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Friends, Family and Neighborhood: Understanding Academic Outcomes of African American Youth

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Primary and secondary education are constitutional rights offered to all U. S. citizens. Further, high school graduation opens the door for additional educational attainment and improved future options. However, those living in urban areas are less likely to graduate than those living in suburban areas (NCES, 1996). And minority students attending predominantly minority schools in urban areas often fare the worst (Fine, 1991; Waggoner, 1991), achieving this important milestone in even lower proportions.

Recent ethnographic descriptions and empirical studies provide some insight as to why urban schools populated by children of color often fare poorly. According to Wilson (1987, 1996), since the 1970s, large metropolitan areas have been vulnerable to industrial and geographic changes leading to increased joblessness within certain African American neighborhoods that previously were predominantly working class. These neighborhoods that are increasingly poor, with more crime and single parent families, have become socially isolated from society at large. Families and children who do not move out have had to deal with the increasing deterioration of their communities.

Elijah Anderson (1990, 1999) provides a rich description of street life in one such urban neighborhood. Youngsters with little hope of regular employment are less considerate of their neighbors, are likely to participate in drug deals or other criminal activities, and are frequently violent in an attempt to command respect. Children at an early age (particularly boys) must learn to negotiate with the street culture to survive and are often forced to choose between the values and behaviors of the street and those that could lead to a better future (possibly equated with school success). Historically “old heads,” older men and women who served as surrogate parents, were respected as they tried to support the values of school, work and family. But as economic prospects declined, many young people were less willing to listen to these “old heads” and the allure of street life became stronger.

Lerner and Galambos (1998), in their review of adolescent development, identified numerous individual and contextual factors associated with academic underachievement. They also acknowledge, however, the lack of research that has been conducted with adolescents who are not White and middle class. They emphasize the role of science in identifying a combination of factors that can promote positive development and decrease the likelihood of youth succumbing to risks they may face for academic failure and/or other problem behaviors.

Large longitudinal nationally representative samples that estimate the relationship between educational outcomes and a comprehensive set of social and family variables are informative, but consider general economic context apart from the choices and perceptions of actual young people (Haveman & Wolfe, 1995). Previous efforts to predict the educational outcomes of African American youth have often focused on individual factors such as motivation, self-esteem and personality traits. This study, however, focuses on how factors in the lives and environment of African American students impact their academic attitudes and performance. It builds upon the body of literature emphasizing the importance of contextual factors, such as neighborhoods, parents, peers (Case & Katz, 1991; Furstenberg, 1993; Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Wahler, Kreutzer & MacPhee, 1996) and religion (Jeynes, 1999) in the outcomes of youth who are poor and/or non-white. Understanding the connections between particular contextual factors and academic

outcomes may be instrumental in modeling aspects of what occurs in many urban school environments.

Discussions of academic performance frequently employ race as a control variable and attempt to explain differences among various racial and ethnic groups in comparison to Whites (Chiswick, 1988; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). In contrast, this study employs a sample of African American students. Rather than focusing on a subgroup of high-achievers or problem students, an entire freshman class was chosen to study normal development and decision-making. These students attended the same urban high school, lived in the same general neighborhood, and were evaluated on three aspects of academic life: disposition toward school, academic achievement, and problem behavior in school. A better understanding of the relationship between these contextual factors and academic performance will increase our knowledge and suggest possible points of intervention for those working with other urban high school students.

This study will address the following research questions: How are 1) intentions to complete school, 2) grade point average (GPA), and 3) suspensions influenced by gender, living arrangement, religiosity, exposure to academic success, and perceptions of neighborhood for African American youth?

Related Literature

Gender

Research reports that females are performing better than males in the educational arena. Males drop out of school at slightly higher rates and consequently females are more likely to have completed high school (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). In particular, African American males appear to be losing ground relative to African American females. Higher percentages of females are graduating from high school and college, earning advanced degrees, and entering white-collar professions than their male counterparts (Carter & Wilson, 1993; Hawkins, 1996; US Census Bureau, 1999). These differences in educational experiences by gender seem to begin in early childhood. Elementary school boys typically receive lower grades in reading and misbehave more often and intensely than girls (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997). More boys than girls repeat a grade, which is linked to dropping out of school in later years (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; US Census Bureau, 1992). These educational disparities undermine the earning capacity of African American men and have implications for their economic security and quality of life (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Family structure

Although parenting has many aspects that affect children's well-being, one factor often considered to be instrumental is family structure. Furstenberg and Hughes (1995) found that even when controlling for human capital measures (e.g., socioeconomic status, mother's education), the presence of the biological father in the home was positively related to high school graduation. Research has been mixed on the importance of family structure and its effect on academic achievement. Some studies have found that children from single-parent homes are

less likely to graduate from high school and have worse academic, economic, and social outcomes (Zimilies & Lee, 1991; Sandefur, McLanahan, & Wojtkiewicz, 1992; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Salem, Zimmerman, & Notaro, 1998). Such studies imply that living with both biological parents has the most positive impact on adolescent outcomes (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). A longitudinal study of Black urban youth supports the importance of family structure, particularly emphasizing a father's presence in middle childhood and early adolescence (Brooks-Gunn, Guo, & Furstenberg, 1993). However, a recent study suggests that the negative association between female-headed families and academic achievement among African Americans may be associated with the fact that the students are typically surrounded by other schoolmates in a similar situation, leading to a concentration effect (Bankston & Caldas, 1998).

Religiosity

African American youth are more likely to be religious than white youth (Donahue & Benson, 1995; Bachman, Johnston, & O'Malley, 1993; Bachman, Johnston, & O'Malley, 1998). Simply going to church seems to influence the way young Black men allocate their time, leading to more time at school or work and less in socially deviant activity (Freeman, 1986). Although most studies highlight the direct effect of religiosity on adolescent behaviors, e.g., substance abuse or sexual activity (Free, 1992; Bahr, Maughan, Marcos, & Li, 1998; Benda 1997; Cochran, 1993; Kendler, Gardner, & Prescott, 1997), religiosity may also have indirect effects by influencing a student's peer group. Bahr and colleagues (1998) found religiosity to be a protective factor working through peer association, and that students who were religious tended not to use drugs or to have close friends who use drugs. Another study found that youths with religious friends were less likely to be involved in numerous delinquent behaviors, e.g., cheating, stealing, vandalism, drunkenness (Evans, et al., 1996).

Religiosity may also have direct implications for academic outcomes. A recent study of African American adolescents found that church involvement has a positive effect on academic self concept and that church support influences student attitudes and conduct (Sanders, 1998). Using the National Educational Longitudinal Survey, Jeynes (1999) observed that Blacks and Hispanics who are religiously committed achieve at higher levels academically than their less religious counterparts, even when controlling for socioeconomic status, gender, and attendance at a private religious school.

Exposure to Academic Success

Social learning theorists suggest that reinforcement from peers and family members can influence behavior, either by direct teaching or observation (Bandura, 1977; Akers, 1994). Through exposure to models, verbal discussions, and discipline moments, young people can learn from others in a way that influences their behavior and development (Grusec, 1992). According to recent research, such significant others may be particularly important in the face of periodic obstacles and stresses (Zimmerman, 1995).

In this study, students who have peers and relatives that complete high school should be more likely to stay in school than students without such reinforcement. An earlier paper based on this same data found that the opinion of family members was consistently ranked as most important

in supporting students' decision to remain in school (Miller-Cribbs, Davis, & Johnson, in press). Another study found that 'very important' nonparental adults play a role in adolescent development, explaining misconduct and depressive symptoms (Greenberger, Chen, & Beam, 1997). In addition, perceptions of the prosocial behavior of peers, such as graduating from high school, provide evidence of informal social controls and the protective role played by peers (Nash & Bowen, 1999).

Neighborhood

Researchers have documented the decline of urban communities and their impact on minority youth (Anderson, 1999; Jargowsky, 1997; Wilson, 1996). In particular, some have established links between neighborhood factors and school performance (Crane, 1991; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997; Aaronson, 1997; Duncan & Raudenbush, 1998). Case and Katz (1991) note that "residence in a neighborhood in which many other youths are involved in crime, use illegal drugs, or are out of work and out of school is associated with an increase in an individual's probability of the analogous outcome even after controlling for a variety of family background and personal characteristics" (p.3). It may be that residence in high-risk neighborhoods reduces parents' ability to control youth behaviors (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985) or impairs family functioning (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994).

Although much has been written about the increasing deterioration of many urban neighborhoods and the negative aspects of these communities, there is some evidence that community resources and institutions have a beneficial effect. Furstenburg (1993) concludes that for Blacks in urban neighborhoods, strong local institutions that support families help ensure a better future for their children. Another study suggests that students in better-off neighborhoods make more progress in the summer when school is out than those in poorer neighborhoods because there are more organized activities and resources available and less hazards to avoid (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997).

Data Methods

Sample

The study was conducted at a high school located in a large metropolitan area in the Midwest with funding from the Department of Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration, Division of Maternal and Child Health. The school has a total enrollment of approximately 1200 and is 99% African American. Approximately 40% of its graduates go on to some form of post-secondary education. The school district's graduation rate (78%), student/teacher ratio (17/1), average teacher years of experience (14.3), per pupil expenditure (\$6,291) and performance on state examinations are comparable to nearby high schools with a similar student composition.

The sample included 231 ninth grade African American students (103 males and 128 females) in the class of 1998. Thirty-two percent of the sample lived with both biological parents and 58% received free or reduced lunch. Youth were recruited with the assistance of a school guidance counselor who served as primary liaison between students and the research team. They were asked to respond through their homeroom classes. Students were informed that the research project would seek to collect data on their attitudes toward school and school completion. Consent was obtained from each student and his/her parent or legal guardian.

The questionnaire was administered in groups of 15 to 40. Due to the wide variability in reading levels, a research assistant read each item to the group while another research assistant aided those students who experienced difficulty in completing the questions. Both research assistants were African American, selected to reduce possible bias due to the race of the interviewer. Research has shown that often the race of the interviewer can make a difference for respondents depending on the content of the questions (Bradburn & Sudman, 1988). It took approximately one hour to complete the survey. Each student was paid \$15.00 for participating in the study.

Measures

Three dependent variables were used as indicators of academic attitudes and performance.

Intention to complete school. Based upon the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Sutton, 1998), which provides a justification that the intention to complete a task or behavior is the immediate predictor of said behavior, a multi-item scale was used to measure students' intention to complete the school year. Participants responded to whether they 'intend to,' 'will try to,' 'expect to,' 'am determined to,' and possibly 'might not' (reverse scored) complete the current school year. Each item was measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from disagree very much (1) to agree very much (7). A mean scale for these five items was obtained. The five items' coefficient alpha was .52.

Grade Point Average. Official data from each student's record on cumulative grade point average (GPA) was obtained from the school at the end of the year. The possible range for student GPA was 0 to 4.0.

Number of suspensions. At the end of the academic year, the school also provided official data on number of suspensions for each student.

The following nine predictor variables were used to investigate academic outcomes.

Gender was dummy coded and included in the model. Females were coded as 1.

Living Arrangement indicates with whom the student resides: both biological parents, biological mother or father only, or some other arrangement. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) demonstrated no statistical difference in means on the three dependent variables between single parent households and other household arrangements. Therefore, responses were dichotomized into both biological parents or other living arrangement. Both biological parents was coded as 1.

Personal Religiosity is measured by a single item asking students “How religious would you say you are?” Responses ranged from 1 ‘Very religious’ to 3 ‘Not at all religious.’ These responses were dichotomized into not at all religious and religious. Religious was coded as 1.

Church Attendance of relatives was measured by a single item, “Thinking of others close to you (e.g., relatives), have they attended religious services in the last 6 months?” Possible responses ranged from 1 ‘Nearly all’ to 4 ‘None.’

Church Attendance of peers was measured by asking students, “Thinking of your closest friends, have they attended religious services in the last 6 months?” Possible responses ranged from 1 ‘Nearly all’ to 4 ‘None.’

Peers completing measured the academic success of peers by asking students the question, “What percentage of students in your grade level at your school do you think will complete the current school year? Choose a number between 0 and 100.” Responses ranged from 0 to 100.

Relatives completing measured the academic success of relatives by asking students the question, “Not counting your parents, what percentage of your close relatives (e.g., aunts, uncles) completed high school? Choose a number between 0 and 100.” Responses ranged from 0 to 100.

Neighborhood Deterioration was measured by summing various self-reported counts of deterioration in the student’s neighborhood (i.e., drug dealing, shooting, murders, abandoned buildings, neighbors on welfare, homeless people in the streets, and prostitution). The possible range of this measure was 0 (none) to 7 (all). Factor analysis indicated that this scale had only one factor and the same study further found that it mediated the effect of the objective environment (measured by census tract data) for adolescents (Stiffman, Hadley-Ives, Elze, Johnson, & Dore, 1999).

Neighborhood Resources was measured by various self-reported counts of resources in the student’s neighborhood (i.e., neighbors who help each other, job opportunities for teens, health clinics, community centers, transportation, counseling/social services, park/playground/gym, and police who help). The possible range for this measure was 0 (none) to 8 (all).

Analysis

Bivariate relationships (i.e., t-tests and zero-order correlations) were conducted to explore relationships between variables. Multiple regressions were run for each of the three outcome variables. Although the predictor variables attempt to provide insight into the context that influences these African American students, some are personal while others are more commonly shared. These are entered in four sets, starting with the personal and then adding more distal factors and perceptions. Previous studies suggest that factors within the child and home have the greatest influence. Neighborhood factors have been found important, but secondary to family (Haveman & Wolf, 1995). In our analysis, gender and living arrangement were entered first into the model. The religiosity variables were entered next, followed by the exposure to academic success variables and the neighborhood perception variables.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlation Matrix

Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Intention to complete	6.42	.85	---									
2. Suspensions	.71	1.25	-.17**	---								
3. Grade Point Average	1.86	1.00	.40***	-.47***	---							
4. Personal Religiosity	2.05	.55	.14*	.02	.18**	---						
5. Attendance (Other relatives)	2.16	.93	-.26***	.08	-.06	-.16*	---					
6. Attendance (Peers)	2.72	.98	-.18**	.29***	-.32***	-.21**	.34***	---				
7. Peers Completing	68.4	22.8	.28***	-.10	.20**	-.06	-.05	-.11	---			
8. Relatives Completing	71.7	32.0	.17**	-.19**	.23***	.04	-.24***	-.15*	.28***	---		
9. Neighborhood Deterioration	3.43	2.09	-.25***	.14*	-.29***	-.04	.12	.11	-.11	-.23***	---	
10. Neighborhood Resources	5.24	1.70	.15*	-.08	.09	-.02	-.18**	-.12	.05	.12	.04	---

*p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Results

The means and standard deviations for both predictor and dependent variables are shown in Table 1 along with the correlation matrix. Peer church attendance is significantly correlated to all three dependent variables, while relative church attendance is significantly correlated only to intention to complete school. Having relatives that completed high school also is significantly correlated to all three dependent variables as well as to peer completion. Peers that complete high school is significantly related to intention to complete school and GPA. Neighborhood deterioration is also significantly correlated to all the dependent variables.

Table 2**T-tests by Gender and Family Structure**

Variable	<i>Gender</i>			<i>Living Arrangement</i>		
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	t-value	<i>Both Parents</i>	<i>Other</i>	t-value
	Mean (s.d)	Mean (s.d)		Mean (s.d)	Mean (s.d)	
Intention to complete	6.24 (.89)	6.56 (.79)	2.98**	6.57 (.76)	6.37 (.87)	1.76
Number of suspensions	1.14 (1.52)	.37 (.83)	-4.59***	.42 (.75)	.838 (1.42)	-2.92**
Grade Point Average	1.45 (.97)	2.14 (.92)	5.44***	2.02 (.90)	1.77 (1.04)	1.91
Personal Religiosity	2.10 (.57)	2.01 (.53)	-1.24	1.94 (.51)	2.11 (.56)	-2.15*
Relatives' Attendance	2.18 (.88)	2.14 (.97)	-.30	2.07 (.89)	2.20 (.94)	-.91
Peer Attendance	2.95 (.98)	2.54 (.95)	-3.01**	2.57 (1.03)	2.78 (.96)	-1.41
Peers Completing	65.5 (23.6)	71.1 (21.7)	1.85	71.0 (23.0)	67.6 (22.7)	1.03
Relatives completing	69.5 (34.6)	73.3 (30.2)	.84	76.3 (31.6)	69.4 (32.3)	1.44
Neighborhood (Positive)	4.97 (1.69)	5.45 (1.67)	2.17*	5.15 (1.66)	5.26 (1.73)	-.46
Neighborhood Deterioration	3.74 (2.12)	3.18 (2.05)	-2.03*	3.03 (2.15)	3.63 (2.07)	-2.00*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Gender and family structure

The initial bivariate results highlighted in Table 2 show gender differences across the three outcome variables. Females have stronger intentions to complete school ($t= 2.98, p=.003$), lower numbers of suspensions ($t=-4.59, p=.0001$), and higher grade point averages ($t=5.44, p=.0001$). Females also have more peers who attend church ($t= -3.01, p=.003$), more positive perceptions of their neighborhood ($t=2.17, p= .031$) and fewer negative perceptions of their neighborhood ($t=-2.03, p=.044$). Living arrangement was significantly related to number of suspensions ($t=-2.92, p=.004$), personal religiosity ($t=-2.15, p= .03$), and negative neighborhood perceptions ($t=-2.00, p=.047$). Hence, students living with both parents had fewer suspensions, were more religious, and perceived less negativity in their neighborhood, on average, than those living in other arrangements.

Table 3

Regression Model Predicting Intention to Complete School (N=231)

Independent Variables	Model I		Model II		Model III		Model IV	
	Beta	t	Beta	t	Beta	t	Beta	t
Gender	.18*	2.37	.16*	2.20	.14	1.90	.10	1.45
Living Arrangement	.11	1.47	.08	1.10	.06	.90	.07	.98
Religiosity								
Personal Religiosity			.08	1.10	.09	1.31	.11	1.55
Relative Attendance			-.28***	-3.58	-.23**	-3.02	-.19**	-2.50
Peer Attendance			.03	.31	.05	.61	.06	.81
Exposure to Academic Success								
Peers Completing					.22**	3.11	.21**	3.04
Relatives completing					.12	1.56	.08	1.04
Neighborhood								
Neighborhood Deterioration							-.18**	-2.49
Neighborhood Resources							.15*	2.13
R ²	.05		.13		.20		.25	
Adj. R ²	.03		.11		.17		.21	
R ² Change	--		.08		.07		.05	
F-value	4.11*		5.18***		6.17***		6.14***	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Results for the three regression models are shown in Tables 3-5.

Intention to complete school

Table 3 shows that gender was significant for understanding students' intention to complete the school year, explaining 5% of the variance in the model. When adding the religiosity variables, gender continued to be significant and the R^2 improved by 8%. Gender drops out when the exposure to academic success variables are added, and the variance explained improved by 7%. Adding the neighborhood perception variables improved R^2 by an additional 5%. With all the variables included (Model IV), peers completing school ($B=.21$, $p<.01$) and perception of neighborhood resources ($B=.15$, $p<.05$) were positively related to intention while less church attendance by relatives ($B=-.19$, $p<.01$) and perception of neighborhood deterioration ($B=-.18$, $p<.01$) were inversely related to intention. Collectively, these variables explain 25% of the variance in intention to complete the school year.

Table 4

Regression Model Predicting Grade Point Average ($N=231$)

Independent Variables	Model I		Model II		Model III		Model IV	
	Beta	t	Beta	t	Beta	t	Beta	t
Gender	.29***	4.07	.23**	3.09	.20**	2.83	.17*	2.38
Living Arrangement	.09	1.23	.06	.88	.05	.65	.04	.58
Religiosity								
Personal Religiosity			.10	1.35	.10	1.40	-.11	1.57
Relative Attendance			.04	.53	.10	1.23	.14	1.77
Peer Attendance			-.22**	-2.77	-.21**	-2.64	-.21**	-2.72
Exposure to Academic Success								
Peers Completing					.08	1.15	.08	1.06
Relatives completing					.21**	2.82	.17*	2.31
Neighborhood								
Neighborhood Deterioration							-.22**	-3.18
Neighborhood Resources							.05	.73
R^2	.10		.15		.21		.25	
Adj. R^2	.09		.13		.18		.21	
R^2 Change	--		.05		.06		.04	
F-value	9.32***		6.21***		6.34***		6.33***	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Grade Point Average

Table 4 shows that gender is significant in affecting students' GPA and remains significant across all four models. Each block of variables significantly added to the variance explained. In Model IV, relatives completing school ($B=.17$, $p<.05$) is positively related to GPA while less church attendance by peers ($B=-.21$, $p<.01$) and perception of neighborhood deterioration ($B=-.22$, $p<.01$) were inversely related to GPA. Collectively along with gender, these factors explain 25% of the variance in student grade point averages.

Table 5

Regression Model Predicting Number of Suspensions ($N=231$)

Independent Variables	Model I		Model II		Model III		Model IV	
	Beta	t	Beta	t	Beta	t	Beta	t
Gender	-.28***	-3.89	-.24***	-3.29	-.23**	-3.18	-.21**	-2.85
Living Arrangement	-.07	-.92	-.06	-.88	-.05	-.75	-.05	-.70
Religiosity								
Personal Religiosity			.12	1.64	.13	1.77	.12	1.69
Relative Attendance			.05	.62	.02	.22	-.01	-.14
Peer Attendance			.22**	2.72	.22**	2.73	.22**	2.74
Exposure to Academic Success								
Peers Completing					.08	1.05	.08	1.13
Relatives completing					-.18*	-2.38	-.15*	-2.02
Neighborhood								
Neighborhood Deterioration							.15*	2.04
Neighborhood Resources							-.04	-.55
R ²	.09		.14		.17		.19	
Adj. R ²	.08		.12		.14		.15	
R ² Change	--		.05		.03		.02	
F-value	8.21***		5.77***		5.06***		4.47***	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Number of suspensions

Table 5 shows that gender is significant in predicting the number of student suspensions and remains so across all four models. The addition of the religiosity, exposure to academic success, and neighborhood perception variables all explain additional unique variance in the model. In Model IV, percentage of relatives completing high school ($B=-.15$, $p<.05$) is inversely related to number of suspensions, while less church attendance by peers ($B=.22$, $p<.01$) and perception of

neighborhood deterioration ($B=.15$, $p<.01$) were positively related to number of suspensions. Collectively, these variables explain 19% of the variance in number of suspensions.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results from this study suggest several ways that contextual factors can provide pertinent information concerning the academic attitudes and performance of African American high school students in an urban setting. First, males and females seem to differ greatly in their grade point average, number of suspensions, and intention to complete the school year. It is clear that powerful gender influences are at work here. It may be that there is something different in the ways that males and females relate to urban school settings or the stronger pull of street culture on boys. Some studies have found that males in particular benefit from living in a middle-class neighborhood and may be more sensitive to neighborhood effects (Ensminger, Lamkin, & Jacobson, 1996). Others recommend that schools offer more culturally responsive teachers, instructional techniques, curriculum, and school structures for African American students, especially males (Irvine & Irvine, 1995).

Church attendance by relatives is significantly related to intention to complete school. Church attendance by peers is significantly related to both GPA and number of suspensions. By contrast, personal religiosity was not significant in any model. This may reflect that having relatives and peers who are religious simply has a stronger influence on academic outcomes than one's privately held religious beliefs. In the absence of persons or activities that reinforce and support one's personal beliefs, those beliefs may have little effect on academic outcomes.

The expectation that one's peers will complete the school year is related to student intention to complete the school year. But having relatives that actually graduated from high school is significantly related to both number of suspensions and GPA. This may reflect the importance of exposure to academic success, but with the most important aspects coming via stable adult role models.

For this group of African American high school freshmen, perceptions of neighborhood deterioration are more powerful correlates of academic outcomes than perception of resources. These findings suggest that neighborhood negativity can adversely affect academic outcomes, but that positive resources are less sufficient to improve academic outcomes. One study finds that although positive local institutions, such as recreation centers, were insignificant in the initial analysis, there was an interaction effect. Thus, in neighborhoods with severe deprivation, recreation centers had an increasingly negative effect on overall violent crime (Peterson, Krivo, Harris, 2000). Perhaps for students who experience greater neighborhood deterioration than those in this sample, neighborhood resources would be more of a protective factor.

Community efforts that offer services without addressing some of the negative economic and social realities of distressed neighborhoods may be ignoring the more important issues. Those organizing recreational activities or counseling might consider simultaneously involving their teen participants in neighborhood clean-up efforts, or anything that might help them directly confront the negative aspects of their community. In fact Pollard, Hawkins, and Arthur (1999)

suggest that prevention policies and programs for adolescents should focus both on reducing risk and promoting protective influences in communities.

Although informative, this study has a number of limitations. First, the sample is from just one school and is not representative of all African American adolescents. Our findings reveal the relative importance of certain contextual factors in one population of urban students, but these could change in a different setting. Second, we were unable to include data about parental employment and education in the analysis because large numbers of students responded “Don’t know” to these queries suggesting that they might not provide accurate data concerning their parents’ educational and occupational status. Such information about parents could provide better controls for resources and advantages in the home. Third, although we used a measure of personal religiosity similar to what has been used in other studies, there may be a better way to access this factor. Churchgoing by a student’s friends and family might reflect the development of particular personal religious beliefs and attitudes, which were not captured adequately in the single item used.

However, these findings do suggest a synergism between family, peer, and neighborhood influences on academic performance. Specifically, the protective qualities of religiosity and exposure to academic success are factors worth exploring. Perhaps African American students who want to complete school and can avoid negative behaviors that lead to suspensions, whether with the help of religious peers or family buffers, are less aware or influenced by negative influences that exist around them. For example, one study (Johnson, Jang, Li, & Larson, 2000) found that the harmful effect of a disordered neighborhood is not as great when youth are involved in a church.

The findings also suggest some natural partnerships. Youth programs might want to consider what adult relatives, churches, and neighborhood resources can offer, encouraging new relationships to build upon existing support networks. Churches could be aware of what schools the children in their congregation attend and encourage parents and adults to assist with homework or participate in major school events. Work by Heath and McLaughlin (1994a, 1994b) emphasizes the role of community-based youth organizations as partners for schools to help engage young people in activities that support academic skills in alternative learning environments. The authors suggest such youth organizations can provide a bridge that engages students when they feel schools are inattentive to their needs. This may be particularly true in neighborhoods where there are few choices of places to be that are safe, organized, and academically stimulating.

Such research challenges those who work in urban settings to create more beneficial spaces and activities to buffer exposure to detrimental ones. But many existing institutions may not be up to the task. Rubin, Billingsley, and Caldwell (1994) admonish Black churches for not doing enough to meet the needs of adolescent nonmembers in urban areas. Their survey of churches found that only 28% offered a community outreach program for youth. As churches and other local institutions are more attentive to the needs of African American youth, this may be one step toward turning around some of the discouraging statistics found in urban, predominantly African American high schools.

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