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Martin Luther King, Jr. Lecture - "It's Set Up For Failure... and They Know This!": How the School-to-Prison Pipeline Impacts the Educational Experiences of Street Identified Black Youth and Young Adults

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Martin Luther King, Jr. Lecture

“IT’S SET UP FOR FAILURE . . . AND THEY KNOW THIS!”:
HOW THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE IMPACTS THE
EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF STREET IDENTIFIED
BLACK YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

YASSER ARAFAT PAYNE* & TARA MARIE BROWN**

I. INTRODUCTION

I had dropped out in the 10th grade . . . ‘cause, I was bad . . . all I wanted to do was crimes and fight and sell drugs. Like, school wasn’t for me Before I got into that type of phase, a lot of my teachers were disrespectful, [and they] told me that I wouldn’t be successful. I’ve even been hit by teachers. And, I’ve always been a very smart, educated kid. I had good grades and everything but I would always get into it with teachers.

—Louis (31), study participant

Louis is one of a staggering number of Black youth and young adults in the United States who have found themselves trapped in *the school-to-prison pipeline* (SPP)—a tangle of institutional conditions inside and outside of schools that funnel youth from schools to prisons. Like many other young people affected by the pipeline, Louis valued learning and

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(307)

education. However, disrespect and lack of support from teachers compelled him to leave high school before graduating. Once out of school, and with few legal options for sustaining himself, Louis was drawn into the illicit activities that were prevalent in his inner city community. At age nineteen, he was incarcerated.

This paper focuses on how street identified Black youth and young adults, like Louis, are thrust into the SPP. While high rates of school failure and incarceration among these young people are often framed as the result of their resistance to learning and conventional norms, this study shows a confluence of oppressive schooling conditions that directly and indirectly push them out of school and into the criminal justice system. They include institutional and interpersonal racism, poor treatment and lack of academic and social support from school personnel, exclusionary disciplinary action, and school violence and disorder. Examining participants' experiences through the Sites of Resilience and Structural Violence theoretical frameworks, the authors argue that the SPP is a set of both intentionally and unconsciously created institutional processes designed to educationally and economically disenfranchise low-income Black individuals and communities.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMING: STREET IDENTITY, STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE, AND LOW-INCOME BLACK SCHOOLS

Sites of resilience (SOR) theory provides an alternative framing of a street identity as an expression of resilience and resiliency.¹ SOR theory contextualizes how street-identified Black men and women acquire this social identity as a function of individual and structural conditions. "Street" identity, "street life," or "the streets" comprise phenomenological language used by persons, active in a life of crime, as an ideology centered on personal, social, and economic survival. Street life is also a system of behaviors maintained through *bonding* and *illegal* activities. Bonding activities include attending or sponsoring social events, and examples of illegal activities include the use and sales of narcotics, gang activity, or armed robbery.

SOR theory is grounded in structural violence theory and describes how structural institutions and systems prevent individuals, groups, and communities from meeting their basic needs through policies, laws, and other regulations. A street identity, we argue, is more appropriately understood as a racial-ethnic and socio-cultural-based site of resilience in response to a persistent context of structural violence.

1. See Yasser Arafat Payne & Tara M. Brown, *The Educational Experiences of Street-Life-Oriented Black Boys: How Black Boys Use Street Life as a Site of Resilience in High School*, 26 J. CONTEMP. CRIM. JUST. 316, 316-38 (2010); see also YASSER ARAFAT PAYNE, *THE PEOPLE'S REPORT: THE LINK BETWEEN STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND CRIME IN WILMINGTON, DELAWARE* (2013), http://www.thepeoplesreport.com/images/pdf/The_Peoples_Report_final_draft_9-12-13.pdf [<https://perma.cc/C9BZ-XL59>].

Furthermore, the theoretical framework for this study builds off earlier work that examined how street identities were specifically used as a site of resilience inside schools.² These studies specifically found that, as a function of experiences with economic poverty, Black boys embraced street identities to cope with and be resilient within public school environments interpreted to be intellectually unsupportive and oppressive. Many low-income Black boys and girls attend public schools with sub-par clothing and schooling materials only to be made fun of by other students and ignored or mistreated by school personnel. As a result, some Black youth embrace street identities which are manifested in various forms of activities, including school violence, gang activity, sales of narcotics, or even dropping out, as a way to cope with challenges with students and educators inside schools.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

K–12 schools' increasing reliance on law enforcement and exclusionary disciplinary practices in response to student behavior has raised concern about the relationship between schools and incarceration in the United States.³ This relationship—SPP—is characterized as web of institutional “education and public safety policies and practices that push our nation’s schoolchildren out of the classroom and into the streets, the juvenile justice system, or the criminal justice system.”⁴

The ways in which schools contribute to incarceration fall within three general pathways through the SPP.⁵ First, in their use of law enforcement and the courts to address disciplinary matters, particularly at the secondary level, schools create a direct conduit to the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. The remaining two pathways pertain to how school personnel push students out of school either by removing them through disciplinary action or creating alienating or hostile learning environments that cause students to leave school. Out-of-school youth and young adults without a secondary degree, who are largely locked out of the formal labor market, then become vulnerable to illegal activity, arrest, and detention. Black students—especially those in low-income, urban schools and communities—are most acutely disenfranchised by the mechanisms

2. See Payne & Brown, *supra* note 1, at 316–38; see also Yasser Arafat Payne, Brian Chad Starks & LaMar Rashad Gibson, *Contextualizing Black Boys' Use of a Street Identity in High School*, NEW DIRECTIONS FOR YOUTH DEV., Fall 2009, at 35, 35–51.

3. See Robert Balfanz, Vaughan Bytnes & Joanna Fox, *Sent Home and Put off-Track: The Antecedents, Disproportionalities, and Consequences of Being Suspended in the Ninth Grade*, 5 J. APPLIED RES. ON CHILDREN, 2014, at 1, 1–19; see also KATHLEEN NOLAN, *POLICE IN THE HALLWAYS: DISCIPLINE IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL* (2011).

4. See Deborah N. Archer, *Introduction: Challenging the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, 54 N.Y.L. SCH. L. REV. 867, 868 (2009).

5. See Lisa H. Thurau & Johanna Wald, *Controlling Partners: When Law Enforcement Meets Discipline in Public Schools*, 54 N.Y.L. SCH. L. REV. 977, 1020 (2009); see also Harry Wilson, *Turning off the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, 23 RECLAIMING CHILDREN & YOUTH 49, 49–53 (2014).

and outcomes of the SPP. As compared to other racial and ethnic groups, they have the highest rates of school removal, in-school arrest, referral to courts by school personnel, and dropout,⁶ as well as juvenile and adult incarceration.⁷

The disproportionate impact of the SPP on low-income, Black students is attributed, in large part, to school policies and practices that are riddled with institutional inequities and biases along racial, ethnic, and class lines. For example, it is well documented that many schools that serve large numbers of low-income students of color are characterized by inadequate resources, low expectations, poor quality instruction, and inadequate academic and social support, violence, and disorder.⁸ With few school-sanctioned options for redressing such marginalizing conditions, students often register their dissatisfaction through actions such as disengaging from school and academics and challenging authority, which lead to disciplinary action.⁹

Black youth are grossly overrepresented among students subject to disciplinary action in preschool through high school. Black youth, who represent 16% of the Pre-K-12 student population, make up 40% of those suspended or expelled. Moreover, “27% of students referred to law enforcement, and 31% of students subjected to a school-related arrest.”¹⁰ In contrast, Whites are underrepresented among students suspended, expelled, arrested, and referred to the courts. These disparities do not exist because Black students misbehave more than White students. Rather, Black students are punished more often and more harshly for the same behaviors displayed by Whites, and they are more likely to be sanctioned for minor and subjective infractions, such as insubordination and disre-

6. See U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., CIVIL RIGHTS DATA COLLECTION: DATA SNAPSHOT: SCHOOL DISCIPLINE (Mar. 2014), <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Downloads/CRDC-School-Discipline-Snapshot.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/Z24S-BWD9>] [hereinafter CIVIL RIGHTS DATA COLLECTION]; see also Balfanz, Bytnes & Fox, *supra* note 3, at 1–19; Robert Balfanz et al., *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic* (2014), AMERICA'S PROMISE ALLIANCE (Apr. 28, 2014), <http://www.americaspromise.org/resource/building-gradnation-progress-and-challenge-ending-high-school-dropout-epidemic-2014> [<https://perma.cc/V44E-DEYV>] [hereinafter *Building a Grad Nation*].

7. See E. ANN CARSON, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, PRISONERS IN 2014 (2015), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p14.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/8C6A-6YRA>]; see also Judith A.M. Scully, *Examining and Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Strategies for a Better Future*, 68 ARK. L. REV. 959 (2016).

8. See GASTON ALONSO ET AL., OUR SCHOOLS SUCK: STUDENTS TALK BACK TO A SEGREGATED NATION ON THE FAILURES OF URBAN EDUCATION (2009); see also Payne & Brown, *supra* note 1, at 316–38.

9. See Tara Marie Brown & L. F. Rodriguez, *School and the Co-Construction of Dropout*, 22 INT'L J. QUALITATIVE STUD. EDUC. 221, 221–42 (2009); see also Payne & Brown, *supra* note 1, at 316–38.

10. See CIVIL RIGHTS DATA COLLECTION, *supra* note 6, at 1, 6.

spect.¹¹ Thus, “researchers conclude that school policies and practices more than differences in behaviors, predict higher suspension rates.”¹²

As indicated by racially inequitable disciplinary practices, interpersonal relationships between Black students and school staff are often troubled, and research shows that many teachers and administrators hold negative stereotypes of these youth.¹³ In her seminal study of disciplinary practices in an elementary school, Ann Ferguson describes how Black boys’ “misbehavior is likely to be interpreted as symptomatic of ominous criminal proclivities” by White teachers, who make up the majority of the K–12 teaching force.¹⁴ Moreover, school personnel often view Black girls as aggressive and defiant and “have been more inclined to respond harshly to the behaviors of Black girls” as compared to White girls.¹⁵ Racially-biased perceptions, in interaction with harsh, zero tolerance disciplinary policies, have led to the overrepresentation of male and female Black students among those removed from school through disciplinary action.¹⁶ Coincidentally, disciplinary removal is highly correlated with dropout, as are troubled student–teacher relationships and other adverse schooling

11. See Catherine P. Bradshaw et al., *Multilevel Exploration of Factors Contributing to the Overrepresentation of Black Students in Office Disciplinary Referrals*, 102 J. EDUC. PSYCHOL. 508, 508–20 (2010); see also Russell J. Skiba, *When Is Disproportionality Discrimination? The Overrepresentation of Black Students in School Suspension*, in ZERO TOLERANCE: RESISTING THE DRIVE FOR PUNISHMENT IN OUR SCHOOLS 176, 176–87 (William Ayers, Bernardine Dohrn & Rick Ayers eds., 2001); Russell J. Skiba et al., *Where Should We Intervene? Contributions of Behavior, Student, and School Characteristics to out-of-School Suspension*, in CLOSING THE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE GAP: EQUITABLE REMEDIES FOR EXCESSIVE EXCLUSION 132, 132–46 (Daniel J. Losen ed., 2015).

12. Daniel Losen et al., *Are We Closing the School Discipline Gap?*, UCLA CIV. RIGHTS PROJECT 19 (Feb. 2015), https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/federal-reports/are-we-closing-the-school-discipline-gap/AreWeClosingTheSchoolDisciplineGap_FINAL221.pdf [<https://perma.cc/N56E-7JFV>].

13. See Tara Marie Brown, *The Racialization of Threat: Responding to the Punishment and Purging of Black and Latina/o Youth in School*, in CONTESTING THE MYTH OF A ‘POST RACIAL’ ERA 128, 128–42 (Dorinda J. Carter Andrews & Franklin Tuitt eds. 2013); see also TYRONE C. HOWARD, *BLACK MALE(D): PERIL AND PROMISE IN THE EDUCATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES* (2014); Skiba, *When Is Disproportionality Discrimination?*, *supra* note 11, at 176–87.

14. See ANN ARNETT FERGUSON, *BAD BOYS: PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THE MAKING OF BLACK MASCULINITY* 89 (2000).

15. See Monique W. Morris, *Race, Gender and the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Expanding Our Discussion to Include Black Girls*, SCHOTT FOUND. FOR PUB. EDUC. 5 (Sept. 17, 2012), <http://schottfoundation.org/sites/default/files/resources/Morris-Race-Gender-and-the-School-to-Prison-Pipeline.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/ZJ62-PLDU>].

16. See *id.*; see also CIVIL RIGHTS DATA COLLECTION, *supra* note 6; Edward J. Smith & Shaun R. Harper, *Disproportionate Impact of K–12 School Suspension and Expulsion on Black Students in Southern States*, UNIV. OF PA., CTR. FOR THE STUDY OF RACE & EQUITY IN EDUC. (2015), http://www.gse.upenn.edu/equity/sites/gse.upenn.edu/equity/files/publications/Smith_Harper_Report.pdf [<https://perma.cc/7D22-D6TS>].

conditions,¹⁷ and Black students are significantly more likely to leave high school before graduating than those from other racial and ethnic groups.¹⁸

As compared to low-income students of color more generally, research suggests that street identified youth are even more likely to be viewed as academically incapable, to receive inadequate support, and to be disciplined in school. For example, in her study of Black, male adolescents, L. Janelle Dance found that teachers often perceive “street-savvy students as irrationally disruptive and uneducable.”¹⁹ Similarly, in Flores-Gonzalez’s study on street identified students at a predominantly Latino, high school in Chicago, teachers often “labeled them as troublemakers, and denied them access to opportunities to engage in school through participation in academic and extracurricular programs.”²⁰ These findings are also reflected in Victor Rios’s study of street identified Latino and Black, male youth in Oakland whom school personnel viewed, foremost, as a threat to the school environment.²¹ Such perceptions increase the likelihood that students’ troubles with and critiques of school will be met with punishment and exclusion rather than social and academic support.

Poor schooling conditions often interact with and compound the detrimental effects of structural violence outside of school. Many youth in economically impoverished inner cities face difficulties in their families and communities, which can impact their in-school behavior. Students whose families experience financial hardship may arrive to school hungry, without adequate clothing, or with unaddressed health problems.²² These conditions can make it difficult to focus on learning and draw students’ attention away from school and towards activities that directly address their basic needs. Moreover, too many Black youth in urban communities have witnessed violence or are coping with the violent deaths of loved ones.²³ Exposure to these forms of structural violence can cause feelings

17. See Christine Christle, C. Michael Nelson & Kristine Jolivet, *School Characteristics Related to the Use of Suspension*, 27 *EDUC. & TREATMENT OF CHILDREN* 509, 509–26 (2004); see also Talisha Lee et al., *High Suspension Schools and Dropout Rates for Black and White Students*, 34 *EDUC. & TREATMENT OF CHILDREN* 167, 167–92 (2001).

18. See *Building a Grad Nation*, *supra* note 6.

19. See L. JANELLE DANCE, *TOUGH FRONTS: THE IMPACT OF STREET CULTURE ON SCHOOLING* 47 (2002).

20. See Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, *Popularity Versus Respect: School Structure, Peer Groups and Latino Academic Achievement*, 18 *INT’L J. QUALITATIVE STUD. EDUC.* 625, 628 (2005).

21. See generally VICTOR M. RIOS, *PUNISHED: POLICING THE LIVES OF BLACK AND LATINO BOYS* (2011).

22. See generally RICHARD ROTHSTEIN, *CLASS AND SCHOOLS: USING SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM TO CLOSE THE BLACK–WHITE ACHIEVEMENT GAP* (2004).

23. See PAYNE, *THE PEOPLE’S REPORT*, *supra* note 1; see also Deanna L. Wilkinson & Patrick J. Carr, *Violent Youths’ Responses to High Levels of Exposure to Community Violence: What Violent Events Reveal About Youth Violence*, 36 *J. COMMUNITY PSYCHOL.* 1026–51 (2008).

of anger, sadness, or fear, which may lead to “inappropriate” behaviors in school.²⁴ School personnel in high-poverty urban schools, who are often ill-equipped to address such traumas effectively, regularly compound students’ troubles by responding to these behaviors with disciplinary action.

Despite the myriad institutional conditions that low-income Black youth face in schools and communities, which impede their academic success and funnel them into the SPP, research shows they do value learning and education. This is evident in studies on street identified youth who are the most likely to be seen as placing no import on or outright rejecting formal education.²⁵ For example, in Payne and Brown’s 2010 study of 156 street identified Black boys and young men, the vast majority of participants had positive attitudes towards education; they wanted to graduate from high school and secure a good job in the formal economy.²⁶ Study participants also reported that students who engaged in violence and drug trafficking in school had lost faith in school as a viable pathway to success.²⁷ These authors argue that when students feel that school is not preparing them for college or future employment, they are more likely to engage in street activity.²⁸ Similarly, the street identified high school students in Pedro Mateu-Gelabert and Howard Lune’s 2007 study understood the importance of education as a pathway to success; however, they believed that “the education that *they* got was not worth the effort. The students wanted to participate in the normal, mainstream processes of going to school and getting an education. But they felt frustrated in their efforts.”²⁹ Students of color often resist requirements for school success, which denigrate their intellect or personal dignity.³⁰ Street identified and other low-income Black students who are perceived as oppositional to school are oftentimes not rejecting education. Rather, they are rightly skeptical of the value and conditions of the particular schooling experiences to which they have access.

24. See Brett Zyromski, *African American and Latino Youth and Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome: Effects on School Violence and Interventions for School Counselors*, 6 J. SCHOOL VIOLENCE 121, 121–37 (2007).

25. See, e.g., J. Ogbu & H. D. Simons, *Voluntary and Involuntary Minorities: A Cultural-Ecological Theory of School Performance with Some Implications for Education*, 29 ANTHROPOLOGY & EDUC. Q. 155–88 (1998); Elijah Anderson, *The Code of the Streets*, ATLANTIC, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/05/the-code-of-the-streets/306601/> [<https://perma.cc/S9VX-HEXV>] (last visited Mar. 7, 2017); THOMAS R. SIMON, NANCY M. RITTER & RESHMA R. MEHENDRA, U.S. DEP’T OF JUST. & U.S. DEP’T OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVS., *CHANGING COURSE: PREVENTING GANG MEMBERSHIP* (2013), <https://ojp.gov/fbnp/pdfs/changecourse.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/2T9M-MHKY>].

26. See Payne & Brown, *supra* note 1, at 316–38.

27. See *id.* at 330–31.

28. See *id.* at 332–35.

29. See Pedro Mateu-Gelabert & Howard Lune, *Street Codes in High School: School as an Educational Deterrent*, 6 CITY & COMMUNITY 173, 183 (2007).

30. See ALONSO ET AL., *supra* note 8; RIOS, *supra* note 21.

Clearly, the ways in which schools contribute to the SPP, through disciplinary action and inhospitable schooling conditions, are particularly prevalent among low-income Black students. While some studies on Black youth and young adults' lived experiences of and perspectives on the SPP exist, research in this area remains limited, particularly as related to those who are street identified. These young people, many of whom are involved in illegal activities, are extremely vulnerable to school removal, dropout, and incarceration. Further research on their experiences will help to deepen our understanding of the role of schools in funneling Black youth into the SPP and what can be done to disrupt pathways from school to prison.

This study's secondary analysis is guided by the following research questions: *To what extent and in what ways do street identified Black youth and young adults conceptualize their educational experiences as a function of institutional racism?*

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Community Site

This study was conducted in Wilmington, Delaware, where nearly 60% of its approximately 71,000 citizens are Black.³¹ Data collection took place in two predominantly Black neighborhoods: (a) the Eastside, which has about 5,000 residents and (b) Southbridge, which has about 2,000 residents. At the time of the study, median household incomes for Eastside and Southbridge were \$23,375 and \$20,221, respectively.³² Unemployment among Whites in 2010 was 4%, and it was nearly five times higher for Blacks at 22%. Among adults age 18–24, 28.8% had less than a high school education, and 32.2% had a high school diploma or GED. Among adults age twenty-four and older, over 50% had a high school education or less. On average, 40% of Black tenth graders in Wilmington score below standard in reading, and 54% score below standard in math.³³ Furthermore, there is a 60% dropout rate for Black youths and 65% dropout rate for Black male youth, and for several consecutive years, no Black males residing in Southbridge graduated from high school.³⁴

31. See *Wilmington, Delaware Population: Census 2010 and 2000 Interactive Map, Demographics, Statistics, Quick Facts*, CENSUS VIEWER, <http://censusviewer.com/city/DE/Wilmington> [<https://perma.cc/58AB-AXQB>] (last visited Mar. 7, 2017).

32. See PAYNE, *THE PEOPLE'S REPORT*, *supra* note 1.

33. See WILMINGTON EDUC. ADVISORY COMM., *STRENGTHENING WILMINGTON'S EDUCATION: AN ACTION AGENDA B-1* (Mar. 31, 2015), http://www.ipa.udel.edu/publications/weac_final_report_33115.pdf [<https://perma.cc/83MH-FT5A>] [hereinafter *STRENGTHENING WILMINGTON'S EDUCATION*]; see also DEL. DEP'T OF EDUC., *DELAWARE SCHOOL DISTRICT ORGANIZATION AND BOUNDARIES: CLOSING THE GAP* (Mar. 2004), <http://www.doe.k12.de.us/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=3431&dataid=10922&FileName=DelSchDistOrg-Boundaries.pdf> [hereinafter *DELAWARE SCHOOL DISTRICT ORGANIZATION AND BOUNDARIES*].

34. See PAYNE, *THE PEOPLE'S REPORT*, *supra* note 1.

Although Delaware as a state has just hit a thirty-year low with respect to dropout rates, these rates, nonetheless, are still twice as high for Black youth in comparison to White youth.³⁵ For the years 2009–2010, only 47% of Black males in Delaware graduated in a four-year period in comparison to 52% of Latino males and 68% of White males.³⁶ In fact, the Schott Foundation ranks Delaware as the seventh worst state in the nation with respect to Black male graduation rates and eleventh in the country for Latino males. According to the State of Delaware Department of Education, in 2011–2012, a total of 1,527 students dropped out of school statewide. However, Blacks accounted for 43% (659 students) and Latinos accounted for 13% (204 students) of Delaware's dropout rate. Most Black and Latino students who dropped out were in the ninth and tenth grades. More specifically, and with respect to race and gender, 403 Black males and 111 Latino males dropped out during 2011–2012. New Castle County, where this study took place, accounted for 67% (1,022) of all dropouts in Delaware.

Wilmington, Delaware was included in the original *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. *Brown* was made up of cases from five states, including the following two from Wilmington: *Bulah v. Gebhart* and *Belton v. Gebhart*. Due to a forty-year-old court decision desegregating the city schools, Wilmington's public school students are distributed among five school districts, each consisting of multiple cities and towns.³⁷ While there are no regular public high schools in Wilmington, there are private and charter high schools and one selective public vocational high school. Thus, the vast majority of Wilmington's secondary students attend one of eight high schools outside of the city, along with students from other municipalities. Seven of these schools did not meet their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) benchmarks in 2014.

B. *Street Participatory Action Research*

This study was a street participatory action research (Street PAR) project that organized fifteen local residents formerly involved with the streets or criminal justice system to document the lived experiences of street identified Black people in the Eastside and Southbridge neighborhoods of Wilmington.³⁸ Street PAR members comprised of three women and twelve men ranging between twenty to forty-eight years of age. Street PAR as a methodological framework extends out of the traditional participatory

35. See Matthew Albright, *Dropout Rate at 30-Year Low in Delaware*, DELAWAREONLINE (Feb. 20, 2014, 10:22 PM), <http://www.delawareonline.com/story/news/education/2014/02/20/dropout-rate-at-30-year-low-in-delaware/5665543/> [https://perma.cc/DE6L-YEXE].

36. See Morris, *supra* note 15.

37. See DELAWARE SCHOOL DISTRICT ORGANIZATION AND BOUNDARIES, *supra* note 15; see also STRENGTHENING WILMINGTON'S EDUCATION, *supra* note 15.

38. See PAYNE, THE PEOPLE'S REPORT, *supra* note 1.

action research literature.³⁹ PAR projects, which can be used across populations, must include members of the population under study on the research team. PAR team members are included in all phases of the research project, including development and execution of: (1) research questions and hypotheses, (2) theoretical frameworks, (3) methodological designs, (4) data collection and analysis, (5) formal publications, (6) formal presentations, and (7) training in action or socio-political organizing in response to data outcomes. Also, PAR members are monetarily compensated for all efforts contributed to the project.

C. *Survey Subsample*

The study's survey sample consists of 520 mostly street identified Black-American men (40%) and women (60%) between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. The survey sample represented a quota sample based on 2000 Census data on the Eastside and Southbridge sections of Wilmington. Sixty-four percent of participants surveyed lived on the Eastside, and 23% in Southbridge. Thirteen percent of the survey sample lived outside of the Eastside and Southbridge but reported frequenting these two neighborhoods. Additionally, three age cohorts were identified based on established census age groups: (a) 173 participants between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one (33.3%), (b) 205 participants between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-nine (39.4%), and (c) 142 participants between the ages of thirty and thirty-five years (27.3%).

D. *Procedure: Community Sampling*

This Street PAR team developed an eighteen-page questionnaire that spanned nine domains, including: (a) attitudes toward psychological and social wellbeing, (b) attitudes towards employment, education, crime, and prison re-entry, (c) attitudes and experiences with law enforcement, (d) experiences with violence, and (e) demographic information on education, employment, housing, arrest, and incarceration, as well as medical and healthcare history. For this paper, quantitative analysis involves only a descriptive analysis of educational items.

Further, the Street PAR team, mapped out and classified street communities in Wilmington in at least three ways: (1) *cool sites*, which exhibit a low rate of criminal activity, (2) *warm sites*, which exhibit a moderate level of criminal activity, and (3) *hot sites*, which exhibit a high rate of criminal activity. Street outreach and snowball sampling were used to identify and recruit study participants. All participants received a consent form, \$5 per completed survey, and a resource package that highlighted potential employment, educational, and counseling opportunities. Surveys took participants approximately thirty to forty-five minutes to complete.

39. See Fran Baum et al., *Participatory Action Research*, 60 J. EPIDEMIOLOGY & COMMUNITY HEALTH 854, 854 (2006).

E. *Qualitative Design*

Qualitative data were collected on mostly street-identified Black men and women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five in the form of: (a) twenty-four individual interviews, (b) four dual interviews, (c) three group interviews, and (d) extensive field observations. A total of forty-eight participants were interviewed for this project. The average age of interviewees was 27.4.

F. *Individual Interview Subsample*

Twenty-four individual interviews were conducted for this study to tap into more personal or intimate discussions about schooling. The average age for this subsample was 26.3 years.

G. *Dual Interview Subsample*

Dual interviews are interviews conducted with two participants within a single interview. Originally, these participants were scheduled for individual interviews, but they decided they would be more comfortable conducting their interview with a friend. Three dual interviews were with women, and one dual interview consisted of a male and female participant. The average age for this subsample was 33.1 years.

H. *Group Interview Subsample*

Four group interviews were conducted (N=15).⁴⁰ Group interviews are often the least intimate of all interview types. However, such interviews offer a group analysis. Two group interviews were with all males (N=7), one group interview was with all females (N=4), and a final group had both males and females (N=4). The average age for this subsample was 30.9 years.

I. *Procedure: Data Collection*

All participants received consent forms, \$10 per completed interview, and a resource package that highlighted potential employment, educational, and counseling opportunities. Interviews took approximately one to two hours to complete. Also, all interviews were video recorded, and most were held in the Hope Commission's Hope Zone, which is located in Southbridge. Four individual interviews were conducted in private homes, four were conducted in a local business, and two were conducted in a park.

40. Fifteen participants in total participated in the four focus groups for this study.

V. RESULTS

Results strongly supported the study's conceptualization of the SPP as an active and unconscious process, as well as an institutional and intergenerational experience.⁴¹ Participants spoke extensively about multifaceted experiences with structural violence inside schools. For them, much of their schooling experiences were filtered through institutional systems and processes fraught with checkpoints and pitfalls. In general, participants positively affirmed the value of a quality education, however, much of their educational ideals and actual experiences were compromised by negative interactions with school officials—that were ultimately reinforced by a larger institutional climate. The SPP was conceptualized as a pipeline extending out of schools through students to families and local neighborhoods to permanently situate them into economic poverty and the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Most participants experienced the institutional or structural racism created by the SPP in at least five ways, through: (1) negative interactions with teachers or school officials, (2) school violence, (3) institutional removal, (4) school-induced community crime, and (5) positive academic motivation.

A. *Institutional as Foundational to SPP*

Most participants in this study believed that public schools were intentionally developed to produce negative outcomes for Black children in low-income neighborhoods. Anthony (33) argued that schools were “designed, to set us [low-income Black neighborhood] up for failure,” as evidenced by the lack of quality academic preparation received by Black children. Poor student instruction and guidance in particular was perceived to be the result of persistently nimble and devastating institutional forces. Thus, Anthony and most others understood how it would be adaptive from the perspectives of some Black students to engage in illegal activity as a function of unequal or unjust schooling experiences:

[I]t's . . . the infrastructure; it's already programmed and designed, to set us up for failure . . . [and] [school officials] know this . . . “[W]e're gonna set them up from young and we're not even gonna create the opportunity.” Sixty-five percent is gonna drop out. A lot of them is not gonna run that race. So what's gonna be the alternative? They're gonna drop out, they're gonna go right back to the streets . . . and they be like, “Why I got to go get an education when big brother is pushing XYZ [or selling drugs for a sizeable profit].”

41. See Yasser A. Payne & Tara Marie Brown, “I’m Still Waiting on That Golden Ticket!”: Attitudes Towards and Experiences with Opportunity in the Streets of Black America, 72 J. SOC. ISSUES 789, 789–811 (2016); see also PAYNE, THE PEOPLE’S REPORT, *supra* note 1; Payne & Brown, *supra* note 1, at 316–38.

Gloria (35) described how schools' institutional organization of low-income Black children contributes to students' negative academic and behavioral outcomes. It was obvious for Gloria that her high school's overcrowded classrooms, concentration of low-income Black children, and poor resources were predictive of school violence vis-à-vis victimization and perpetration. According to Gloria, students actively and unconsciously acquired "angry" dispositions as a way to cope with physically unsafe and intellectually un-nurturing schooling environments. The violence taking place amongst students, and sometimes between students and educators, eventually resulted in Gloria's high school militarizing itself with "security guards" and "police officers." The institutional culture, from her perspective, forced students and school officials into a pervasive social tension that concluded in students and teachers disengaging from the learning process. Both students and educators entered in a perfunctory space that undermined students' ability to thrive academically.

And because [the school is] so large and there's so many students in there, fights are gonna break out . . . I'm gonna bump into somebody . . . [t]here's so many kids out there that are just angry and want something that they don't have, the materialistic stuff . . . Then fights start and now they have police officers there, they have security guards there . . . Because it's the largest high school in Delaware there's so much different things going on in there that the teachers are afraid of the students. Like I said [teachers] come in, get a check and they leave. They clock in and they clock out . . . [The] first day of school was always a fight, drugs . . . I couldn't wait to bolt out of that school. It got to the point where I was like, "do I want to go to school?"

Anthony also supports Gloria's overall argument on how contentious relationships sometimes emerge between educators and low-income Black children. He noted some teachers, as a function of the institutional culture within schools, are negatively ruled by racial and class biases against low-income Black children. More precisely, Anthony claims that, as a consequence of personal or emotional challenges, negative interactions with students, and poor professional socialization on how to work with low-income Black children, some embittered teachers find it more adaptive to understand their work as "getting a paycheck," rather than helping some of the most vulnerable children succeed in school.

Some of [the teachers] come to school with their personal problems and take it out on other children . . . some of them already have a biased look on the children, like for example [a teacher] that lives in the suburban community comes to the 'hood and teach, they already got a mind frame like, "I ain't got time for these Niggers. I'm just gonna let them run loose, I'm

getting a paycheck at the end of the day.” Then you’ve got some genuine teachers that care about the students

B. *Experience of Race and Racism in Schools*

Byron (21) was expelled from school in tenth grade for assaulting a school official. It should be noted Byron completed his GED, and at the time of the interview, he was near completion of his Associates of Arts degree. Byron recalled a schooling experience filled with insidious and outright expressions of racism. He even claimed some teachers were so racist they provoked low-income Black children to misbehave so that school personnel could tarnish their school records and legally remove them. For Byron, much of his educational experience was deeply informed by race, racism and social class. He underscored that “living in poverty” exacerbates the vulnerability of Black children inside schools.

I think teachers today in school they challenge students, especially the ones that’s living [in an] impoverished situation [Students] living in poverty, it’s fucked up! These teachers challenge us, they push you, they want to see you do it [behave inappropriately/physically threaten or harm someone], they want to see you do it and when you do it they’re like, “I told you” . . . I done heard a teacher call a kid a Nigger.

Younger participants like Byron and Pop-Pop Solid (18) also talked about how the intersection of race, racism and especially economic poverty negatively impacted relationships between students, which in turn compounded already strained relationships between students and teachers. These young men agreed with Gloria’s concern that economic poverty impedes positive participation in classrooms among too many students and being economically poor also causes some students to engage in violent behavior and illegal income generation as a way to stave off what they perceive as oppositional forces inside schools. Numerous participants testified that scores of low-income Black children in Wilmington periodically attended schools tired and emotionally disheveled, unclean, hungry, in ragged and dirty clothing sometimes for days on-end. These children were reported to be the most likely to be made fun of by students or mistreated by school personnel. Public schools, teachers, and school personnel are generally too under-trained, ill-equipped, and under-resourced to appropriately respond to these children’s basic emotional, psychological, and structural needs, and as a result, many students act out in order to cope with distressing circumstances. While this form of coping, which is adaptive, preserves students’ dignity in the short term, in the long term, it usually presents significant barriers to school success.⁴²

42. See generally FERGUSON, *supra* note 14; RIOS, *supra* note 21; see also Payne & Brown, *supra* note 1, at 316–38.

Byron shared how his economic poverty painfully impacted his personal experience inside classrooms. His statement underscored that material needs matters tremendously with regard to educational achievement—that attentiveness, confidence or esteem, and comportment by low-income Black students are inextricably tied to hygiene, access to quality clothing and school materials, and a respectful learning environment. Much of Byron's embarrassing experience also caused him to be viciously ridiculed by more privileged classmates, which further exacerbated his negative behavior in school.

I got raked on [made fun of], picked on . . . I didn't have the clothes [that would be considered socially-acceptable] . . . I didn't have the Rocawear shit [other students] had . . . [My] thread count was low. I know it was 'cause [his clothes] ripped easy. You feel me? I didn't have his [hypothetically more privileged student's] mom . . . he going on the field trips, he got lunch money . . . I didn't have what they had.

Pop-Pop Solid agreed it was naïve for schools to expect positive student engagement without considering the negative impact of students' living or housing conditions and family economic well-being. Deeply empathetic, he made a connection between students' economic poverty, experiences in school, and the eventual involvement of some in crime in local neighborhoods. More precisely, Pop-Pop Solid conceded it was adaptive or made sense for some low-income students to engage in crime for financial gain as a way to cope with fear and embarrassment inside schools. Additionally, he made the argument that this type of negative experience inevitably impacted their ability to concentrate or perform well in school.

[Anyone's mother] who don't work or just get food stamps and a check, it's hard. It's kind of hard to tell [those students] not to go out [in the streets] and try and make some type of money . . . you can't really tell a kid who when he go to school, everybody talking bad about him and he can't concentrate on his work . . . not to go try and get some new sneaks and clothes so people will leave him alone and stop bothering him [in school].

C. *Positive Attitudes Toward Learning*

Most participants in this study did not fare well in school, and survey results strongly suggest that high school non-completion is an intergenerational problem among Black residents in the Eastside and Southbridge neighborhoods of Wilmington. About 44% of survey participants dropped out of high school, which was indicative of their parents' educational achievement. Forty-two percent of survey participants reported their mother had not graduated high school, and 59% reported their father

had not graduated or that they did not know their father's educational status.

Amazingly, participants still demonstrated a deep appreciation of and desire for the promise of quality learning in schools. Although most participants had negative educational experiences and were suspicious of the public schools to which they had access, they nonetheless were optimistic about the educational prospects for their children or themselves. They still felt savvy and resilient enough to navigate formal education to produce some positive outcomes for their children and themselves. Many participants asserted that formal schooling, even within oppressive environments, was the best course of action to improve their socio-economic circumstances.

Charlie (19), for example, did not do well in school and was critical of schools more generally. However, he concurrently believed for him to get out or "escape the streets" and economic poverty, he needed to complete his GED and obtain a Bachelor's of Arts degree. Not only did he think education in general was important, but he also noted he "liked school" because it provided opportunities for him to "interact with my friends, meet new people, new teachers—going to different places, sports, [and] extracurricular activities."

I (the first author) met Richard (19) at his friend's funeral. His friend was shot and murdered at 17 in Southbridge, Wilmington. Richard agreed to later do an interview with me at his mother's home. Although he dropped out in ninth grade, Richard nonetheless spoke about how dropping out does not mean a student does not understand and appreciate what school has to offer.

I never thought about goin' to college Mr. Yasser but I want somethin' better for myself, man. Cause when I got my GED I was so happy. I was so proud of myself . . . I ain't gonna lie, I ran around with my GED in my hand. Almost cried. Cause I'm so bad at math, I never ever thought I'd ever do my GED, but I passed that test. Now picture how I'm gonna feel when I get a degree in college.

VI. DISCUSSION

The SPP was found to be an active and unconscious process, as well as an institutional and intergenerational experience. For most participants, SPP represented a viciously complicated structural phenomenon developed to under-educate low-income Black communities. Put simply, SPP was conceptualized as a pipeline extending out of schools through students to families and local neighborhoods to permanently situate them in economic poverty and the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Most participants experienced institutional or structural racism created by SPP in at least five ways, through: (1) negative interactions with teachers and

school officials, (2) school violence, (3) institutional removal, (4) school-induced community crime, and (5) positive academic motivation.

Low-income Black students, often because of unstable family dynamics and neighborhood conditions, bring into schools unusually high levels of emotional, psychological, spiritual, and structural trauma. Most public schools do not have the capacity and overall resources to address extreme trauma and, in turn, generally respond in ways that exacerbate the children's behavior. Themes most pronounced in our data were negative interactions with teachers and school violence, which stifled participants' educational aspirations.

Further, we also found evidence of a fifth theme emerging out of participants' conceptualizations of school-based institutional or structural racism. Many positively affirmed the value of a quality education but noted the most effective response to an oppressive educational experience is to endure the indignity of educational oppression as a means to an end. It should be noted that the authors do not support this idea as a way to respond to educational inequality, but we do understand how this method would be emotionally and structurally adaptive for some street identified Black youth and young adults.

Most participants in our study indicated they wanted to go to school, including college, and they wanted the same for their children and other loved-ones in and out of their local neighborhoods. Also, it is important to underscore that most participants concurrently held both positive and negative attitudes toward teachers, other school personnel, and schools generally. Additionally, it is necessary to note that study participants were likely to blame both themselves and schools for their own and their loved-ones' inability to thrive inside Delaware's schools.⁴³ As evidenced by the larger social science literature, personal responsibility is a personality and socio-cultural trait that is prevalent in or widely supported by low-income Black communities.

VII. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We call for more large-scale, on-the-ground community research projects organized through the phenomenological-based educational experiences of street identified Black youth and young adults. The social science literature is in desperate need of more voices from the persons and populations most affected by the SPP phenomenon. Also, we call for more scholars to incorporate Street PAR designs as a way to conduct ethnography and effectively capture the streets' voices in relation to schooling experiences, as well as use Street PAR to do action with Street PAR members and for the larger population being studied. Additionally, Street PAR is an excellent way to provide reading, writing, data analysis, and activist-based skill sets to Street PAR members. Acquisition of such a skillset

43. See JAMES R. KLUEGEL & ELIOT R. SMITH, BELIEFS ABOUT INEQUALITY: AMERICANS' VIEWS OF WHAT IS AND WHAT OUGHT TO BE (1986).

will make it much easier to transition Street PAR members into quality educational and employment-based opportunity. For example, six of the Street PAR members involved with this study enrolled in college, and all fifteen Street PAR members were employed, making between \$15 and \$20 per hour by the end of the funding period for this Street PAR project. Also, our project led to and participated in countless community programs on educational and employment opportunities for low-income Black communities in Wilmington.

Further, Street PAR enables the most vulnerable to not only be involved in the development and shaping of intellectual discourse, but Street PAR members, as a function of their positionality, will ask different kinds of questions and explore non-traditional areas of inquiry that should be embraced by the larger social science community. For instance, in the authors' collective body of work, which stretches across several cities and local neighborhoods, we have found street identified youth and adults, as well as other local residents, calling for more research on school personnel's demeaning or even violent behavior inside schools, as well as more research on the lack of psycho-social support and counseling for material deprivation, poor hygiene, family dysfunction, substance abuse and extreme economic poverty. Community members have also called for more analyses grounded in the perspectives of students who drop out or who are "pushed out" of school.⁴⁴

Next, the authors of this study call for more empirical attention to cultural competence curriculums and training manuals designed for educators and aspiring researchers interested in working with low-income Black students. Very few teachers, school officials, or other educational experts have direct training on the socio-cultural and class experiences of low-income Black children, and what little training is offered is generally not enough to prepare them to work with these students and their respective neighborhoods effectively. There are few, if any, required courses, concentrations, or majors in college at the undergraduate and graduate levels that prepare college students to work with or even do research in a fair and culturally competent way with low-income Black children. In most instances, educators, school officials, and educational researchers are "self-professed" or "self-trained experts." Unfortunately, most of us, at least as it relates to cultural and class competence, are figuring ourselves out or, more appropriately, figuring out our professional agendas as we go along. Some of us "experts" are more responsible in this process than others. However, as a result of this glaring professional limitation, we all

44. See MICHELLE FINE, FRAMING DROPOUTS: NOTES ON THE POLITICS OF AN URBAN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL (1991); see also Marguerite Lukes, *Pushouts, Shutouts, and Holdouts: Educational Experiences of Latino Immigrant Young Adults in New York City*, 49 URB. EDUC. 86 (2013).

2017]

THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

325

contribute, in some way, to educational and socio-economic inequities and the funneling of low-income Black youth into the SPP.⁴⁵

45. See generally John Raible & Jason G. Irizarry, *Redirecting the Teacher's Gaze: Teacher Education, Youth Surveillance and the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, 26 TEACHING & TEACHER EDUC. 1196 (2010).