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African Americans are overrepresented among arrests, defendants, and convictions despite no significant differences in self-reports of criminal offending between African Americans and Whites. This research examines the differences in family and educational experiences among fifteen men who live in North Carolina. Retrospective interviews were conducted face-to-face with adult men who attended N.C. public schools and had been previously apprehended for a criminal law violation. Patterns of socialization and class- and race-based differences are analyzed. Results indicate no substantial differences in school experiences between African Americans and Whites in the sample. However, findings suggest race is salient for criminal justice outcomes.

OFFENDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHOICES THEY
HAD AND THE CHOICES THEY MADE:
A NORTH CAROLINA CASE STUDY

by

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To those who choose a different path.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As part of the Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) Research Team for the Middle District of North Carolina, I had the opportunity to learn more about the community's most dangerous criminals. What I observed was that an overwhelming majority of offenders in this area were black men from low-income neighborhoods who seemed to be socially isolated, despite criminological studies that find no significant differences in self-reports of criminal behaviors for blacks and whites. These observations prompted a series of questions about the influence of race and class on criminal justice outcomes. However, the salient question became: "How does social structure influence the life trajectories of adult criminal offenders?"

It's important to answer this research question for several reasons. First, these studies show how not only offenders but also offenders' families of orientation and procreation are affected inadvertently by the offenders' actions. They also show the ways in which schools do not always level the playing field between youth from less privileged backgrounds and those from more affluent backgrounds. As a final point, studies of offenders show the social and psychological implications of incarceration, stigmatization, and discrimination.

Ex-offenders, potential offenders, and their families are likely to benefit from this type of research. They will benefit by learning from the experiences of others and having

a greater understanding of the ways in which social institutions function. This knowledge has great potential for empowering and enriching the lives of these individuals. Additionally, law enforcement officers, attorneys, and counselors may also benefit from knowing the answer to this research question in that they will have a better understanding of the challenges that offenders, ex-offenders, and their families face daily. Equipped with this knowledge, cops, attorneys, and counselors will be better prepared to assist offenders, ex-offenders, and their families make informed decisions for their futures.

Broadly, my research is a study of inequality. African Americans' experiences of discrimination and/or perceptions of unequal opportunities can greatly affect their choices. When a minority group experiences systematic discrimination and oppression, society cannot benefit from the talents that minority individuals have to offer. Individuals who are discriminated against regularly have fewer chances to excel and share their abilities. More egalitarian social relations are needed, social relations characterized by evaluating individuals by other social measures than ascription – the color of one's skin or the social class of the family into which one is born.

Considering the historical disadvantage experienced by African Americans in the United States and their over-representation in the criminal justice system, I am particularly interested in the effects of structural disadvantage. Since offenders are the population being studied, the discussion will be grounded in the criminological literature; however, this work will attempt to bridge the divide in sociology between the social inequality literature and the criminology literature.

This research is exploratory in nature, an approach which I hope will provide insight into the perspectives, considerations, and behavioral motivations of those who commit crimes. I wish to understand how offenders determined the choices available to them and the social forces that shaped their perceptions of available opportunities. I have a policy motive, hoping ideally that my research findings will inform policy-makers. Greater equality could undoubtedly be achieved by re-evaluating the use of government resources. Politicians and others who make funding decisions should focus on how to most effectively use limited resources to maximize opportunities to those who have traditionally been marginalized in American society.

I wish to gain a better understanding of the institutional and motivational forces that influence an individual's engagement in law violation. A qualitative methodology is employed to gather in-depth data on participants' trajectories, including both their perceptions of the choices they had as well as the choices they made. The following chapter delineates a theoretical argument that draws connections between weakened institutional controls, structural disadvantage resulting from minority membership, and criminal law violation.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The ascribed characteristics of race and social class shape perceived opportunities, thereby influencing the lives that individuals create for themselves. Individuals do not always recognize the full range of opportunities available to them and construct their lives by selecting the most appropriate choices they believe they have. Erdmans (2004) argues that ‘lives’ are the consequences of actions constructed within a realm of perceived choices affected by socially constructed ideologies of dominance/subordination such as race, class, religion, and family structure. Although individuals can have numerous opportunities for achievement and advancement, these possibilities may be obscured by more powerful social forces that dictate available choices and best choices. For instance, if poverty is studied without examining the intersection of race with socio-economic status, differences in experiences of low-income blacks and low-income whites are masked by their shared social class; differing experiences affected by race and ethnicity are often overlooked unless controlled for systematically.

This research is primarily concerned with the sociocontextual characteristics of men who engage in law violation, and it examines the points at which these social forces began impacting their choices. More specifically, this study attempts to show similarities

and differences between African American and white men. Although the intersection of race and social class will be taken into account, this study will also attempt to distinguish between their separate effects.

Control theorists in criminology maintain that law violation results when an individual has weak ties to conventional institutions such as the family, school, and dominant belief systems (Hirschi, 1969; Nye, 1956, 1957, and 1958). Yet another theoretical tradition in criminology maintains that African Americans are overrepresented in the criminal justice system due to lack of economic wealth and legitimate avenues for social mobility (Merton, 1968). Research on the effects of the education system on youth delinquency complements this perspective. Specifically, Cohen (1955) maintains that public education is geared toward white, middle class achievement; structurally disadvantaged youth experience more problems in school than youth reared in more affluent households.

The inequality literature also finds a strong correlation between school environment and inequitable conferment of status to certain groups (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Kozol, 1991, 1995). Social reproduction theory posits that the education system is responsible for the reproduction of our existing class-based social structure (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Yet other work, such as MacLeod's (1995), shows that the hopes of African Americans remain intact throughout school but are dashed once young black men enter the labor market.

Sufficient Social Conditions for Deviant Behavior

Control theories in criminology take a contradictory approach to explaining why certain individuals choose to commit crimes; instead control theories seek to explain why certain individuals choose to obey laws (Hirschi, 1969). Control theorists assume a consensus model of the law, meaning that most members of society agree on what constitutes moral behavior.

The Hobbesian model of human nature, which posits that humans have a natural propensity toward need gratification, is assumed. Kornhauser writes, “Since non-normative means usually provide quicker and easier routes to such gratification, everyone has sufficient motivation to delinquency” (Kornhauser, 1978, p. 24). In other words, control theories assume that strain, the frustration which results from unfulfilled desires, is constant across all individuals and is therefore invariable. Socialization, however, varies. Improper socialization may lead to weakened institutional effects on individuals. In effect, control theorists argue that we are socialized to accept institutional controls as acceptable sources of power.

Hirschi is most often identified with social control theory. He posits a direct negative correlation between delinquent behavior and the quality of the social bond an individual maintains with society, explaining that individuals engage in delinquency because their ties to conventional society have been weakened or even severed (Hirschi, 1969). Hirschi (1969) identifies four principal elements of the social bond (i.e., attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief) and maintains, “The more closely a person is tied to conventional society in any of these ways, the more closely he is likely

to be tied in other ways” (p. 27). The social bond manifests itself in relationships with various institutions of social control such as one’s family, school, and house of worship (Hirschi, 1969; Shoemaker, 2005).

Hirschi’s conceptions of attachment and commitment have received considerable empirical support (Briar & Piliavin, 1965; Hirschi, 1969; Nye, 1956, 1957, 1958; Sampson and Laub, 1990). Attachment refers to the individual’s affection and sensitivity toward others and reflects the individual’s fear that love and affection will be withdrawn as a consequence of delinquency.

Others have suggested that youth attachment to peers is governed by stakes in conformity; youth with a higher stake in conformity are more likely to associate with other youths who have similar goal-oriented behavior (Briar & Piliavin, 1965). Jackson (1957) proposes that stakes in conformity, and ultimately society, can be influenced by family socioeconomic status, race, and neighborhood. Youth who feel unwanted by society as a result of their class background or race have less to lose by behaving deviantly.

Hirschi’s operational definition of commitment emphasizes an individual’s personal investment in conventional lines of action, arguing that participation in conventional social activities binds an individual to the moral and ethical codes of society and thereby reduces the likelihood for involvement in delinquent activities. Commitment is also negatively correlated with delinquent behaviors, assuming “the organization of society is such that the interests of most persons would be endangered if they were to engage in criminal acts.” (1969, p.21) Individuals evaluate their personal investment in

conventional society, such as occupational or educational careers, and weigh the risks and outcomes of delinquent behavior (which could include a loss of prestige, virtue, or some other more tangible resource) to negotiate conformity.

The third and fourth elements of Hirschi's social bond theory are criticized for theoretical flaws.¹ Involvement refers to the extent to which an individual participates in conventional activities. Involvement in conventional, legitimate activities, Hirschi maintains, engenders the social bond. Past research has focused on the type and amount of time youth devote to leisure. However, as previously noted, evidence also suggests that involvement may have a weak mediating effect on delinquency (Wong, 2005). Hirschi's fourth element of the social bond, belief, is defined as the degree to which an individual accepts a conventional value system (Shoemaker, 2005). It encompasses the extent to which one feels that he/she must obey the law, respect for society's rules (Hirschi, 1969), and by extension, the legal system.

Critics of Hirschi's theory charge that, in addition to not specifying the salience of any specific element of the social bond, he also does not address the instability of the elements through the life course. Although Sampson and Laub's work (1990) supports the significance of the social bond in general, they argue that attachment to parents and peers exerts little influence over an adult offender's engagement in criminal activity; instead, job stability and strong marital attachment show a stronger negative effect on adult patterns of criminal offending. Additionally, Sampson and Laub argue that

¹ Hirschi's element of belief has been criticized by criminologists for its difficulty in measurement. Hirschi measured belief using a single item that asked the respondent about the extent to which he believed it was acceptable to personally violate the law.

Hirschi's original theoretical formulation also ignores other elements of the social bond that may influence a youth's delinquency.

Hirschi's theory provides a theoretical framework that emphasizes the influences of institutions in determining delinquent outcomes. His theory is useful in that it elucidates the conditions under which an individual is more likely to violate laws, but it offers little theoretical utility for understanding individual motivation. Therefore, one might wonder: Which institution plays a larger role in fostering delinquent outcomes – the family or the school?

Motivations to Offend

Merton's theory of structural anomie addresses the previously mentioned criticism of Hirschi's theory and is able to account for individual motivations to engage in law violation. Merton (1938) maintains that delinquency and law violation are affected by both cultural and structural forces. In accord with Kornhauser's (1978) later work, Merton argues that culture and social structure can be analytically separated, although he acknowledges that they "merge imperceptibly in concrete social situations" (1938, p. 672). The primacy of culture is emphasized; structure is only important insofar as it braces the stratification system and access to legitimate opportunities.

Merton analytically distinguishes between two elements of culture and one element of social structure that explain motivations to violate laws. The first element Merton identifies as a necessary condition for delinquent and criminal behavior is the internalization of culturally valued goals, purposes, and interests. These shared cultural

meanings manifest in the individual's aspirational frame of reference. Individuals are socialized to share in a symbolic universe (Berger and Luckmann, 1962) which emphasizes the attainment of universal goals, despite differential social organization which seriously impedes universal access to their attainment.

Merton addresses this structural issue in his theory by emphasizing the importance of the second element, structural access to legitimate means for securing goals. He writes:

the social structure defines, regulates, and controls the acceptable modes of achieving these goals. Every social group invariably couples its scale of desired ends with moral and institutional regulation of permissible and required procedures for attaining those ends. These regulatory norms and moral imperatives do not necessarily coincide with technical or efficiency norms (p. 672-73).

Institutional norms regulate the choices available for securing commonly shared goals. Legal codes are one such example of institutional norms designed to regulate behavior, reflecting moral consensus of behavioral expectations and the legitimacy of various institutional means to secure commonly shared goals.

Equilibrium between these two elements is accomplished as long as individuals accrue satisfaction from both the culturally prescribed goals and the available means deemed legitimate for securing goals within a given society. However, Merton acknowledges that certain groups in society are systematically disadvantaged by their relative position within the social structure, so equilibrium cannot always be achieved on the individual level. Structural disadvantages, exacerbated by situational determinants,

are conducive to varying levels of acceptance and rejection for both culturally shared values and institutional means for attaining goals.

Merton posits five possible combinations, represented in the table below (where + indicates acceptance, - indicates rejection, and ± indicates rejection and substitution with a new frame of reference):

Table 1. Merton’s Typology of Individual Adaptations

Individual Adaptations	Cultural Goals	Institutionalized Means
Conformity	+	+
Innovation	+	-
Ritualism	-	+
Retreatism	-	-
Rebellion	±	±

As the table above shows, conformity ensues when both cultural goals and institutional means are accepted. Of specific interest is Merton’s typological formulation of innovation. When individuals are properly socialized to share within the dominant framework of culturally prescribed goals but their structural disadvantage prevents them from reaching these goals through available institutionalized means, Merton maintains that innovation will ensue. Although he did not explicitly define innovation in his work, he refers to an individual’s use of creative methods to obtain goals. Innovation need not be original or contemporary; a course of action can be consider innovative as long as it disregards institutionalized norms of conduct. To further this discussion, I include a

systematic examination of the distinct ideologies in America that contribute to individual acceptance and rejection of both cultural goals and institutionalized means.

The Great American Meritocracy

Messner and Rosenfeld (2001) extend Merton's work by explicitly stating the ideological mechanism with which American youth are led to believe that hard work will lead to financial success. Specifically, Messner and Rosenfeld argue that the American Dream, defined as the accumulation of wealth, emphasizes individual success and the universal nature of culturally proscribed goals and their relative institutionalized means for attainment. However, too much priority is placed on monetary success within American culture, which devalues work outside or indirectly related to the economic sphere. For instance, education is increasingly viewed as a means to an end – in other words, education is less sought now for its intrinsic value, but more sought for its indirect effects on monetary returns which presumably will ensue.

In effect, the American Dream, with its unrestrained reception of innovation, promotes goal attainment *by any means necessary*. Messner and Rosenfeld write, “The American Dream is a mixed blessing, contributing to both the best and the worst elements of the American character and society...The cultural emphasis on achievement, which promotes productivity and innovation, also generates pressures to succeed at any cost” (p. 7). This pressure that Messner and Rosenfeld allude to, also referred to as “strain” within the criminological literature, is exacerbated by structural disadvantage.

Messner and Rosenfeld argue that economic inequality is the salient variable in structural disadvantage, but they pay too little theoretical attention to other important sources and effects of structural disadvantage. Specifically, Messner and Rosenfeld seem to ignore the role of schools in legitimating and perpetuating structural disadvantage. For youth, the school is the primary setting in which youth learn how to attain the American Dream. The utility of their theory for further explaining the structural element in Merton's typology is compromised; Cohen helps develop the argument.

The School's Influence

In Cohen's theory it is more difficult to analytically separate the independent effects of culture and structure, but the utility of his theory in understanding the link between experiences in the educational system and delinquent/criminal outcomes is overwhelming. Cohen (1961) argues that youth are evaluated in the educational system using a middle class measuring rod, a practice which perpetuates structural inequality and systematizes disadvantage. Youth are evaluated against nine distinct standards that embody middle-class normative expectations for behavior:

- ambition;
- individual responsibility;
- cultivation of skills valued in the economic sphere;
- "worldly asceticism" characterized by deferred gratification and renounced self-indulgence;
- rationality;

- cultivation of manners, courtesy, and personability;
- control of physical aggression;
- participation in “wholesome” recreation; and
- respect for property.

Ambition is viewed as an observable sign of virtuous character; therefore, its absence indicates personal defect (Cohen, 1961, p. 88). Youth who are perceived as lazy or ambivalent toward their future are perceived as having an innate defect in character that justifies differential treatment. Individual responsibility denotes one’s resourcefulness and self-reliance, an ability to ensure survival with little or no assistance from others. Youth are also expected to cultivate skills that are valued within the labor market, but other forms of achievement are also recognized (such as athletic achievements).

Middle class standards regarding worldly asceticism emphasize the importance of delaying gratification and renouncing self-indulgence (Cohen, 1961, p. 89). Youth are expected to strive for long-term goals such as a career, even though they may not enter the labor force for another decade. Additionally, youth should be wary of self-indulgence; shared goals of the community or society as a whole should outweigh individual desires to indulge. Conscious, premeditated rational action is highly valued.

Cohen’s conception of rationality also encompasses the efficient use of both time and resources, in all spheres of life (Cohen, 1961, p. 90). The rational cultivation of manners, exemplified in conventions of speech and gesture, signifies higher status and prestige among youth. By extension, personal control of aggressive impulses is

respected; aggressive and/or violent behaviors are perceived as detrimental to middle-class notions of conflict resolution. Cohen also maintained that youth are expected to form “good personal relations with as many people as possible” (p. 91). Youth should strive to be gregarious, accommodating, and likable.

Similar to Hirschi’s conception of involvement, Cohen also argues that youth are expected to participate in conventional activities, such as athletic competition, classes outside of the educational institution (i.e., piano lessons, dance classes, karate), or a hobby. And last, Cohen maintains that youth should learn and display respect for property – theirs and others’. Material possessions should be treated with respect, for its own sake, regardless of ownership.

Although these nine standards reflect middle class ideals, and thus reflect the effects of culture, these ideals indicate the effects of structure also, and more specifically, the effects of structural disadvantage. Cohen conceptualizes structural disadvantage as “class-linked handicap,” arguing that lower class children are ill-prepared to conform to dominant, middle class achievement ideologies. He writes:

Systemic class-linked differences in the ability to achieve will relegate to the bottom of the status pyramid those children belonging to the most disadvantaged classes, not by virtue of their class position as such but by virtue of their lack of the requisite personal qualifications resulting from their class-linked handicaps (p. 86).

Individual class membership is structurally determined and reproduced institutionally: a youth has no control over the class to which he or she is born and the dominant

institutional structures are designed as such to seriously impede the advancement of certain groups of individuals.

The American public education system has received considerable theoretical attention. Many argue that it functions as an institutional mechanism which identifies and stigmatizes youth who are unable or unwilling to conform to middle-class standards of achievement, behavior, or appearance, and thereby reproduces the existing system of structural disadvantage which manifests most recognizably in the social class system.

Some kids dismiss the potential positive influences of educators and school administrators. Willis (1981) finds that youth who are either disinclined or incapable of complying with the school's middle class expectations for behavior respond by rejecting school officials as legitimate sources of authority. In his work with British working class youth, Willis finds that nonconforming youth form an oppositional subculture in response to the school expectations for behavior. Working class sons grow up to see themselves in their father's likeness and strive to attain similar types of jobs after graduation from high school. A reproduction of existing class inequalities results from the youth's limited perceptions of available opportunities.

Other theorists have also designated the educational system as a principal perpetrator in institutionalizing and legitimating inequality within American society. Social Reproduction Theory, put forth by Bowles and Gintis (1976), maintains that the American educational institution is both aligned with and reflective of the Marxian model of production and structure of class relations. Public education is regarded as a

preparatory experience that trains young adults to enter the workforce; however, it systematically fails to educate certain groups of individuals. Bowles and Gintis argue:

...the major aspects of the structure of schooling can be understood in terms of the systemic needs for producing reserve armies of unskilled labor, legitimating the technocratic-meritocratic perspective, reinforcing the fragmentation of groups of workers into stratified status groups, and accustoming youth to the social relationships of dominance and subordinancy in the economic system (p. 56).

The wealthy ruling elites are nurtured by the educational system to assume positions of power, while lower class youth are systematically disadvantaged by the educational system as a means to ensure their positions at the bottom of the social structure. Through the use of a meritocracy ideology, lower class individuals are conditioned by the educational system to accept domination.

Another dynamic within schools that has direct effects on minority achievement is tracking, the placement of students in homogeneous groups according to perceived abilities. Tracking is based on variables more social than academic. In a classic study on self-fulfilling prophecies among ghetto youth, Rist (1970) gives an account of lower class African American children who were grouped according to “ability” on the eighth day kindergarten. The groupings were subjective in nature, based more upon indices of social class than student performance. Teachers grouped youth based on the initial interviews with mothers, pre-registration forms, and receipt of public assistance. Rist observed that students who were placed in the “high achievers” group were those who conformed to middle class, white standards of appearance; they “wore cleaner clothes that were

relatively new and pressed, had no body odor, spoke more standard English, were generally lighter skinned, and were more likely to have processed (straightened) hair” (Nieto, 1996, p. 87). When the same students were observed almost two years later, the arbitrary groupings made during kindergarten remained nearly intact.

School authorities and law enforcement officials’ perceptions of adolescents are also influenced by other indicators of social class. Chambliss (1973) found that two gangs of youth, the Saints and the Roughnecks, were perceived differently by authority figures and community members despite similar rates of delinquency for both groups. Chambliss attributed these distortions in perception to the differential visibility the two groups and differences in the youths’ demeanor, both of which are functions of social class.

Tracking, as well as a substandard regular curriculum, leaves students at a disadvantage after graduation, a position that has been readily voiced in communities and scholarly writings. However, much less attention has been focused on the psychological injuries resulting from underprivileged youths’ self-perceived inequities. Self-perceived inequalities begin in childhood and adolescence, enduring into adulthood where they affect attitudes and perceptions about oneself and the world. With an unwavering sense of equity, hopes and aspirations are shattered by the time these young people reach adulthood.

In contrast, others argue that African American aspirations remain intact through school, only showing signs of diminishing once they reach the labor market. MacLeod’s work (1995) examining aspirations and attainment among the adolescents in Clarendon

Heights, a low-income neighborhood, compared the attitudes of two groups of young men, one predominantly black and the other predominantly white. A common stereotype regarding African Americans' motivations toward achievement, coupled with the documented absence of hope in low-income, minority neighborhoods, makes it plausible to expect that whites would achieve more than blacks. To the contrary, MacLeod found the group of predominately black young men had higher aspirations than the group of white young men, although the degree of difference in actual achievements beyond high school was minimal. Only after graduation and entering the labor market did the African American men become disheartened about their chances for success. Also, in stark contrast to West (1994) and Kozol's (1991, 1995) arguments (discussed below) the African American men were not more likely to perceive the world as an unfair place; the white men were more likely to view the world as treating them unfairly.

So far I have delineated a theoretical argument maintaining that youth engage in delinquency when they have weak ties to institutional controls and are frustrated by their lack of legitimate opportunities for success. Further, legitimate opportunities are restricted by one's social class. Previous research suggests that the school functions to confer status on more privileged students while limiting the opportunities for other, less privileged students. Youth who are unable to meet middle class expectations for behavior in school are more likely to become delinquent. However, African American men are more likely to be apprehended, prosecuted, and incarcerated than white men. The next section will explore the effects of race on life trajectories.

Racial Differences in Offending

Racial differences in delinquency and criminal offending are readily observed when examining official reports. Harris (1997) maintains that racial profiling is the primary reason that greater numbers of blacks and Hispanic drivers are arrested and charged with offenses. State law allows patrol officers to stop drivers based on suspicions of illegal activity. Once a vehicle has been stopped, law enforcement officers may legally search the motorist's person and vehicle, or request assistance from one of the agency's drug sniffing canines on mere suspicions. In effect, Harris argues, black drivers are stopped for "driving while black." If a traffic stop results in a formal charge, law enforcement officers are not required to provide evidence or proof to justify the initial stop.

Hirschi's social bond theory assumes that individuals engage in delinquency as a response to weakened institutional regulation; therefore, for the control theorist deviance is "rooted in original human nature" (Merton, 1938, p. 672). This sheds very little light on the effects of the sociocontextual conditions which influence an individual's choice to engage in deviant behavior. Additionally, Hirschi did not specify differences in the formation or nature of the social bond across races.

However, Hirschi does note two plausible explanations for the disproportionate rates of black offending reflected in official reports – discrimination by law enforcement agents and verbal ability. The official reaction hypothesis states that racial differences observed in official reports of criminal arrests are due to four distinct processes: increased police patrol in areas heavily populated by blacks; officers' beliefs that blacks

are “unusually more likely to commit criminal acts” (p. 79); officers’ prejudicial attitudes toward blacks; and greater degrees of interaction between blacks and institutional officials other than law enforcement (Hirschi, 1969). Although Hirschi admits the persuasive power of this explanation in accounting for differential rates of offending in official reports, he concludes that the relationship between offender race and delinquency/criminal outcomes is spurious. Race differences are explained away once a variety of other variables are taken into account. Hirschi cites the relationship between offender’s verbal ability and delinquent/criminal outcomes, finding that “when verbal achievement scores are held relatively constant, the relation between race and official delinquency is considerably reduced...differences in academic achievement go along way toward explaining Negro-white differences in delinquent activity” (Hirschi, 1969, p. 80). In other words, racial differences in levels of offending are not explained by race; social class has more explanatory value.

Strain theorists, on the other hand, would argue that blacks’ disproportionate rates of arrest and incarceration reflect differing degrees of strain. Merton posits that “some social structures exert a definite pressure upon certain persons in the society to engage in nonconformist rather than conformist conduct” (p. 672). Individuals who are both historically and systematically disadvantaged would experience greater amounts of strain than individuals from the dominant ruling class. African Americans have held little economic wealth or political power in relation to the historically dominant group, white men.

Additionally, the educational system systematically works to instill feelings of inferiority among minority youth. Jonathan Kozol's work with children in urban public schools exposes the deplorable conditions within impoverished school districts but also reveals perceptions of inequality experienced directly by youth in low-income districts (1991, 1995). Kozol (1991) argues that the disproportionate funding between urban and suburban schools is greatly responsible for the well-documented achievement gap between middle class, predominantly white children and minority children of lower socioeconomic status. Implicit in his argument is the notion that this differential funding reflects underlying ethnocentric attitudes of those in power: minority children are receiving less than their middle-class, predominantly white suburban counterparts because they are deemed as unworthy of investment.

This is not without harmful psychological implications for these youth. Kozol's (1995) later work with inner-city children sheds further light on the psychological implications of ghetto life. Youth ask their teachers why they do not have computers like the suburban white children just a few miles away, why they do not have a classroom, and why they don't have playground equipment. These observations resonate with youth and cause them to question their worth. The hopes of ghetto residents are periodically fed by powerful community leaders to later be crushed by those very same people.

Left with nothing to hope for, residents find themselves surging forward to a collective state of cultural nihilism. West (1994) contends that race is the overarching basis for discrimination in the United States. African American culture, according to West, is a product of white ethnocentric ideologies and systemic, structural

discrimination. Corporate market institutions, primarily controlled by white men, serve as mechanisms of cultural fabrication – their vast resources and influences place them at the pinnacle of lifestyle production. Corporate market institutions have infected American society with a market morality, a mentality in which life is characterized by endless consumption, objectification of others, and immediate gratification. Consequently, American culture has become flooded by images of comfort, convenience, and sexuality, the culmination of which have given rise to a new emphasis on pleasure. Although African American households are flooded with the same images as middle-class white households, they cannot consume at the rate they would like to because of their lower socioeconomic status.

As a result of blocked opportunities, a collective state of cultural nihilism now plagues the African American community; this idea complements Kozol's contention that hope among many African Americans is destroyed long before entering the labor market. As a consequence of American culture, cultural nihilism has emerged among the black community. Cultural nihilism, as West (1994) uses the term, refers to the collective condition of angst found in African American communities resulting from the lived experience of coping with a life devoid of hope and meaning. African Americans' hopes and aspirations are drowned in despair long before they reach adulthood. Their restricted participation in American culture ensures that their dreams seem unattainable, even from a young age.

The collective state of cultural nihilism shares many similarities with the individual state of strain discussed in the criminological literature. Both are extreme

forms of frustration that result from blocked opportunities. And both have the potential to change an individual's behavior. I draw from the social inequality and the criminology literatures to show that institutional influences affect an individual's ability to deviate, but a psychological state of frustration is the motivation for deviation. For many youth, the school becomes their primary source of frustration, leading them to obtain material wealth by any means necessary – even if that means breaking the law.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Fifteen men over age eighteen who attended public schools in North Carolina and have been apprehended by law enforcement were included in the sample: ten African Americans and five Whites. Although the experiences of African Americans were the primary focus of this study, including whites in my sample allows for a comparison group to assess the salience of race in criminal justice outcomes. Most had been convicted previously of a crime; however, two were not formerly charged despite being taken to the police station or a local jail. All of the men currently live in a metropolitan area in North Carolina and range in age from 22 to 40 years old. Most grew up in a lower middle class household with either an intact or a reconstituted family, although several were raised in a working class household. Many belonged to the same social network.

When considering the available methods of data collection appropriate for scientific inquiry, the researcher must consider the depth of the data that is desired. Although most criminological research utilizes quantitative methodologies, this research takes a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of how social structure affected life trajectories. While quantitative methods are more appropriate when standardized response categories can be employed in a relatively large sample, qualitative methods allow the researcher to gain richer, more in-depth information from participants.

Perceptions of experiences and social issues are subjective in nature, highly complex, and rather personal, which make a qualitative method most appealing for this research. Babbie (1986) cites flexibility, degree of depth, and Gestalt as the three primary strengths of the qualitative method, allowing the researcher to probe issues exhaustively while also allowing the researcher to be open to the participant's demeanor and the surrounding physical environment.

To examine the effects of specific variables on individual trajectories, retrospective interviews were conducted. A retrospective interview inquires about past events, behaviors, and attitudes that are of importance to the researcher. Prior research shows that retrospective recall of events and attitudes does yield reliable data despite errors commonly associated with retrospective recall (Gutek, 1978; Jacobs, 2002). Interviews were conducted to assess individuals' perceptions of childhood, school, their futures, and what they might have done differently had they to make their decisions again.²

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted in various settings. Some interviews were conducted in restaurants and others in private homes, while several took place in a small shop that sold closed circuit video camera systems in the front of the store and automotive installation services in the rear. Interviews were conducted between summer 2005 and fall 2006.

Feminist researchers champion the use of semi-structured interviews for studying marginalized groups (DeVault, 1999; Reinharz, 1992). Often, criminal offenders

² See Appendix B for Offender Interview Protocol.

represent an isolated population not easily identifiable; researchers must rely on information provided by a law enforcement agency or an informant to identify people who have committed crimes. To circumvent these obstacles, a snowball sampling approach was employed: a key informant identified offenders for the study.³

At the close of each interview, offenders were asked to refer other potential interviewees. Consequently, several interviewees had ties to each other. This allowed for a limited degree of validation; although it was not possible to check the validity of every response, the accuracy of some statements was authenticated by others' statements. For instance, several participants discussed a particular church they each attended to meet girls.

Sometimes it becomes necessary for a researcher to disclose personal opinions and beliefs to build rapport. Feminist researchers who employ a critical approach to scientific inquiry "...may not hesitate to share their own opinions or beliefs. They tend to call those whom they are studying their research participants, to emphasize their greater role in shaping the research process" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 88). Even though participants in this study were asked the same questions, they were also encouraged to structure their own narratives. I maintained neutrality during most of the interview, but especially found it was necessary to share my personal opinions and beliefs to build rapport with black participants.

³ Although the term "offender" is used here, some men in this study may be better described by the term "ex-offender."

During one particular interview with a black participant, I sensed apprehension when I asked if his race seemed to have had any influence on his criminal justice outcomes. He seemed suspicious and was reluctant to answer. At (what seemed to be) the end of the interview, I shared my own beliefs about the influence of race on criminal justice outcomes; surprisingly, the participant began to speak candidly about his experiences of race discrimination. By sharing my own beliefs with the participant, I was able to build a rapport with that participant that would not have been possible otherwise. I began to share my personal beliefs concerning the prevalence of racial discrimination in the criminal justice system with all black participants prior to minimize social desirability bias.

Rapport, however, must not be confused with real trust. Duneier (1999) writes of his participant observation study of homeless black street vendors, "...as a survival mechanism, many blacks still feel that they cannot afford to speak honestly to whites (p. 338). He goes on to remark, "...it would have been a methodological error for me to believe that apparent rapport is real trust, or that the poor blacks I was writing about would feel comfortable taking off the mask in my presence" (p. 338). Even though I was able to build rapport with participants, I was not able to earn their trust in such a short period of time. More likely than not, my interview respondents wore the mask of which Duneier speaks.

To circumvent deficiencies in reading abilities for securing informed consent from the participants in the study, the long consent form was read aloud to inform all participants prior to the interview, and each participant was asked to sign a confidentiality

agreement.⁴ As previously discussed, I shared my beliefs and opinions regarding the influence of race on criminal justice outcomes with black participants; I did not find it necessary to share this information with white participants.

Due to the sensitivity of data gathered, as well as foreseeable impacts on participants' lives should particular participants be associated with specific responses, privacy was guaranteed for all participants. Lofland and Lofland (1995) write, "If you are studying people engaged in illegal or politically suspect activity...or well-known figures who are speaking openly with the assurance that it is 'off the record,' you may want to take considerable precaution with the data log itself" (p. 76). As a further measure to ease participants' concerns about disclosing incriminating information, interviews were not audio recorded. Handwritten notes were taken during the interview and additional notes were written subsequent to its completion; all interview notes were transcribed to electronic form. Efforts were taken to remove all personally identifiable information about the participants from the interview notes and subsequent analysis. No names were included in interview notes, in both handwritten and electronic form, and each participant is referred to only by a pseudonym in the subsequent analysis.

⁴ See Appendix C for Offender Consent Form.

CHAPTER IV

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

While criminal offenders are no longer thought to be mentally ill, they continue to be stigmatized. In effect, they are labeled as “criminals” and thought to be fundamentally different than the majority of society’s members. “Criminals” are often perceived as less than human, unworthy of human rights, opportunities, and respect that is afforded to other individuals as a taken for granted reality. Offenders face challenges to pursuing their goals through legitimate institutional means. They are legally discriminated against in the labor market, legal statutes mandate the types of jobs for which they are eligible, and their chances for attaining higher education are affected.

The men in this study have endured and continue to face real challenges. They were raised in families that cared for them, but their family members also faced their own challenges. These men attended schools that made no particular impression on them as being especially bad or especially good. They want to work, raise their own families, and provide a better life for their own children, despite the obstacles that they encounter each day. Most importantly, they are individuals who recognize societal problems and have creative ideas about solutions, but are disenfranchised and rendered relatively powerless to make them.^{5 6}

⁵ Due to the snowball sampling method used, several participants shared common friends and acquaintances. Further information about these network associations can be found in Appendix D.

⁶ Key demographics of the sample is also displayed in a table in Appendix D.

Alex

Alex is a 29 year old, white man who is mild-mannered and easy going (when sober). He estimated that he's had between twenty and thirty encounters with law enforcement officials, mostly for fighting (while drinking) at bars, although he has also been convicted of a misdemeanor drug charge for marijuana possession.

His living arrangement as a youth was more complicated than most others interviewed in this study in that he grew up in two working class, reconstituted households. He spent half of the week with his mother and stepfather, and the other half was spent with his father and stepmother. His mother worked as a bartender, and his stepfather as a telephone repairman by day and gambler by night. His biological father drove forklifts, and his stepmother worked as a secretary.

After finishing high school, he worked odd jobs until his mother passed away and he inherited the bar she owned. After several years he moved the bar to a new location, where business continues to flourish. Observation of Alex's behavior indicates that he was most influenced by his mother and stepfather. He now owns a bar and spends his nights drinking and gambling on games of billiards, and he told me stories of his stepfather's skill at billiards and cunning techniques for taking unsuspecting players' money. He is currently married and has one son. Despite his successful business, Alex feels that his future is bleak.

Anthony

Anthony is a 31-year old African American man who is both well-spoken and charismatic. Anthony has an extensive history of both nonviolent and violent criminal activity, ranging from armed robbery to selling illicit drugs and illegal firearms. He admits to having a youthful fascination with guns that he has never quite outgrown, although he has learned to weigh the consequences of his actions prior to acting on his initial impulses toward violence. Anthony stated that he has had over one hundred encounters with law enforcement officials. Most recently, he was sentenced to a period of active incarceration for armed robbery, kidnapping, and assault with a deadly weapon.

Contrary to the assumption that violent crimes are committed by lower class men, Anthony was raised in a lower-middle class family by both parents. His father was a career military man, in the army for twenty-two years, and his mother held a civilian position as a librarian on the military base. Anthony described his father as “authoritarian” and divulged that his parents’ relationship was fraught with troubles. He used his parents’ marital problems to his advantage, citing their personal tribulations as a justification for acting out.

Anthony was a bright student, placed in advanced learning tracks where he mostly earned high marks. He completed two years of study at a local college but left school before finishing his degree. Anthony currently works as an installation manager for a heating and air business, where he makes a comfortable lower-middle class income of over \$60,000 a year. He attributes his success at finding employment after incarceration to his social network.

Ben

Ben is a 31 year old black man who is married. He is a full-time parent to one stepchild and also financially supports his own child who lives with her mother. Unlike most of the other black participants, his encounters with the judicial system did not result in criminal convictions. He has been formally charged with assault on a female and has participated in various drug-related offenses, including both using and selling.

He, too, was raised in a lower middle class household. Growing up, Ben's father was absent. He lived with his mother and grandfather, and the church has played an integral role in his life – both then and now.

In school, he was placed in special classes for academically gifted students. After graduation from high school, he went to college but left school just two semesters shy of earning a bachelor's degree. He is currently employed in sales/management and just recently began to take college courses online to earn his degree.

Duane

Duane is a loquacious 24 year old African American who's prone to bouts of depression. He was raised in a lower middle class household – his father was a Baptist minister and exterminator on the side while his mother did some clerical work from time to time when she wasn't parenting her sons. Not surprisingly, their church played an integral role in Duane's life. At age thirteen, Duane's father died, leaving his mother alone to raise their two sons. To say that the untimely passing of his father affected

Duane's religious beliefs is an understatement; Duane lost the strong religious beliefs of his childhood and questioned the existence of God.

During high school he was placed in the building trade curriculum, and he drew on these skills after graduation. He's had a variety of jobs, but recalls the uniformed ones most fondly. Wearing a uniform makes him feel as if he has accomplished something, that he is "somebody."

At the time of his interview, Duane had already been prosecuted for a previous offense, and his case for several charges of felony breaking and entering and larceny was currently waiting to be heard. He was employed through a temporary agency, but was concerned that a felony conviction would impact his future eligibility for employment with the service. Moreover, he was exceedingly worried about finding and maintaining permanent employment should he be convicted of the charges. Understandably, he also was worried about how he will be able to provide for his pregnant girlfriend and their family.

Jackson

Humorous and charming, Jackson is a 39 year old black man who has several felony convictions for driving while intoxicated, breaking and entering, and felonious assault, actions which stand in stark contrast to his mild-mannered, warm, open temperament. He's full of life, loves to laugh, and enjoys being the center of attention by making others laugh. Verbose and creative, Jackson is easily likeable and fun to be around.

He was raised in a working class household by his mother who worked at a local mill; he has never met his father. He graduated from high school but has no plans for attending college. He currently works at a manufacturing company nearby to where he grew up; however, the only way he would be eligible to work with the company was to fail to report his past criminal convictions. Since the company is located in a county adjacent to where he lives, he was able to provide a clean criminal report from the county in which the company is located.

He currently lives with his fiancée and their two children. He is optimistic, but realistic, about his future. He drinks and uses drugs frequently but continues to maintain employment.

James

James is a now 29 year old black man who grew up in a single-parent, female-headed working class household. His mother worked two jobs, as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and a school bus driver, to make a living for herself and her two children. He has been convicted of obtaining property by false pretenses, possession of stolen goods, and possession of marijuana, and has also served an active sentence of incarceration in a state prison.

Money was always scarce when James was growing up, and he recalls several ways in which participating in activities or organizations was not affordable. However, he was placed in the accelerated academic track and played several different sports. After graduation, he attended a public university for two years but left college prior to

finishing a course of study. At the time of the interview, he had a steady girlfriend and one young child and was employed in a sales/management position with a mid-sized corporation. Since the time of the interview, his employment was terminated due to conclusive evidence that he was defrauding the company.

Jeremy

Jeremy is a twenty-eight year old white man who raised in an affluent middle class family; his father was an engineer and his mother was a librarian. He had a trust fund and grew up comfortably. His mother and father divorced when he was very young; he remained with his mother but maintained a close relationship with his father.

Until his sophomore year in high school, Jeremy was a straight A student. Around age sixteen he began to smoke marijuana with his friends, which led to trying other drugs. Jeremy began to sell LSD and ecstasy to his peers, was eventually arrested and convicted for several charges of drug possession, and served an active sentence of incarceration.

In many ways, Jeremy is an exceptional case. Unlike most of the participants in this study, Jeremy sought post secondary education and completed a course of study. He is the only participant interviewed who completed a program of study at a four year university. Currently, he works in the computer sciences field. Even though he has a bachelor's degree in computer sciences, he took an entry level position at a local organization and is presently climbing the corporate ladder.

LaShaun

LaShaun is quietly suspicious of those with whom he is not familiar. He is 34 year old black man with several drug charges and one for discharging a firearm. He grew up in a lower-middle class household with both parents. His father served in the military and his mother held odds jobs, sometimes working as a school teacher.

After graduating from high school, he received a full scholarship to play baseball at a four-year university. However, shortly after graduation he was approached by law enforcement officers while loitering with several white women. After a heated verbal exchange during which the officers' reactions were seemingly prejudicial, LaShaun lost his temper, pulled out a firearm, and fired several shots into the air. He was arrested and charged with discharging a firearm, and his criminal transgressions cost him his scholarship after three semesters of study. He is currently unmarried and works as a barber.

Maurice

Maurice is a 30-year old black man who was raised in a lower-middle-class family. His mother was a school teacher and his father was in the military. Maurice's story is quite different from that of his half-brother, Tyler. Maurice has several charges, all of which are for violent assaults. Additionally, he has fought an enduring, unsuccessful battle with drug addiction. Maurice did not graduate from high school, reporting the eleventh grade as the highest level of schooling he obtained. At the time of his interview, he had not completed his GED.

Neil

Neil has been convicted on multiple counts of robbery, burglary, and possession of stolen goods and has served an active sentence of incarceration. Additionally, he has committed numerous crimes that were not reportable, such as robbing drug dealers for their money and/or drugs.

Leaning on a Carolina blue Cadillac at a local car stereo business, Neil, a 29 year old black man, talked about growing up in a lower middle class household. His parents were divorced when he was young, and he lived with his mother and “somebody” – whether it was his father, one of his mother’s boyfriends, or finally her new husband. His real father was in the military, and his mother worked as a psychiatric technician at a local medical facility.

Neil was placed in special education classes when he was young because of his unruly behavior at school. He dropped out of public high school and enrolled in a program to earn his diploma at a local technical college but also left that program prematurely. While in prison he earned his diploma, despite the challenges that prison environments pose to learning.

He currently works as a government contractor, a job he acquired through network connections, and has a steady girlfriend. When asked about the future, he reflected on his accomplishments and vested interests in conventionality; Neil is optimistic about his future.

Richard

Richard is a 31 year old white man. He grew up in a lower middle class household with both parents. Like many other participants in the sample, his father, too, was employed by the United States military service. His mother was a civilian employee at the nearby military base, and his father was required to be away from home often. He has multiple drug-related felonies and has previously served an active incarceration sentence.

After high school, Richard attended a four year university only to leave after one semester. After returning to his hometown, he enrolled at a local community college where he studied culinary arts. Unlike most other participants in this sample, Richard finished his program of study and has since found employment using his credentials. He currently works as a chef at a local country club.

Roger

Roger is a 40 year old black man who has had numerous run-ins with the law, six or seven of which have been major. He was recently released from prison for felony convictions of drug possession, sale and delivery, and trafficking. His last encounter with law enforcement, which resulted in an active prison sentence, was prompted by a set of dirty scales and a large amount of money found during a routine traffic stop. Since that time, his home and vehicle have been seized by the state.

Roger grew up in a lower middle class household with both his mother and father. His father was in the military, and his mother owned a daycare and worked part time on

the military base. He finished high school and attended college for several years but left prior to earning a degree.

At the time of his interview, he was employed and living with his girlfriend and their two small children. The conditions of release from his incarceration made him ineligible to apply for a driver's license for a few years. Although he was actively searching for a job, he was unable to find one given limited ability to transport himself.

Todd

Loquacious and energetic, Todd is a 22 year old white man with numerous charges, including assault, drug possession, and unlawful breaking and entering, most of which were committed before he was eighteen. He reports extensive drug abuse, primarily during his youth, although he still sporadically uses marijuana and illegally-obtained pharmaceuticals. He spent much of his youth in and out of group homes designed to supervise delinquents.

Raised in a working class household, Todd's mother worked at a local McDonald's, a job which provided inadequate income for her and her son. Consequently, he lacked books and a computer and disclosed that, at times, he stole clothing to dress for school.

His relationship with his mother was characterized by strife, and he suffered physically at her hand. With no male figure in his home with which he could identify, he self-disclosed a lack of respect for most women. Time and time again during the interview, Todd spoke candidly about his desire for a positive male role model.

After high school, Todd enrolled in a local community college to study auto mechanics but left school before completing the program. He moves in and out of jobs frequently and currently works two jobs to make ends meet, one as a security guard and the other as a sales representative. Although only 22 years old, he wonders how he will ever be able to support a family.

Tyler

Soft-spoken Tyler is a 32-year old African American man, who has had only one encounter with law enforcement despite his regular criminal activity, mostly involving assaults against unfamiliar at nightclubs. His only encounter with law enforcement did not result in criminal prosecution. He strongly believes that his traffic stop was based on racial profiling and discriminatory.

Tyler, too, was raised in a lower-middle-class family. His mother was a school teacher and his father was a mechanic, primarily servicing machines in a yarn plant. He reported no history of drug abuse, which he primarily attributes to his younger brother's (Maurice) enduring battle with drug addiction.

He was enrolled in what he referred to as the "basic" curriculum in high school, although further probing revealed that he was placed in a vocational oriented, automotive track. Despite the discrimination he experienced from law enforcement, Tyler aspires to be a police officer someday. At the time of the interview, he had completed Basic Law Enforcement Training (BLET) but had yet to be hired. He currently works as an installation technician, installing car stereos and accessories.

William

Well over six feet tall, William is a 35 year old white man with four children by two different women. Like many of the other participants in this study, William engaged in numerous offenses punishable by law, including violent assaults, armed robbery, and illegal drug sales, and was charged with the most unusual of crime of all participants- for selling a home that he did not own. Luckily for William, he has managed to successfully navigate through the criminal justice system during each occasion he found himself there, attributing his positive outcomes to competent attorneys and access to financial resources.

William grew up in a lower middle class household with both parents. His father served 21 years in the military and his mother worked on post at the Post Exchange (PX). After his retirement from the army, William's father began his own trucking company and drove a truck himself to support his family. This meant that his father was frequently on the road, and before long his mother was traveling with her husband, leaving William and his older brothers at home with no adult supervision.

He described his father as "crazy" and disclosed that their relationship was filled with strife. His mother attempted to exert control over him and his brothers, but William believes his father's absence was central to his delinquent behaviors. At the age of 16, his parents disowned him after they found three pounds of marijuana and \$10,000 in cash in his bedroom.

William is one of just a few participants that reported any type of gang involvement. In fact, after a moment of consideration, he characterized his peer group as a gang, defined by the somewhat organized, social nature of their delinquency.

Although he did not finish high school, he did complete a GED program. He currently receives worker's compensation for a work-related physical injury and manages a local bar, where he receives unreported compensation for his labor. He credits his desistance to his concern for his children and their future and uses what he has learned through his own experiences to teach his children to avoid the same path.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS: CHALLENGES DURING ADOLESCENCE

Socialization occurs in various institutional milieus, with each institutional structure exerting influences on individuals; however, schools and families are most influential in youths' socialization toward conventional behavior. Participants in this study faced numerous challenges shown by research to be detrimental to the socialization process. Problems were noted in school and family settings. Dysfunctional family relations emerged as common experiences and participants experienced problems controlling aggression at school. Peer group relationships were characterized by violence and inappropriate behavior, especially in their relationships to members of the other sex.

Aspirations and Achievement

Stereotypical images of the criminal invoke images of a bad boy, an outlaw, who has actively resisted authority and has little interest in school, age-appropriate activities, or legitimate paths to success. This image is exacerbated by official statistics which show that most incarcerated offenders have very low levels of formal education. The United States Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs reports, "An estimated 40% of State prison inmates, 27% of Federal inmates, 47% of inmates in local jails, and 31% of those serving probation sentences had not completed high school or its equivalent

while about 18% of the general population failed to attain high school graduation (Harlow, 2003, p. 2). However, evidence offered here paints a different picture of criminal.

Academic achievement was common among participants (see Table 1 in Appendix E). Most were either somewhat or very interested in school and reported that they earned A's and B's for most of their educational career. However, some participants indicated less positive attitudes toward educational achievement (3 out of 5 white participants, and 2 out of 10 black participants). Alex, a 29 year old white man, who was also from a working class background, stated, "I wasn't very interested in school. I didn't do well." For Alex, doing well academically directly paralleled his interest in school. William, a 35 year old White from a working class background, who at age 16 took \$30,000 from the prospective buyer of a house that he did not own, said, "I wasn't very interested up until the point I found out I could get good grades with little work...then I had an easy time and it was good." William wasn't interested in working hard to earn good grades, but became more interested as his grades improved. However, I question rather William was ever really interested in school for the sake of learning; when asked if he hoped he would do well in his classes, he said, "I didn't care. It didn't seem important. I wanted to play football." Although the issue was not probed further, it seems that William was interested in school not for the sake of learning or doing well, but for maintaining his eligibility to play football.

Anthony, although a very bright student for most of his school career, received little support from his parents in regard to school achievement, despite parental expectations that he and his siblings would excel:

I was self-motivated. At my house, you cleaned your room and made good grades...My parents had problems, fussing and fighting all the time and sleeping in different rooms...[if we didn't do well] they blamed it on themselves.

Others echoed these sentiments. Although they were expected to succeed academically, when parental expectations were not met discipline was absent. William felt that “they [his parents] expected more from me, but didn't do anything when I didn't [achieve in school].” Parents' lack of action in response to their children's academic disappointments confirmed the participants' suspicions that performing well in school is not important in young adults' lives.

Furthermore, education was not always valued for its benefits of learning. “I don't feel like it helped me in life” (Todd, white, 22). Anthony seemed motivated to perform well in school to lessen his burden on his parents' troubled marriage. Neil hoped to do well academically so he could improve his chances for relationships with girls: “I made good grades but I wasn't focused or enthusiastic about it. It was just something you have to do. You can't holla' at chicks if you're a dummy.” This particular participant believed that academic achievement may enhance his sexual prowess.

Early Differentiation

Almost all participants interviewed were suspended from school on either a short-term or a long-term basis at least once (see Table 2 in Appendix E). Black participants were less likely than white participants to be suspended from school; however, black participants were considerably more likely than white participants to report being suspended on a short-term basis. Most suspensions resulted from fighting on school property, demonstrating violent tendencies among these young men. These young men were identified as unable to meet the middle-class behavioral expectations of school authorities.

Some participants believed that graduation from high school was an indicator of one's survival abilities. Neil, a 29 year old black man currently employed as a government contractor with an extensive criminal record (including possession of stolen property, multiple counts of robbery, and breaking and entering), felt that graduating from high school was a sign of survival capabilities: "just to make it out of high school was the plan – before something happened to you." High school was a dangerous place, even by the standards of a convicted criminal.

Data also suggest that black participants experienced differential treatment by school officials. One participant attributed his suspension to the discriminatory decision-making by school officials: "a football player put a snake on me when I was asleep...so I beat him with a desk – caught an assault charge for that...He didn't even get in trouble" (LaShaun, African American, 34). Even though the football player clearly provoked LaShaun, he was not penalized.

Many participants seem to have been impacted by tracking. I coded as follows: the behavioral problem track required behaviorally challenged students to attend separate classes; the working class employment track taught a skill or trade in preparation for working class employment; the college preparatory track refers to the state-mandated curriculum in which most students are placed; and the accelerated track refers to Academically Gifted (AG) or Advanced Placement (AP) curricula (see Table 3 in Appendix E).

Black participants were more likely to report that they were placed within a working class employment track. With the exception of one white respondent who was ordered to attend a class for behaviorally challenged students, all white participants were placed in the college preparatory or accelerated educational track compared to 60% of black participants.

Several participants reported that they were classified as academically gifted and placed in advanced classes during high school but lacked the motivation required to do well. One respondent said that he just didn't "have the work ethic" to complete homework. Often, students were placed back into a college preparatory track, only to later be assigned to the classes designed for youth with behavioral problems. A smaller number of participants, all of whom were black, indicated that they were placed in an automotive track. However, these students were no different in outcomes: they ultimately took classes designed for youth with behavior problems, isolated from their more successful peers.

Youthful peer associations were dysfunctional. For example, violence was common in the lives of participants, and many fought frequently with peers. Several participants recalled drunken nights out with their friends that typically ended in fighting. However, peer groups uniquely contributed to the lives of these individuals. Participants were conferred a special status when amongst other deviant peers. Anthony said, “I felt like an important part of my club...when I was with my boys, I was somebody – everywhere else, I was average.” Peers reinforced negative behaviors by revering the guys who could win the most fights, had the “freshest” car, or had access to normally restricted goods. The emphasis on using violence to prove one’s strength and power within peer groups also suggests that peer groups functioned to cultivate masculinity.

Although some participants indicated problems beginning during middle school, most participants indicated that serious problems began in high school. Several participants spoke about a “transition period” which occurred around the 10th grade. Anthony, a 31 year old black man from a lower middle class background, responded:

I made straight A’s until the 10th grade...Then I went through a transition. Being smart wasn’t cool anymore...After 10th grade it didn’t matter...I lived life one day at a time.

Other participants also spoke about a transition period that occurred around their sophomore year. Jeremy, a 28 year old white man also from a lower middle class background, shared, “I had pretty much straight A’s ‘til 10th grade. Then I started smoking the reefers and tryin’ to be cool, hanging out...eventually, I stopped going [to

school].” It’s during this time that peer group relationships began to take on a new importance in participants’ lives, assisting in identity formation.

Parents too slack?

The family is generally regarded as primarily responsible for socialization. Most participants were raised in a two-parent household; however, black participants were more likely than whites to report a one-parent household at the age of thirteen (see Table 4 in Appendix E).⁷

Although racial differences are observed in family structure, being raised in a one-parent household in itself does not adequately explain involvement in delinquency nor does it presuppose the inadequate transmission of positive values. However, being raised in a one-parent household does impact the extent of parental supervision. For participants raised in a one-parent household, the caregiving parent was more likely to work more than one job to provide adequate income for the family.

For many this was also the period during which participants begin to challenge authority and parents began to see their children as young adults capable of making their own decisions and, consequently, culpable for their *individual* mistakes. Many participants began to see themselves as independent and responsible for their own choices during this time.

⁷ Thirteen was selected as the threshold because this age represents the transition to teenager status, when youth are typically less supervised, around their peers, and dating. Additionally, the well-documented age-crime curve in offending begins to spike at this age.

Approximately half of the participants indicated that their parents could not have done anything differently to better their achievement (see Table 5 in Appendix E). However, when responses are analyzed by race, a distinct pattern is observed. Blacks were more likely to report that their parent(s) could not have done anything differently, whereas the majority of white participants felt that their parent(s) could have changed their parenting practices to be more effective. This suggests that black parents were aware of the challenges that being a minority presents. In response, they put forth extra effort to raise their children according to white middle-class standards for conduct.

Reflecting on past experiences, several participants noted that parents should have exerted more authority and increased discipline. When asked what his caretakers could have done differently to help them achieve more, Todd, a 22 year old white, stated, “Slap the hell out of me when I needed it.” Neil also felt that his parents should’ve disciplined him more harshly, “[they should’ve] beat my ass more. I got away with a lot of stuff.” Anthony resounded this attitude, stating, “[they should’ve] whipped my ass.” For participants, authority was based on the use of physical force. This observation elucidates the normalcy of violence in participants’ lives; violence was viewed as an appropriate technique of control. However, it also indicates that participants were cognizant of their low social status: in hindsight, participants felt that their behavior could have been restrained by their parents’ use of coercive measures that are usually reserved for managing (and commonly employed by) individuals of low social standing.

Discipline was not the only deficiency noted. Participants also cited a wide range of parental responsibilities that went undone in their homes. For some, parents didn’t

notice that their child was not meeting the school's expectations: "They could've not ignored the fact I was flunking out" (Alex, white). Others indicated that their parents didn't support their interests: "[They could have] shown interest in my likes and dislikes, just to give a little push...in even the small things" (Duane, black). Yet others wished that their parents should have spent more time with them: "[I wish she would've] spent time with me doing something fun and shared her personal experiences." (Todd, white). These comments indicate that parents showed little interest in their children's activities and did little to assist in cultivating their children's interests. Most importantly, participants expressed that their relationships with parents were unfulfilling; had their relationships been more conventional, participants would have perceived different available choices and perhaps, made different decisions.

The Role of the Church

Black participants were much more likely to attend church services frequently than white participants; in fact, none of the black participants reported not attending church services as a youth, and all but one reported that they attended services frequently (at least once per week; see Table 6 in Appendix E). Again, this suggests that black parents put forth considerably more effort to socialize their children according to middle class standards of behavior.

These data suggest that religion was an integral part of home life for most participants; however, qualitative data suggest that many had a superficial attachment to their houses of worship. Several participants indicated that they were forced by their

parent(s) to attend religious services. As participants matured, church became another setting characterized by dysfunctional peer relationships. Some participants reported attending church services for the sexual opportunities it offered: "I went a lot - there was no other choice. But I went to church for the wrong reasons...the girls. I've done some bad things at church..." (Anthony, African American). Other participants attended church for the substance abuse opportunities it offered: "My parents didn't want to go to the same church that I did so we went to different churches. I used to drink liquor before church with hot girls" (William, white). Yet, other participants went primarily for the social opportunities church offered. While in middle school, Todd attended an after-school program at a local church on Wednesdays. He recalled, "There were snacks, discussion, games, activities, but I went to meet girls" (white). Initially, I questioned the validity of Anthony's comments about his relationship with his community of faith. However, William attended the same church as a youth; his statements substantiate Anthony's previous remarks. Overall, the participants indicated a lack of respect for institutions of authority (i.e., the school, the family, the church) and conventional behaviors (i.e., age appropriate behaviors and activities, conventional relationships with peers, and abstinence) as youth.

CHAPTER VI

RESULTS: GROWING UP IN A STRATIFIED SOCIETY

Much criminological research finds that criminal activity is concentrated in lower class communities. However, data presented in this work suggest that lower middle class youth also engage in criminal offending.

Social Class and Crime

Social class membership can be measured in several different ways. Occupation, income, dwelling, neighborhood, and/or participation in various civic groups indicate one's social class standing (Warner, 1949). Participants were asked about their parents' occupations to determine ascribed class status. For the purposes of this study, Coleman and Neugarten's definitions will be used. Coleman and Neugarten (1971) maintain that the lower middle class includes both white- and blue-collar workers, and members may have a college degree or some other form of specialized vocational training (but these credentials are not necessary for membership in the lower middle class). All members possess specialized knowledge or skills that allow them to be successful in semi-professional careers. Typical occupations include teacher, police officer, firefighter, skilled craftsman, manager, small business owner, bank teller, skilled tradesperson, or a career in the military. In general, they are "home- or church-centered people ...who sent their children to college" (Coleman & Neugarten, 1971, p. 159). However, note that

Coleman and Neugarten do not state that lower middle class parents teach their children how to be successful in college; they only socialize them to attend college.

Working class occupations require minimal skills and offer the worker little autonomy in the workplace. Members of the working class are not poor, but they typically do not make enough money to afford many luxuries. Factory worker, jobs in the service sector, and manual laborer are examples of working class jobs. And while working class parents may hope that their children attend college after high school, “a high school diploma was accepted as sufficient” (Coleman & Neugarten, 1971, p. 176). Working class parents have high hopes for their children, but expect very little from them in terms of success.

Most participants were raised in a lower middle class household, but a few were raised in a working class household (see Table 7 in Appendix E). Almost all participants indicated that their parent(s) worked full-time. In an American capitalist economy, this typically results in a parent being absent from home for forty hours every week.

Prior research shows that educational attainment is positively associated with class status: as class status increases, educational attainment increases also. However, data suggest a relationship between race and educational attainment. Black participants were more likely than white participants to have left school prematurely (see Table 8 in Appendix E). Black participants were more likely to have dropped out of school, and they were also more likely to have started but not completed college. In contrast, white participants were more likely to have completed a degree once enrolled.

Interestingly, African Americans were just as likely as whites to report limited opportunities for success (see Table 9 in Appendix E). This finding most likely reflects the success of the equal opportunity ideology that emerged from the Civil Rights Movement. It is noteworthy that both of the African Americans who perceived limited opportunities had served an active sentence in a state-operated penal institution. Interestingly, both of these participants had attended college following high school. This suggests that despite their educational achievements and intellectual capacities, incarceration seemed to alter their sense of life chances.

Lower middle class membership did not insulate participants from engaging in criminal behavior:

I was a middle class kid. I walked over to that neighborhood. I chose to hang around with the few bad kids so I could learn to be bad. I knew I would be good at it, and it was funner. (Neil, African American, 29)

Lower middle class affiliations insulated youth from negative outcomes until the age of 18 but had no insulating effects once participants reached legal maturity to adult status.

Social class impacted criminal justice outcomes for white males, either directly or indirectly, but had relatively little, if any, mediating capacity for African Americans. For instance, on one occasion William and an accomplice, whose father owned a Century 21 franchise, were able to sell a home that did not belong to either of them. They took a \$30,000 down payment from the unsuspecting buyer and left town for several months. Since the accomplice's father was not willing to prosecute his own son, William was not

prosecuted either. Although William's own lower middle social class status was not enough to impact the outcome, his peer's social class (which undoubtedly was higher) did have a mediating effect. In this case, law violation was handled informally with neither stigmatization nor punishment imparted to the youthful offenders.

An Alternate Conception of Status

Also related to class position, social status emerged as an important theme in understanding individual motivations for criminal behaviors and deserves a treatment apart from particular social class membership. Social status, defined as "the objective organization of entitlements and privileges" (Marshall, 1994), has traditionally been measured by individual educational attainment, income, and occupational prestige, as well as class standing; however, it has a much different meaning for the participants in this study.

As youth, many participants were dissatisfied with their socioeconomic status, using criminal activity as a means to gain materially, garner respect from peers, and gain acceptance within deviant peer groups. Anthony was intelligent and perfectly capable of educational achievement, but wanted to sell firearms. Although in the beginning he sold pre-manufactured legal firearms (such as small handguns, which were "easier to sell"), he soon built on his knowledge of firearms and their intricate construction to customize pieces according to buyers' specifications. "I had a fascination with guns...my social status came from guns." Having access to restricted goods gave Anthony a special status among his peers; he was revered for his access to and ability to modify firearms.

Drug sales were another non-conventional approach to subsidize designer clothes, expensive cars, partying, and overall social status. Most participants sold marijuana at some point, and many of those advanced to selling more profitable drugs. And although most participants used drugs as well, making money (i.e., not getting high) was the primary motivator for selling drugs. After leaving college, LaShaun began selling cocaine to subsidize his lifestyle:

That's why I quit school. See other people with nice cars and going to the club spending money and they like, 'don't worry, I got you' - But I wanted my own money...that's why I started sellin' drugs.

For others, criminal activity became a mode to maintain status and continue to live a lifestyle to which they had become accustomed. American society is supposed to reward education, experience, and accomplishment; however it is nearly impossible for some youth to achieve financial success by these standards. Many participants worked part-time jobs while in high school; however, time requirements, resulting from educational responsibilities, lack of real-world work experience, and the limited selection of jobs guarantees low wages, resulting in job and status dissatisfaction.

For-profit crime became a way participants could supplement their meager incomes. Some participants used their middle class upbringing as a rationalization for their actions: "I got addicted to fast money, easy money...I was born middle-class and was used to a lifestyle" (Roger, lower middle class). However, others suggested awareness that their age, inexperience, and school responsibilities hindered their ability to

earn the income they wanted: “At \$8 or \$9 an hour, I couldn’t live the way I was livin’” (Anthony, lower middle class). Interestingly, Roger and Anthony were conscious of their families’ middle class orientations.⁸ Both discussed their middle class membership during the interview without being prompted to do so. Despite their self-identifications as middle class, their statements contradict middle class values. The middle class value system emphasizes deferred gratification; however, it seems that these two participants were not socialized effectively to practice this value. Both participants suggested that for-profit crime was an easy way to supplement their incomes; had these participants internalized middle class values of deferred gratification and denial of self-indulgence, they would not have participated in these activities. They would have taken more conventional approaches to improving their financial situations.

Survival Strategies

While most participants in the sample were raised in a lower middle class household, several participants came from single-parent, working class households. Class position also played an integral role in working class participants’ law violations; however, participants from lower SES households were more focused on survival, such as eating, being properly clothed, and being able to pay for housing and utilities. James, a 29 year old African American, spoke at length about growing up in a single-parent, working class household:

⁸ Although Anthony and Roger self-identified as middle class, they seemed to have lower middle class backgrounds.

The way I grew up – mom worked two jobs and showered us with attention, no father or child support, we lived in the projects. The church looked down on my mom ‘cause she was single with two kids. In that situation, you need people to help you out. It’s not her fault that she had two kids and daddy bounced...Back when you’re poor, you feel smothered. Just can’t get a job or nothing – it’s [crime] the easiest way to get something.

For James, crime seems to represent a response to frustration. When other legitimate means are unavailable, crime becomes an option for survival.

Other participants spoke about crime as a response to extreme frustration. Duane is a 24 year old black man recently charged with several counts of breaking and entering. Prior to his offending, Duane had worked a full-time manual labor that entailed commuting 100 miles each day. Having troubles with his living arrangements, it was necessary that he move, and he missed one day of work to relocate. Returning to work the next day, Duane finished his work early and went to the break room for a few minutes. Exhausted from work, the long commute, and his life in general, he sat down in a chair to rest but fell asleep. Later in the day, his manager asked to speak with him. “I sat down with my boss and he sounded like he wanted to fire me, like he had enough of me getting by.” Duane was fired from his job. Although Duane acted like he had been fired unjustly, his comment suggests otherwise. He perceived that his boss was unsatisfied by his performance and that he had had enough of Duane “getting by.” Although this issue was not probed further, I expect that Duane wanted others to see that he had been treated unfairly.

Soon thereafter, it became apparent to Duane that he would have to seek governmental support to feed himself, his child, and his girlfriend who was pregnant at the time. Frustrations mounted in response to the “denials” he was dealing with:

Yea, denials...ESC denied me for sleeping on the job...tried to get assistance, you know, food stamps – denied. They said they didn’t have any funds...I’m thinking “I got a pregnant girlfriend, a court date for being one month late on rent and they tried to get me for \$1500 for sub-floor sinking.” And Social Services shows up. When you get denied so many times, you get upset. Not mad – but upset. The system is screwed up.

Significantly, Duane, when asked by the interviewer, was certain that his social class, rather than his racial identity, led to this problem with his employer and the social service agency.

Duane then spent much of his time at home, sitting on his porch. Desperate for money, he was “turned on” to breaking and entering by a neighborhood acquaintance. Now, with the possibility of a criminal conviction for breaking and entering looming over his head, his concerns for the future are focused on the challenges that a conviction presents for employment. “Trying to get a job with a record is hard – it’s [having a criminal record] punishment enough. You end up working in places that you normally wouldn’t.” Duane’s comment alludes to the reciprocal impact of inequality. He engaged in criminal behavior because he perceived that he had no other alternatives for income, but now recognizes that his behaviors will only place limits on his earning potential.

For Duane, all known options for income had been exhausted prior to his decision to commit a crime. Unlike many other participants in this sample, elevating his status

was not his main motivation for breaking and entering, although his actions reflect a deep sense of frustration related to his status. Lacking skills valued by a predominately middle-class workforce ensures low wage, physically demanding jobs that have a vast surplus labor pool. When employees lack specialized training, they are more vulnerable to being fired.

CHAPTER VII

RESULTS: CRIMINAL JUSTICE OUTCOMES

Most African Americans in the sample were reluctant to speak about racial discrimination, but they may have been treated differently because of their race.

Criminalization and Conviction of Black Men

Stereotypes, racial prejudices, and racial discrimination during encounters with law enforcement, racial prejudices, and stereotypes were commonly reported and exclusive to African American men. Several participants spoke about incidents of covert racism in interactions with law enforcement personnel. Common forms of reported victimizations included unjustified motor vehicle stops as well as more blatant forms of harassment. James, a 29 year old African American who currently works as a sales manager, reported several instances of being stopped while driving an expensive vehicle. When he was younger, he was pulled over numerous times while driving his mother's car. Now he gets stopped when driving his own vehicle: "I get pulled over all the time now while leanin' [term used to refer to an individual's posture while driving, also referred to as "driving while black"] in my SUV." And not only were participants affected by racial profiling, but their family members were also. For example, Roger shared that his father, a retired military leader, was ticketed for driving four miles over the speed limit. Roger believed that his father was stopped because he was a black man

driving a very expensive car. Although some may question the validity of the participants' claims regarding unjust treatment by police, it seems likely that his claims were accurate given Roger's statement about his father: an older, typically law-abiding black man was also treated differently which moderately substantiates black participants' claims.

Other black participants spoke about encounters in which they were falsely accused. Tyler, a 32 year old black male from a working class background, currently works as a stereo installation technician but hopes to someday become a cop. Several years back he was arrested for driving under the influence (DUI) of alcohol:

See, I was stopped at a stoplight on my bike [motorcycle]...the [white] cop said I pulled out in front of him, but that won't true. He asked me if I had been drinkin' and I said no. I had had a beer earlier, but only one. He made me blow and said he was arresting me for DUI. I went downtown and blew again and it wasn't enough so I was released. Now, you know there ain't no way I was blowing drunk then 15 minutes later I wasn't.

Tyler did not believe that he was stopped by police for a legitimate reason. Additionally, he viewed the incident as harassment. Despite the officer's efforts, Tyler was released without being formally charged with an offense. Afterwards, Tyler let the incident go. Most likely, he did not feel that he had enough legitimate power in the community to challenge an institution of authority such as the law, nor would he have had the financial resources to do so.

When white participants were asked if they felt their race had any impact on encounters with law enforcement, they recognized unconsciously the privilege they are

afforded by their skin color. Alex's response to this specific question was characteristic of group sentiments, "No [it's never been a factor] - I'm white." Recognizing that black men are at a disadvantage in the criminal justice system indicates that whites are privileged in comparison.

Blacks' encounters with law enforcement were characterized by more blatant forms of harassment, provocation resulting in acts of violence. LaShaun, a 34 year old black male who currently works as a barber, had at one time a very promising future by most middle class standards. After graduating from high school, he was offered a full scholarship to play baseball at one of North Carolina's state supported universities. It was important to his parents that he "get away from the neighborhood," and this opportunity allowed just that. However, following graduation LaShaun had his first serious encounter with law enforcement and the criminal justice system:

I was just hanging out with the wrong crowd...white females...and the [white] cops showed up and started hasslin' me. They didn't want me around their women. So I pulled out a shotgun and fired a couple of rounds...did 20 days [for discharging a firearm].

LaShaun was able to begin college as he and his family had anticipated. Soon thereafter he was found guilty for discharging a firearm with the conviction resulting in termination of his scholarship. Mounting frustrations eventually took their toll on LaShaun, and he left college.

Differences were also found in criminal justice system outcomes between African Americans and whites in the sample. More specifically, race impacted participants'

reports of experiences in relation to plea bargaining and availability of resources for hiring competent attorneys. Roger, a black man in his forties, has an extensive criminal record, “probably 15 pages.” Only six or seven of his convictions were major encounters, all of which were nonviolent, drug-related offenses such as unlawful possession, trafficking, and conspiracy. He grew up in a lower middle class household with both his mother and father. Roger’s most recent encounter with law enforcement resulted in a prison sentence, and although it, too, was drug-related, he felt that the severity of his punishment reflected something other than the evidence against him:

I had left the house with two dirty scales [device used to measure the weight of marijuana, cocaine, and other illicit drugs] and a lot of money. Had like \$10,000 on me. Cops pulled me over...charged me with conspiracy [to sell and deliver] even though they didn’t have any other proof. They seized all my possessions...took my home, even the one with dad’s name on it. They [law enforcement] put my family out on the street, took like \$11,000 and ran up a [cell] phone bill from calling the people in it. I’ve seen other people get better deals than I got. Other people get caught with a ball [8-ball or ball is a common way people refer to an eighth of an ounce (or 3.5 grams) of cocaine] and they get a misdemeanor or it’s thrown out. I get caught with a dirty scale and they take everything I got.

Roger’s experience with the criminal justice system was much different than William’s, a 35 year old white man from a lower middle class background. Although William had committed numerous crimes against the state, he was never convicted of a single offense. When asked how he was able to avoid prosecution, he replied. “I always had money to hire a very good lawyer.” Although this example is used to illustrate the racial differences in criminal justice outcomes, it’s important to note that this example is also a

clear illustration of the mediating capacity of social class. However, it is sometimes impossible to distinguish between the effects of race and class on criminal justice outcomes; in fact, the outcomes may be affected greatly by the intersections of these categorizations.

Life Behind Bars

Once arrested, inability to effectively navigate the criminal justice system lead to varied sentencing outcomes. Lack of knowledge regarding the system was compounded by incompetent attorneys and discriminatory treatment. “My lawyer showed up drunk...I didn’t know about rights, like to dismiss a lawyer” (James, African American, 29). Not being able to maneuver through the criminal justice system reflects a class-related disadvantage. Members of the lower class commonly do not feel as if they have enough legitimate power to challenge the practices of authority figures.

Approximately half of the participants had served time, incarcerated in state prisons (see Table 10 in Appendix E). Many participants who served time in prison used the situation to better themselves, while still viewing prison as an environment not conducive to positive growth. “I got my diploma in prison. It was harder to learn with inmates [as opposed to students]...I knew I had to do it there ‘cause I probably wouldn’t do it at home” (Neil, African American, 29). Others found existential hope, believing that God has a purpose for them: “I could’ve went away forever for the things I’ve done...God has a purpose for me” (Anthony, African American, 31). Even though most

described their experiences in prison as negative, the data suggest that the participants made positive changes while incarcerated.

Dominant American cultural ideals pertaining to individualism made it likely that participants would blame themselves for their indiscretions, but these ideals also affected individual perceptions of self-control over rehabilitative efforts. In spite of the accomplishments and personal growth made by these individuals during their incarceration, each disregarded the institution's influence on personal rehabilitative efforts. "Prison only works if someone wants to change" (Anthony, African American, 31). This, too, reflects the participants' weak ties to institutions.

Even Anthony, whose lifestyle was characterized by normative violence, was deeply disturbed by the prison atmosphere. He remarked:

penitentiary was a whole 'nother thing...I wasn't "bad" anymore. From charge to prison, it seemed like a dream...still like a dream until I woke up and the lights were six inches above my head. Then I thought that ' I got twenty years'.

Although Anthony was a minority "on the outside," he found himself to be a member of the majority within the penitentiary. The resulting shift in reality forced him to understand his new environment from a racialized perspective:

Prison is predominately black. Black people in there for murder, robbery, and drugs cause the punishment is more severe for crimes that black people commit. Society feels like selling drugs is more severe than child molestation. When I was in there, there was this guy who embezzled \$500,000 and was out in 12 months...

Neil also echoed these sentiments, believing “they pass laws to give more time to black people for the crimes they commit.” Based on their observations and experiences, participants perceived racial disparities in criminal justice outcomes. Whether these observations are supported by official statistics is relatively unimportant; however, what is important is that black participants perceive institutional discrimination in society.

Their perceptions of differential treatment affect indirectly the strength of their ties to institutions in the community. As a consequence of their weak institutional ties, they may unconsciously socialize their own children to disregard sources of institutional authority as legitimate, thereby perpetuating existing inequitable social relations.

Future Plans

Despite committing numerous crimes in their pasts, most participants displayed concern for their community. They recognized the challenges they face, but most participants were optimistic and hopeful for their future. Some indicated that they have put the past behind them: “Got out of prison, still alive, got a girl, job. I’m feelin’ good about it” (Neil, African American). Others seemed to indicate that innovation was still a promising way to fulfill needs: “I have a positive outlook...not because it’s [the future] promising. I’ve found loopholes to get the things I need” (Roger, African American). Yet, other participants indicated that a lesson had been learned: “I’ve achieved a lot, but I think everything had to happen the way it did to make me focus” (Jeremy, White). “I wouldn’t change any of my friends or incarceration – I would’ve been dead. Just wish I wasn’t gone for so long” (Anthony, African American).

Participants with children of their own expressed a deep commitment to ensuring their child would not make the same mistakes. Many participants made a conscious effort to change their behaviors around their children: “My six-year old asked if he could have a cigarette so I won’t even smoke around them now” (Roger, African American). Others now realize the importance of deference and obedience and try to instill those values in their own children: “No crimes anymore, got children, I make good money – I try to teach my kids knowing what I have done to try to help them” (William, White). Participants draw from experience to prevent their children from repeating their mistakes; however, it is unlikely that participants are consciously aware of all of their own mistakes.

During the time interviews were conducted, all participants except one (who had recently been released from prison on drug charges) held a job, regardless of race or criminal background. Although these individuals each vary in the stigmatization they must now endure as a result of the criminal transgressions, each one of them readily embraces notions of family, community, and social betterment. Many have realistic ideas about how to improve their community but lack the political power to effect such changes. Society has labeled each of them as “criminal” and relegated them to a lowly social status, but these individuals are committed to their community in spite of this. They expressed hope in their future, their children’s future, and the future for all others like them who find themselves making bad choices in light of their perceived options. Roger leaves us with these words: “I have hopeful and wishful thoughts for people waking up to the troubles this lifestyle will bring.” But hopes never equal expectations.

CHAPTER VIII

DISCUSSION

The black men in this study reported experiencing racial discrimination in school and in the criminal justice system. Structural inequities inherent to systems of public education disadvantage students from challenging backgrounds, both black and white. Schools are ill-equipped to manage students who challenge authority. Students who do not conform to cultural ideals and values of deference and obedience are identified early and handled in ways that dramatically shape their life trajectory, but black and white men deal with this common problem in different ways.

Theories of structural strain assume equal opportunities to attain the American Dream while recognizing that unequal opportunities can lead to law violation. Meritocratic achievement ideologies emphasize the universal nature of opportunity – people need only try hard enough to succeed – despite differential access to legitimate opportunities for large segments of the population. In American society social class and race define available opportunities.

Merton's theory of structural anomie (Merton, 1968) is useful in understanding how participants adapt and respond to structural disadvantage. An emphasis on achievement (the attainment of the "American Dream," which is typically defined as the accumulation of wealth) combined with restricted access to the means to achieve success gives rise to frustration among individuals with lower socioeconomic status. In response

to this frustration, individuals adapt their behaviors to deal with their circumstances. In Merton's terms, they innovate.

Data support Bowles and Gintis' (1976) theory of social reproduction. Disadvantaged students systemically fail. Their lack of achievement and personal success ensures their dependence on marginal labor and justifies their low socio-economic status later in life. The achievement ideology central to American meritocratic-technocratic social relations functions to prevent individual consciousness of differential effects of systemic, structural inequity. "Innovative" choices are thus directed to deviance and crime.

Systematic discrimination begins in one's early years in the family. Then the system of public education has an impact. In school, status is not conferred according to talent or ability, but rather according to conformity to institutional standards for behavior. Status is conferred on students based on teachers' perceptions of students' class membership, as indicated by factors such as appearance and mannerism. Data support Cohen's original thesis that the educational system assesses students' performance using middle class standards for behavior. Participants' attempts to elevate their status among peers in school contributed to their involvement in delinquency as youth and criminal law violation as adults.

Identified by conventional institutional agents as unable to conform to accepted standards of behavior, participants are encouraged to engage in a progression of deviant behaviors. Eventually, they come to the attention of law enforcement officials and the criminal justice system. After establishing a relationship with these institutional agents,

black participants were subjected to discriminatory treatment by law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges in the criminal justice system. Although the race of law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, and magistrates is not known for all participants in this sample, there is evidence that offender race negatively affected discretion at one or more of these stages in the criminal justice process. Discrimination was not identified as such. Rather, participants noted the inability to obtain knowledgeable legal counsel and to effectively maneuver through the criminal justice system.

Participants' access to cultural capital impacted their trajectories. Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) consists of one's knowledge, skills, education, and expectations, each of which contributes to social status. Two types of cultural capital are relevant to the present discussion: the embodied state and the institutionalized state. Embodied cultural capital is acquired through the process of socialization, and represents an individual's character and way of thinking. One form of embodied cultural capital is linguistic capital, an individual's ability to express oneself through the correct use of a relatively sophisticated vocabulary. Although a few participants included in this study were articulate during interviews, most conjugated verbs incorrectly, did not form complete sentences. Many used either slang or obscure phrasing to express themselves.

Institutionalized cultural capital is attained through education and specialized training, objectified in academic credentials and labor force qualifications. For participants in this sample, parents' lack of education meant that they were unable to provide any real support to ensure their children's success in college. Parents were

unable to prepare their children for college. They lacked the necessary skills to provide experiential advice on key topics for college success, such as time management and collaboration among peers.

All participants reported problems with their teachers and peers, with penalties ranging from short-term suspensions (for fighting) to long-term suspensions (for the accumulation of too many absences as a result of skipping class). While these experiences impacted individual trajectories, data also show that peer associations at school played a mediating role in individual decisions to engage in delinquent behaviors and later adult law violation.

Whereas the elevation of status was important in decisions to pursue deviant trajectories, strong institutional ties were also influential in the decision making process. An overwhelming majority of participants reported family problems while growing up. They indicated that their lives as young children were characterized by instability and strife. Several participants explicitly indicated that they were unable to interact with their parent(s) while others indicated that they primarily viewed their parent(s) as an authority figure (as opposed to viewing their parent(s) as a mentor or guide).

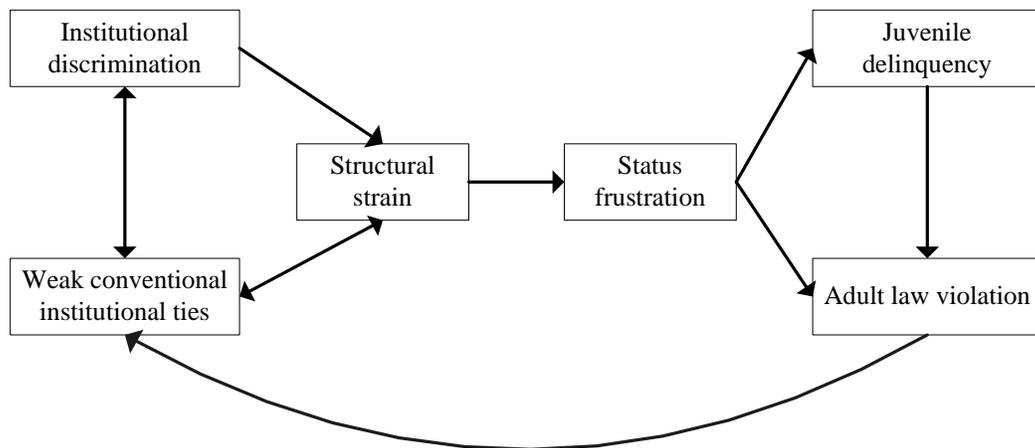
Parenting practices and, more specifically, techniques for control are functions of social class. Kohn (1977) found that middle class parents were more likely to tolerate nonconformity and value self-direction. In contrast, working class parents were more likely to stress obedience, punish deviant behavior, and believe in strict leadership – in effect, they stress behavioral conformity. Kohn maintains that differences in parenting practices arise from differences in parents' work environments. Middle class parents are

more likely to work independently with people or data, while working class parents are more likely to work with things under close supervision; in effect, these job characteristics influence parents' techniques for control in the home. Heimer (1997) also argues that social class is correlated negatively with the use of coercive punishment in the home: as class status decreases, parents are more likely to stress obedience and use coercive punishment. Because working class parents tend to be employed in manual labor, they have little autonomy in the workplace. The strict rules at work serve as a model of coercive forms of control with their children; their work roles shape their family life.

Although no participants attributed their decision to desist from further criminal involvement to a single person or thing, every participant talked at length about a significant other. Those who have children mentioned their children without being prompted to do so. This suggests that these individuals have greater stakes in conformity, and these stakes insulate participants from engaging in further law violation. In effect, finding a companion and raising children strengthens the individual's conventional social bond. In accord with Sampson and Laub's work (1990), although the nature of the elements that comprise the social bond are age dependent, the bond itself is not. For instance, Hirschi maintains that commitment to school insulates youth from engaging in delinquent behaviors. However, as Sampson and Laub argue, this particular type of commitment becomes less important as youth grow older, and is replaced by commitment to family.

Taken together, these findings suggest a need for theoretical integration of strain and social control perspectives within the criminological literature. The dysfunctional relationships an individual has with representatives of social institutions, such as teachers, parents, employers, and the church, can lead to structural strain. However, structural strain can also weaken the strength of institutional ties, and also lead to a psychological state of status frustration. Consequently, the individual, acting out of frustration and anger, may engage in juvenile delinquency and adult offending. Both juvenile delinquency and adult offending are examples of innovation. The theoretical model below illustrates these relationships:

Model 1. Integrated Model of Institutional Strain



Data gathered from participants in this study indicate these patterns, but the small size and convenience of this sample does not allow for generalizability to the larger

population. Further research with a larger, randomly selected sample is necessary to evaluate the validity of this model.

In addition to providing a theoretical model of criminal deviance, the model above also illustrates the feedback mechanism by which racial inequality is legitimated in present social relations. Once an individual has been identified as deviant by the criminal justice system, criminal stigmatization provides a basis for legal discrimination within the labor market, thereby perpetuating and legitimating the existing inequality present within American society. Current statistics on the racial composition of state and federal prisons in the United States indicates that African Americans are disproportionately represented within the criminal justice system. Although the total number of those incarcerated in a correctional facility are small in comparison to their representation in American society, these numbers do not take into account the intergeneration difficulties experienced by families of those who are incarcerated and disadvantaged in the labor market.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

The research question addressed in this study was: “How does social structure influence the life trajectories of adult criminal offenders?” Data indicate that both class and race impacted the participants’ trajectories. Working and lower middle class membership hindered participants’ socialization toward a middle class value system, as well as their abilities to meet behavioral expectations in school, hire competent attorneys, and effectively navigate through the criminal justice system.

Race became more important in participants’ experiences of institutional discrimination by school and criminal justice officials. Racial profiling, racial prejudices, and overt discrimination by law enforcement were common experiences among African American participants and their families.

Schools conferred status to individuals designated as the most capable and deserving, while identifying other individuals as being incapable, undeserving, and deviant. Although it is a common practice in American society, judging an individual by his or her social class status or membership in a particular racial group is problematic. Reducing individuals to such a nominal existence marginalizes them and renders them unable to reach their human potential with something unique and valuable to offer.

The Key to Social Reform

The government holds considerable power over many lives. And with that power comes a social responsibility to increase the life chances of all members of society, not a select few. Unequal treatment against minority and marginal groups provides unequal opportunities for success. Individual talents go underdeveloped, underappreciated, but most importantly, overlooked. While proponents of harsher penalties for crime may argue that their loyalties are to the majority who choose to conform to society's standards, this argument is faulty in that their allegiance really lies with another. Those with power are most interested in producing a compliant workforce that will perpetuate existing social relations which legitimate their present power. By legitimating their present power, they are able to secure their families' power in the future.

Government officials' allegiances most often lie with those who have power over the labor market. First and foremost, government officials protect the interests of businesses. North Carolina state law mandates that children attend an institution of education until they are sixteen years old. The education system functions to accustom children to working on a schedule, conforming to the wills of others, and being productive. Additionally, the education system functions as an institutional agent with the authority to confer status to certain individuals who are perceived to be more deserving than others.

The court system functions to stigmatize offenders, thereby perpetuating and legitimating inequitable social relations in American society. Once an individual is convicted of a criminal offense, employers can legally discriminate based on the

individual's background, despite the length of time that has passed, positive changes an individual has made in his or her life, or the individual's abilities.

While these institutional agents are highly visible in everyday life, politicians are the key to social reform. Politicians are responsible for developing and instituting new legal statutes that govern the educational and criminal justice systems. They exert control over the types of behaviors that are punishable by law and the type and length of sentences available to punish those convicted of law violation; they even exert power over the types of jobs for which an individual is eligible once convicted of a criminal offense.

To say that politicians are not searching for answers to alleviate society's ills is not the point of this argument nor is it accurate; many politicians and community leaders are concerned with these issues. The point that should be taken from this work is that politicians should begin to think in more radical terms about how to best use the funds available to reach disenfranchised individuals.

While concrete policy implications are beyond the scope of this work, this study does suggest several factors that should be considered. Class and race shape the opportunities and choices that one has; therefore, class and race should be considered when formulating and implementing crime prevention and offender reintegration policies and programs. Since both family and school experiences shape an individual's trajectory, crime prevention and offender reintegration programs should consider the strengths of these institutional ties while simultaneously assisting in improving their deficiencies.

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APPENDIX A
RESEARCH NOTE

Conducting interviews with isolated or stigmatized populations presents special challenges – mainly, how to find and select participants for inclusion. For the purposes of this study, the sample drawn was a convenience sample employing a snowball sampling technique which may not be representative of the population of interest. Consequently, many participants shared a common peer group which possibly led to greater homogeneity among participants in the sample.

Prior to beginning the interview, I informed all participants of my educational background; this may have influenced participants' self-reported educational achievement. Invalid data may have been collected from participants who were motivated to provide false answers to manage my impression of them. Since I have a close relationship to the key informant who identified participants for this study and who had a close relationship with many of the participants, social desirability bias may have influenced participants' responses (Esterberg, 2002). Participants may have wanted to help the researcher by responding in ways they believed the researcher wanted them to respond.

Additional sources of bias may have resulted from memory decay (citation needed), whereby recollection of past events may be distorted in ways unknown to the researcher, or particular events relevant to the topic addressed in a particular question may have been forgotten entirely.

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. When you were growing up, how interested were you in school?
2. How many adults lived in your household growing up?
3. In regards to achieving in school, did you receive a lot, little, or no support from the adults in your household?
4. Did adults ever talk with you about your plans for the future (post-high school)?
5. Did you hope you would do well in school?
6. Did you feel that your teachers wanted you to learn?
7. Some students are placed in different classes in school based upon how much teachers think students are likely to achieve, a phenomenon known as tracking. Do you feel that you were impacted by tracking?
8. Were you ever suspended from school on a short-term or long-term basis?
9. Did you think it was fair?
10. What was your last year in school like (good experience, so-so experience, or not so great experience)?
11. Growing up, to what extent did your neighborhood provide you with good friends?
12. Were there gangs in your neighborhood?
13. If so, what was your relationship with the gang(s)?
14. When you were growing up, did you attend church a lot, little, or not at all?
15. How about now? Do you attend church a lot, little, or not at all?

16. How many encounters have you had with the police?
17. Were they positive or negative? Explain.
18. What could adults have done to help you achieve more?
19. Could the church have done to reach out more to you?
20. How do you feel about the future? Are you optimistic?
21. How did your parents make a living?
22. When you were growing up, did you feel that you had many opportunities for success?
23. What is the highest level of schooling you have attained?
24. Have you used illegal drugs?
25. What types of charges and convictions have you had?
26. Who do you primarily blame for your past criminal actions: your friends, yourself, your parents, or some other person?
27. Do you feel that your race has affected your criminal justice outcomes?
28. Participant's race and sex (interviewer coded):
29. What was your age on your last birthday?
30. Do you currently hold a job? If so, what type?
31. Is there anything else that you would like to share that I have not asked you about?

Thank you for your willingness to do this interview.

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM

Project Title: “Why Young People Turn to Crime: A North Carolina Case Study”

Project Director: M.J. Gathings

Participant's Name:

DESCRIPTION AND EXPLANATION OF PROCEDURES:

The purpose of this project is to learn more about your past and how your past has contributed to who you are today. Over the next six months, I will be gathering information from individuals like you that are eligible to use Sentencing Services’ pretrial services. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes to complete. I will ask you a series of questions and you will be given a chance to respond. I expect that community leaders of all levels will be interested in your experiences and, through learning about you, will be able to develop new strategies to create a better community. Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary which means you may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time. If at any time during the interview you wish to not continue, just let me know and we will end the interview with no penalty or prejudice to yourself. Data and consent forms will be stored in a secure location by the principal investigator for a period of two years, after which time the data will be destroyed.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this project. It is important for you to understand that there is no direct association between this project and ReDirections. Your participation in this project has no impact on the quality of service you receive from ReDirections’ Sentencing Services program and ReDirections will not penalize or reward you in any way for your participation in this project. It is also important for you to understand that your participation in this project has no effect on your current court case. You receive no rewards or penalties of any kind for choosing to participate in this project.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS:

A possible benefit of this discussion to you is it will give you the opportunity to share your experiences with others. This is an opportunity to reflect on your past, assess your current situation, and think about your future. By sharing your experiences, others alike and unlike yourself can gain better insight into how to make a community more productive and supportive for all its members.

COMPENSATION/TREATMENT FOR INJURY:

Your participation is entirely voluntary; you are free to refuse to participate or withdraw from this project at any time. Your participation in this project has no relation to the services you obtain from ReDirections' Sentencing Services program and affects your agreement with Sentencing Services in no way. Your participation in this project has no effect on your current court case. You will not be rewarded or penalized for participating in this project. Once again, you will not be compensated in any way for your participation; your participation is entirely voluntary.

CONSENT:

By signing this consent form, you agree that you understand the procedures and any risks and benefits involved in this research and that M.J. Gathings has answered all of your current questions regarding participation in this project. You are free to refuse to participate or to withdraw your consent to participate in this research at any time without penalty or prejudice. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you will not receive compensation for participating in this project. Your privacy will be protected because you will not be identified by name as a participant in this project.

The research and this consent form have been approved by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board, which insures that research involving people follows federal regulations. Questions regarding your rights as a participant in this project can be answered by calling Mr. Eric Allen at (336) 256-1482. Questions regarding the research itself can be answered by calling M.J. Gathings at (336) 342-5238. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided to you if the information might affect your willingness to continue participation in the project.

By signing this form, you are agreeing to participate in the project described to you by M.J. Gathings.

Participant's Signature

Date

By initialing below, you are agreeing to allow M.J. Gathings to use personal data contained in ReDirections' files for research purposes.

Participant's Initials

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Table D.1. Participant Demographics

	Criminal Record	Served time in Prison	Track in School	Social Class Background	Race
<i>Alex</i>	Misdemeanor drug charge	No	Enrolled in classes for academically gifted for a limited time	Working class: mother – bartender; stepfather – telephone repair & gambler	White
<i>Anthony</i>	Armed robbery; kidnapping; assault with a deadly weapon	Yes	Academically gifted	Lower middle class: father – military; mother – civilian position (librarian) on military base	Black
<i>Ben</i>	Assault on a female	No	Academically gifted	Lower middle class:	Black
<i>Duane</i>	Breaking and entering; larceny	No	Trade-oriented	Lower middle class: father – minister; mother – homemaker/clerical	Black
<i>Jackson</i>	Breaking and entering; DWI; assault	Yes	NA	Working class: mother – textile plant	Black
<i>James</i>	Possession of marijuana; obtaining property under false pretenses; possession of stolen goods	Yes	Academically gifted	Working class: mother – CNA & school bus driver	Black
<i>Jeremy</i>	Possession of LSD and ecstasy	Yes	Academically gifted	Lower middle class: mother - librarian	White

	Criminal Record	Served time in Prison	Track in School	Social Class Background	Race
<i>LaShaun</i>	Discharging a firearm; felony drug charges	No	NA	Lower middle class: father – military; mother – odd jobs	Black
<i>Maurice</i>	Assault	No	Trade-oriented	Lower middle class: father – military; mother – teacher	Black
<i>Neil</i>	Robbery; receiving stolen goods	Yes	Special education (behavioral issues)	Lower middle class: father – military; mother – psychiatric technician	Black
<i>Richard</i>	Drug charges	Yes	Academically gifted	Lower middle class: father – military; mother – civilian military position	White
<i>Roger</i>	Drug possession; trafficking; sale and delivery	Yes	NA	Lower middle class: father – military; mother – owned daycare	Black
<i>Todd</i>	Breaking and entering; drug possession; assault	No	Special education (behavioral issues)	Working class: mother – McDonald’s restaurant	White
<i>Tyler</i>	DUI (never formally charged)	No	Trade-oriented	Lower middle class: father – mechanic; mother – teacher	Black
<i>William</i>	Drug charges	No	NA	Lower middle class: father – military; mother – civilian military position	White

Network Connections

- Maurice & Tyler – half brothers
- Maurice, Richard, Tyler, William – close friends
- Anthony, LaShaun, Maurice, Neil, Richard, Roger, Tyler, William – friends
- Ben, Jackson – friends

APPENDIX E

TABLES

Table 1. Participants' Interest in School by Race

	Black	White
Very interested	5	0
Somewhat interested	3	2
Not interested	2	3

N = 15

Table 2. Participants' Suspensions by Type and Race

	Black	White
None	2	0
Short-term	7	2
Long-term	0	1
Both short- and long-term	1	2

N = 15

Table 3. Participants' Tracking by Type and Race

	Black	White
Behavioral problems	1	1
Working class employment	3	0
College preparatory	3	2
Accelerated	3	2

N = 15

Table 4. Participants' Family Structure at Age Thirteen by Race⁹

	Black	White
One parent	5	1
Two parents	5	4

N = 15

Table 5. Participants' Perceptions of Parenting Could Have Been More Effective by Race

	Black	White
Could have been more effective	4	4
Could not have been more effective	6	1

N = 15

Table 6. Participants' Church Involvement by Race

	Black	White
Did not attend	0	1
Attended somewhat frequently	1	3
Attended frequently	9	1

N = 15

Table 7. Participants' Social Class Status as Youth by Race

	Black	White
Low income	0	0
Working class	2	2
Lower middle class	8	3

N = 15

Table 8. Participants' Level of Education by Race

	Black	White
Less than high school	1	0
High school	3	1
GED	0	1
Specialized training	1	1
Some college	5	1
College degree	0	1

N = 15

Table 9. Participants' Perceptions of Opportunities for Success by Race

	Black	White
Adequate	8	4
Inadequate	2	1

N = 15

Table 10. Participants' Incarceration in State Prison by Race

	Black	White
Yes	5	2
No	5	3

N = 15