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ABSTRACT: In response to the structural barriers that block many Black male youth from legitimate employment opportunities, some have redefined the concept of work. Engaging in violence and crime is perceived among some marginalized young Black men as a form of labor where violence and other illicit activities are treated as work. Through our contextual analysis of words and behaviors as analytic units, the colloquial street term “putting in work” captures how some young Black men enmeshed in the culture of the street frame violence and crime as work. Using Anderson’s code of the street as a theoretical framework, we explore the multiple ways Black male youth offenders “work to get known” on the street. Drawing on focus groups conducted among 15 Black male serious violent youth offenders adjudicated in adult criminal court and detained in an adult jail, this paper explores the concept “putting in work.”

I felt nothing but a sense of duty. I had been to five funerals in the previous two years and had been steeled by seeing people whom I had laughed and joked with, played and eaten with dead in a casket. Revenge was my only thought. Only when I had “put work in” could I feel good that day; otherwise I couldn’t sleep. “Work” does not always constitute shooting someone, though this is the ultimate. Anything from wallbangin’ [writing your set name on a wall] to spitting on someone to fighting—it’s all work. And I was a hard worker. (Sanyika Shakur, Monster: The Autobiography of an LA Gang Member)
INTRODUCTION

Sullivan’s (1989) seminal classic, Getting Paid, explored how many young Black and Latino inner-city males equate youth crime with work. In response to blocked opportunities to mainstream labor markets, the illegal underground economy in poor inner-city neighborhoods replaced the barriers to legitimate employment (Sullivan, 1989; Wilson, 1987, 1996; Anderson, 1999; Venkatesh, 2008). Through extensive fieldwork and interviews, Sullivan’s research provided an in-depth contextual analysis of how structural barriers to the labor market and neighborhood social disorganization affected local patterns of youth crime. Sullivan (1989) notes that the young men he studied spoke of their criminal activities as “getting over” and “getting paid,” terms that spoke directly, albeit ironically, to economic motivation and reflected the perception of a social structure of restricted opportunity. Getting paid equates crime with work.

Two decades after Sullivan’s (1989) research on youth crime as work, this paper examines how the phrase “putting in work” equates violence with work among some serious violent youth offenders. This paper differs from Sullivan’s study of delinquency and youth crime in its explicit focus on equating violence with work. Sullivan’s study explicitly focused on economic crime as a form of work with limited attention given to violence. Through their thick rich descriptive narratives, youth discuss violence as work and how they use violence to advance their social mobility in the hierarchy of the street. Using Anderson’s (1999) subculture of violence theory, the “Code of the Street,” as the theoretical framework for this discussion, we contextually explore how and why some inner-city Black male youth equate violence with labor. We use words and behaviors as analytical units, particularly the phrase I found reiterated among jobless Black male youth, “putting in work.”

As legitimate work continues to disappear among Black men living in poor inner-city communities, particularly young Black men with histories of criminal justice involvement, we explore how the concept of work among some young Black men may be broadly defined. Past research has failed to uncover the complex nature of the interplay among the economic marginality of Black male youth and violence. Sampson (1987) found that Black male joblessness directly affected family disruption, which in turn resulted in high rates of urban violence among young Black men. Anderson’s (1999) work on interpersonal violence among young Black men in poor neighborhoods in inner-city Philadelphia found that violence is the result of alienation and marginalization from mainstream labor opportunities. According to Anderson (1999), the inclination to violence springs from the circumstances of life among poor Black
men, particularly the lack of jobs, in general, and those that pay a living wage. Interpersonal violence and the street codes that frame violence emerge from a profound sense of alienation from mainstream society and its institutions felt by many poor inner-city Black people, particularly young males. Interpersonal violence among young Black males is the result of structural violence (i.e., systematic and systemic barriers to employment) fostered by institutional racism. Structural violence is violence exerted systematically (Farmer, 1996). It is conceptualized as a form of violence that kills slowly through forms of oppression and poverty, for example the number of avoidable deaths that occur because low-income young Black men have easy access to firearms (Galtung & Höivik, 1971). Structural violence results in direct violence, which is defined as violence that kills quickly (Galtung & Höivik, 1971). For the purposes of this paper, we examine how structural violence (i.e., systemic and systematic barriers to employment among low-income young Black men) leads to direct violence (the perception of violence as a form of labor).

**WHEN WORK DISAPPEARS: BLACK MALE JOBLESSNESS**

By the 1970s, deindustrialization removed many unskilled and semi-skilled workers from the labor market (Kasarda, 1990). A disproportionate number of these included African American men (Wilson, 1987, 1996). In 1982, the four largest cities in the US—New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia—accounted for one quarter of the nation’s central city poor, losing more than one million jobs in manufacturing, wholesale, and retail enterprises. The shift of the economy into white collar service-industry jobs (Kasarda, 1990) (i.e., accounting, finance, advertising, law) resulted in positions requiring formal education, thereby institutionalizing job requirements, which, in turn, left many African American men jobless. Blacks and minorities became increasingly concentrated in neighborhoods characterized by poverty. Under-resourced neighborhoods and underfunded schools gradually dominated the urban landscape in many central cities. As Black male joblessness increased in inner-city neighborhoods, fewer young Black men completed high school and more Black men were pushed into poverty and lives marked by crime and violence (Sampson, 1987; Wilson, 1987, 1996; Young, 2004; Mincy, 2006).

The deterioration of urban neighborhoods and the associated rise in crime and violence has fueled research on the role of neighborhoods on various adolescent outcomes (Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Levanthal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Rankin & Quane, 2002). The earlier work of Shaw and McKay (1969) on juvenile delinquency suggests that highly disadvantaged neighborhoods tend
to have lower levels of social cohesion and weak and ineffective social controls. Sampson (1987) found that African American male unemployment rates were positively associated with rates of violent crime among African American adolescents. Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997) found that neighborhood economic deprivation and social disorganization were positively associated with residents’ perceived violence and violent victimization.

By the turn of the 21st century in central cities, cited by Wilson (1987) two decades earlier, Black male school dropout rates were 50% or more (Schott, 2008). In 2004, among Black men in their 20s, 72% of high school dropouts were jobless. By their mid-30s, 6 in 10 had spent time in prison (Mincy, 2006). Among high school graduates the numbers also remain bleak among Black men in their 20s: 21% who did not attend college were in jail or prison and 46% were jobless (Mincy, 2006). Black male joblessness has resulted in a myriad of social problems. Many young Black men have become socially dislocated and alienated from mainstream institutions, labor markets, and opportunities (Sullivan, 1989; Rose & Clear, 1998; Edelman, Holzer, & Offner, 2006). Black male joblessness has significantly contributed to crime, violence, incarceration, and family disruption (Sampson, 1987; Western, Bloome, & Percheski, 2008; Western & Wildeman, 2009; Pager, 2011; Levine, 2007; Anderson, 1999, 2009). Research on youth employment and segmented labor markets suggests that employment may not be a competing option for many inner-city youths because it simply is not available in many poor neighborhoods (Sullivan, 1989). Consequently, adolescents’ propensity for violent behavior is a function of societal constraints, such as a lack of employment opportunities and normative beliefs that support aggression (Paschall & Hubbard, 1998).

Data on Black male youth unemployment indicates a national employment crisis among this population. From 2008 to 2011 Black youth (ages 16–24) consistently held the highest rates of unemployment among all adolescents (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). The average annual unemployment rate for this group ranged between 25 and 31% during this period. In November 2009, Black youth unemployment peaked at 49.1% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). According to a recent study on youth employment conducted by Sum, Khattewa, and Palma (2014), young teens ages 16–17, males, Blacks, and low-income youth have been hardest hit by declining teen employment rates. In response to a lack of legitimate employment opportunities for inner-city Black male youth, some have turned to secondary underground economies.

An array of impressive ethnographic studies has made significant contributions to our understanding of Black male participation in the underground economy, where informal economic activities, particularly crime, support the lives of
disenfranchised young Black men. Sullivan’s (1989) work provides rich descriptive ethnographic data on the lives of young poor unemployed minority men in New York City and their perceptions of youth crime as work. Williams (1990) and Bourgois (2002) provide compelling narratives on disenfranchised African American and Latino youth and young adults who work in the underground cocaine and crack cocaine economy in New York City. In addition, Venkatesh’s (2008, 2009) research on the unregulated and untaxed work of inner-city residents, particularly gang members, illuminates how young Black men perceive crime and violence as “legitimate” work. Perhaps the most insightful analysis of equating violence to work among young inner-city Black males can be traced to the autobiography of Sankiya Shakur, known previously as “Monster Kody,” a former member of the Crips in South Central Los Angeles.

Shakur (2004) argues that engaging in violence was “like a job, a full-time occupation.” For Shakur and the many young men like him enmeshed in the gang culture of South Central Los Angeles, violence was a type of criminal skill used to acquire and maintain respect. Shakur identified three stages of establishing respect on the street: 1) building a reputation through violence, 2) building name recognition in relation to a gang so the member’s name and his gang become synonymous, and 3) establishing an active work ethic, i.e., daily and routine participation in violence. In his autobiography, Shakur notes that “whether shooting or fighting someone, it is all considered work.” For Shakur, killing a rival was the ultimate form of work. He devoted much of his youth and young adulthood, as he notes, “working” for the gang by engaging in routine violence against rival gangs. Shakur deemed himself a “hard worker.” Cle “Bone” Sloan, a former gang member of the Los Angeles Bloods, vividly describes in the award-winning documentary film Bastards of the Party how deindustrialization and the loss of manufacturing jobs in his South Central Los Angeles neighborhood resulted in disenfranchised young Black men equating violence with work (Sloan, 2005). How neighborhood disadvantage frames the justification of interpersonal violence among young Black males is critical in understanding how some high-risk African American youth perceive engaging in chronic violence as a form of labor.

NEIGHBORHOODS AND THE CODE OF THE STREET

Although neighborhood street culture’s influence on violence has been under-researched, a few studies have been conducted on Anderson’s thesis of whether neighborhood structural inequality gives rise to individual-level street-code values that legitimize the use of violence (Stewart & Simons,
One study on neighborhood disadvantage and violence found that adolescents adopt street-code values in which they believe that the use of interpersonal violence is justified in acquiring and maintaining respect (Stewart & Simons, 2006). Stewart, Schreck, and Simons (2006) found that adolescents, specifically African American youth, living in high-risk neighborhoods embraced street codes that increased their risk for violent victimization. In addition, Stewart, Simons, and Conger (2002) found that the adoption of street-code values on the individual level were a significant predictor of violence among African American youth living in disadvantaged communities. Drawing on a national sample, one study found that disadvantaged urban youth who adopted street-code values were more likely to engage in violence (Brezina, Agnew, Cullen, & Wright, 2004). On some level, neighborhood disadvantage has primacy in explaining the relationship between street-code beliefs and violence among disadvantaged urban youth on the individual level (Brunson & Miller, 2009; Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2003; Harding, 2009).

Structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods are often characterized by weaker local institutions and diminished access to external resources (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Wilson, 1987; Harding, 2010). Harding’s work (2010) suggests that violence itself may also affect the social organization of local communities, as individuals respond to fear of victimization and engage in adaptive behaviors. Residents may fear intervening in youth conflicts for fear of retribution. As a result, residents disengage from social networks and civic engagement in the community (Putnam, 1995, 2000). In turn, public spaces are no longer monitored and controlled by adults. Youth dominate public space, particularly street-oriented adolescents and create a neighborhood street culture that provides a set of informal rules that shape public interactions around violence. The adoption of street-code values represents individuals embracing values, beliefs, and behaviors that are consistent with the rules or norms of the neighborhood street culture (Stewart & Simons, 2010). Anderson’s (1999) code of the street suggests that residents’ beliefs and behaviors are likely to be structured and influenced by the neighborhood environment. In disadvantaged socially isolated neighborhoods knowing the code is largely defensive and necessary for operating in public.

Whether an individual is personally committed to the rules of the code or not, they must know the code to survive (Stewart et al., 2006). In structurally disorganized and disadvantaged settings, where decent and street values clash, violence and disorder become a way a life (Anderson, 1999). Residents of the community, regardless of their orientation, whether decent or street, are not only subject to knowing the code, but they must also engage in it for survival.
and defense purposes. Having knowledge of the streets is critical in these neighborhoods. Therefore, the adoption of the street code is necessary for all community residents where this value system is prevalent.

When a neighborhood culture is widespread, it may have a direct influence on violence at the individual level, where everyone is pressured to have knowledge of the code and be willing to use violence to protect themselves (Bernburg & Thorlindsson, 2005). The neighborhood culture places pressure on all residents to conform. This may be of particular importance among adolescents who may use violence to construct social identity and promote an image of toughness among peers. Thus, there is significant interaction between neighborhood street culture and the individual-level street code values that influence violence, particularly among adolescents (Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994). Neighborhood context matters in shaping beliefs, norms, values, and behaviors. Stewart and Simons (2010) found that neighborhood structural characteristics combined with deviant cultural and situational codes lead to the perpetuation of violence.

Anderson (1999) argues that high rates of poverty, joblessness, violence, alienation, lack of faith in the police and judicial system, and hopelessness have produced a neighborhood street culture that influences how individuals negotiate interpersonal violence. The structural inequalities and institutional racism that have disconnected young Black men from educational and labor market opportunities has resulted in a subculture within poor communities where an underground and illegal economy has provided both the social and economic means for young Black men to survive (Mincy, 2006; Wilson, 1987, 1996; Young, 2004; Venkatesh, 2008). Anderson's work on the plight of inner-city young Black men suggests that the social dislocation of these men from job opportunities and mainstream institutions creates an oppositional culture in many poor inner-city communities. Young Black men ascribe to an oppositional culture that embraces norms, values, and behaviors that prize violence and aggression. The inclination to violence springs from the circumstances of life among the ghetto poor—lack of jobs that pay a living wage, the stigma of race, the fallout from rampant drug use and drug trafficking. Respect is loosely defined as being treated right or granting the deference one deserves. For many youth, their identity, honor, and self-esteem is intricately tied to respect and the deference they are granted on the street (Anderson, 1999).

According to the code, many hard-core street-oriented youth feel that it is acceptable to risk even dying over the principle of respect. Many inner-city youth, in particular, crave respect to such a degree that they will risk their lives to attain and maintain it (Anderson, 1999; Wilkinson, 2004; Canada, 1995; Stewart &
In resource-deprived communities, where legitimate employment opportunities among young Black men are elusive and often unattainable, respect becomes a highly valued commodity. In the street culture, respect is often more highly valued than money, and other material goods. For many youth living in disadvantaged communities where resources and jobs are scarce, respect may far exceed monetary worth. Primarily because there is little respect to be had, everyone competes for affirmation in a tight market where the distribution of respect is in short supply but high in demand (Anderson, 1999). In the world of the street-oriented, respect is the ultimate trophy. It is a form of currency, an intangible form of social wealth. For many jobless street-oriented youth, maintaining respect and their street reputations becomes a full-time occupation (Shakur, 2004). In the inner cities, where Black youth unemployment often exceeds 50%, youth may reject traditional concepts of work. Thus, violence as work becomes a cultural adaptation to endemic Black male joblessness.

Violent skills may serve as a form of human capital that provides greater opportunities to acquire respect and social mobility in the social hierarchy of the street. Youth in this paper discuss violence as a particular skill set. For example, some discuss learning how to knock victims out “the right way” through practicing violence on the street. Others express a sense that they are entitled to respect, because they earned or “worked” for it through public displays of violence (Anderson, 1999). Thus, young Black men in this paper have conceptualized “working” as engaging in violence or presenting a public image of ruthlessness where any transgression will be addressed with mayhem (Shakur, 2004). While generally those who do not live in communities characterized by the code may find this concept of work irrational, among some Black male youth, engaging in violence to acquire “respect” is not only perceived as legitimate work, but necessary for survival.

For street-oriented youth, their “campaign for respect” equates violence to work. What is problematic about working for respect in this way is that the maintenance of respect is tenuous at best. The loss of a fight can lead to public humiliation and the loss of respect. The trophy that took so long to gain can be easily lost. Therefore, the game of who controls respect on the street has a zero-sum quality.

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

In response to the structural violence (defined as violence that kills slowly) that has blocked some inner-city Black male youth from accessing the labor market, direct violence has resulted (defined as violence that kills quickly) (Galtung &
Høivik, 1971). Structural violence occurs when economic and political structures systematically deprive certain segments of society. When economic deprivation occurs, the need for well-being is not satisfied, resulting in deficits in human growth and development. Scholars have long-posited a relationship between structural violence and direct violence (Christie, 1997; James et al., 2003). For marginalized populations, lack of power or oppression can lead to social decay, alienation, loss of cultural identity, and internally directed hostility (James et al., 2003). The structural violence of endemic Black male youth joblessness and persistent racism may fuel direct violence and significantly contribute to Black male youth framing violence as work. Sampson (1987) found that Black male joblessness was strongly correlated with family disruption and urban violence. The ethnographic works of Sullivan (1989), Bourgois (1995), Venkatesh (2006, 2008), and others suggest that among many poor inner-city Black and Latino youth crime is perceived as legitimate work. However, this analysis has not been applied to equating youth violence as work, particularly among street-oriented Black male youth. In this paper, we draw from multiple focus groups with 15 Black male serious violent youth offenders adjudicated in adult criminal court and detained in an adult jail in a large northeastern metropolis. We explore their perceptions of the code of the street and the concept of “putting in work.” We used these focus groups to examine, explore, and untangle the nuanced concept of violence as work and how serious violent youth offenders conceptualize the street colloquium “putting in work.”

METHODOLOGY AND STUDY SETTING

The data used for the analysis were collected from a qualitative pilot study on the health risk behaviors of youth offenders (ages 15–17) processed in adult criminal court for serious violent crimes and detained in the Bay City Jail (pseudonym). Bay City Jail is an adult jail facility in a northeastern city that houses approximately 2100 adult inmates. The Bay City Jail juvenile unit houses a maximum of 30 male youth offenders.

Participants

The recruitment of the sample for this study was completely voluntary. Fifteen youth \( n=15 \) were members of the sample and the average age of the participants was 16.7 years of age. Approximately 62% of the sample came from three wards of the city with the highest rates of poverty and crime. One out of five participants (20%) was a teen parent. At the time of this study, 100% of the youth offender population was African American and the average length of incarceration was 210 days. Armed robbery (60%) was the most common offense among youth offenders, however, they were incarcerated for a wide range
of violent offenses, which included homicide, attempted murder, carjacking, aggravated assault, battery, and rape. One hundred percent of the sample were members of violent youth gangs and the majority was unemployed at the time of arrest. None had a history of legitimate employment.

Procedures

This study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to collect data on their perceptions and attitudes regarding health risk behaviors among adolescents in Metro City, particularly youth offenders. The voluntary nature of the study was emphasized and there were no incentives provided for participants. However, many acknowledged that the opportunity to engage in activities with other youth and adults instead of spending the majority of the day in their individual cells was a key incentive. We believe the time participants spent in the focus groups and not idle in their cells reduced participant burden. Twenty-three-hour-a-day lockdowns were typical for most youth on the unit.

Parental consent was waived by the IRB after several attempts were made by the researchers to contact the parents via phone, email, and postal mail. The IRB acknowledged that researchers may not even have access to the parents in a routine way, forcing them to expend a great deal of energy just to reach them, let alone secure their consent (Abrams, 2010). Participants consented to participate in the study.

Focus groups were led by two African American male researchers who were both culturally competent. Both researchers were extensively trained in qualitative research methods and have conducted community-based participatory research (CBPR) in disadvantaged African American communities, jails, and prisons for a combined total of over 20 years. One researcher had an extensive history of incarceration and was raised in the neighborhoods where several of the young men in the study resided. In addition, the lead researcher had considerable expertise in conducting ethnographic research on the social context of adolescent violence among African American males in disadvantaged communities in New York City, Philadelphia, and Chicago. He also had five years of experience as a volunteer mentor working with incarcerated youth in several juvenile detention facilities. Researchers recruited participants for the study by making a group presentation to the youth detainees, which was followed by approaching each participant individually in their private cell during lockdown (Abrams, 2010).

Fifteen youth consented to participate in the study. For reasons unknown, not all youth agreed to participate in the study. We were unable to determine whether there were differences in those who chose to participate and those who
refused. The research team conducted weekly focus groups with youth offenders on health risk behaviors such as unprotected sex, substance/alcohol abuse, and violence. Data were collected over a six month period. These focus groups were typically conducted on Saturday afternoons in a classroom located in the juvenile unit. The average length of the focus groups was two hours and participants were actively engaged in the discussion for the entire time.

All subjects are referred to by pseudonyms. We conducted a total of ten [N=10] focus groups and the average range of participation was 13–15 participants for each. All the participants remained in the study until completion. Researchers were able to establish validity and reliability through practicing trustworthiness (Harding, 2010; Goffman, 2009; Liebow, 1967; Anderson, 1978; Young, 2004). One of the strengths of our study relied on our cultural competence as African American male researchers and the numerous focus groups we conducted with the same group of youth. Our continuous and routine presence allowed us to establish trust with the participants.

Focus group sessions were explicitly framed as voluntary conversations and questions were open-ended and tended to be free flowing (Draus & Carlson, 2009). Focus groups are a useful qualitative method for the following reasons: 1) data collection is cost effective (Krueger, 1994), 2) participant interactions can enhance the quality of the data (Krueger & Casey, 2000), and 3) the range of views can be easily and quickly assessed (Patton, 2002). A particular disadvantage of a focus group is the possibility that the members may not express their honest and personal opinions about the topic at hand. They may be hesitant to express their thoughts, especially when they oppose the views of another participant. As a result, caution should be used when interpreting and presenting the results of focus group discussion. The researchers also used a semi-structured discussion guide composed of open-ended questions about the code of the street. The discussion guide was framed by questions taken from a previous ethnographic research study on the code of the street, violence, traumatic stress, and substance use among young Black men (Rich & Grey, 2005). The overall goal of the focus groups was to describe the social context of HIV risk behavior, substance misuse, and violence among youth offenders detained in an adult jail. This paper focuses on the goal to gain a better understanding of the contextual experiences related to violence.

The researchers leading the focus groups developed rapport with the participants over the course of the pilot study, which allowed for more in-depth discussions of sexual behaviors, substance use, violence, and the code of the street. Conversations that began with simple questions concerning violence often moved into the realm of social contexts, interactions, and the embedded
meanings and perspectives of the participants themselves (Draus & Carlson, 2009). As participants elaborated on their views regarding violence, they delved into their narratives regarding participating in and observing violence. Participants also elaborated on their views regarding respect, violence on the street, and what contextual factors framed how, why, when, and where interpersonal violence and aggression should be used.

Discussions were usually initiated by using the first 45–60 minutes of the focus group to screen a film, typically a documentary or docudrama. The film’s subject matter was then used to frame the theme of the focus group discussion. For example, we used the HBO series The Wire, which fictionally documented drug use, crime, violence, and poverty in Baltimore, to frame focus group discussions. We attempted several approaches (some successful and others not) to learn that we “had to meet the participants where they are.” Initially, we attempted to use readings from autobiographies, such as the Autobiography of Malcolm X, but found that some young men in the group were functionally illiterate. In fact, some participants acknowledged that they were unable to read and suggested to the researchers that watching films would be a more effective approach for framing our discussions. This method was quite successful in eliciting responses from the participants.

Due to restrictions in the jail, audiotaping was prohibited. A researcher was assigned to take detailed notes and the lead researcher facilitated the discussion. After the focus group sessions were completed, the facilitators met to debrief and discuss their context. Transcripts were made of each focus group session and the notes from the discussion were analyzed using the qualitative analysis software Atlas Ti. We conducted content data analysis after each focus group session, which involved analytic induction that applies, first, a deductive analysis approach and then an inductive approach that allowed for the identification of emergent themes (Patton, 2002). Using a grounded theory approach for the data analysis, the themes and subcategories evolved from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Atlas Ti was also used to code data according to themes and subcategories.

To conduct the analysis, the lead author read through each of the 10 transcripts from the focus group and extracted all of the segments related to the research questions. The author and a research assistant (unfamiliar with the data) independently coded a subset of transcripts to note major themes, concepts, and patterns (Abrams, 2010). Coding decisions were compared and reflected a high level of consistency with those of the author and the two coders found strikingly similar initial data patterns. This procedure allowed the coders to conduct reliability checks to ensure consistency with regard to the interview data collection. The initial broad
Coding categories were as follows: (a) respect, (b) substance/alcohol use, (c) exposure to violence, (d) neighborhood violence, and (e) code of the street. When the coding procedure was completed, the author constructed a table that included, in the left column, the main organizing categories and sub-codes and, in the right column, a summary of what youth reported across focus groups (Abrams & Hyun, 2009). Once the data pattern was identified, the author revisited the transcripts to challenge and refine the major findings (Abrams, 2010). The term “putting in work” was consistently mentioned in the analysis. During the focus groups, the reiteration of this phrase became so thematic it deserved further exploration. Consequently, we used the phrase and the behaviors associated with it as analytic units.

**HOW YOUTH VIOLENCE BECOMES WORK AND BUILDING THE STREET RESUME**

For many young Black men living in disadvantaged neighborhoods in Bay City, particularly those with histories of criminal justice involvement, connections to the primary and secondary labor market were limited. Youth in the study were quite cognizant of their inability to access legitimate work opportunities. Several youth were able to clearly articulate how the concept “putting in work” correlated to Black male joblessness. Here Dre (age 17) discusses the concept “putting in work.”

**Interviewer:** Why do think it’s called putting in work?

**Dre:** Because nobody around our neighborhoods is working. So hustling [selling drugs], hitting someone’s head [murder] it’s like working.

Ice (age 16) also elaborates on how Black male joblessness has resulted in equating violence with work.

Most of youngins ain’t working so they have no other way to make money. So they catch wreck [violence] for work. A lot youngins gotta start off in the game hitting heads for people [murdering or violently injuring people] or robbing so they work to get their name up.

Similar to a professional resume, which highlights educational and job skills for advancement in the mainstream labor market, the street resume captures human capital and job experience for advancement in the hierarchy of the street. In the street, incarceration or the building of a jacket (criminal record) captures an investment in human capital through the acquisition of criminal skills. Juvenile detention facilities have been defined by some scholars as “deviance training schools” (Gatti, Tremblay, & Vitaro, 2009). For street-oriented
youth, the street resume captures where an individual was incarcerated, for what crime, for how long, and with whom he served time. All of these factors raise one’s reputation and street credibility. For disadvantaged Black male youth, these experiences are analogous to mainstream educational experiences. For example, serving time in a notorious federal prison would be equivalent to attending a top-tier university, as serving time at specific federal institutions builds the street resume. In the culture of the street, youth indicated that doing time at federal prisons located in Lewisburg, PA; Terre Haute, IN; and Atlanta, GA; added credibility to their street resume.

Among street-oriented youth, being waived to adult criminal court and detained in adult jail also adds to an individual’s street reputation. Youth adjudicated in adult criminal court in Bay City were perceived by peers as graduating or transitioning into adulthood, symbolizing the transition from being a boy to a man. Youth acknowledged that detention in the juvenile system was perceived as “sweet” or “soft,” but doing time in adult jail reinforced a sense of masculinity and toughness. The crime and length of time served also added to an individual’s cachet on the street. Every public display of violence and known incarceration has additive value in building the street resume. Here, Ice (age 16) discusses the street resume:

> Once you put in work your rep [reputation] follows you. People know you from the work you put in on the street [violence]. What jail you went to, what you did time for, how long you did time, that’s your jacket [criminal record], all that goes into building your name up on the street.

Below, Mo (age 16) elaborates on how violence adds to the street resume and raises one’s reputation on the street:

> I got four friends I run with, we all been friends since we was little. We put in work together. We’ve laid down people together [murder] and have taken charges for each other. Everybody in the Hill [housing project] knows our resume from the work we put in.

In what follows, Kenny (Age 16) discusses how being waived to adult court, known on the streets as “titled,” signaled that he had transitioned from adolescence to adulthood.

> Once they titled me [transferred to adult court], I was like, damn, when I saw it on my sheet. I was like I’m f-ked now (laughs). But I knew it was coming because everybody in my neighborhood’s been titled, all my friends been titled and all my cousins been titled, I had put in too much work not to be titled, so I guess it was my time.
CAMPAIGNING FOR RESPECT

Victor (age 16) was a member of the Purple City gang, also known as Purp City. By age 12, Victor had earned a notorious reputation throughout the gang as a fighter, often engaging in fights and violent assaults with weapons (knives and bats) with rival gangs several times a week. After committing several violent assaults, he was arrested and sentenced to Metro City, most recently for stealing a boy’s gold chain and breaking his jaw. While incarcerated, Victor continued to earn a reputation for fighting. In his first few months of detention, he was in well over 20 fights, including one in which he violently beat an inmate with a pipe. Each fight augmented his reputation and he was soon approached by the Black Guerillas, a predominately Black gang that controlled the jail.

Everybody knows my name in the jail because I put in work in here. I put in my work. I was banging for Purple City when I first got here but now I bang for BG [Black Guerillas] too. So I bang for both of them, Purp City and BG. I got the name of both of them ringing bells up in here [raising the reputation of the gang].

Shakur (2004) notes that building name recognition in relation to a gang, so the gang member’s name and his gang become synonymous, is part of the process of putting in work.

While Victor was incarcerated, gang membership in Purple City outside grew to over 60. However, Victor was disgruntled by this increase, believing the overwhelming majority of new members had not “put in enough work” to join the gang. Similar to an organization where workers may be terminated for a lack of productivity, Victor sent messages to high-ranking members on the outside asking that they terminate unproductive gang members. He instructed to keep only the most productive workers, those who actively “banged” for the reputation of the gang.

They didn't put in enough work to be down with Purp City, they was gettin a hood pass [legitimacy, credibility, and respect] from claiming affiliation with Purp City without actually putting in the work. So I had to revoke their hood pass. They wasn't putting in enough work, they wasn’t active, they wasn't catchin wreck [violence]. Just acting like they were real when they wasn’t.

Some youth, like Victor, devoted a significant amount of time engaging in violence on the street building their street reputations.
I put in so much work, knocking people out, that everybody knows who I am in my neighborhood. I got respect from everybody around there now. Real OGs [older gang members], they respect me.

Here, Victor discusses working for the gang. As a new member of the Black Guerilla gang, he was considered a soldier, the lowest rung in the social hierarchy. However, staying “active” provided opportunities for social mobility.

With BG, I bang with them in here. I’m active. I put in work for them, like I would for Purp City. I’m slowly gaining too [moving up in the social hierarchy of the gang]. The more work you do, the more you gain.

In what follows, Mo (age 17) discusses the pattern of recruitment for his gang. According to the code, street-oriented youth are eager to engage in violence to acquire respect and a reputation. On the street late adolescents and young adults are considered “OGs” by early adolescent youth (Anderson, 1999), who often seek out older members (Harding, 2010) to gain credibility, protection, and recognition. These relationships can provide aspiring “workers” with the opportunity to gain respect and social mobility. As Mo describes, early adolescents seek work from late adolescents or “OGs.”

I don’t have to go out and recruit youngins to put in work. My resume speaks for itself. Sh-t they come to me looking for work. I don’t have to look for them. They make themselves known to you. All that recruiting people talk about is bullsh-t! These youngins are dying to prove to you that they are real. I get asked all the time by youngins if I want them to put in work [kill or violently injure someone]. They’re eager to get my attention.

The use of violence to acquire and maintain respect was a common theme among youth. The acquisition and maintenance of respect required them to remain “active” or routinely engaged in violence. For some it seemed that the cycle of putting in work never ended, whether conscious of it or not, youth were always working to maintain their reputation through the use of violence. Anderson (1999) notes that in the street, respect is tenuous at best; it is hard to gain, but easy to lose.

Central to the issue of manhood is the widespread belief that one of the most effective ways of gaining respect is to manifest nerve, which exposes a lack of fear of dying. Many youth feel that it is acceptable to risk dying over the principle of respect (Anderson, 1999). Not to be afraid to die suggests that they also have little reservation about taking someone else’s life. Given this, we found that youth were often fatalistic about their lives and expected that they would not live beyond young
adulthood. Here, Mo and Ice reveal no compunction about taking an individual’s life or dying in the process of defending their honor:

I have put in too much “work” in my “hood” to give it up [reputation] to some other dude. I got a family name to protect, ’cause they [rival gang] killed my brother, so I can’t be soft [weak] in no way. You got to show no fear and be ready to put in your work [kill] at any time. (Mo)

I mean f-ck it, if you gotta go, you gotta go. It is what it is. (Ice)

THE HONING OF SKILLS

In the mainstream, putting in work is defined as the effort, time, and mental resources an individual invests toward attaining a specific goal or outcome, which is typically achieved through repetition of specific practices or activities. As shown in Brooks’s (2009) ethnographic study of inner-city Black male youth and basketball, youth devote considerable time to honing their basketball skills, with courts representing the staging area where they can display them. Brooks describes this process as “working to get known” and I found similar parallels among street-oriented youth. Youth in the current study expressed that honing their violent skill set was necessary in their campaign for respect. In some instances, youth worked for older gang members during a probationary period, where these skills were routinely tested.

Armed robbery was the crime that most youth used to hone their violent skills set (62% of the sample was adjudicated for armed robbery), as taking valued objects was one way of campaigning for status. Anderson (1999) notes that objects play an important and complicated role in establishing self-image: jackets, sneakers, jewelry, a nice pistol all reflect a presentation of self. Young men are able to command respect through their presentation of self by allowing their possessions to speak for them. Thus, a primary method of campaigning for status is taking the possessions of others by force. In this context, seemingly ordinary objects can become trophies imbued with symbolic value that far exceeds their monetary worth (Anderson, 1999). Jewelry, sneakers, jackets, hats, a rival’s girlfriend, or a street corner can become trophies. This game of who controls and owns what is constantly being played out on the inner-city streets. Several youth relied on armed robbery as a method to obtain trophies and respect. As Malachi (age 17) affirms, “I had to put in work doing demos [armed robberies committed alone]. Nobody is going to consider you to be real until you do some demos.”

Bo (age 16) specialized in armed robbery. Although members of his crew primarily engaged in group offending (selling drugs), Bo preferred to work
alone, which garnered him more respect on the street. Here, Bo offers why he preferred solo offending:

I don’t get involved in selling drugs, it’s too many people involved in the process. You got to give this person money, then get the drugs from this person. Too many people are involved in that, that’s too much work! That’s why I just jack [armed robbery] by myself. I do my dirt all by my lonely [alone].

Below, Chink (age 17) confirms this preference for burglarizing homes, referring to the process of improving his burglary skills as “homework.”

When youngins first started out with my crew they had to put in a lot of work. Some jacked [armed robbery], some laid cats down for us and got bodies [murder], some sold dope, and some, like me, did B&E’s [breaking and entering]. It’s all kinds of ways for youngins to put in work. We call burglarizing a home alone homework. The more homework you do, the more respect you get.

Other youth routinely engaged in violent victimization to hone their skill set. As Lou (age 16) describes, he practiced knocking people out on the street, which is particularly significant given the recent national discourse on the violent “knockout game” where youth assault unsuspecting victims on the street by testing whether they can knock them out with one punch.

Around my neighborhood we like to knock out bums for practice. Sometimes we just go around seeing what people we can knock out. You see somebody, you just hit them. After some practice, you start getting good at it. I got to a point where I could do one hitter quitters [knock someone out with one punch] real easy. I was the king of the one hitter quitter, everyone knew me for that!

NEVER GET CAUGHT SLIPPIN: HYPER-VIGILANCE ON THE STREET

Some youth expressed living in a state of hyper-vigilance while on the street and behind bars. For street-oriented youth, every interaction has meaning and something valuable is always at stake (Anderson, 1999). For youth invested in the code, a public image must always be presented to discourage strangers, acquaintances, and even friends from thinking about testing their manhood. Constant vigilance is required to give the public the impression that transgressions will not be tolerated. Here, Mo (age 16) elaborates on being hyper-vigilant while on the street:
It’s not about being scared… you got to show no fear and be ready to put in your work at any time [initiate or be the aggressor]. You can never get caught on the streets slippin [not being vigilant] or you’ll get got [robbed or assaulted].

Youth were chronically exposed to neighborhood violence. One hundred percent of the sample had witnessed the murder or violent injury of a relative or close friend and perceived their neighborhoods as unsafe.

Interviewer: On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 meaning your neighborhood is safe and 10 meaning that your neighborhood is dangerous, how would you rate it?

Malik: Twenty. It’s always somebody getting shot in my neighborhood.

Kenny: Ten. Two of my friends were murdered right beside me in a drive-by. Somebody drove by shooting so we all fell on the ground, but they didn’t get up. They died right there in front of me.

G: Ten. I seen my man shot in the head right in front of me, he died in my arms.

Mo: Ten. My brother was killed in front of me. He got killed in new pair of Jordans. I still have them (sneakers). I have the sweat suit he was killed in too.

In response to neighborhood violence and the constant threat of violent victimization, the majority of youth carried firearms for protection.

Interviewer: Do you carry a weapon for protection?

Ice: I carry my gun anywhere I go. I mean if I got to crush [kill or maim] someone, then I will, I don’t care. It’s either him or me.

Black: I carry my gun around anywhere, even if my mother is around. I mean, if I see the guy I got beef with [dispute] then I’m gonna crush him.

Mo: Yeah, I’ve even carried my gun to Juma [Muslim prayer at a local mosque]. It’s plenty of dudes in Juma with gats [guns] on them. You might be safe in Juma, but you still have to get back home.

Within the context of the jail, where the code of the street continued to govern interpersonal violence, youth were forced to remain constantly vigilant. Here, BL (age 17) discusses the importance of “not slippin.”

You can’t trust nobody in here. Ain’t nobody your friend, you got to watch your back at all times. You can never get caught slipping or somebody might stab you, jump you, whatever. You gotta be on point all the time, you even gotta sleep with one eye open (laughs).
ROLE AND MANAGEMENT OF VIOLENCE

Knowing the role of violence, how to manage it, and when to employ it was important in maintaining respect on the street. The ability to employ violence effectively required judgment and social skills that came with work experience (Sullivan, 1989). Some youth were much more skilled and savvy than others about violence. “Shot callers” had a clear understanding of when, where, and why violence should be used.

Dre: Sometimes I have to make calls in situations when youngins put in work on the wrong people. When I got locked up, I gave my people rules about how to do sh-t. Even if I’m not out there on the street, my reputation on the street rides on who is working for me.

Some youth offered broader conceptualizations of putting in work, describing how violence led to other “working” opportunities on the street. In some instances, an individual’s reputation for “putting in work” increased other opportunities to earn income. Kane (age 17) describes this process:

The problem with a lot of youngins putting in work is it’s all about jacking or laying somebody down. You can be putting in work in other ways like taking money from the street, hustling, and promoting parties and shows [entertainment]. You could be putting in work on the street so you could buy equipment to start a studio or record label. Or you could open a barbershop or front [give] somebody the money to open one.

On the other hand, youth adjudicated for murder, such as G (age 16), discussed the negative consequences of “putting in work.” Although, for street-oriented youth, respect is the ultimate compensation for violence, for some, equating violence to work was a regrettable career decision.

What if you know you getting 15 to 20 years for something you did? Why should I have any hope or care about sh-t? I just be depressed sitting in my cell at night thinking I put in all that work on the street for this? By the time I get out I’ll be an old man, half my life will be over.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented here suggest that the code of the street can be a useful conceptual framework in understanding why some jobless inner-city Black male youth equate violence with work (Shakur, 2004). Previous research on urban Black male joblessness has been strongly correlated to violence and crime (Sampson, 1987; Sullivan, 1989; Wilson, 1987, 1996; Wilkinson, 2004;
Venkatesh, 2008; Mincy, 2006; Anderson, 1999; Young, 2004; Rich, 2009; Harding, 2010; Alexander, 2010). The profound sense of alienation experienced by poor young Black men barring them access to mainstream opportunities and institutions has resulted in a cultural adaptation where respect on the street is a highly valued commodity. The cultural adaptation to endemic joblessness, persistent racial discrimination, and societal rejection has produced informal rules or a code among poor inner-city African Americans, particularly young Black men, that governs interpersonal violence and dictates how respect is acquired, controlled, and maintained. According to the code, respect serves as the ultimate form of currency among young Black men in distressed inner-city communities. Consequently, for many young Black males who have been systemically blocked from legitimate labor market opportunities, ascribing to the code legitimizes crime and violence as labor. Sullivan (1989), Bourgois (1995), Venkatesh (2006), and others have made significant contributions to conceptualizing how poor inner-city African American and Latino males respond to structural barriers to legitimate employment by legitimizing their participation in the underground economy. Previous research on crime as work suggests that selling drugs, theft, robbery, burglary, and fencing stolen goods are all considered respectable forms of work among marginalized young black and brown men living in distressed communities.

In this paper, we found that youth respond to endemic joblessness by employing specific empowerment strategies to achieve self-efficacy that can be helpful in alleviating oppressive situations. One strategy for gaining mastery over their lives is redefining violence as “work.” With few legitimate employment opportunities accessible, violence as work advances one’s social mobility in the social order of the street. Respect serves as compensation for being a “hard worker” (Shakur, 2004). To advance in the social order of the street, youth must invest considerable time and effort in their “work” such as honing their violent skill set. The “knockout game” and other acts of violence are often recorded by youth and posted on social media websites.

All of these characteristics add to building the street resume of Black male youth, which may capture his history of criminal justice involvement and the propensity to commit violence. Incarceration is considered, among some street-oriented youth, a rite of passage, further adding to the credibility of the street resume. Respect is deferred to youth based on where they served time, the crime(s) of which they were convicted, time served, and with whom they did time (social networks). In fact, incarcerated youth and adults refer to this process as “showing your paperwork.” While incarcerated, youth and men must produce official documentation (paperwork) for their peers to confirm
their charges, which further validates street credibility. If jails and prisons are considered by some scholars as “deviance training schools,” the narratives of these youth suggest that certain correctional institutions hold the same cachet on the street as ivy league and top-tier public universities hold in mainstream culture (Alexander, 2010). Among some street-oriented youth, prisons may serve as a form of human capital. In lieu of the few forms of human capital that contribute to successful rehabilitation within the prison setting, incarcerated youth have a greater likelihood of increasing their criminal knowledge and skills. Consequently, the structural violence of mass incarceration among some young Black men has created a culture in some poor inner-city neighborhoods where direct violence is perceived as expected, normative, and has an additive value in the campaign for respect.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should further explore the concept of putting in work and whether violence is a truly meaningful and valued form of work for some jobless young Black males, particularly those enmeshed in the code of the street. Understanding how Black male youth joblessness has resulted in the perception of violence equating to work and incarceration producing human and social capital is critical in examining how some low-income Black male youth frame their identity and view their social position. For those unfamiliar with the code, violence as work, prison as human capital, and respect as currency would seem incomprehensible. However, for those who are invested in the code, these concepts are linked to the structural violence that specifically targets low-income young Black men, their social identity, perceptions of manhood, and survival. Some adolescents have consciously invested themselves and considerable mental resources into this oppositional culture to preserve themselves and their self-respect (Anderson, 1978).

What is problematic about the concept of violence as work and respect as the ultimate form of currency on the street is that it is not transferable to mainstream society. In fact, respect and the cachet it carries for some young Black men may be limited to a few blocks. Roy’s (2004) work on young Black men living on the South Side of Chicago illustrated how structural inequalities and concerns for safety confined their social interactions to physical spaces within a four-block radius of their homes. Other ethnographic studies on urban Black males indicate the importance and meaning of space, especially the “street corner,” in understanding how ecological factors affect the daily experiences of young Black men (Anderson, 1978; Liebow, 1967). Consequently, among
many Black male youth, the respect they work so hard to acquire and maintain through the use of violence may be confined to merely a street corner or other bound geographical space. Beyond this physical space, their social identities and how they perceive themselves may be meaningless. Youth like Mo discussed how he had “worked” too hard in his neighborhood to give up his respect. For Mo, the extent of his young life was defined by the reputation he worked for in his public housing project (a physical space of six blocks).

Why leave? If you got the projects on lock [under control] and ain’t nobody f-cking with you, and that’s where you put in work at, and you cool with everyone around there, why would I want to leave? I get respect around there, my name be ringing bells, you feel me? (Mo)

Future research should also examine the physiological and psychosocial effects of hyper-vigilance associated with violence as work. Several youth expressed symptoms characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder, particularly emotional numbing. A key question to be addressed is, what affect does hyper-vigilance have on the psychological and physiological well-being of Black male adolescents immersed in the culture of the street? We should further investigate how stress impacts brain functioning and decision-making, particularly among youth who reside in high-risk neighborhoods.

Finally, future research on Black male youth joblessness, the code, and violence should pay more attention to words and behaviors as analytic units. We found that the words Black male youth use in everyday conversation often capture their behaviors and experiences. The phrase “putting in work,” which is commonly used in the mainstream to capture the investment or effort of an individual to attain a specific goal, has similar connotations among those who are enmeshed in the culture of the street. However, for individuals invested in the code, violence and crime are redefined as work.

In sum, the structural violence and inequalities that perpetuate institutional racism, endemic joblessness, mass incarceration, and felony disenfranchisement among young Black males may contribute to direct violence. For youth adjudicated in adult criminal court, they may be burdened for their entire lives with what Alexander (2010) defines as the “prison label,” a label that reduces them to invisible second-class citizens, bound in a racial under-caste system that may permanently bar them from employment opportunities, public housing, voting rights, and federal student loans.

For those invested in the code, this further legitimizes that it may be easier to negotiate the violent context of the streets than attempt to negotiate the maze of structural barriers that block them from obtaining human capital (via
higher education or vocational training skills) and legitimate employment. The data suggest that the multiple ways some young Black men internalize institutional and personalized racism often becomes reflected in their behaviors. For many, their behaviors are directly influenced by pervasive institutional racism and structural inequalities. Presently, Black male youth unemployment is at its highest since 1972 (Sum, Khatiwada, & Palma, 2014). In some large cities, the rate of Black male youth unemployment and school dropout has reached 50%. This suggests that many Black male youth are transitioning into adulthood without any meaningful work experiences and those who do are more likely to be employed later in life. Thus, disadvantaged youth may greatly benefit from employment. However, in 2012, only 25% of youth reported having a paying job and low-income youth were even less likely to be working (Sum, Khatiwada, McHugh, & Kent, 2014). Furthermore, recent studies on teen employment have shown that it helps keep youth out of trouble and that low-income teenagers with jobs were less prone to engage in violence and drug and alcohol use (Sum et al., 2014). Many central cities with large populations of Black male youth and high unemployment rates among this population, such as Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and Milwaukee, have recently experienced spikes in youth violence. Until we address the rejection and alienation young Black males experience as a result of institutional racism and structural inequalities, equating violence as work will continue. However, violence as work has an ephemeral career span.

APPENDIX

Questions

1) How do you define respect?
2) In what ways do you acquire and maintain respect on the street?
3) How do you lose respect on the street?
4) What defines being a "sucker" or a "punk"?
5) Do you trust or have faith in the police?
6) Who do you rely on for protection?
7) How do you protect yourself?
8) Have you ever been violently injured?
9) Have you ever witnessed someone harmed or killed?
10) Is your neighborhood dangerous?
11) How important is it to be respected in your neighborhood?
12) What are signs of disrespect on the street?
13) What does disrespect mean to you?
14) How do you respond in situations where you think you have been disrespected?
15) Do you carry a weapon?
16) Have you ever witnessed a violent injury of a family member or friend?
17) Are you in a gang?
18) Have you ever engaged in gang-related violence or crime?
19) Do you smoke marijuana or drink alcohol?
20) Is jail a dangerous place?

REFERENCES


