief during the Great Depression. The Civilian Conservation Corps (colloquially known as the CCC Camps) was the first work relief program created and financed public service jobs for as many of the 13 to 15 million unemployed persons (approximately 25 percent of Americans) (NumberOf.net 2015). Under the CCC program, American women and men worked in a variety of jobs that ranged from building and repairing roads and bridges, parks, playgrounds and public buildings to creating art. When unemployment persisted, the Roosevelt administration created a permanent jobs program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) (History.com 2009; u-s-History.com 2015).

Over its eight-year existence, WPA employed about 8.5 million people (mostly unskilled men) to carry out public works projects, including the construction of public buildings and roads; workers transformed the national infrastructure, made clothing for the poor, and created landmark programs in art, music, theater and writing. The agency's construction projects produced more than 650,000 miles (1,046,000 km) of roads; 125,000 public buildings; 75,000 bridges; 8,000 parks; and, 800 airports. The Federal Arts Project, Federal Writers' Project, and Federal Theater Project – all under WPA aegis – employed thousands of artists, writers, actors and directors in large arts, drama, media, literacy projects and cultural programs. WPA also sponsored the National Youth Administration, which provided part-time jobs for young people (Works Progress Administration 2013). Another well-known WPA effort was the extensive collection of over 2,300 slave narratives recorded between 1936 and 1938 (Educational Broadcasting Corporation 2004).

Furthermore, private donors (individuals and business partners) should be encouraged to invest in the economic stability of America generally and in Hidden America in particular. For example, in his most recent effort to help change the trajectory of urban youth, in 2015, NBA Hall-of-Famer Earvin "Magic" Johnson donated \$10 million to strengthen a summer job program for Chicago teens called One Chicago Summer Plus. The program includes a 25-hour-a-week summer job, mentoring, cognitive behavioral therapy, and social skills building. In addition to Johnson's donation, the city of Chicago

has committed to contributing \$6 million to the same program to ensure program quality (Connley 2015). One Chicago Summer Plus has a proven track record of effectively combating violence among youth in Chicago. According to one study, youth accepted into the program committed nearly half as many violent crimes as the youth who applied to the program but were not selected. The same statistics held true 16 months after program completion (cited in Connley 2015). Such programs provide opportunities for residents in high-crime neighborhoods to use existing capacities and build new skill sets to directly cultivate positive neighborhoods, in general, and for African American mothers and their children in particular.

CONCLUSION

Despite media attention on violence in urban spaces like Chicago, the lives of African American mothers and their children in Hidden America often goes unnoticed. Their experiences often include the daily threat of being shot, verbal assaults, physical attacks, and the inability to protect their children from these same dynamics. This essay argues that the negative consequences of living in Hidden America include psychological and physical costs that often are ignored or not well understood (Clark et al. 2008; Gorman-Smith and Tolan 1998; Hagler 2013; Jenkins 2002; Jones 2008; Mitchell et al. 2010; Satcher et al. 2005). We inform this essay using both a Black Feminist paradigm and a cumulative disadvantage framework to expose and give voice to the realities of mothers living in high-violence neighborhoods. In this way, we endeavor to make visible both the cumulative disadvantage suffered by such African American mothers as well as the strength and resilience they display.

We highlight the fact that for such women, motherhood is much more than a role linked to nurturing and loving children. Motherhood is also a context in which these mothers constantly challenge, act against, and consciously behave in ways that protect themselves, their loved ones, and other residents through emotional and physical survival. In a variety of ways, they endeavor to transform their disadvantage and fears of violence through survival and protective actions such as developing explanations and meaning about such violence that help them sustain themselves and their families. Informed by Black Feminist literature, we present such women as "activist mothers" who collectively advocate for and support their communities. Their resilience and survival strategies are forms of resistance to structural violence and reflect ongoing struggles to provide safety for themselves and their children that constitute the foundation of activist mothering (Naples 2014).

This essay also reveals rich data ranging from news reports to federally

commissioned examinations of the violence that plagues single low-income mothers as well as the African American community at large. Mixed-methods and community-based participatory action studies can enhance future understandings of the lived experience of this demographic and their parenting, coping, and resilience (Mendenhall et al. 2015). In addition to highlighting experiences and responses to community violence, we suggest that researchers, policy makers, and concerned citizens consider funding programs like the DREAM project, Cease Fire, and job creation initiatives to tackle the core of the overwhelming violence in such communities. This essay provides a framework for future studies of African American coping and resilience strategies within high-violence neighborhoods. We simultaneously highlight the need for cities, communities, institutions and organizations to develop holistic and comprehensive interventions to ensure that adults and children are not subjected to violence in the streets of America generally or in Hidden America specifically.

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NOTES

- 1 Hypervigilance refers to the experience of being constantly tense and on guard; persons experiencing hypervigilance are motivated to maintain an increased awareness of their surrounding environment to identify potential sources of threat (Tull, Rodman, and Roemer 2008).
- 2 This same news source referenced a study of seven-year old children in a neighborhood in North Philadelphia that found that 75 percent of them have heard gunshots in their neighborhood; 61 percent of those same children were afraid that they would get shot and killed.
- 3 According to this same researcher, chronic activation of the cardiovascular stress-response can slowly damage heart muscle and weakens vessel walls.