

A Demographic Genealogical Analysis of Poor, Urban Black Men's Conjugal, Family and Parenting Relationships

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The issues of male unemployment, family instability, and female headship are central to the debate over urban poverty and children's well-being (Myers 1991; Wilson 1987, 1997). Much of the prominent research on urban families addresses the need for a closer examination of the experiences of Black males, if we are to alleviate poverty and children's hardships in inner-city neighborhoods (Coley 2001; Devine and Sams-Abiodun 2001; Furstenberg 1995; Jencks 1992; Kasarda 1983; Koball 1998; Mincy and Sorenson 1998; Neckerman and Aponte 1988; Wilson 1987, 1996). Men are crucial to efforts to strengthen communities and families in many urban neighborhoods. Unfortunately, sociologists and policy analysts depict many poor and low-income communities as matriarchal domains. Nevertheless, many men reside and participate in these same communities. Because of our misconception of public housing as largely female-headed, male-barren households, we often overlook how men contribute to low-income families and communities.

We contend that because researchers often conceptualize familial attachment as constant over time, social scientists frequently fail to appreciate the more fluid, flexible relationships to families, conjugal partners, children, and community that Black men establish in impoverished inner-city neighborhoods. This oversight distorts how sociologists view several dimensions of Black urban men's lives. First, current assessment strategies do not always consider the pervasive employment instability and social displacement Black men face because of the restructuring of urban labor markets. On the whole, Black men have been left out of jobs where they can make meaningful living wages. Housing and welfare policies also force many to dissimulate about their residency and act "invisible" by marginalizing themselves from leases and formal household membership.

These chronic financial troubles affect how Black men live and contribute to households. In ethnographic research, some of which we detail here, we find that many men are in cohabiting relationships with a “pay/stay” stipulation. When men cannot contribute to the woman who is the leaseholder, he is often pushed out or leaves until he feels he can meaningful provide and protect. Edin (2000) has found this same cohabiting pattern. Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan (2002) find significant associations between parents’ human capital, housing costs and the likelihood of co-residential fathering. Further, we argue that current assessments do not consider how the survival strategies of low-income families create unique residential patterns, such as adult men living with their mothers or shuttling between kin households.

The mis-conceptualization of Black men’s attachment to households is even more problematic when assessing Black men’s fathering obligations. For example, Mott (1990) argues that the way traditional family demographers have examined fathers’ presence and absence, especially for Black children, has not been appropriate. He suggests that statistics that demonstrate the absence of men in households substantially misrepresent the reality of meaningful father or father-figure contact. He shows that visitation patterns indicate that Black fathers are likely to see their children at least weekly. Hamer (2001) too describes substantial contact and close relationships between Black men and their non-residential children. Another key point of Mott’s (1990) research stresses what he calls paternal “flux.” Flux describes the process by which many fathers move repeatedly into and out of their children’s home. Further, even if fathers had never lived in the home, mothers reported the biological father as a predominant father figure, even if the relationship between the mother and father was ambiguous.

We contribute to research on Black urban low-income fathers and family men, by using genealogical and qualitative methods (das Gupta 1988) to explore their varying attachments and

contributions to households. We focus on the ways men and their families describe their positive services as providers, protectors, nurturers, and caretakers. We also address Black men's barriers to healthy family relationships and especially barriers to effective parenting. The interviews and genealogical analyses clearly show a strong pro-social desire to contribute as family men and civic leaders in their poor neighborhoods. But our basic finding is that Black men are routinely spread thin across multiple households and bear substantial responsibilities as elder and child caregivers. Since we focus on a very distressed, disadvantaged public housing project, we find that the majority of men face serious limitations that hamper their fathering and family roles.

Description of the sample and study

This project uses multiple methods to explore the parenting and union histories of 27 Black men who are residents of a low-income public housing development. Between 1999-2001, we incorporated life history interviews of these men, demographic genealogical methods that establish their fluid residence across several households, and in-depth focus group and personal interviews with the relatives, children, partners, and ex-partners who live in the households where the men participate through social and financial support. They live in a very well established New Orleans public housing development. The estimated current poverty rate for this community exceeds 90%, with 60% of the residents reporting annual household incomes of less than \$6,000. The majority of leaseholders are "unaffiliated" African American women (91%) with children (67%). This community's predominantly-female lease-holding status masks actual residency patterns. The majority of these female-headed households have adult men who are full- or part-time residents, or socially-bound to the household through active kin-keeping.

Of the 27 men, only 19% are currently married, 37% are cohabiting, and 44% are not in a committed relationship. Twenty-two percent are aged 25 years or younger, 48% are aged 26

through 40, and 30% are 41 years of age or older. Forty-five percent of the men report having lived in the development their entire lives, and 48% report living there 15 years or less. Only 56% of the men are currently employed, and 48% have less than a high school education. Thirty-seven percent have a high school degree or equivalency. While 11% have some college, vocational or technical training, none have a college degree. Seventy percent of these men are fathers and 33% have at least three children. Seventy percent of the men are substance users and 85% report having a history of legal troubles, including both false and justified imprisonments for a variety of reasons, but primarily for burglary, robbery, and drug-dealing offenses, police and state harassment over child support obligations, legal decrees requiring wage garnishment, court-issued arrest warrants for parole violations, and outstanding legal fees and fines.

Residential patterns of men in the neighborhood

Three residential patterns describe men's attachment to households in the neighborhood. The first is lifelong residents; these are men actually born and listed on a lease at an address in the public housing development. These men have experienced all of life's vital events in the neighborhood. Their marginalization as residents begin when men who are residents are removed from leases and not officially counted, as their advancing age affects welfare and public assistance eligibilities of their parental household. As they leave their household of birth and move to other households, they never become listed lease members. Several men in this study fit this pattern. These men have lived in the housing development all of their lives, but when they move into cohabiting relationships, they lose their membership on leases.

A second pattern is residential stability whereby men have long-term connection to specific households over time. The strongest attachment is the result of family ties. Men who

are stable residents live in one household for a prolonged period and do not move between many different households.

The third pattern of residential fluidity is movement across two or more households. Men maintain residential fluidity through relationships with members of each household. Though they are not considered formal residents or leaseholders in any one household, their social, emotional, and financial attachments are vital. Most men will live at least part of their prime adult years with this pattern of residential fluidity.

One man in our study explained how these multiple attachments aid his family and partners. He said, “I do what I can to help my family and everybody out. I can’t do everything for everybody or be everything to everybody, so I give a little bit here and little bit there. I try to give a little bit to help them all. That way they know that I care about them. They see I ain’t got nothing and I doing the best I can.” This man has connections across several households in the neighborhood through his many financial and personal contributions to his ex-wife, children, and family and community elders. He validates his identity as a man and caretaker through these relationships and contributions.

In today’s modern technical society, “multi-tasking” is considered a skill of highly effective people. Men in this community are “multi-housing,” contributing through different relationships to more than one household at a time. They may not easily be measured as permanent residents of these households, but are viewed as members with authority and rights. The advantage of this fluidity of residence for the men is that they are able to meet their personal definitions of competent manhood. The disadvantage is that they spread themselves thin. They never completely focus on strengthening one household.

A genealogical analysis of policy barriers to promoting healthy relationships

In the following, we present four genealogies that illustrate these patterns of men's household attachments. The first genealogy examines Andre's lifelong residence and primary attachment to his grandmother's household, but also his participation in his mother's, girlfriend's and father's household. The second genealogy explores Clarence's lifelong residence and attachment to his mother's household, while maintaining partial residence with a pregnant girlfriend and social and financial ties to an ex-partner. The third genealogy examines Mike's stable attachment to his mother's household, secondary residences with a sister and girlfriend, and his social support ties to four daughters and grandchildren distributed across four other households. The fourth genealogy investigates Glen's fluid residence between his mother's, sister's, and girlfriend's households, and his attachment to three other households through his young children. The four men are selected from the sample of men interviewed because they are representative of the types of residence patterns observed: lifelong, stable and fluid. The men range in age from 23 to 45.

Genealogy 1: "I always come back to my grandmother."

Figure 1 presents the genealogy for Andre, a 23 year old demolition crew worker. He has a medium build and wears thin sideburns and a beard. His nickname is "Sandman" which he has tattooed on his arm. He earned this nickname in middle school, when he also earned a reputation for sexual prowess.

Andre's transition to adulthood was challenging. He got into trouble with some friends, while visiting a girl in another public housing project. In that altercation, a young man on a balcony challenged Andre, they exchanged words and fought. Both pulled their "pieces" and police took them to jail. He served 18 months for this confrontation, recalling that jail was tough

and that he had to fight all the time just to survive and build a reputation. He subsequently has vowed never to return to jail again. He left jail three years ago.

Andre wants to better his life, but has no concrete plans. He wants to own a house, get a good job, return to school for engineering, earn a master's degree in business, and secure his children's lives. His wishes are admirable, but entirely inconsistent with his reality. His construction job is temporary. Before this welfare-funded employment, he had not worked for six months. He spends most of his time hanging out in the Joneh Court, playing dominoes in the evening with other young men and getting high. His fundamental philosophy is that an individual must scratch out survival. He said, "You go out and get it. By using any means necessary. If it means selling drugs, you have to do whatever you need to survive."

Figure 1 presents Andre's residence and attachment patterns across the households most important to his current life. Andre's primary, most stable residence is with his grandmother with whom he spends the majority of his time. He also maintains partial residence with his girlfriend, spending a night or two a week with her when they are on good terms. He provides social support to his mother's household, although he does not live there.

Andre's grandmother has lived in the same house in the Joneh Court for over many decades. She is a wheelchair-bound diabetic. Andre's grandmother had five children, including Andre's mother. Her youngest son and Andre's uncle, Monty, lives with her as an unofficial resident also. He recently was diagnosed as a diabetic, as well.

Andre was his mother's firstborn. Although Andre lived with his mother, he did not like their neighborhood in the project, so he always came back to his grandmother's apartment on the Joneh Court. Thus, even as a child, he maintained residences at both his mother's and grandmother's homes.

Andre has a younger brother who is eighteen years old and a ten-year-old sister by his mother. He is very close to his little sister and accepts great responsibility for her. He considers her his first little girl. He manages her doctor and dental appointments, so that his mother does not have to leave work. He changed her diapers, fed her, babysat, and took her to parks and special places.

By his father, he has two half-sisters, aged seventeen and eighteen years old. They all live in Mississippi. He is not close to this branch of his family. He has not visited them, since his paternal grandmother died. Andre graduated from a Mississippi high school, though he attended the district high school for youth in the housing development. His mother sent him to live with his daddy and grandmother because she was concerned about his peers. He perceives her decision as sound, since his closest childhood friends are dead from drug-related violence.

His girlfriend and mother of his twin girls, Alisha, lives downtown. His twins are two years old. Andre has no plans to marry because Alisha's mother irritates him. Andre believes that her mother distrusts him because he went to jail, lives in the projects, and is unemployed. Currently, he is not on good terms with either his girlfriend or her mother.

Despite his troubles with Alisha, he has close relationships with his daughters. He believes that they are tough like boys. He enjoys his time with them, taking them out to eat, shop and visit his mother. He believes that his children make a difference in his life and are a disincentive to undertaking the risks of drug-dealing.

Thus, Andre has active membership in three different households. He supports his little sister in his mother's household. He provides child care and supervision, while his mother works. In his girlfriend's household, he focuses his attachment strongly on his daughters. He enacts his vision of good fathering, by spending time with them and providing financially

whenever he is able. Last, he lives with his grandmother and displays his most essential roles as protector and provider. He cooks for her and attends to her medical needs as a diabetic. Again, when he is able, he provides financial assistance to her.

Andre mentioned that though he and his uncle get along fairly well, they do experience tension, fueled by Andre's lack of full-time, permanent employment. His uncle reports that Andre is simply manipulating residence with his grandmother and needs to leave. So, Andre struggles to maintain relationships with the three most significant women in his life — his grandmother, mother and girlfriend. As a child, he was a counted resident on his mother's lease. As time progressed, he maintained fluid residence between his mother's and grandmother's households. Now, as an adult, he does not appear on any lease and has become an "invisible" member of this public housing development.

Andre's stable presence in his grandmother's household is likely to continue throughout her remaining years of residency in public housing. As matriarch of the family, the men's activities continue to revolve around her household. Of her own three sons, one is dead as a result of alcoholism and the other is in jail. Monty is her youngest and he feels great responsibility to stay and care for her. Consequently, his commitment to the care of his elderly mother ensures that he, like Andre, has a place to live.

Genealogy 2: "She ain't want me no more, it hurt, so I hit her."

Figure 2 presents the genealogy for Clarence. Clarence is a nice-looking man who shows signs of a busy and fast life. He currently is unemployed and lives in an apartment in a hot, drug-slugging part of the housing development. His pregnant girlfriend, Shondra, lives with him, as well as her 3 year old daughter. Shondra is substantially younger than Clarence by 14 years and is in her fourth month of pregnancy with his child. He is surprised and only a little happy about

this pregnancy. Clarence has lived in the housing project all of his 36 years, and has 6 older sisters. He is his mother's youngest child and only son. He lived with his mother at the address where she was a leaseholder for 47 years, before moving to his current residence.

His mother currently lives in an independent-living apartment complex for the elderly. She left the development in 1995 because of the drugs, crime and violence. She also admits that she left because it became increasingly difficult to live with Clarence's drug addiction. She left the apartment to Clarence, pays his rent, and maintains herself as the listed leaseholder, so that he will have a residence.

During the interview, Clarence reported that he applied for a custodial position at a mall and is waiting for a callback. He wanted a ride to get money from his mother, so that he could purchase a drug that will hinder an employer's drug-tests. He has worked several minimum wage jobs, including two custodial and food service jobs at a local university. He was fired from both jobs because of his temper and poor conflict resolution skills. Besides his 12th grade education, he has a certificate in air conditioning and refrigerator repairs, as well as one in industrial arts. He says, "I was good in school...I don't know what happened to me."

Figure 2 presents Clarence's residence and attachment patterns across households. Clarence's permanent, most stable residence is in the apartment leased by his mother. Clarence provides occasional social support to his mother, but she provides greater financial and material support to him than he reciprocates. Clarence's residence in public housing has been consistently stable over his lifetime, but his life has not. He misbehaved in high school, cut classes, and did not earn enough credits to graduate on time. Three years after completing high school, he became a father to his now thirteen-year-old daughter and two years later to another daughter. He and the mother of these two girls do not get along, so he does not spend much time with them

or provide much emotional care. When he works, he provides some financial assistance for their clothes. He reports that he does not pay child support, but that lately his daughters have been reaching out to him.

His relationship with the mother of his older children is so poor that it merits special focus. He reports that he wanted to marry this woman, "My two little girls' momma, the reason why we didn't [marry], and that was my heart too, we was supposed to get married. She wanted to mess around with some other guy." He explains that he cheated on her, shortly after the birth of his first daughter, and that she sought revenge by initiating an affair which later became serious. As he says, "I guess she was feeling since I did it to her, she wanted to do it back to me. But if she was going to do so, she should of did it right away, she shouldn't have let my feelings get more deep. She ain't want me no more, it hurt, so I hit her."

A short time after this assault, he stopped by her apartment unannounced to visit his daughter and was jumped by his ex-partner's boyfriend and friend. As Clarence reported

We was on the 3rd [floor], he came up from behind me, didn't even give me a chance to turn around. I didn't even know he was going to hit me. He hit me in the back of my head and I went down. I was surprised that I didn't black out, but then he started to hit me some more. She opened the door to see what was happening, she wanted to see him beat me up. As the dude hit me, the other dude pulled a gun out, a big 'ol gun. I thought, 'oh boy, I'm dead.' And I just knew he was going to kill me, so he try to pick me up and driving me over the 3rd floor [balcony]. I'm scared of heights though and I was gripped to him like a cat. I was like 'nah uh, you ain't gettin' me over there.' I broke loose and I was all messed up.

His mother talked him out of seeking revenge on these men, but she was unable to assuage his rage at his ex-girlfriend. He says, "I told her, I said, 'Watch, God is going to punish you.'" I said, 'Watch, I bet He's going to turn on you because I said He turned on me.' She was getting beat up, everyday. He [the new boyfriend] was on rock. He wasn't nothing but a rock head. He was taking her money when she get her check." As he reports, her punishment came swiftly when

she tried to leave this abusive man. Clarence said, “So she tried to do him what she did me, break up with him, and he ain’t taking that. Guess what he do? One day she puttin’ the groceries up, and he bust in there and got her gun and shot her six times. She lucky to be livin’. She lucky she ain’t handicapped. She very lucky.”

Clarence reports other major negative experiences with women, including one woman he wanted to marry, but instead left her because he felt she was having sex with her stepfather. As he says, “I ain’t never been married. Women, there’s always something that make me so I can’t trust her or make us break up.”

Clarence is very much the “Baby Boy,” even though he is now a grown man. Everyone usually takes care of him. His mother still pays the rent on his apartment. His sisters, who all left the project, continue to give him financial support. His current cohabiting partner, Shondra, also cares for him. He expects Shondra to give him part of her welfare check every month. They recently had a fight because she refused to give him money. She left with the children to stay with her father for a few days. This exact fight occurred at least twice, during the course of the study. Of this typical conflict, Clarence says,

I don’t know why ya’ll women are like that. She wasn’t working, I was maintaining the house, paying rent, and all that. She say when she get a job she would help me out. I went and bought 52 dollars worth of groceries. They ate that up right away. We ain’t broke up, but she went to spend the night at her daddy’s house. She going to let her daddy give her money and groceries and then when she talk back, she going to be broke. I can’t keep going through this everyday. I want to know what I’m going to do.

Clarence really expects her to take care of him. He is very used to women caring for him.

Clarence has strong opinions about what constitutes independent manhood. As he says, “We need more men like my uncle. He is always in a church program and had a job.”

Unfortunately, Shondra does not have either of these two qualities in Clarence. However, she

expressed gratitude for the emotional and non-financial support he provides. She says, “Clarence was there for me when my momma was sick with cancer two years ago. And he has helped me a lot since she died last year.” Shondra values not only his kindness as a confidante, but also appreciates his non-financial support, especially with household tasks. She says, “Clarence helps a lot around the house. He cleans up, makes bottles, bathes the children, and washes clothes. He cooks too. Things like beans, roast, bake or fried chicken.”

The shared value working between Shondra and Clarence is reciprocity. Both believe strongly in norms of exchange. For instance, Shondra and Clarence had arguments about Shondra’s welfare check. Clarence expects Shondra to give him money, “I asked her to give me \$20 from her check and she told me no ‘cause she had to buy things for her and the children. When I get money, I always give her. When I wash a car, I give her a couple of dollars, but I can’t depend on her when she gets hers. She always pack her stuff and go over by her daddy.” Clarence has strong feelings about Shondra sharing her resources with him. He feels that she owes him because he allows her to live with him in his mother’s apartment. After complaining about her unwillingness to share her welfare check, the interviewer pointed out that he would soon have greater responsibilities, given that Shondra is expecting his child. He replied, “Well, she ain’t going to be living here.” Shondra’s underlying belief is that Clarence is a man and should take care of her and the children, and that her welfare stipend is for her children’s direct benefit.

On the other hand, Clarence perceives his mother as a steady source of material and social support. He says, “I can always depend on my momma.” He depends on his mother when he is unable to work or take from Shondra. Mrs. Junie has always been a backbone for Clarence. Unfortunately, she feels that she “can’t depend on that boy” because of his crack addiction. She

ensures him a place to live and money for food because she does not want him homeless or living with her.

Clarence's residence and attachment pattern illustrates a special case of a man who is a significant drain on people in his networks. Clarence is a man with a strong exterior who is immature. His mother and women support and carry him. Clarence's central conflict is between looking like "the man" and "being the man." His mother gave him a home and set him up, but she must assist him to maintain his appearance of independence. He invites Shondra to live with him, but she has to financially assist his desired illusion of being the man of a family. Clarence said, "I like to dress and look good, like the man." This inconsistency between how he wants to be visibly perceived and who he actually is becomes the stimulus for many of his problems.

His life history demonstrates the type of marginalized migration that occurs when a mother maintains her lease to assist a son in maintaining his visible image as a man. Clarence does not appear on the legal rosters of this public housing project, while his mother appears as a leaseholder, though she has left long ago. Clarence presents himself as a functioning head of household. However, his mother (and sisters) heavily assist him by paying rent, buying food, and providing pocket money. Clarence is likely to be in dire straits when his mother passes.

Genealogy 3: "I've always been a good starter, but a loser as a finisher."

Mike is a slim, medium height, 45 year old. His very dark skin looks rough, like leather, the result of years of cigarette smoking and a profound crack addiction. His most noticeable physical trait is a gap in his mouth from missing front teeth, but this somewhat unsettling appearance is masked by Mike's obvious intelligence and eloquence. He is a well-read, politically conscious man with a talent for writing. During the study, he shared some of his writings, including an essay about the social and spiritual experience of marriage between a man

and woman, and the importance of the marital union for children. He writes about substance abuse, his life as a Black man, and the necessity of building strong communities.

Mike has two younger siblings. When he was seven years old, his father was sent to prison for a year and a half, and when his father returned, his mother left him and took her children to live in public housing. Mike held great responsibility for his siblings, while his mother worked long days as a domestic maid. When he was 9, he says, "I was the man of the house. My dad wasn't there, so I had to adjust to the responsibilities that a man's supposed to take. I learned how to hustle. There was some ugly areas in my life and I learned some things and they weren't good things, but they were things that help you survive. I was able to bring in money." He worked the parking lot of Winn Dixie, carrying grocery bags and collecting aluminum cans. He also shoplifted, sold weed, and considered himself "a soldier of the streets."

During this time, his maternal uncle frequently lived with the family, as the uncle moved continually between Mike's grandmother's and mother's household. His uncle helped the family through difficult financial and personal troubles, by drug-dealing. He says that his uncle "brought me along," showing him "what it was to be independent, help, like clean up the house." Mike says, "So, I learned that from him. I cleaned up because my mom would be gone twelve hours of the day. So, she'd come home and the house was clean. My uncle was staying with us off and on. He would just move from my grandmother to my moms. So, he was that role model. He was that one for me that when I need to talk to a man about manly things, he was that one."

At the age of 12, he was arrested for shoplifting and sent to a juvenile prison. He says, "I stood there a year. I think I was about thirteen going on fourteen when I came home. And for sure, I was the man then, you know?" As he defines this transition to manhood, he says, "So about thirteen years old is when I really took on that role as the protector, the provider. From that

point on, I start doing things that wasn't really conducive. It wasn't really healthy for me, but that was the norm, you know, for a young boy." He has been to jail several times since this point in his young life.

He was sent to a vocational high school for troubled youth, retained twice, and dropped out of school in the 10th grade at the age of 17. After dropping out, he took an even more active role in the streets, selling drugs and stealing.

Now as an adult, Mike still lives a drug-dependent life and has even more demanding personal responsibilities. Mike has four daughters by four different women. He was 18 years old when his first daughter was born. Her mother was his childhood sweetheart and lived in another public housing development in the city. His second daughter is fourteen years old and lives in western Louisiana which limits Mike's contact with her. His third daughter is seven years old and his fourth is five years old. This last daughter lives in northern Louisiana with her mother. Mike says that he is very close to his youngest daughter and misses her very much. Her mother left him when he went to jail and he still struggles with her absence. Of his fathering situation he says, "I wouldn't recommend the way I've gotten my daughters to young men today. I would say to them that the responsibilities is more than just makin' a baby and sayin', 'I'm the Baby Daddy,' you know? It comes a whole lot more."

Three of Mike's children are on welfare and the new child support laws have affected him. He says, "Today they makin' me accountable for 'um. And, uh, I'm not sayin' that I wasn't, but, you know. I mean, I'm not alright with feelin' that someone have to force me to take care of my daughters. I'm not alright with it. But that's the way of some laws. They garnish my checks." He reports having a better relationship with the mother who does not rely on welfare administrators to ensure child support. He says, "Me and her, we cool, you know. Like I send

her when I have, you know, the extras and stuff. I'll send it to her. I'll try to be on time with her, with whatever I promise her.”

Currently, he is employed on a construction crew and his work history indicates that, when he can fight his addiction, his employment is long-term and stable. He worked as a counselor-in-training for a substance use and abuse initiative. For twelve years, he worked at a wholesale grocery store. At one time, he was an assistant warehouse manager with substantial responsibilities at a major store. He wants to reorder his life and, indeed, at the time of the interview was enrolled in night school and holding a second part-time job. He says, “I always felt that it was more to life than just goin’ to prisons and doin’ the things, you know? And I always had a drive in me to do better or want to do better. You know, sometimes I sit back and I try to playback tapes in my mind of where I got sidetracked.” He envisions a responsibility to his community, saying “I thank God that I had the experience in life, that I can go back in my mind, reflect back, and I see that, as far back as then, this community had all the elements. It had everything that it needed to bring up productive, successful people, men and women. I wanna give back. I wanna preserve my involvement in this community. The community seem to be like a family to me.”

Much of his current efforts are focused on giving back to his mother. Figure 3 presents Mike’s residence and attachment patterns across households. Mike’s primary, most stable residence is with his mother. He maintains partial residence with his current girlfriend who also lives in the development, spending frequent nights with her, depending on the state of their relationship. Together, they attend a community-based substance abuse program as recovering addicts. Mike has a role in her life as a stepfather to her thirteen-year-old son. He also maintains partial residence with his sister who lives around the corner from his mother. He enjoys

spending time with his niece and nephew and feels a responsibility to set an example for them.

Mike has fluid residency between these three households, sharing reciprocal financial and social support. Throughout his life, he has been in many cohabiting relationships, but his mother's house serves as his home base when these relationships fail.

Of his primary relationship with his mother, he says

My mom, she's a wild one. She's a breath of fresh air for me, you know. I'm boarding with her now. I clean her house up for her. I take the trash out. I run errands for her. She need something from the supermarket, I'll go and I'll get it for her. But I guess the most thing that I can give her is to be clean. See what I'm sayin'? And not druggin', for her to worry about, you know, when she hear gunshots and stuff, thinkin' that I'm in some type of a confrontation. Uh, to go back to school..to get this degree..puttin' my best foot forward and makin' a dream a reality, as far as being a homeowner for my mom. That's my goal is to get her out of this project and place her into her own home. [But] like I say, I'm a good starter, but finishing is always my problem.

He clearly would like to be a strong man for his mother, children, and community, and even discussed his desire to become a community activist, working against the blight and crime that undermine the neighborhood.

However, his noble ambitions recorded at the start of fieldwork were derailed by end. By the end of the study, he was back on crack, hustling for his next high. His cycles of addiction and desires for breaking free to a better life can probably best be understood in his own words,

When I do drugs, I'm doin' drugs because I'm afraid of something. Uh, responsibility sometimes. When I know that there's something that I should be accomplishing and I'm not accomplishing it, it's easy for me to cop out and just, you know, say throw my hands up. You know, go get loaded and not deal with it. Although every time I come down, I still got to deal with it. So, I stay out there on these runs sometimes, a year, you know, 8, 9 months at a time. It doesn't bother me. I hit bottom. But it be under God's grace that I pull me up. Wipe me off. And say, 'Ok, I'm gonna start tryin' to help you again.

Compellingly, Mike's lucid, drug-free moments are filled with a desire to nurture his community and kin.

Genealogy 4: “Why they act like that, you know, for no reason? Women, I don’t know what they need, sex or whatever, but they just get a rage. It be like a rage thing.”

Glen is 33 years old, very tall, and approximately 210 pounds with a warm brown complexion and a pleasant personality. He is a high school graduate, presently employed as a line cook supervisor at a major hotel, and with previous employment at other major tourist industry restaurants. He also earns extra cash as a DJ. Through his efforts, he purchased a van which distinguishes him from many men in his community. But he has not always been so stably employed. By his own admission, he has taken many varieties of drugs and worked as a drug-dealer. He was once shot in this employment and has been to jail for drug-dealing three times, serving 4 years collectively. He says that he will not work illegal jobs any longer and that living with his mother provides a hindrance to temptation. Glen says, “She have so many jobs, she just like to work. She ain’t used to play. She say, ‘You going to be home and you going to work, or you’re going to be home and stay in school. You gonna do one or the other, you ain’t just going to do nothing.’”

Figure 4 presents Glen’s attachment and residence pattern. Glen’s most stable, permanent residence is with his mother who does not live in the development. He uses his mother’s address on job applications and for all of his mail. He also has partial residence in two households in the development with his sister and a recent girlfriend. Glen and his sister are very close. He has great respect for her as a sister and mother. He says, “We two of a kind, that’s what people say. She take pride in whatever she do, like she trying to fix her house up. I try to show her, you got to treasure what you have because you never know when you going to lose it again. You know it’s hard for a Black person to get nice things. You have to really, really work hard for it. It ain’t like White people, they just get it all. We got to struggle.” He says that he

and his sister provide real help to each other through hard times, “We going to stick by each other through thick and thin.”

He perceives himself as his sister’s protector, believing that his presence in the neighborhood makes her safer. Initially, when his sister moved into the project, he was spending 3-5 nights per week at her home. Now that his sister has a cohabiting boyfriend and Glen has a girlfriend, he spends more nights with his girlfriend and her three year old daughter. His girlfriend lives a couple of doors away from his sister. However, he and the girlfriend acknowledge that he does not “live” there. Glen actively supports his sister’s household. He bought her new furniture and brought it to her house. He befriended her boyfriend. He runs her errands and gives her cash. He also enjoys cooking for them.

However, as a parent, Glen struggles. He is now the father of three children, aged seven months, one and ten years old. Each of his children has a different mother. Though he is the most gainfully employed of the men presented in these genealogies, he is no more financially responsible for his children than they are. He admits that he does not pay child support for their care. Glen’s parenting is impaired because of his overtly hostile attitude toward women. He does not have relationships with his children because of the extreme conflicts he has with their mothers. Glen describes his relationship with his children and their mothers as follows,

We cool [i.e., the children and Glen], but they mommas are whack. If I knew they was like that, I would never had kids with them. They could see you talking to somebody, or it could just be a friendly conversation. They say, ‘who that?’ Oh, man, going on. They want to break your car, cut your tires up. My car tires got cut up twice.

These relationships interfere with his ability to develop meaningful relationships with his children. For example, he has a very limited relationship with his oldest daughter because of her mother. As he says, “No, she [the mother] be trippin’. She be trippin’. She want to fight. She

won't see me. She want to curse me out. I'm coming to get my daughter. She go off. If my little girl outside somewhere playing, I spend time with her like that. Other than that, I ain't going to knock on the door and I ain't calling her." He is not happy with this state of affairs, but can see no alternative. As he says, "It makes me feel sad. I wish I could give her [my daughter] everything in the world, but I can't right now. I wish I could."

The same relationship pattern appears with his second daughter and now with his infant son. He and his ex-girlfriend broke up before his son was born. She was a girl from a two-parent, middle class home, attending a local college. Her parents disliked Glen and felt he was bringing their daughter down. He was forbidden to contact the family, after the breakup. So, Glen and his sister saw the baby only once, after sneaking over to his ex-girlfriend's house while her parents were gone. He provides no financial support to any of his children, nor does he spend time with them. Though he acknowledges his children and knows where they live, he does not provide any social support.

Glen's antipathy to women is strange, given his role model for manhood. Glen's father apparently tried to instill a respect for women. Of his deceased father, Glen says,

He was the most precious thing in the world. He showed me a lot of things about life. I'd go over there with a girl and he'd say, 'Son, you've got another one. Who is this? You know, you can't be doing things like that. You can't play with people's feelings.' Like I told him, you know, they's just women friends. I just like to be around women.

He talked at length about his close relationship with his father, even mentioning that he used to love to jump into bed with him early in the morning when he was a young boy. He said that his father lived long enough to meet Glen's first daughter and that his father adored her and wanted a close grandfathering relationship with her.

Besides discussing his respect for his father, including his father's ability to turn "a little house into a castle," Glen spent most of his interview detailing women's failings. He is angry that the mothers of his children want child support. He is angry at his ex-wife for divorcing him when he went to jail. He says, "I went to jail and that was the end of that. Next thing you know, divorce papers coming in the mail." He says that he would not mind marrying in the future, and felt close enough to some of his ex-girlfriends to consider marriage. But in the end, he reports that "always be the woman have problems, I don't know why. I don't, man. Every woman I meet, something in her life that happened or is happening...it never fails. They have baby daddy problems or something. It always something." He claims that a man can never be sure of a woman's real nature. As he says, "I will get involved with them and they be a whole 'nother person. Like my baby momma, that's a whole 'nother person. Everything be A-OK when you first meetin' and datin', but then you get to live with them, that's a whole 'nother thing." His basic orientation to women can be summarized in his own words, "I have feelings for women, but I contain to a certain point. If I see that it's gettin' to be more than what I want it to be, then I just break that off."

Glen's relatively good financial standing and van would make him a comparatively good catch in this low-income community. However, Glen wants relationships with women for fun and companionship, but not responsibility and commitment. The only two women that he has a strong sense of responsibility and respect for are his mother and sister. He cannot connect with his children because of his limitations with women.

Momma knows best: Concluding discussion of genealogies

All four of the genealogies stress the strength of kinship ties to mothers and sisters, but never to wives or long-term partners. These men are tied to kinship structures exclusively in the

female line: such as grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and aunts — not, it seems to grandfathers, fathers, brothers, and uncles. Mothers will never put these men out or throw them away. For example, Mrs. Patty is comforted when Mike returns home after a drug binge. The son or brother is often seen as a protector or warrior, like the son who stays with his elderly mother because of an unsafe neighborhood or uses his income to supplement his mother's rent. In Andre's situation, as long as his grandmother lives, his uncle knows he can never just get rid of him. The same is true of Clarence whose mother will pay his rent to guarantee him a residence. Others may allow their sons to live with them, hiding their status on a public housing lease. A few mothers in the study even maintain leases for their sons when they themselves do not live in the public housing apartment. For instance, one mother who received a Section Eight voucher leased a private low-income house for her son while she lived with her daughter. Although technically fraudulent behavior, the greater point is the extreme lengths mothers will take to protect their adult sons.

Men's fluid residence between two or more households has important policy implications. This fluidity is a survival mechanism for the men and the other household members. The men contribute and fulfill some aspect of their socially-defined roles as men. For the household members, they receive companionship, protection, some additional resources, and the benefits adhering from obligations forged through reciprocal exchange.

Note that these men's cohabiting relationships are not strong or stable. Several spend time with their girlfriends, but do not consider the sporadic co-residence as their primary home. They talk mainly of spending nights or spending time with these women, including occasional intimate time with ex-partners and baby mommas. A prime reason for the weak cohabiting relationships is that the men do not work or have stable incomes. Thus, they do not establish stable

relationships and definitely do not marry. These men are not considered marriageable partners by their mates. In most cases, they themselves do not feel prepared for that commitment. Financial instability and routine substance use make most of these men less appealing as marriage partners. Despite these entrenched limitations, women still develop intimate relationships with these men and the men long for interpersonal connections. Even Glen manages to say that “if they [women] have personal feelings for you, it’s a deep thing. Believe that.”

Black men are in the heart of multiple households.

The genealogies demonstrate that these low-income men are an intimate part of and maintain fluid residence across many households. They live with girlfriends, mothers, and grandmothers, biological children and stepchildren, nieces and nephews. They contribute both financially and non-financially to each of these households. Thus, as providers and nurturers, they are spread thin, especially given their lack of resources and extent of personal problems. The primary finding is that, for this sub-sample of men, momma is the anchor household. Residential dependence on momma, or at least the ability to have momma’s home as backup, is a central social structure of this neighborhood.

Several policy implications arise from these basic findings. First, many of these men have many parenting responsibilities across differing households, and are willing to serve as step-parents to lovers’ children, daddies to their own, and mentors to their siblings’ and cousins’ children. Many of our interviews show that men began their parenting when they were very young, helping to raise their own siblings when a parent was terminally ill, died, or was gone for long periods because of employment or incarceration. Policymakers need to address how to support men in these multiple forms of fathering, rather than assume that these poor men should

be encouraged to “choose” one set of children and one mother to channel their nurturing and resources.

Second, healthy marriage promotion initiatives need to pragmatically consider the problem of promoting long-term conjugal bonds among a population of men who perceive their mother’s home as a base residence. The residential dependence on momma must be considered by policymakers and deserves further research. We must be cautious not to put too much policy focus on cohabitation and marriage as the only, or even the most appropriate venue for poor men. These men are not stable enough to set up their own households or to support their children sufficiently. As a result, they have developed fragmented roles across multiple households and their family networks are stronger than their conjugal bonds.

We need to create social policies and programs that acknowledge these complex household and family relationships. A number of reasons might explain these strong mother-son bonds. The precarious economic situation of men is certainly key; a mother will tolerate what an intimate or cohabiting partner may not. Also, from a policy point of view, perhaps men’s investment in their momma’s lives is a public good, in low-income neighborhoods. We commonly address the difficulties of young single mothers with children, while little imagining the social, medical, legal and economic difficulties facing older ladies who have already sacrificed years to raise their own children, care for others’ children, and keep an “open home.” We must become more sensitive and clear about the interdependence in the ways men, their mothers, their women and children assist each other to survive extremely distressed neighborhoods.

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Figure 1: “I always come back to my grandmother.”

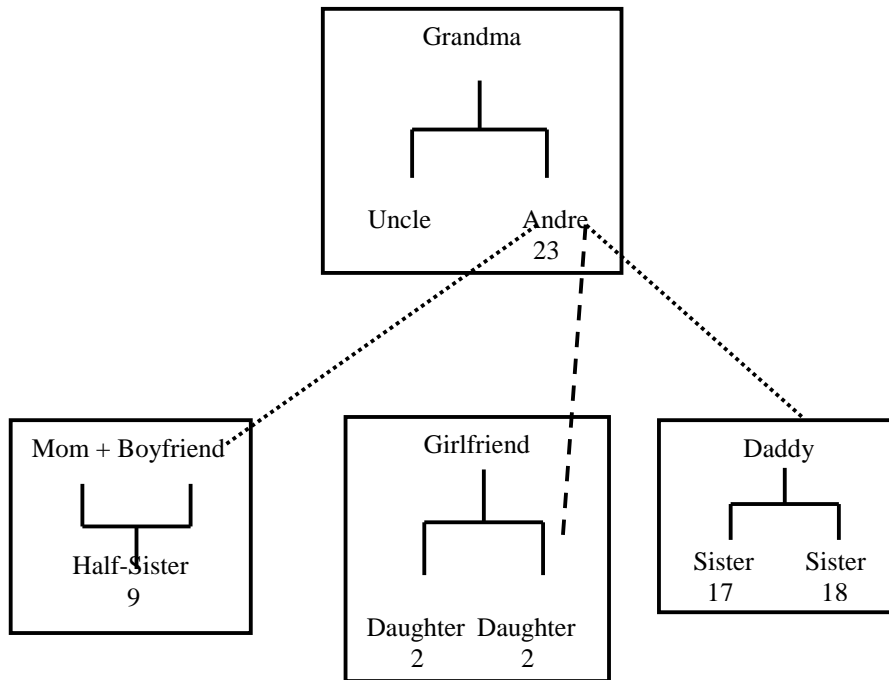


Figure 1:

- Main Residence _____
- Partial Residence - - - - -
- Social Support/No Residence

Figure 2: “She ain’t want me no more, it hurt, so I hit her.”

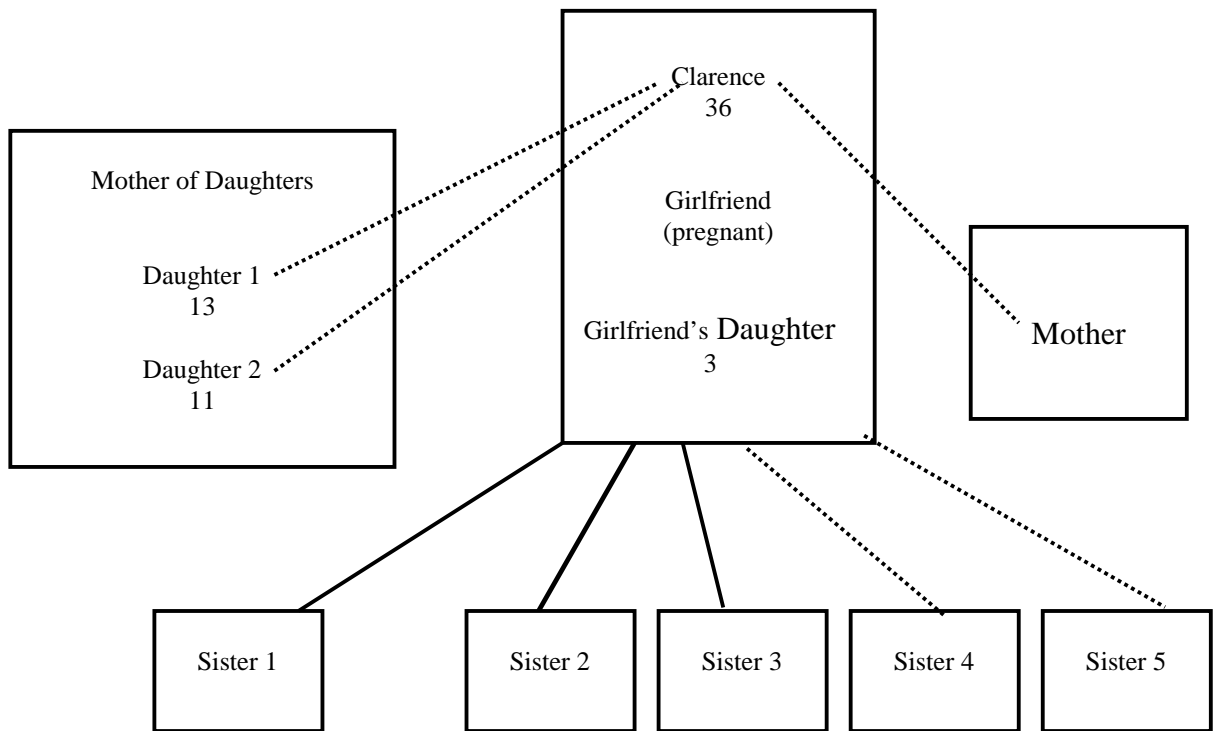


Figure 2:

- Main Residence —————
- Partial Residence - - - - -
- Social Support/No Residence

Figure 3: “I’ve always been a good starter, but a loser as a finisher.”

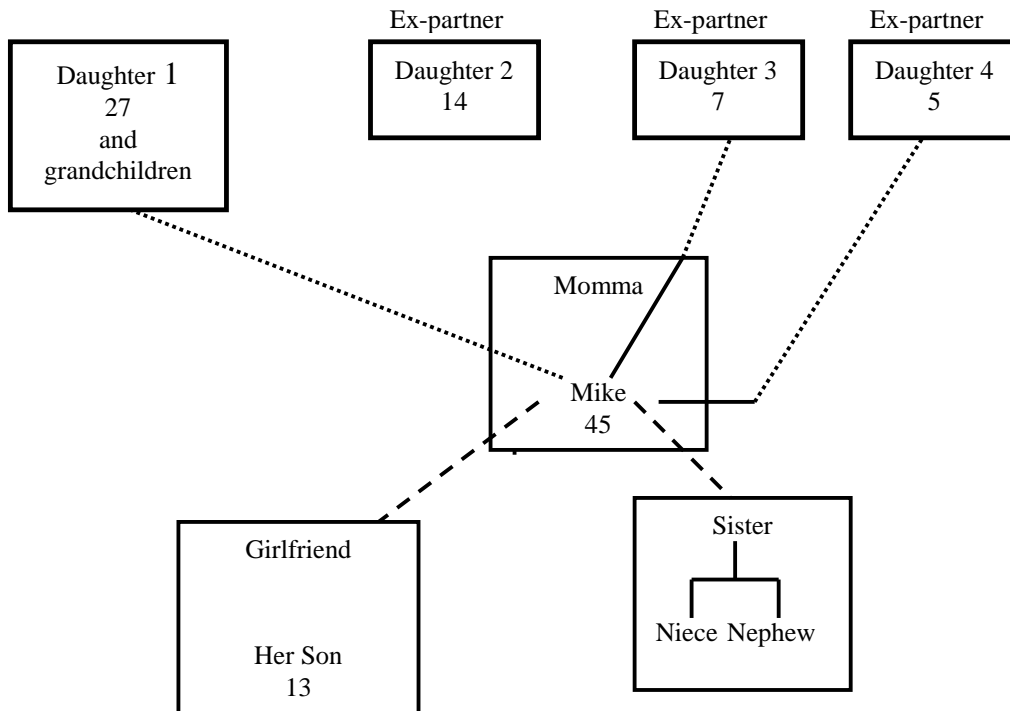


Figure 3:

- Main Residence _____
- Partial Residence - - - - -
- Social Support/No Residence

Figure 4: “Why they act like that, you know, for no reason? Women, I don’t know what they need, sex or whatever, but they just get a rage. It be like a rage thing.”

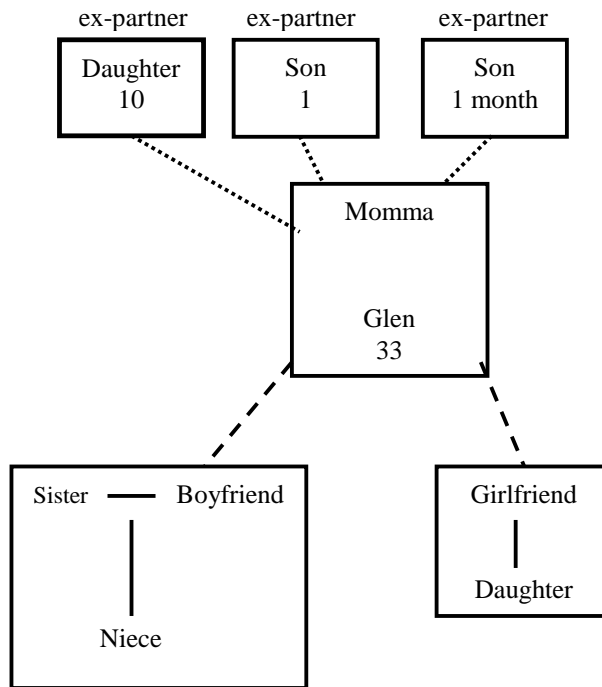


Figure 4:

- Main Residence —————
- Partial Residence - - - - -
- Social Support/No Residence