

Access to Justice Commission Hearing: Education and Root Causes Committee

Understanding the Lived Experience of Dis-Opportunity

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Wilmington, Delaware Profile

A vicious nexus of structural dis-opportunity is the eye of the storm or the center and cause for much of the crime, taking place in numerous low-income neighborhoods in Wilmington, DE. This structurally fueled storm has quite frankly disrupted, shaken to the core and permanently broken countless personal lives, thousands of families and dozens of local neighborhoods in Wilmington. Generations of individuals, families and neighborhoods have been left to survive and “figure it out” on their own or have been dismissed and sent to wade in a type of structural rot.

The poverty rate for Blacks in Wilmington is about 30.2%, which is more than double the rate for Whites (13.2%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). Joblessness rates are even more disparate. Unemployment among Whites was 4.4% in 2010 and for Blacks it was nearly five times higher at 21.8%. Neighborhood level data is even more revealing and poignant. It is inside particular neighborhoods where we can see starker levels of structural inequality. For instance, census track data indicate that in 2010, the median households incomes for Eastside and Southbridge were \$23,375 and \$20,221, respectively (Payne, 2013). Older but very informative 2000 US Census data reports more of an entrenched legacy of structural violence (Garrison & Kervick, 2005). According to Garrison and Kervick (2005), 44% of Southbridge lived below the poverty line with 38% of residents making \$15, 000 or less per year. The Eastside’s Tract 17 revealed that 60% of households made \$15, 000 or less per year and 44% of residents lived below the poverty line with a median income of about \$11, 500. Or, when exploring Tract 7 or a section of the Riverside neighborhood, results indicate that approximately

61% of residents live below the poverty line with about 53% of households making \$15,000 or less per year. The median income for Tract 7 was about \$14,500.

Education in Wilmington: On average, 40% of Black 10th-graders are below standards in reading, and 54% are below standards in math. Among adults age 18-24, 28.8% had less than a high school education, and 32.2% had a high school diploma or GED. Among adults age 24 and older, a little over 50% had a high school education or less.

In addition, other sources report a 60% dropout rate for Black youth and for Black male youth across the city—dropout rates are at approximately 65% (Taylor & Porter, 2009). More poignantly, Black male dropout rates for some Wilmington neighborhoods such as Southbridge were 100% between 2006-2009 (Garrison, 2006; Garrison & Kervick, 2005; Porter, Soto & Pedersen, 2010; Taylor & Porter, 2009). Dropout rates have been reported to be very predictive of underemployment, unemployment, overall crime, violent crime as well as arrest and incarceration rates. In a recent News Journal article Ms. Jessica Reyes (2015) noted 80-85% of all inmates in State Prison in Delaware test at or below 9th grade reading and math standards.

Crime and Criminal Justice in Wilmington:

Prior research alongside the aforementioned state, city and neighborhood level data strongly suggests African-Americans are profoundly struggling with access to quality educational and economic opportunity as a function of Delaware's criminal justice system. It should be underscored that 60% of all adult aged male inmates are Black and 60% of Black men in Wilmington are argued to be in some phase of the

criminal justice system (Reyes, 2015). Furthermore, although Blacks account for approximately 22% of all Delawareans, they make up 42% of those arrested and 64% of those incarcerated (Eichler, 2011). Most Blacks are incarcerated for drug related offenses. Although Blacks use and sell drugs at similar rates as the broader population, Blacks account for approximately 87% of those incarcerated for drug offenses in Delaware.

The People's Report's Study

The People's Report is a study I conducted with local residents in the Southbridge and Eastside neighborhoods of Wilmington, Delaware (Payne, 2013). The People's Report's collected 520 surveys stratified by gender and age from mostly street identified Black Americans between 18-35 years of age. Also we interviewed approximately 50 residents in these two neighborhoods as well.

Slides 5 & 6: Leondrei (35) – Why The Streets?

Leondrei (35) is a famous local urban fiction writer. Leondrei, by his own admission has struggled with drug addiction and stints of incarceration. He argues that involvement in crime is mostly predicted by the profound structural violence experienced in Wilmington's Black neighborhoods. Leondrei (35) says:

Leondrei (35): Basically, finance and wanting better things for yourself... we act like we don't see it but boarded houses paint our neighborhoods, pot holes paint out neighborhoods, that's the stuff that keep us stuck. You know little stuff like a pot hole... That's telling me how they don't care about me - that they won't even fix my pot hole and then I got to go home and four houses on my road is boarded, that's like a eyesore to me.... (Now) I'm looking for a release valve, any release valve, and guess what the release valve is? There's

a liquor store on every corner in the hood, as opposed to when I go to Hockessin or Greenville (wealthy mostly white suburban communities)... the drinks is called wine and spirits, I need to be put in a better spirit. **So I'll go get a shot to deal with looking at these boarded up ass houses and these potholes and there's a boot on every car ... and this is what I'm seeing. So, when you got a child that's growing up and he's looking at this, he says, "Damn, mom," because dad ain't around because he's down PO Box 9561 or 1181 Paddock Road doing who knows how much time, right, so he says, "Mom is this all that we have?" ... You know, Damn!**

Slide 7: Rennie Rox (35) – [Living Conditions]

Although Rennie grew up in challenging living conditions, it is important to underscore that Rennie still was very proud of his mother for what she was able to provide to him and his siblings. He says:

I mean, wasn't nothin', **wasn't nothin' new (in the home)**. You know... **you talkin' about books holdin' up couches... you might not have a bed frame. Your mattress and your box spring's on the floor. The typical poverty Wilmington situation. But I never take nothin' away from my mother... she tried everything she could to make sure that we had a hot meal every night, even if it was just... breakfast food...** "We're... gonna make some French toast or somethin' tonight" (laughter)... **I love my mom to death. She's... the inspiration for me...**

Slide 8: Byron (20) – [Youth Homelessness]

Some participants also talked about parents' lack of capacity or will to adequately supervise and care for their children. One of the most heartbreaking examples of difficult home conditions was the case of **Byron (20)**. He said his father had denied paternity, and his mother told him he was a "mistake" when he was 11 years old, causing him to contemplate suicide. After years of poor treatment, **Byron's** mother kicked him out of the house on a rainy night, at the age of 13, with only the shorts and tank top he was wearing. Thereafter, **Byron** was homeless and, as he described, he often resorted to

"anger and aggression" to cope with the severe psychological distress caused by his parents' rejection and need to survive on the streets.

Byron (20): Experiencing homelessness at the age of 13, sleeping in the park... I had to go to the store every day, dog, and steal just to eat... sleeping on my people's back porch, asking for covers and blankets, you know what I'm saying? That shit hurt. Real talk, it hurt. Like yo, that's why I be ready to put a nigger under [kill someone] with no problem, no remorse, 'cause I done been through it, you feel me?

Slide 9: Richard (19) Employment

I met Richard (19) at his friend's funeral who was shot and murdered at 17 in Southbridge in 2010. Richard lived in Southbridge, the most isolated or removed section of Wilmington. Richard argues that this level of neighborhood isolation significantly contributes to so many Southbridge residents being unemployed. Richard says:

Richard (19): And Southbridge.. I could name... two people [who] got computers in they crib [home]... [that actually] have working internet... it's hard to look for a job when you ain't got no money, you gotta get on a bus, you gotta go here and there to fill out applications... when I lived in Southbridge, I never left Southbridge..... (it's not) no real good payin' jobs unless it's in the middle of the city where you workin' in a big building or whatever, or construction...

Slide 10: Yadira (31) [Employment & Re-Entry]:

Yadira (31) a mother of two small children also agrees that Black men in Wilmington go to the streets because of experiences with extreme economic poverty and unemployment. Yadira also argues that economic poverty and unemployment is exacerbated or compounded by felony charges accrued by mostly Black men in search of employment. Yadira says....

Yadira (31): No, I [don't] think [the men in my community have] no uh, he has no resources. **He can't find a job!** ... you know he's in jail or whatever. **He may**

want to be rehabilitated and want to change his life, but when he gets out into the community, where is he gonna find a job? Where is he gonna go to get the education because once you're labeled a felon, that's it, in the state of Delaware.

Slide 11 thru 13: [Education/School Completion Rates]:

According to most survey participants, employment opportunities in Wilmington were bleak; 64% (N=504) reported being unemployed. Notably, 68% of men reported that they were unemployed, 57% of whom were actively looking for work. Women reported similarly in that approximately 63% were unemployed, 54% of whom were actively looking for work. The majority of participants who were employed indicated that they were under-employed; that is, due to inadequate wages or hours, they struggled to meet their day-to-day material needs, which contributed to a perpetual cycle of debt and economic poverty and this structural dynamic was considered by participants to be predictive of involvement in crime.

Furthermore, this study found economic wellbeing to be predictive of lower rates of experiences with violence as well as improved rates of psychological and social well-being. *Go to Power Point Slides 12 & 13...*

Slide 14 & 15: [Education/School Completion Rates]:

The vast majority of study participants demonstrated positive attitudes towards formal education but this level of optimism did not necessarily translate into school success. Forty-four percent indicated that they had not earned a high school diploma. Moreover, 42% reported that their mother had not graduated from high school, and 60% reported that their father had not graduated or that they did not know their father's level of educational attainment. Thus, the data suggest that among Black residents of the

Eastside and Southbridge, high school non-completion is an intergenerational problem. Qualitative data indicate a variety of factors, which contributed to the relatively poor schooling outcomes among the study participants.

Slide 16: (Aaron (29) [Education/Economic Poverty]:

Aaron (29), who taught in a charter school for six years, described the extreme poverty he witnessed among some of his students, saying,

Aaron (29): ...sometimes you will have kids come to school and tell you that they didn't have lights on or they didn't have food or, uh, their mother or father didn't come home. Or all week they wore the same uniform to school for a week because they couldn't get their clothes washed. They didn't have clean underwear and clean socks to wear.

Slide 17: Khiry (18) [School Suspensions/Expulsions]:

Khiry (18) was convinced school officials and in particular his principal was not equipped to effectively work with low-income urban Black children from Wilmington. As a consequence, he notes that his principal's default response or intervention, if you will, to address behaviorally challenged students—was simply to “suspend” or expel them.

Yasser: Do you believe schools are genuinely interested in educating Black youth?

Khiry (18): “Not really... I just think they're (school officials) there just to be there... my [principal] told me... he really don't know how to deal with... African American kids (or) like the urban kids. So... he just don't like tolerate it, he just like get rid of them and he was like other principals. If you probably like to fight he probably talk to you or something, but [if] you got in a fight, he'd probably just like suspend you for like the maximum days he could or something.”

It should be noted that very few teachers, school officials and/or educational experts actually have direct training on the socio-cultural and class experiences of low-income Black children. In most instances, we are self-professed or self-trained experts. There are very little to no courses, concentrations, minors and majors in college at the undergraduate or graduate level that prepares or trains students to work with low-income children color.

Slide 18: Mike (27) [School Suspensions/Expulsions]:

Mike (27) also echoes the same cultural concerns of Khiry in that he believes particularly young, White teachers, are not prepared to work with these children from Wilmington. And for Mike (27), these mostly White teachers are not only not prepared, many also eventually develop cynical, antagonistic or pessimistic attitudes toward these children. Teaching at this point for Mike (27), is simply about a “check” or getting paid as opposed to enlightening or opening young minds. Mike (27) says:

Mike (27): ... the teachers are young, White and they don't care so they figure well, “I ain't got to put up with this, so I don't give a damn if you learn or not... that's up to you or you gonna get suspended,” and them kids know that (i. e. true intentions of teachers)... a lot of the teachers, they don't want to deal with nobody else's kids, that's how they look at it. **They come to get a check and that's it. If they can get you out of their classroom in order for their class to run smooth that's what they're gonna do. So now you're losing out on learning... Now you (students) got an attitude 'cause you've been embarrassed so every time you come in class you got beef, you understand? **Then the crib (home of students) is not right, we be barely eating, subsidized housing...****

Slide 19: Kevin [Negative Teacher Student Interaction: Lack of Cultural Competence]:

Kevin (35) works as a janitor in an elementary school in the Riverside neighborhood of Wilmington. Kevin, like Khiry and Mike, also speaks to how a lack of

socio-cultural an class competence leads to the under-education of economically poor Black children from Wilmington. Kevin (35) says:

Kevin (35): So what does it look like for the kids? It looks real grim because the teachers now don't understand it, **they can't relate.** So I go through all these classrooms throughout this building and I'm seeing a teacher teaching but **they don't understand how to even teach a Black child. It's a method, it's a strategy, you just can't come in here with your book knowledge, book knowledge is not working, you have to have that feel, that understanding of the child, the community and the families.**

Slides 20 & 21: Louis: (29)[Negative Student Teacher Interaction]:

Interviewees also talked about parental drug addiction, which led to chaotic and unstable home environments and had a negative impact on children's schooling experiences. Louis dropped out of school in the 10th grade. Much of his emotional and behavioral problems began in and out of school after he witnessed his father being killed in front of his home in Wilmington. Louis noted that he never felt school was a nurturing or supportive place for him or the challenges he was struggling with. In fact, he recalls several of his teachers not only being very “disrespectful” towards him, but he also recalls several teachers physically abusing him as well. Louis says:

Yasser: Do you feel like the teachers cared for you, before you dropped out?

Louis (29): “...a lotta my teachers, um, were disrespectful. Some teachers, told me that..., I wouldn't be, “successful [in life].” I've even been hit by teachers... and I've always been a very smart, educated kid. I had good grades and everything but, uh, I would always get into it with teachers... I've even been hit a couple times. I've been choked by teachers. I've been hit. I've been disrespected.... And I wouldn't say nothin' to my mom or nobody (about it). I would just take it to the chin.”

Also, Louis (29), noted he "grew up in a crack house," or how egregious home conditions and his mother's drug addiction impacted him negatively as a child in school.

Louis (29): Holes on the wall. Um, clothes everywhere. And I came from a clean family but addiction ... will break anything down. Um, uh, paranoia. Um, no trust. ...**you're, going to middle school and your teacher has a newspaper with your mom's name on it: a drug raid. You know, that's embarrassing.** Um, **coming out of school on the bus and coming home and people point at you, "Ain't that your mom right there buying drugs?"**

For **Louis (29)**, this led to fights with other children and disciplinary problems at school. Other participants described how drug addiction impaired parents' ability to adequately supervise and provide for their children and, as a result, some youth turned to the streets to meet their material needs and to cope with emotional pain. Also, under such conditions, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for young people to focus on schoolwork. Also, interview data indicate that schools are largely unprepared to effectively support students who are struggling with troubled home environments.

Conclusion

Based on empirical evidence, it is safe to strongly suggest that we are failing multiple generations of Black people in the state of Delaware by blocking them from accessing their basic needs. Study findings reveal participants are well aware of the structural barriers they and many other Black Wilmingtonians face. These structural barriers include institutional racism, hiring discrimination, lack of jobs—especially those which pay a livable wage, neighborhood economic poverty, prevalence of physical violence, the infestation of drugs in their communities, lack of safe and affordable housing, and inadequate academic and social support in schools. Consequently, this vicious and unrelenting nexus of structural dis-opportunity leads countless numbers of Black men into the streets who are actually in search of economic opportunity to provide for themselves and other loved-ones. For many of the men, their choice is between

risking physical injury, incarceration and death or either simply do nothing but squalor in third world living conditions. A critical mass of men, for right or for wrong, choose the former, thus, explaining why so many of them are hyper-arrested and hyper-incarcerated.