



# “It’s on Me”: Arrest and the Transition to Adulthood for Street-Involved Youth

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“It’s on Me”: Arrest and the Transition to Adulthood for Street-Involved  
Youth

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of the Graduate School of Education of Harvard University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
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# Preface

At the end of my first year at Harvard, I joined Bruce Western's Boston Reentry Study (BRS) as a research assistant. In this role, I interviewed men and women who were returning to the Greater Boston area after periods of incarceration in Massachusetts state prisons. While the study was primarily designed to catalog the first year of life after imprisonment, we also gathered information about participants' early life experiences. I was struck by the high frequency of what scholars refer to as adverse childhood—and in this case, often adolescent—experiences that transcended racial, gender, and generational boundaries. Suspensions and expulsions from school, exposure to violence at home and in the community, housing and financial insecurity, and single-parent households were all common experiences in the early lives of these formerly incarcerated adults. Moreover, the majority of the men and women we interviewed first came into contact with the justice system well before adulthood. Observing this homogeneity across the sample, led me to shift my research focus from adults' educational experiences in prisons to the aftermath of a young person's arrest. In particular, this dissertation explores how a group of young men who were first arrested as children and adolescents interpret the role of their arrests in their subsequent life experiences.

While the questions at the center of *It's on Me* emerged from my BRS fieldwork, I first started studying incarceration and the criminal justice system as an undergraduate at Princeton University. Though it has been ten years since I first visited a prison, it was only recently that my research and conversations related to the justice system and incarceration

really began to engage with crime. For those of us who are not criminologists, but conduct research in related fields, an aversion to taking part in discourses about crime appears to be somewhat typical. Crime is what most often galvanizes public and political conversations about policing, the courts, and corrections, however, I find that the scholars whose work has been influential to my own research rarely include discussions of criminal acts in their investigations of the justice system. Instead, they attend to the disparities in the enforcement of laws and access to procedural justice, which have been shown to work in concert with poverty and racism to produce and sustain social inequality. While the underlying reasons that studies of crime often exist separately from studies of the justice system may be varied, this tendency results in a limited understanding of how the justice system intervenes in life both in terms of social theory and practice-based interventions.

In light of this, a central goal of this dissertation is to knit together two realities. The first is that for many of the young men first arrested as minors, interpersonal violence, theft, underage drinking, drug use, drug dealing and other forms of delinquency were regular features of life. The second is that the entities that comprised the justice system—as it exists in Massachusetts today—systematically disempowered, and sometimes, intentionally mistreated these individuals over the course of their lives.

All names of youth participants and organizations are pseudonyms. To protect the identities of stakeholder participants, I include on general descriptions of their positions.

# Acknowledgements

Writing this dissertation has been among the great privileges of my life. I am fortunate to be in community with exceptional and compassionate individuals and institutions and *It's on Me* exists as a testament to their generous support.

This study was only possible because twenty-six young men, their youth workers, and other juvenile justice officials shared their time and entrusted me with their experiences. I hope that they find this to be an accurate and humanizing account.

I am tremendously grateful to the members of my dissertation committee for their mentorship throughout graduate school. My committee chair, Natasha K. Warikoo, has been a true advocate for me as both a person and researcher. Natasha has always encouraged me consider the larger picture and to thoroughly address the connections between my work, theory and practice. She also has two of the most important characteristics of an advisor: she is highly responsive and always delivers quick, detailed, and constructive feedback! The care with which Roberto G. Gonzales enters fieldwork and represents the fullness of his research participants has been a model for my own work. Roberto advised me to be cognizant of the personal, emotional impact of my research in one of the most impactful and honest conversations I had in preparation for this study. At the end of my first year of graduate school, I stumbled into Bruce Western's office and emerged with Research Assistantship that transformed my research trajectory. My work on the Boston Reentry Study led me to the research question at the center of my dissertation and equipped me with the research skills to answer it, and I am immeasurably grateful to have had that experience.

Various programs across Harvard University awarded the grants that funded research expenses and participant compensation. These include the Spencer Foundation Early Career Scholars Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Program in Criminal Justice at the Harvard Kennedy School, and the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston at the Harvard Kennedy School. Additionally, fellowship support from National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation, the Inequality and Social Policy Program at the Harvard Kennedy School, the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education provided me with another invaluable resource: time to write.

I am also grateful to the numerous friends and colleagues who served as thought partners, critical editors, accountability partners, and believed in me, especially when I was mired in self-doubt. Thank you to Alix Winter, Ari Levy, Betty Cox, Celia Gomez, Chelsea Kolff, Daniel Busso, Deena Schwartz, Deepa S. Vasudevan, Elaine Preston, Elisha Nuchi, Elizabeth Adelman, Elizabeth Dilday, Emilie Aguirre, Eve L. Ewing, Francie Ward, Janine de Novais, Jessica T. Fei, Katherine Fallon, Nate Giraldi, Nathan Richards, Paola Conery, Patrick Martinez, Priya Sitaraman, Shauna Leung, Stephany Cuevas, and the tutors, staff, and students of Cabot House. I appreciate you all and am glad to have you in my corner.

I am fortunate to have countless relatives who have shepherded me through life. Thank you to my aunts, uncles, and cousins in New York, Virginia, Maryland, South Carolina, and Florida for being models of strength and ingenuity. I am thankful to my sisters, Rochelle T. Wright and Shalewa Mackall, and my nephew, Akinsheye Brunson, for keeping me

grounded. Through their examples, my mother, Jacqueline L. Wright, and my father, Akinlabi E. A. Mackall, continue to show me the importance of approaching every new opportunity as a chance to learn. Ma and Baba, I appreciate everything you did so that I get to live my dream. Being your daughter is my greatest accomplishment.

I dedicate this dissertation to the spirits and legacies of my ancestors. In particular, my brother, Akintunde Mackall, who—like too many Black boys—did not get to true chance to grow in to a man; my maternal grandmother, Lilian Thomas, who had a quick wit and a poet's tongue; and my paternal grandmother, Isabelle Gibbons Mackall, whose standards for excellence shape who I am today.

To each of you: I am, because you are.



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# Abstract

Annually, nearly 1.5 million youth under age 18 are arrested nationwide. Regardless of the outcome of their arrests, this formal contact with the juvenile or criminal justice system is a critical developmental turning point, with substantial implications along the life course.

Arrests during adolescence are associated with social isolation, low educational attainment, unemployment, and continued system-involvement in early adulthood. However, the underlying mechanisms through which contact with the police and courts results in these undesirable outcomes for youth is unclear. Some social theorists suggest that young people internalize the idea that they are ‘delinquent,’ which cultivates a deviant self-concept and a corresponding withdrawal from prosocial networks and behaviors; while others emphasize societal responses to the stigma of arrest that exclude young people from prosocial opportunities.

To expand our understanding of how contact with the justice system shapes experience and development, this dissertation examines how male youth who were first arrested as minors interpret the role of their arrests in their daily lives. Data for this study were collected in Massachusetts’ Greater Boston Area and include: three rounds of in-depth phenomenological interviews with young men aged 17 to 24 (n=26); contextual interviews with stakeholders who have either personal or professional experiences with youth arrest (n=15); and over 20 hours of participant observation at events related to juvenile justice issues.

By using an ecological perspective, I identify a set of related processes that influence young men's self-concept and decision-making in the aftermath of justice system contact. Early life adversarial interactions with teachers, social workers, and law enforcement, produced alienation and distrust of public institutions. Following arrests, young men viewed their social network's responses to their arrests as an indicator of loyalty and status. These peer and family networks, however, rarely had the capacity adequately support young men through lengthy and expensive periods of justice system involvement. In the absence of both public and personal supports, young men expressed a strong sense of responsibility for their own well-being that ultimately stymied help-seeking behaviors. To conclude, I consider the implications of this work for sociological theory and interventions aimed at facilitating the transition to adulthood for justice system involved youth.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Just before Jamal's second birthday, his father was murdered outside of the family's home in Roxbury, a neighborhood in Boston. His father had just come home after a stint in jail when he was shot by a younger member of his street gang, following dispute over drug dealing. Following his father's death, Jamal, his older brother and sister, and his mother—pregnant with another son—moved to the nearby Dorchester neighborhood. Six years later, Jamal's older brother, then seventeen, was fatally shot in the eye by another boy while hanging out in the apartment of their downstairs neighbors. His brother's death was officially ruled an accident, but Jamal equivocated as to whether this was the actual truth, having heard rumors that his brother and the boy who shot him argued about gang-related issues before the gun went off.

Following his brother's death, things got increasingly dire for Jamal and his family. Jamal noticed that his mom was getting high on crack-cocaine with greater frequency. A new boyfriend of hers moved in and began using the apartment to traffic drugs. His mother and her boyfriend also got into violent fights in which his mother would end up beaten and bloodied. Jamal heeded his mom's warning to "not tell her business" to anyone; however, his older sister did not. She told a teacher about the domestic violence she and Jamal frequently witnessed, and the Department of Children & Families (DCF), Massachusetts' child welfare agency, opened a case investigating the family's conditions. In Jamal's view, the rotating cast of social workers who stopped by the apartment for short visits and asked perfunctory questions did not result in any improvements to his family's conditions. His mother

continued to sell the family's food stamps to buy drugs. Bills accumulated as did utility service shutoffs and evictions. Jamal's sister became pregnant at age fourteen. Kids at school and in his neighborhood teased Jamal for his dirty and worn out clothes, body odor, and uncut hair. In an effort to avoid being bullied, Jamal spent more and more time indoors, frequently missing school and rarely heading to the playground. Midway through his third-grade-year, Jamal had been absent so often that his school district filed a Children in Need of Services ("CHINS") petition with the Suffolk County Juvenile Courts for his habitual truancy.

Under pressure from the courts and DCF, Jamal marginally improved his attendance, but little changed about the living situations which had contributed to his truancy. Taking matters into his own hands, on days when Jamal did go outside or go to school, he carried a kitchen knife. He explained,

I started bringing knives like to deal with the situation... I came in [to school] with a knife and somebody was like, 'Oh, I'ma tell on you!' I was just like, 'Fuck it, go tell!' And I put the knife in they face, and I end up getting expelled. I caught a case over it. Had to go to court, all that. That's when my life really started getting ... that was my first major, major crazy case. I found out then that the law is real. Growing up, I'd just get a ride home. Now it was, I did something bad. This is serious. Like, I'm going to court now.

The other student's parents pressed charges and took out a restraining order against Jamal.

Court proceedings for the incident lasted for two years until Jamal eventually took a plea deal.

I'm just like, 'Damn, when is case gonna end? When is it gonna end?' I'm not innocent, *but I'm innocent*. [The boy] asked to see the knife, and then they gonna

snitch on me, so it was like ... I'm like ... At the time, I didn't know we weren't supposed to bring knives to school, but I'm young, I didn't know. So I'm like, 'Damn, why is this such a big deal? I ain't stabbed nobody. I ain't do nothing to nobody.' But to them, they was like, 'You dangerous. We got to handle the situation.'

At one point during those two years, the police picked up Jamal with some of the boys from his neighborhood. The group had attempted to steal a man's shopping bag. The other boys were taken home. However, unbeknownst to Jamal, he had an outstanding warrant for his arrest that had been issued for failing to attend an earlier court date. Thus, at nine-years-old, he was arrested and transported to the Metro Youth Service Center, a secure facility within the Department of Youth Services (DYS), Massachusetts' juvenile correctional agency, that is better known as "Harvard Street" for its Dorchester address. Jamal spent a week in pre-trial detention at Harvard Street, where he was the youngest person in his unit by about five years. He likely would have remained there for longer had he not encountered a DYS counselor who felt that he was too young to be detained. The counselor urged the court to reconsider Jamal's case. A few days later his bail was reduced to \$1.00, and his mother was able to pay it and pick him up.

When I share Jamal's story with people who work in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, I stop at this point and ask, "Based on your professional experience, what do you think happened after this in Jamal's life?" Regardless of their profession, they offer similar predictions:

*Jamal is dead.*

*Jamal is a member of a gang.*



*Jamal did not stay in school.*

*Jamal was arrested again.*

*Jamal is a drug dealer.*

*Jamal is locked up.*

*Maybe Jamal got into a program?*

Jamal's early life was characterized by extreme adversity and an inarguably high exposure to trauma inducing conditions. The deaths of his father and brother, witnessing domestic violence, frequent school absences, and Jamal's experience of neglect, all within a context of deep poverty and material deprivation constituted a set of factors that put Jamal at a heightened risk for arrest. The practitioners' predictions regarding what the rest of Jamal's life might entail are informed by patterns that they have observed, which are also well established in sociological and criminological literature.

Regardless of whether an arrest results in spending time in jail, prosecution, incarceration, or no charges being filed at all, this formal contact with the juvenile or criminal justice systems is a critical developmental turning point for young people and has substantial implications for their transitions to adulthood (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Scholars find that arrests before the age of 18 are associated with social isolation (Lemert, 1951), low educational attainment (Kirk & Sampson, 2013), and continued system-involvement in adolescence that often persists into adulthood (Lieberman, Kirk, & Kim, 2014; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2006).

This dissertation is about what life is like for young males, like Jamal, after they have been arrested, from the perspective of youth in the midst of this experience. How did they perceive their arrests? How did justice system contact influence their self-concepts? How did being arrested shape their daily experiences and their decision-making processes? What, if anything, in their lives changed, as a result of their arrests? How do arrests influence their development and transitions to adulthood? What strategies did they use in the wake of their arrests? In the period following their arrests, what happened that made their situations worse? What did they find to be helpful? The goal here, is not simply to describe the experiences of young people who have been arrested. Rather, I analyze their accounts of their own lived experiences in search of *opportunities for change*. Put another way, the central aim of this dissertation is to practically address the strong correlations between arrests before age 18 and assorted negative life outcomes in adulthood. To accomplish this task, I examine the mechanisms through which being arrested results in undesirable outcomes for youth and I explore how peer and family networks, practitioners, and policymakers can take action to disrupt these patterns by intervening in young peoples' lives in ways that are responsive to their authentic developmental experiences.

In studying how young men make sense of their lives subsequent to their arrests, I examined the broader youth and justice policy environment and considered youth experiences that preceded justice system contact. Arrests generally followed years of adversarial relationships with teachers, police officers, and social workers. These adversarial relationships were instructive to the young men; leading them to conclude that public

institutions were capricious entities to be navigated but not trusted for support or guidance. In the absence of a social safety net, after an arrest young people were left to rely on only their peer and family networks. However, most friends and families were ill-equipped to provide the forms of support that young people needed and expected following their arrests. Often disappointed with the failures of friends and families to be there for them, or to respond in loyal ways to their arrests, the young people generally drew further inward. Arrests reinforced the deep-seated belief in the young men that they alone were responsible for the conditions of their lives, and that they alone would be responsible for their futures. A sense of personal responsibility and accountability are generally good things; however, I found that the brands of responsibility held by the young men in this study often resulted in decisions that made their lives increasingly difficult, while stymying their help-seeking behaviors and often discounting the guidance of others. As the boys grew into young men they correspondingly became more frustrated with their inability to actualize autonomy, which contributed to muted aspirations during their transitions to adulthood.

## Youth Arrest in the United States

For the purposes of this dissertation, I define arrest as an event when an individual was held in legal custody by the police. In a juvenile arrest, the young person's hands were restrained with either zip ties or metal handcuffs. He was transported in a police vehicle to a police station, where he was processed, and his parents were likely called and notified that he

was in custody. Depending on the circumstances of his arrest, after being processed, he was either released back into the custody of a parent or guardian, arraigned, or held overnight in secure confinement with the Department of Youth Services if the arrest occurred in the evening or on the weekend. While rare among the participants of this study, police departments and prosecutor's offices can decide to divert the case from going through normal court channels prior to arraignment. At arraignment, he would receive a bail assignment or notification that he would be held in custody without the possibility of bail. The young person would then decide between going forward with a trial or to admit culpability in exchange for a less severe punishment and take a plea deal. While those decisions were being made, the young person might be at home under administrative probation supervision or held in a DYS facility in pre-trial detention. At any point throughout this process, the prosecutor had the discretion to drop the charges, the judge could have ruled to dismiss the case, or the prosecutor and defense attorney could have agreed to file a continuance without finding or (CWOFF) in which, the young man admitted to the presence of "sufficient facts" that indicate his guilt, without pleading guilty and instead is assigned to probation for a negotiated period.

Nationally, juvenile arrests rates have been on the decline in recent years. In 2016, the national arrest rate was approximately 2,500 per 100,000 which is equivalent to just over 1 million young people (OJJDP, 2018). This figure is a 70 percent decline from 1996, the year with the highest rate of juvenile arrests in the past thirty-seven years. This decline is consistent with reductions in juvenile crime rates and may also be attributable to new

approaches to policing in the past few years. While this overall trend is promising, the outlook for these 1 million young people is decidedly less so.

## Youth Arrest and the Transition to Adulthood

Regardless of whether an arrest results in spending time in DYS, jail, incarceration or no charges being filed at all, this formal contact with the justice system is a critical developmental turning point for adolescents; and has substantial implications along the life course (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Scholars find that arrests before the age of eighteen are associated with social isolation (Lemert, 1951); with individuals arrested as youth often reporting small social networks or “fragile” family structures. Individuals first arrested before age 18 are less likely to complete high school or college than peers who have not been arrested (Kirk & Sampson, 2013). Additionally, juvenile arrests are highly correlated with arrests in early adulthood and continued criminal involvement (Lieberman, Kirk, & Kim, 2014; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2006).

While the research paints a clear picture of the life outcomes of youth who have been arrested, it is ambiguous with respect to “why” these outcomes are the case. Despite being “the ever-critical filter for the system” and “front-end process,” arrest is understudied relative to related topics like delinquency, crime, or incarceration (Tapia, 2012). Understanding the “why” is a necessary precondition for more effective intervention and support for youth who have been arrested.

## Labeling Theory

What does the theoretical and empirical evidence suggest as to why youth arrest is associated with undesirable outcomes in adulthood? Within criminology, labeling theory posits that formal sanctioning by the juvenile justice system encourages future delinquency. Within this framework, there are two different processes through which is thought to impact youth outcomes in early adulthood. The first argues that upon being arrested and labeled “criminal” or “delinquent” a young person reorients their attitudes and behavior around deviance, withdraw from positive and socially acceptable behaviors and interactions, and engage in increased delinquency (Lemert, 1951). Matusueda (1992) describes this as the process by which youth internalize a “deviant self-concept,” and a self-fulfilling process ensues.

Alternatively, the second strand of labeling theory, tells a different story focused on social structure. In this conception, upon being arrested and labeled “criminal” or “delinquent” youth experience “secondary sanctioning,” whereby society responds to the negative labels by closing off opportunities for young people (Sampson & Laub, 1997). Over time, the hardships stemming from the “delinquent” label accumulate. Sampson and Laub (1997) describe this phenomenon in their theory of cumulative disadvantage as a “snowball effect” wherein, “adolescent delinquency and its negative consequences, increasingly ‘mortgage’ one’s future, especially later life chances molded by schooling and employment” (p. 147).

Students of labeling theory tend to focus on the second strand of labeling theory. This literature includes empirical work by Victor Rios (2011) that charts the ways that public service institutions function as a youth control complex and police the behaviors of Black and Latino boys in urban communities. Research that indicates that re-enrollment in school after terms in juvenile detention is difficult because credit transfers rarely go through, and because schools increased surveillance of justice system involved youth makes them feeling unwelcome (Askew, 2011). As well as, studies that find that adults who have criminal records are less likely to receive call-backs from employers (Pager, 2003).

### **Conceptualizing Youth Arrest in an Ecological Model**

I designed this study of young people's perceptions of their arrests, using the ecological systems theory of human development first popularized by the psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977). Examining how youth experience and interpret their arrests in this developmental frame provides a more holistic depiction of youth contact with the justice systems and account for the ways in which arrest may matter differently in different contexts (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). The central premise of ecological systems theory is that human development is both situational and contextual. Situational refers to the on-going interactions within and between microsystems. Contextual refers to the laws and policies which structure interactions in microsystems and reflect popular and academic ideologies about young people's criminality and how it is best addressed. In order to understand the

experiences, vulnerabilities, and assets of young people who have been held in legal custody, it is important to study their “relationships and the social environments that contextualizes their experience” (Nichols et al., 2015).

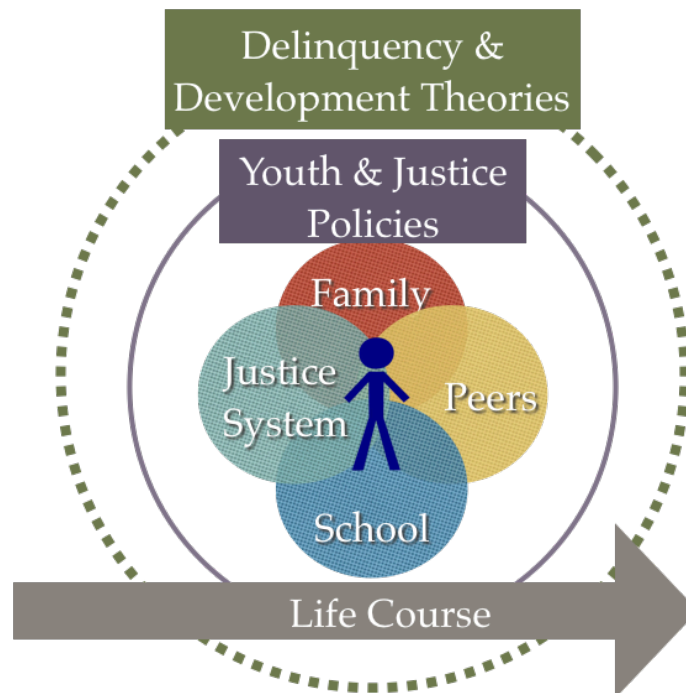
Theorists have identified the family, peer groups, schools, and—for system-involved youth—the justice system as especially important developmental contexts (Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991). As illustrated in Figure 1, at the micro-level, a young man who has been arrested is a student, a brother, a peer, a client, or a juvenile offender. In his mesosystem, the points of interaction between micro-level contexts, the young man’s experience with his probation officer, for example, is informed by his experience at school (and vice versa) because what happens in one microsystem is related to another. At the exosystem level, his experience is shaped by the formal and informal social structures. Put differently, what happens during a case-management meeting and in his classroom, is shaped by juvenile justice policies. Those policies, in turn, are in are both a reflection and a byproduct of the theories and existing patterns of inequality that comprise the macrosystem. Moreover, the chronosystem refers to the evolution and shift of the young man’s developmental contexts and experiences over the course of his life.

While few studies have examined the influence of arrest on the familial developmental context, the evidence that exists indicates that consistent and supportive care is highly beneficial for youths’ positive development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Not only does strong familial attachment reduce the likelihood that youth will engage in criminal or delinquent activity (Hoeve et al., 2009), it also serves as an important support when a young



person is involved in the justice system. Pennington's (2015) study of parental engagement in juvenile court proceedings, found that in a system with overburdened prosecutors and defense attorneys, parental advocacy may influence outcomes in court proceedings. In fact, in the early 20th century the family environment was considered so central to youths' criminal desistance that juvenile probation officers would often intervene into the family directly through counseling or instituting alternative living arrangements (Beard, 1934).

Figure 1. *Conceptual Diagram of Selected Ecological Systems of Youth who have been Arrested*



Note: Diagram adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1988)

As young people begin to individuate from their parents, peer relationships assume a more central role in their identity and development and can become the locus of criminal activity for crime-involved youth (Champion, 1992; Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

Criminologists theorize that because adolescence is characterized by high responsivity to

peer influence and social conformity, peer groups often hold greater influence on crime involvement, than families or schools (Scott & Steinberg, 2008). In the overwhelming majority of cases involving an adolescent aged 17 or younger, the young person was arrested with one or more friends (Elrod & Ryder, 2011). Using the Adolescent Health Supplement of the NLSY, Haynie and Osgood (2005) find that young people embedded in highly delinquent social networks and whose social time is largely unstructured, participate in delinquent behavior at higher rates. Relatedly, while the evidence is not clear on how being held in legal custody influence peer relationships, formerly incarcerated adolescents report feeling pressured to engage in criminal behavior and found it difficult to avoid other crime-involved peers after release (Nurse, 2010).

Schools serve as important developmental and social contexts for adolescents (Eccles & Roeser, 2011), such that weak attachments to schools are strongly associated with higher likelihood of involvement in the justice system (Nichols, Loper, & Meyer, 2015). Students who are repeatedly suspended or expelled from schools in one year, are significantly more likely to be arrested in the following year (Fabelo et al., 2011). Once a young person is court-involved, they are less likely to attend school regularly when compared to their peers (Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991). While there is little information that isolates the relationship between arrest and school experiences, evidence indicates that reentering school after a period of incarceration is often a difficult transition. Adolescents report feeling isolated from their peers and stigmatized or ignored by teachers and school administrators (Askew et al., 2012; Nurse, 2010). Unsurprisingly, arrest prior to age 18 has a

large effect on the likelihood of dropping out of high school (Hirschfield, 2009) and non-enrollment in a four-year college (Kirk & Sampson, 2013).

## Research Design

*It's on Me* exists in the tradition of scientific inquiry that aims to illuminate social processes through the collection of qualitative data. While this is a longstanding approach in the social sciences, in recent years scholars have called for additional qualitative research within the juvenile justice system to better understand the experience of coming into contact with the police, courts, and corrections (see, for example, Pennington, 2015). Using a qualitative methodological approach is especially important to gain insight into how labels like "delinquent" or "criminal" operate in youth life. Sociologists have been quite successful at determining whether and to what extent being arrested curtails later life chances by using large data sets to answer questions about structural processes. However, evidence that institutions exclude young people labeled in these ways does not negate the possibility that young people also internalize negative behavioral labels. It is my contention, that synthesizing across the current knowledge base on youth arrest, provides only a partial accounting of a complex event. Not only do we need studies to help understand whether and to what extent young people may internalize these negative labels, but we also need research to investigate the impact of justice system contact may reverberate across and between the multiple contexts in which young people live and grow.

To understand young men's experiences and interpretations of their arrests, I relied on multiple sources of data each of which corresponded to different elements of their social and developmental ecology as conceptualized by Bronfenbrenner. In this section, I first detail my methods for establishing the macro-system policy environment through interviews with justice system stakeholders, observations of juvenile justice events and meetings, and analysis of policy papers, news articles, and official records. I then describe the series of phenomenological interviews I conducted with each young man to collect information about their micro-, meso-, and chrono-system experiences and understandings. The existing research on youth arrest has been instrumental in documenting the likelihood and consequences of arrest. This information is vital for identifying which young people are in need of support, and what the focus of those interventions. The qualitative research design employed in this dissertation hones in on young people's subjective experiences and interpretations to examine *how* researchers, practitioners, and families should intervene to more effectively support young men who have been arrested.

## **Establishing Context for Juvenile Justice in Massachusetts**

Given my interest in expanding our understanding of the processes through which adolescent arrest influences young people's lives, I first needed to learn more about the juvenile justice landscape in Massachusetts. Consistent with the ecological conceptual design of the study, by garnering an in-depth understanding the policy environment I was able to

identify the highly localized justice systems practices and procedures that structured young men's lives. Moreover, as a central aim of this study is to provide insight into the opportunities to intervene and support justice system involved youth, I needed knowledge as to how stakeholder-practitioners in the justice system perceived to be the needs for young people. How do those who work in and with the justice system understand youth arrest? What role do they see schools, families, peer networks, and justice institutions playing in youth experience and development? What do they believe is working? What do they think needs to change? What guides their professional practice? What are the dilemmas that they face? What are the inconsistencies or conflicts that arise between professional perspectives?

To establish this context, I gathered information from multiple data sources so that I might be able to identify the formal and informal bodies of stakeholder knowledge on youth arrest. I conducted document analyses of official reports, news articles, policy documents, and inter-agency memorandums of understanding on juvenile justice from 2008 up to the present. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with a purposeful sample of fifteen juvenile justice system stakeholders. I sought a diversity of stakeholder perspectives because following an arrest a young person comes into contact with different institutions and agencies. These justice system stakeholders included individuals who had either a personal or professional involvement with system-involved youth such as, parents of youth who have been arrested; teachers, administrators, and staff in schools serving students involved in the justice system; police and probation officers; and defense attorneys, prosecutors, and judges working in juvenile courts.

To recruit these participants, I emailed service providers, court officials, and non-profit organizations that work with system-involved youth. I then employed snowball sampling, in which I asked participants to recommend others for participation and share information about the study with their contacts (Creswell, 2009). These semi-structured interviews lasted from 45 to 120 minutes. The interviews began with questions about stakeholders' backgrounds and experiences with youth who have been arrested. I then solicited their insights on youths' peer and family relationships, school experiences, and interactions with the justice system. These interviews helped me to refine the analytical scope of my research, shifting from an earlier focus on adolescents on probation to those who have been arrested. Additionally, these interviews illuminated the intricacies and common, but unspoken, practices of the justice system in Massachusetts.

When I began the field work of observations of juvenile justice planning meetings, town halls, and public hearings, I planned to conduct non-participant observations. My goal was to be the proverbial "fly on the wall" who would record juvenile justice system stakeholders' conversations and interactions. In addition to getting a sense of the juvenile justice landscape, I also was interested in documenting what practitioners and elected officials prioritized in these venues and negotiated the tensions between stakeholder groups. I hoped that if I disclosed my presence, but sat out of the way I would not disturb the standard environment in the meetings and hearings I attended. However, I quickly gave up on non-participant observation because the stakeholders I encountered actively brought me into their meetings and conversations. In smaller meetings, where a group was convening

around a conference table, I was encouraged to join everyone else at the table. During such observations, I felt conspicuous because I was often the only person feverishly scribbling notes. In these smaller contexts, I was surprised by how often my opinion was solicited. On several different occasions, someone would say something to the effect of, “Well, we have a guest from Harvard. Let’s see what she thinks we should do!” Being positioned in this way made me a bit uncomfortable. I did not want to shift the focus away from the tasks at hand. Moreover, because I often recruited participants for stakeholder interviews at these events, I believed that it was important that I maintain a non-directive stance on issues related to the questions I might later ask in an interview context. As a result, I deflected direct questions by relaying early patterns of my analysis or posing another question to the group.

## **Exploring Youth Arrest in a Street-Oriented Population**

While stakeholder interviews, observations, and textual analyses of justice system reports provided important context about youth justice in Massachusetts, the primary source of data for this study are in-depth phenomenological interviews with young men who were between seventeen- and twenty-four-years-old, and who were first arrested before their eighteenth birthdays. I recruited the young men from a well-regarded non-profit social service organization that operates at multiple locations in the Greater Boston Area, which I call CHANGES (To protect the identities of my participants, I have intentionally omitted certain details about CHANGES). CHANGES provides low wage employment and

programming to young men who have been identified as being at risk for incarceration owing to extensive histories of arrest, known participation in street gangs, or difficulty adhering to probation or parole conditions. At CHANGES, young men are assigned a youth worker who supports them through meeting the expectations of their jobs (e.g., showing up to work on time and responding appropriately to interpersonal conflicts with coworkers) and completing an individualized plan of academic and socio-emotional coursework and programming.

In the first stage of the recruitment process, the staff at CHANGES compiled a list of young men who met the age requirements. All eligible young men were informed about the study by CHANGES staff and received an informational flyer about the study which detailed the purpose of the study, the opportunities and risks associated with participation, techniques for maintaining participant privacy and confidentiality, and the schedule for compensation. To protect the privacy of young men at CHANGES, I was only told the first names of eligible individuals who expressed interest in the study. Those young men then had a meeting with me in which I reviewed information about the study, answered any outstanding questions they may have had about participating, and confirmed their understanding of what participating in the project would entail. All of the young men I met with agreed to participate.

All of my contact with youth participants occurred on-site at CHANGES locations, and I believe this is pertinent to the qualities of the information I garnered through interviews with the young men. While I hung around the buildings a bit, I mostly spoke with



the young men one-on-one in classrooms or staff offices. This afforded a convenient, familiar, controlled and private space which was especially important given the sensitive nature of the content that came up in recounting participants lives and experiences. Moreover, recruiting and conducting interviews at CHANGES, ensured that participants were connected to resources and support services. At the same time, I worked to position myself as someone friendly and familiar with the organization, but who clearly was not a member of CHANGES staff, and I reiterated this at the start of each interview.

However, the most important consequence of my decision to recruit youth participants from CHANGES is that I am only able to capture the experiences of a subset of all those arrested as minors. Young men who were in CHANGES were there for different reasons that stemmed from their assessed risk for being arrested again. In their own words and without any prompting, the young men used the phrase “being in the streets” as a shorthand for their risk of future criminal activity, arrest, or incarceration. In fact, at one point every young man I interviewed described themselves as being in the streets, doing street stuff, or living a street life. For these young people, the streets referred to both specific physical places as well as a cultural system. As physical places, the streets encompassed geographic hot zones or areas with high rates of crime and violence. Such areas were located in low income urban residential communities primarily comprised of public housing projects or homes subsidized by Section 8 housing vouchers. Adolescents in Boston and surrounding areas tend to construct their “neighborhoods” as a few blocks out of the much larger recognized areas that would be named on a map (Harding, 2010). Of those blocks, only

some portion, perhaps a corner or a park, would be the physical location where those engaged in the streets would hang out.

Elijah Anderson's (1999) hallmark ethnography of urban life in an economically depressed section of Philadelphia, *Code of the Street*, provides a helpful starting place for understanding the cultural logic that organizes life for street-oriented youth. Anderson argued that campaigns for respect are at the center of much of the interpersonal violence and distress in neighborhoods where there is a hyper-concentration of poverty. Through acting tough young residents of urban communities gain respect—an essential commodity for protecting themselves from victimization. Though informal, this code is widely understood and regulates behaviors associated with a street-oriented lifestyle. There were many points of resonance between the accounts of life that young men shared with me and those presented nearly two decades ago in Anderson's text. Respect remained a central preoccupation and, as you will read in later chapters, violence was often used as a means to enforce and maintain respect within a street-oriented context. In accordance with the cultural repertoire used to navigate the streets, there were certain behaviors common among street-oriented youth including truancy, acting out in school and at home, use of drugs and alcohol in late childhood, carrying knives, selling drugs, breaking into cars, stealing cars, stealing phones, and muggings, most of which featured the threat of violence.

Where participants in Anderson's study juxtaposed street-oriented individuals and families with those described as "decent," young men in this study distinguished between themselves as "street kids" and friends or siblings who were "school kids." This moniker

held many of the same connotations of Anderson's "decent" while also signaling not only where one spent their days but also their orientation to schooling. One participant, Will, defined school kids as a person who "goes to school every day, doesn't get in trouble, follows all the rules, doesn't break the rules." School kids might have disciplinary issues at school, but they were not chronic. School kids were rarely around during fights. As I discuss in chapter 5, street-involved youth sometimes had a handful school kid friends, often from childhood. Unlike most peer relationships that exist larger networked groups, the relationships between "street kids" and "school kids" would often be dyadic and both parties would engage in practices to shield the "school kid" from violence and other negative consequences associated with the young man's street involvement.

While being in the streets was common in young men's peer and family networks, young men did not view it as normal. Gabriel, a twenty-four-year-old, participant provides an explicit example of how young men made this distinction. Gabriel stopped regularly attending school earlier than most other young men. In seventh grade, he began sneaking out of his middle school on his own to hang out "in the streets." Though Gabriel's family moved to a different neighborhood when he was in fifth grade, he felt a strong connection to the community where they'd lived previously. During the school day, he would hang around with older guys who sold drugs. After two years of "standing around," soon after his fifteenth birthday, Gabriel began selling marijuana, crack, and cocaine and was happy to have a way to make money. For the next six years, Gabriel's days followed a similar pattern. He would wake up early so that he could be "one of the people that was first outside" to sell

drugs. Regardless of the weather, Gabriel spent his days in a circumscribed area “smokin’ and sellin’” until the sun went down. After telling me about the typical structure of his days, Gabriel commented on the substantive difference between the nature of his teenage years and that of a typical teenager. “I can’t really remember the times that we actually did normal things. I can’t... [long pause] Smokin’ weed wasn’t even normal.”

Given that the central aim of this dissertation is to better understand how young men perceive the influence of having been arrested in their daily lives, I found phenomenological inquiry to be the best suited methodological technique. Interviewing is a method well-suited to collecting participants’ accounts of processes and understanding of how participants make meaning. Phenomenological interviewing takes this one step further and engages both the relevant context of participants’ interpretations and the substance of their meaning-making (Seidman, 2013). Thus, to elicit young peoples’ views of their social worlds, events, and lived experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 28), I adapted Seidman’s (2013) three interview series for phenomenological interviewing. This approach is defined by (1) a focus on a temporal account of participants’ experiences; (2) the researcher’s desire to understand participants’ subjective experience of the given phenomena; (3) the use of interviewing techniques that guide participants to reconstitute their lived experiences; and (4) an emphasis on participants’ interpretations and their meaning-making in context (Seidman, 2013).

While I found the above aims of phenomenological interviewing to reflect the empirical gap I intended to bridge, several of Seidman’s suggested interviewing techniques

seemed ill-suited to this study's target population. For example, Seidman recommends maintaining a standard interval of no more than one week and at least one day between interviews. This proved difficult for two reasons. First, meetings were subject to the schedule at CHANGES. As a safety precaution, the staff at CHANGES organized the schedule each day to minimize contact between young men from rival gangs. Second, the young men often struggled to maintain a regular schedule either not showing up for work or not being available to complete interviews at the end of their workday. In order to facilitate full participation in the study, my first adaptation was to be flexible about the scheduling of the interviews. This meant that there were a handful of instances when I conducted multiple interviews with a participant in a single setting. I reserved this as a last case option for young men who either anticipated that they would not be back for an interview or who had been out of contact for an extended period following their first interview.

The more substantive adaptations of the Seidman's approach pertained to the format and structure of the interviews. Seidman recommends open-ended conversational interviews. However, I found that this approach was too abstract and often led to confusion because it requires participants to engage in the cognitively taxing task of recalling, organizing, and retaining extensive information. In my former work as a teacher, I used guided note-taking strategies to aid in organizing information. Drawing on this experience, instead of open-ended interviews, I developed simple graphic organizers, similar to those used by teachers in grade schools, to record information during the first and second interviews.

The first interview focused on the participant's life history. I piloted multiple approaches to the life graph activity. In the first instance, I placed a timeline from 0 to the participant's current age said only, "mark down the big events of your life" opting to leave what constituted a "big event" open to participant interpretation. Even with the graph laid out in front of them, this prompt was intimidating to the pilot test participants, who were unsure of where to begin. Additionally, most of the young men shied away from writing extensively. After a few iterations, it became apparent that even when I provided additional directions, progressing through their lives year by year also led to confusion. Many of the young men lived through extremely hectic childhoods, with numerous moves and frequent school changes. Instead, I adopted a "layered" approach to the life history interview. I would first ask participants to walk me through their residential life history, their family life history, their school life history, and their criminal justice life history. By layering on each of these dimensions of life, each interview included helpful "mile markers" to which participants could refer if they were confused about the chronology of particular events. Though this approach arguably imposed a structure on how the young men would develop their recollections of their pasts, it truly facilitated the reflective interviews because very few of the young men had ever thought about their lives in this way.

In the second interview, I asked young men to complete a social network map and a 24-hour log of their typical days. I also realized that in order to understand the influence of their arrests on their lives, it was helpful to have them complete these activities for both their current circumstances and around the time of their first arrest. The social network mapping

template divided the page into four sections labeled, friends, family, schools/programs, and other. I asked the participants to fill in each quadrant with the initials, nicknames, or professional titles and to organize their networks by how close they felt with each individual such that the people who were most important to them were placed close to the center of the page. To elicit details about their daily activities, I instructed the young men to think about a typical day as if they were on a reality TV show and asked for each hour of the day: What would the cameras capture you doing? Who would be with you? Where would you be? These visual accounts of the events of their life, helped the young men to contrast their current and previous experiences and served as an anchor for the reflective conversations during the final interview.

The third and final interview focused on participants' reflections on the meanings of their life histories and current experiences. Thus, the overarching question for the third interview was, "Given what you have said about your life up until now and what you have said about your arrest, what role do you think your arrest has played and will play in your life?" In contrast to the two previous interviews, the third interview required participants to engage in a rigorous reflective and interpretative exercise. To assist adolescent participants in the meaning-making process, I presented them with their life-graphs, social network maps, and daily schedules, and referred back to these artifacts as I asked questions.

Collectively, this three-interview series allowed me to construct a view of adolescent arrest that authentically reflects participants lived experience. For knowledge to be co-constructed, it is incumbent upon the researcher to provide the best case for participants to

engage in the social encounter. I believe that through introducing these adaptations, I was able to make this reflective practice accessible to young men. What I did not anticipate was how essential the artifacts would be for checking up on idiosyncrasies, monitoring the internal consistency in participant responses, and confirming information (Creswell, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2013). Though the young men I interviewed ranged in age from seventeen to twenty-four, the life graph was an especially useful tool because the chaos and instability of their lives meant that many of them often struggled with chronologically ordering events. By providing an organizational structure, life graphs functioned as a written record that was easily marshaled to clarify when an arrest, a suspension, or a fight occurred in a format that that could be modified as necessary in subsequent interviews. Moreover, meeting with participants multiple times helped me establish a rapport and offered a forum for soliciting feedback from participants on emergent themes.

#### *Sample Characteristics*

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the focal sample of twenty-six young men. On average participants were twenty-one years old. The racial composition of the sample reflects the racial composition I observed at CHANGES. The sample was evenly distributed between those who identified as Black and those who identified as Latino, with only two White-identifying participants. Both of the participants who identified as White/Latino had been raised in households with a White single-mother and had limited contact with their Latino fathers. Massachusetts does not currently publish any demographic data on juvenile arrests. However, estimates suggest that while youth of color make up roughly 33 percent of the youth population in the entire state of Massachusetts, they are just under 40 percent of



those arrested (CfJJ, 2015). It is not surprising that the study sample would not be representative of the state of Massachusetts, given that I restricted my sample to the greater Boston area and recruited from CHANGES an organization serving young men identified as having the highest risk for future criminal involvement. Moreover, the goal of the study was not to construct a representative sample, but rather to construct a purposive one.

Most of the sample grew up in extreme poverty. In keeping with research on social inequality, I use youth reported maternal education as a proxy for child's class background. Most of the participants' mothers had not completed high school, and many had been unemployed for long periods while the children were growing up. Based on the participants' descriptions of their neighborhoods and homes even the few whose mothers had completed college and master's degrees lived in working class and working poor conditions.

While all of the young men matriculated in their high schools, only three of the participants had earned a traditional high school when I interviewed them, though one participant had recently re-enrolled as a high school junior after an extended absence related to his arrest. Just under one-third of the sample, obtained their GED and many had done so with help and preparation from CHANGES. GED holders were a year older, on average, than the non-GED holders. Those who did not have a GED, had, on average, had between a ninth and tenth-grade education.

Interviews revealed substantial trauma and adversity in the childhoods and adolescences of the sampled participants. By age fifteen, most had been arrested, moved frequently, had multiple suspensions from school, and many had witnessed a violent crime.

The sample was selected on the basis of their arrest histories, and as illustrated in Table 1, young men's backgrounds and early life experiences were also highly predictive of arrest.

Table 1. *Sample Characteristics (n= 26)*

Average Age	21
Average Age at First Arrest	14.8
Average Highest Grade Completed (non-GED holders)	9.8
Race (by number of participants)	
Black	11
Latino	11
White	2
White/Latino	2
Maternal Education Level (by number of participants)	
Less than High School	16
High School Graduate	4
Associates Degree/Some College	2
Bachelors/Masters Degree	4

Exposure to Trauma/Adversity (by number of participants)	
Suspended 3 or More Times Before Age 13	22
Moved 3 or More Times Before Age 18	17
Child Welfare Involved	12
Parental Incarceration	11
Witnessed Stabbing/Shooting Before Age 13	10

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was continuous and iterative throughout the study. Immediately after each interview, I completed a brief contact summary report to record my initial impressions from the interview, reflections on ways to improve data collection strategies, and ideas for early codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). All interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. To address issues of reliability arising from errors in transcription, I reviewed each transcript while listening to the original audio-recording (Creswell, 2009). I supplemented the contact summary report with any additional thoughts

and reflections that emerged as I was listening to the interview and reviewing the transcript. Additionally, I regularly wrote analytic memos so that I could “think on paper” about various aspects of the study including key concepts, emerging patterns, and ideas for codes (Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Spradley, 1979). To take stock of my positionality, I also wrote reflexive memos, in which I considered how I might have been influencing the research—either in terms of what participants shared, or the interpretations I was making over the course of data analysis (Creswell, 2009; Pole & Morrison, 2003; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Once data collection was complete, I began the second phase of data analysis. I re-read interview transcripts, contact summary forms, and analytic and reflexive memos to “obtain a general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning” (Creswell, 2009, p. 185). I then coded transcripts and memos using a coding scheme adapted from Tesch (1990) and Bogdan and Biklen (2007), which provided a typological coding structure including broad top-level codes such as “setting and context” and “perspectives on others.” This technique offered the important benefit of providing an analytic structure that corresponded to the research questions without comprising the phenomenological inductive approach in which I was able to “come to the transcripts with an open attitude, seeking what emerges as important and of interest from the text” (Seidman, 2013, p. 119). Following Gibbs (2007), I regularly checked for drift or misapplication of codes by routinely comparing data with the codes and their definitions.

## Constructivist Qualitative Research: Reflexivity and Positionality

When Alicia, a program director at CHANGES, first introduced me to Will he made eye contact as he shook my hand and seemed cordial, but cautious. He entered the office where I was set up for the afternoon and slump into a squeaky chair on the other side of the small round table. I recall being excited when he said, *Hi, I'm Will*, because his accent indicated he might be from Revere or Malden, two working-class, mostly White areas—and I had yet to enroll a white participant (I later found out that when he was a boy his father had been deported to the Dominican Republic and that he racially identified as “Italian-Hispanic”). While I shuffled through papers, I asked him his age, *Twenty*, and how old he was when he was first arrested to confirm his eligibility for the study, *Like fifteen?* I placed the laminated consent form in front of him. When I did this, Will leaned all the way forward and began to read along as I recited the purpose of the study and what he could expect if he decided to participate. I was starting to describe the risks associated with participating when he interjected—*Um, excuse me if this is like not a good question or something, but you get \$20 every time, so it's like \$60 total, right? I know rich people don't like it when you ask about their money and stuff, but like is this a business or something?* As he spoke, he kept his eyes fixed on the form only sheepishly glancing up for a brief moment after he was done talking. Will was the fourteenth participant in the study, and by this point, I had learned to anticipate questions about the compensation and whether the white envelopes I slid across the table at the end of each interview contained my own money. I had not, however, experienced such an explicit gap

between how I imagined the young men in the sample would characterize me (and how I described myself for that matter) and how I was actually portrayed.

It is generally held within the field of qualitative research that as the principal instrument for data collection and analysis, the researcher should consider how their identities shape the research project. Researchers make consequential decisions that are formed by their perspectives and identities. Some of these decisions are deliberate and perhaps strategic, while others are in response to unanticipated circumstances that one will undoubtedly encounter while conducting fieldwork. Youth and stakeholder participants have reviewed the stories and interpretations presented in this text along with scholars specializing in adolescent development and juvenile/criminal justice research. I used these member checks and expert reviews to minimize, to the degree possible, scientific challenges to this project. However, it is true that my identities influenced every phase of the research process. Black participants remarked that it was cool to see another black person attending Harvard “doin’ good, doin’ really good,” as Kyle once commented. Stakeholder participants sought my opinion after learning about my academic background. This is to say, my personality, racial identity, and training mattered when it came to access to research sites and what participants elected to share.

As I conducted interviews and observations, I found myself intentionally amplifying or minimizing facets of my identity. Following my previous work interviewing, mentoring, and teaching men in prisons, I had experience talking with people in contact with justice about their experiences. In instances in which young men made flirtatious romantically-tinged

overtures, I quickly and firmly asserted my researcher status. However, I had not thought too much about how young men would perceive my socio-economic status and class background. I knew I sometimes spoke like an academic using jargon when a simple description would suffice and warned participants to always ask me if they did not understand something I said, which they did. I responded to Will by reaffirming his right to ask questions and to make certain he understood how the study worked. There was a split second when I considered teasingly saying something about all the debt I had accumulated as a graduate student, however, I wisely opted not to. Dismissing Will's assessment would have been no way to build a relationship, and I realized that there was likely much more I needed to consider about how I navigated the social distance between myself and the study participants.

Of the myriad ways I differed from my participants in experience and background, the most salient discrepancy was with respect to our proximity to and involvement with the streets. Growing up in a middle-class household on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, my childhood neighborhood bore little resemblance to those of my participants, nor did the schools I attended, my peer groups, or my family life. Because I was born into a context where I experienced social advantage across these domains, I also have had a very different scope of contact with the justice system. Like many boys growing up in high poverty urban communities, the young men I spoke with had been stopped by the police many times in their elementary and middle school years. I, on the other hand, have primarily interacted with police officers when doing research and was stopped only once by the police over the course

of my life. I was seventeen-years-old, and my boyfriend and I were unwittingly in New York City's Central Park after the park closed. Upon finding out that my boyfriend went to NYU, the officer's alma mater, and that I would be a freshman at Princeton the upcoming fall, the officer engaged us in a friendly chat for a few minutes and then told us to leave the park. He did not record our names or take our pictures, as was customary during stops for the young men I studied, nor did he write up summonses, in fact, he never even got out of his car.

I utilized various approaches to bridge the social distance between me and the young men who participated in this study. I walked around the neighborhoods they grew up in, I conducted contextual interviews with stakeholders and observations in juvenile courts. I researched the schools they attended and the residential placements where they lived. But, most importantly, I probed them for details and definitions during interviews and would explicitly check for my own understanding by saying, "Can I check to see if I get what you're saying?" In my analysis too, I stayed close to the data, making sure that throughout the process of coding, memoing, and identifying themes, I returned the transcripts, life graphs, activity logs, and social network maps to confirm that my claims did not drift from the evidence I collected. It also means that while I include candid descriptions of events that preceded and followed arrests, you will not find moral evaluations of the behaviors or beliefs young men reported in their interviews. Rather, through the collection of multiple forms of qualitative data and a rigorous attention to conducting a valid and reliable analysis, *It's on Me* stands as an accurate representation of the complex and inter-related ways that



being arrested as a minor shape the transition to adulthood for street-involved male youth in the Greater Boston area.

## Outline of the Dissertation

*It's on Me* is a response to two challenges facing practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in their attempts to reduce social inequality arising from arrests during adolescence. The first is insufficient insight into how system-involved young people—those individuals in the very midst of the phenomenon—interpret the role of their arrests in their daily lives. The second is lack of a conceptual understanding of how being arrested alters the social ecology of life for young people. By using an ecological framework, this study of the subjective experience of life following an arrest reveals the complex interplay between policy, experience, and self-concept, across the most salient domains of youth life: family, peers, schools, and justice system. I identify a set of related processes that influence young men's self-concept and decision-making in the aftermath of justice system contact. I argue that early life adversarial interactions with teachers, social workers, and law enforcement, produce alienation and distrust of public institutions placing an added burden on friends and family. Following arrests, young men viewed their social network's responses to their arrests as an indicator of loyalty and status. These peer and family networks, however, rarely had the capacity adequately support young men through lengthy and expensive periods of justice system involvement. In the absence of both public and personal supports, young men

expressed a strong sense of responsibility for their own well-being that ultimately stymied help-seeking behaviors.

Before turning to young men's perspectives that illustrate this process, I begin, in Chapter 2, with a contextual and diagnostic analysis of juvenile justice policy in Massachusetts. Human development occurs within an ecological system that encompasses distal forces like policy along with more proximate experiences in contexts such as classrooms and families. This chapter charts the evolution of the policy environment by tracking the oscillation between two ideals of juvenile justice. One which emphasizes rehabilitation through programs intended to re-pattern delinquent behaviors and another which argues for punishment as means to deter crime and incapacitate unruly children. Efforts to attend to these two conceptions of juvenile justice through state and federal policy produced an unequal system in which being black or Latino, having a mental illness or learning disability, being involved with the Department of Children and Family Services, or living in particular low-income, urban neighborhoods greatly increased a young person's likelihood of arrest. The stark inequalities in youth justice prompted officials in Massachusetts to partner with the Annie E. Casey foundation to implement the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) in 2008. I consider the ramifications of JDAI for how youth in the focal sample experience the juvenile justice system.

The ecological approach allowed me to capture young men's meaning-making of their arrests across different micro-level contexts and within their own life course histories. I found that how young men viewed their arrest was shaped in large part by their experiences

with public institutions throughout their childhoods. In chapter 3, I present evidence that almost exclusively adversarial relationships with teachers and social workers from early childhood through adolescence led young men to be skeptical of public institutions and bred social distrust. Primarily drawing on the accounts of life by Luis, an 18 year old young man who was suspended from school countless times prior to his first arrest at age 16, and Raymond, age 24 who spent much of his childhood bouncing around group homes and residential treatment facilities, I argue that the behavioral labels ascribed to youth as they proceed through both educational and child welfare institutions do more than limit a young person's choice set, they instill important lessons for understanding one's place in the world. I also show that experiences in institutions historically considered to operate the justice system were reciprocally related to the justice system in the minds of young men.

Chapter 4 shifts the attention to youth perceptions of the formal components of the justice system, namely the police, the courts, and correctional forces such as probation and the Department of Youth Services. I focus on the legal socialization—the process by which one comes to view the law and legal actors—of young men as a way to understand their meaning-making of their arrests. Consistent with previous scholarship, young men generally reported negative perceptions of the justice system based on both direct and vicarious experiences with the justice system. In this chapter, I present evidence for three claims young men made about the justice system that served as their rationale for negative characterizations: (1) policing practices intentionally disrupt community cohesion and expose possible witnesses to risks, (2) the court system is centrally concerned with collecting money

and administering punishment, rather than the provision of justice, and (3) individuals have little recourse in the face of the systemic misuse of power and authority by the police, courts, and corrections. Based on these assessments of the justice system, young men came to view the justice system as capricious and inconsistent with realities of their experience. Borrowing Elijah Anderson's (1999) term the "code of the street," which describes cultural practices and logics that organize life in high crime, low-income, urban communities, I find that arrests rendered young men caught between two codes, the code of the street and the code of law. Resigned to the misalignment between the two, youth tended to prioritize the physical and social safety afforded by living a life by the code of the street, despite being aware that this sometimes resulted in re-arrests.

Chapter 5 considers the interpersonal consequences of youth arrest within peer and family networks. Following their arrests, young men viewed how individuals in their social network reacted to their arrests as an indicator of loyalty and social status. However, more often than not families and friends failed to "show up" for young men as expected. Poverty, trauma, and other forms of adversity, which were the norm for the young men I interviewed, constrained families' capacities to provide the emotional and financial support young men sought following an arrest. These experiences of social disadvantage, coupled with a typical adolescent desire to individuate from parents, also meant that prior to arrests young men tended to be deeply embedded in peer groups. In such peer networks, many youth were mutually dependent on one another for food, shelter, clothing, or protection

from neighborhood violence. Like families, these networks rarely had the emotional, financial, or informational resources to withstand trials, lock ups, or attempts at desistance.

In my conclusion, I discuss the importance of an ecological developmental approach to studying the justice system because it incorporates the life course lens, while attending the ways in which experiences and perspectives are shaped by one's environment. I highlight two avenues for effecting change in the lives of youth who have been arrested that emerge from my analysis: using social work and restorative justice to re-establish prosocial peer and family networks and fostering faith in public institutions.

## **Chapter 2: A History of Change: Rehabilitation, Punishment, and the Evolution of Youth Justice in Massachusetts**

When J.R. was seventeen-years-old he was arrested for armed robbery with a dangerous weapon. He was out with two fellow members of his Mattapan-based street gang and the group had mugged a few passersby, stealing cash out of wallets and cell phones. When the group encountered a man, J.R. recalled threatening him and saying “Yeah, we got a gun. Give us anything you got!” The man said that he did not have anything on him, which J.R. and his friends confirmed by forcibly searching his pockets. When they did not find anything, they ran off in search of another target but did not get too far before the boys were apprehended by the police. “Ten, fifteen minutes later [the police] just came out of everywhere, just arrested us,” J.R. told me.

The handful of months between J.R.’s birth date and those of his sixteen-year-old friends would prove highly consequential in determining what would happen next. After initial processing at the police precinct, J.R. was separated from his friends. At seventeen-years-old, in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts he was an adult when it came to criminal matters, whereas his friends were juveniles. Juvenile status afforded certain privileges that were unavailable to J.R.. Prior to his arraignment, he and parents did not have a meeting with a probation officer to determine eligibility for support services and learn about the court process. His arraignment also did not occur in a closed session where the record of his case

would be confidential, as is the practice in the juvenile court, but in a public courtroom on the public record. Unlike his friends who were transferred to the Department of Youth Services (DYS), the Massachusetts agency that oversees juvenile corrections, J.R., was sent to the Suffolk County Jail on Nashua Street (“Nashua Street”), a maximum security facility located in Boston.

J.R., whose hardened affect is best described as aloof, ruefully chuckled as he described Nashua street as “scary.” This arrest was not J.R.’s first, and despite not having any prior adjudications, he had previously spent time in a secure facility. At 15 years old, J.R. was arrested for the first time and charged with assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, though that case that was later dismissed. Given the severity of the charge, he was detained in a DYS facility for about a week until his family was able to amass the \$1,000 for his bail. J.R. and many of the other young men who also spent time in both juvenile and adult secure facilities, used terms like “easy,” “mickey mouse,” or even “comfortable” to describe their stints in DYS, which was distinct from experiences in adult jails and prisons. As a seventeen year old at Nashua Street, he worried about his safety as he was younger and smaller than the others held at the facility. Such concerns are substantiated by research which indicates that youth under age eighteen who are incarcerated in adult facilities experience sexual and physical assault and suicide at disproportionately high rates (CFYJ, 2007). After a while, however, J.R. said that he got used to being at Nashua Street and relaxed as he began to encounter “older dudes from his neighborhood.”

After 6 months of court proceedings, J.R. received a suspended sentence of two years probation. This meant that J.R. would be released from Nashua Street and return to his family's apartment as long as he satisfied the terms of his probation and stayed out of trouble. Having been sentenced as an adult, he was subject to adult expectations, which proved difficult for J.R.. One condition of his probation was meeting with his probation officer every two weeks. Despite reminders from his mother, J.R. missed several of these appointments.

**Abena:** Why didn't you go to those meetings?

**J.R.:** I don't know. I just didn't want to go.

**Abena:** Really? Did you think that they wouldn't actually put you in South Bay?

**J.R.:** I wasn't really even like thinking about it. I really didn't care about it until it was too late.

**Abena:** Why didn't you care?

**J.R.:** I don't know. I don't know. I was just doing other stuff. Plus, I was just being lazy too, so yeah.

Upon violating the terms of his conditional release, J.R. was picked up and sentenced to two years at Suffolk County House of Correction at South Bay ("South Bay"), a correctional facility housing individuals serving sentences of up to two-and-a-half years. At the much larger South Bay facility, J.R. did his best to be "cautious" after he was placed in a cell with two older individuals in violation of federal statutes.

Not only did J.R.'s post-arrest experience stand in contrast to his slightly younger fellow gang members, it also differed from Yanuel's experience when he was arrested at seventeen-



years-old just three years later. Like J.R., Yanuel was heavily involved with “the streets” at a young age. At sixteen-years-old, Yanuel moved out of his grandparents’ house and began selling drugs out of a room he rented in a Lynn apartment. Two days after Yanuel’s seventeenth birthday, he was arrested for drug possession. He explained,

They found me with...cocaine. After that I went...back over home because [my grandmother] bailed me out. Then, it was if you were seventeen, you go to Middleton [House of Corrections] but then the Governor of Lynn put it that if you’re eighteen, you go to Middleton...They switched my case over to DYS, I don't know how or what way they did it...They switched it back to DYS. I'm like, “Alright, I should be good.”

While Yanuel misattributed the change in policy that results in his placement in the DYS juvenile system as opposed to the adult correctional facility—Middleton Jail & House of Corrections—he was referring a substantial change in the Massachusetts juvenile justice system. In September 2013, then Governor of Massachusetts, Deval Patrick, signed into law an act which expanded the jurisdiction of the juvenile court to include seventeen-year-olds. With this change Massachusetts joined the vast majority of states in which cases involving minors are handled by juvenile courts. For Yanuel this change meant that his sentence likely only extend to his eighteenth birthday and would be responsive to his current age and development.

Not even four months go by, I get pulled in [for a probation violation] for like a month, and I'm about to get done with the probation because I'm turning eighteen. By time I turn eighteen, I was like, ‘Now all the charges they done and everything's good. I'm clear. I'm clean. No probation. No nothing. I aged out. I'm good.’

Similarly, the consequences for failing to meet the terms of his probation were adaptive and would not necessarily follow Yanuel through his adult life, as has been the case for J.R..

While both J.R. and Yanuel were arrested at age seventeen and both violated the terms of their conditional releases following their arrests, they had very different experiences within the juvenile justice system that were largely a function of a change in law. Raising the age of juvenile court jurisdiction was not the only change in youth justice policy or practice in Massachusetts that occurred during the period when the young men in this study were growing up. While they progressed through late childhood and adolescence, the juvenile justice system evolved in response to state and local initiatives that have altered the juvenile justice policy environment. This includes diversionary programs operated by police departments and district attorneys, a judicial practice of setting \$1.00 bail, and an initiative coordinated by DYS to provide community based alternative placements for youth awaiting trial and reduce racial disparities in justice system contact, among others. As illustrated by J.R. and Yanuel's contrasting experiences of their arrests at age seventeen, such changes in policy directly intervened on the lives of the young men, and thus the meaning drawn from their experiences.

In this chapter, I argue that Massachusetts' juvenile justice system is best understood as existing within a historical pattern that oscillates between the institutions two core responsibilities. The first is the juvenile justice system's responsibility to provide compassionate, individualized treatment for youth. The second is the juvenile justice system's responsibility to uphold public safety. These dual charges are often characterized as the as

the justice system's existential tension between rehabilitation and punishment, respectively. As this section will show, the youth justice system in Massachusetts has evolved in response to which of these two responsibilities emerges as the dominant juvenile justice ideology in a given period. These periods are not random but dictated by the motivations of people in power (Feld, 1999), real or perceived spikes in youth criminality (Spencer, 2011), accompanied by public dissatisfaction with institutional approaches (Artello, Hayes, Muschert & Spencer, 2015). While the cyclical preeminence of rehabilitation or punishment is by no means unique to Massachusetts' juvenile justice system, because of the state's role in pioneering approaches to juvenile justice this tension has its roots in Massachusetts and has manifested in the state's jurisprudence and policy. Beliefs and anxieties regarding whether juvenile justice is best achieved through rehabilitation or through punishment are a defining characteristic of the Commonwealth's juvenile justice history and examining them allows us to better understand the numerous juvenile justice system reforms of the past decade experienced by the young men in the study.

## A Leader in Juvenile Justice

Massachusetts has long been at the forefront of juvenile justice in the United States. In fact, the Commonwealth is credited with some of the earliest models that provided separate supervision and correctional models for youth and kept them outside of the adult criminal justice system. In 1841, John Augustus, a Boston shoemaker, and others worked within the

courts to construct the informal, volunteer-led system of supervised probation for children that was eventually formalized as paid profession in 1878 (Elrod & Ryder, 2011). In 1846, the Commonwealth opened the Massachusetts State Reform School in Westborough and established the nation's first juvenile correctional system (Department of Youth Services, 2016). Though Illinois receives credit for the country's first juvenile court in 1899, prior to that in 1874 Massachusetts established the children's tribunal as way to manage criminal cases in which children were accused (Scott & Steinberg, 2008). By 1906, the state had established its first juvenile court, which was located in Boston. For over sixty years, the Boston Juvenile Court operated as the only court of its kind until juvenile courts were created in Springfield, Worcester, and Bristol between 1969 and 1972 (Strickland, 1995).

The idea that juveniles and adults are developmentally distinct was crucial to early conceptions of juvenile justice. The first architects of the Commonwealth's juvenile justice system viewed children's behavior as being particularly subject to the influence of their social and familial environments. This premise shaped the courts in two ways. First, it established a differential approach for how the law should assess criminal acts committed by children relative to the same actions when committed by adults. Second, it also provided the basis for the courts and corrections to provide distinct treatment for children. The legislation that established the court put forth a vision consistent with the legal doctrine of *parens patriae* and articulated a court responsibility that also included providing the "care, custody, and discipline of the children brought before the court shall approximate as nearly as possible that which they should receive from their parents, and that, as far as practicable, they shall be

treated not as criminals, but as children in need of aid, encouragement, and guidance” (G.L.c 119 SECTION53).

Accepting that children’s behavior was susceptible to social contexts, meant that enforcing accountability and punishment were not at the crux of the early Boston Juvenile Court. The goal of juvenile justice according to first justice of the juvenile court, Judge Harvey Humphrey Baker was to “put each child who [came] before it in a normal relation to society as promptly and as permanently as possible...conviction and punishment alone was not effective in solving matters relating to juveniles” ((Strickland, 1995, p.9)). Moreover, it was believed that the same characteristics that made youth less criminally culpable than adults, made children more susceptible to rehabilitation than adults, through the introduction of positive environmental factors that would direct the young person toward criminal desistance and pro-social development. (Taskforce on Juvenile Justice, 1995).

Yet, the orientation of the juvenile justice system articulated in its founding legislation, was complicated by a tradition of punitive practices that in actuality curtailed young people’s capacity to alter their trajectories once in contact with Massachusetts’ juvenile justice system. Though founded on the principle that children and adults should be assessed and treated using different standards, the justice system established numerous mechanisms that placed youth back into the adult system. The juvenile courts retained and frequently exercised the power to sentence youth to adult facilities including a 1921 law that required children between the ages of 7 and seventeen charged with any crime that, if perpetrated by an adult,

was then punishable by death or life imprisonment be tried and sentenced in adult criminal courts.

Even those youth who remained within the juvenile system, had only minimal access to rehabilitative conditions. During the Industrial Revolution, Massachusetts founded a number of industrial training schools. Here, too, vocational training and psychological treatments intended to alter delinquent behaviors tended to be punitive and not rehabilitative experiences (Taskforce on Juvenile Justice, 1995). Young people were often committed to these programs up until their eighteenth birthdays, regardless of the severity of their crimes. Though these programs were often described as providing caring support for youth so that they would be able to positively engage with society in official documents, a series of investigations into the facilities between 1965 and 1968, revealed rampant brutality and extreme corporal punishment. Following public outcry and calls for reform, the Youth Services Board which had overseen the training schools, was replaced with the Department of Youth Services, the agency which currently operates juvenile corrections. Dr. Jerome Miller was appointed as the inaugural commissioner, and under his leadership DYS shifted towards a community-based model for handling youth engaged in delinquency. Training, reform, and industrial schools gave way to smaller contracted community-based programs or smaller secure facilities operated by DYS (Strickland, 1995).

## Race, Inequality, and the Juvenile Crime Boom of the 1990s

By end of the 1980s, however, the judicial system that served children and families, which handled almost all matters related to minor children, was overwhelmed. Not only had there been an increase in the sheer volume of cases involving youth accused of crimes and family issues, those cases increasingly featured more serious and more complex issues. In 1992, the legislature passed the Court Reform Act which established a statewide juvenile court that is the foundation for the eleven divisions and sessions in more than forty locations of Massachusetts' contemporary juvenile court. This act importantly clarified and differentiated between the three types of cases that the juvenile court handled: delinquency matters, which were cases that would be considered criminal if committed by an adult; status offenses, which were cases arising from issues unique to minors such as underage drinking or truancy; and family court, which were cases involving the custody of children or the Department of Children and Family services.

The increasing share of the juvenile court cases that involved violent offenders also prompted a shift in the logic used to guide juvenile justice. Like many states, Massachusetts responded to rapidly accelerating juvenile crime rates and growing concerns about a generation of "juvenile super-predators" with reforms that ushered in a more punitive era of juvenile justice. Violent homicides in 1990 and 1991 committed by teenagers in Massachusetts prompted public outcry. However, unlike a few decades prior when the public's discontent led to additional support for rehabilitative initiatives, this time the public

advocated for harsher consequences for juvenile offenders. Both state and federal crime policy have been found to be highly susceptible to public opinion and this was especially true in the 1990s (Roberts, & Stalans, 1997). State politicians took swift action and joined the national trend of altering statutes to once again make it easier for cases with juvenile defendants to be transferred to adult criminal courts (Task Force on Juvenile Justice, 1995, p. 340). Alongside this jurisdictional change, there was a corresponding shift in the approach to juvenile corrections. An inquiry during the mid 1990s into the Department of Youth Services led by the well-known Hogan Commission that was formed at the request of then Governor Weld, concluded, “DYS priorities must shift away from training and rehabilitation to public safety and crime prevention given the ‘more violent juvenile population’” (Weekley, 2016, p.231). The commission argued that rising juvenile crime rates were clear evidence that rehabilitative efforts simply could not work for juveniles. The ramifications of this ideological turn away from rehabilitative services, were soon apparent in the reduced resources the state allocated to DYS. As the population of youth in DYS custody grew over the course of the 1990s, the agency saw a sharp decrease in its budget (Weekley, 2016, p.230).

The reforms of the 1990s ultimately exacerbated the burdens on the already over-extended system for custodial correctional placements. As one senior administrator in juvenile corrections put it, “we were like grotesquely overcrowded. It was like a *60 Minutes* episode. We had two gyms where kids lived twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.” In a separate interview, another senior official in DYS, further explained that facilities were so



over crowded that it was not uncommon for some children to sleep on the gymnasiums' floors.

The surging DYS population was not comprised solely of adjudicated youth. Rather, a growing share of young people in secure facilities were being held in pre-trial detention. Some of these young people were held because a judge determined that their charges were too serious to receive bail or considered them at a high risk for failing to attend court appearances. Others had been assigned a bail, but the young person's family may have been unwilling or unable to make the payment. In addition, detention emerged as an informal tool that was used by prosecutors, probation, and the judiciary to circumvent families or even the Department of Children and Family Services. In both interviews and observations, juvenile justice system stakeholders frequently described detention as a stop gap measure that could be used to immediately intervene and remove youth engaged in some form of delinquent criminal activity from family and neighborhood environments which they described as "toxic," "unsafe," and "dysfunctional."

As the 1990s came to a close, a growing chorus of DYS officials at all levels of the bureaucracy expressed concern about the rising trend of housing youth in detention for extended periods of time. However, they were largely constrained in their capacity to address the issue. Not only had the earlier wave of budget cuts limited their possible actions, whether or not a young person entered detention was a decision made in the juvenile courts. The courts it appeared, were largely unaware of the scale at which detention had grown. The same official who initially told me about the children who were housed in gymnasiums

described those early-stage conversations, “When [DYS] came to the juvenile court and presented them with the data, they had no idea. We asked them, “How many kids under the age of twelve do you think are in detention?” And it was like, “Less than ten?” And like, “Try 500.” DYS officials also recognized a pattern in the demographic characteristics of the young people under their supervision, who, in keeping with national patterns, were almost exclusively poor Black and Latino from high crime neighborhoods in urban areas.

## JDAI and the New Era of Juvenile Justice Reform

Efforts to continue to address pretrial detention for juveniles were concretized as a top priority for juvenile justice reform in 2008 when Massachusetts joined the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s national effort to reduce the number of youth detained in secure juvenile facilities prior to adjudication. First designed in Broward County, Florida, the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) model for juvenile justice reform operates from the premise that detention and confinement pending a court case is harmful to youth and creates preventable public safety issues. Through JDAI, juvenile justice entities were introduced to eight strategies which, the Casey foundation argues, collectively provide a cost-effective template for achieving improved the conditions for youth involved in the juvenile justices system, and promoting public safety (see Table 2).

*Table 2. JDAI Core Strategies*

- Promoting collaboration between juvenile court officials, probation agencies, prosecutors, defense attorneys, schools, community organizations and advocates;
- Using rigorous data collection and analysis to guide decision making;
- Utilizing objective admissions criteria and risk-assessment instruments to replace subjective decision-making processes to determine whether youth should be placed into secure detention facilities;
- Implementing new or expanded alternatives to detention programs — such as day and evening reporting centers, home confinement and shelter care — that can be used in lieu of locked detention;
- Instituting case processing reforms to expedite the flow of cases through the system;
- Reducing the number of youth detained for probation rule violations or failing to appear in court, and the number held in detention awaiting transfer to a residential facility;
- Combatting racial and ethnic disparities by examining data to identify policies and practices that may disadvantage youth of color at various stages of the process, and pursuing strategies to ensure a more level playing field for youth regardless of race or ethnicity;
- Monitoring and improving conditions of confinement in detention facilities.

Source: <http://www.aecf.org/work/juvenile-justice/jdai/>

Though championed by then commissioner of the Department of Youth Services, Jane Tewksbury, JDAI was not initially well received in Massachusetts. In fact, Tewksbury, had attempted to implement JDAI a few years prior to no avail. In 2008, however, two counties—Suffolk County, which includes Boston, and Worcester County, which covers much on the central region of Massachusetts—agreed to be the state’s initial JDAI sites. In both counties, stakeholders voiced concerns that JDAI might encourage too much of a return to a rehabilitative focus at the expense of public safety. Moreover, the judiciary was resistant to change and, as one judge remarked, “locked into our own orthodoxy and anecdotal experience.” The problem, as a senior DYS official shared, was that “if looked with sort of quickly, JDAI can be perceived as second guessing the decisions of the judiciary.

“You shouldn't have locked those children up, you did something wrong.” Throughout its history the juvenile justice system in Massachusetts never implemented a comprehensive model for gathering information. Where adult criminal courts maintain public transcripts and records, the same is not always the case in the more informal and private juvenile courts. This practice benefitted the children and families involved in the courts, but also evolved into a professional shield that insulated the courts from reformers. The systematic collection of information was a marked departure from the status quo in Massachusetts' juvenile courts. Following the critique of orthodoxy used to guide judgements, the same judge remarked, “But it's surprising how many us don't really wanna look at the numbers. There's a defensiveness around these kinds of issues.”

Despite initial hesitations, JDAI continued to expand in Massachusetts. Between 2010 and 2014, JDAI was rolled out in four more counties, and by the time I began fieldwork in 2016, a statewide commitment to implementing JDAI was beginning to take shape. Though reducing the use of pre-trial probation is the core of the JDAI, the Casey Foundation initiative influenced youth justice more broadly. In what follows, I show that the strategies and values central to JDAI encouraged interagency collaboration on other youth justice issues, emphasized the importance of documenting and addressing factors that contribute to disproportionate contact with the juvenile justice system among Black and Latino populations, and made the more technical components of adolescent development a part of the mainstream juvenile justice vocabulary.

## Interagency Collaboration

Interagency collaboration is a hallmark of the JDAI model and in Massachusetts this era of juvenile justice system reforms, brought together a diverse set of stakeholders. The siloed bureaucratic structure that segmented the work of law enforcement, the processes of the courts, and the operation of corrections was a substantial barrier to coordinated systems across agencies. However, as counties moved to adopt JDAI, a collaborative infrastructure emerged. What's more, this included both the departments directly responsible for the provision of juvenile justice such as the juvenile courts, the Department of Youth Services, the Office of the Commissioner of Probation, the Youth Advocacy Division of the public defenders, the county-based District Attorneys' Offices, and local and state police; and also incorporated representatives from the Department of Children and Family Services (DCF), physical and mental healthcare providers, school districts, children's rights advocates, parent advocates, and juvenile justice non-profit policy organizations. In working towards curtailing the population of youth in detention, these stakeholder groups came together regularly for trainings, planning meetings, and to share about their progress on specific goals at monthly county meetings and then quarterly statewide meetings. A juvenile court judge who has been active in the early way of JDAI, explained that coordination across departments became a baseline expectation for those seeking to improve the juvenile justice system.

All of us need to be aligned or we should just stop talking about evidence-based... [Prior to JDAI] we never really got in the room and articulated to each other what we're trying to do... And the JDAI approach has really been helpful. It's like, "Well,

let's just put the data on the table." Probation can't accomplish anything unilaterally. Judges can't be effective without probation, prosecutors. So, that's what we're moving towards and it's been an education process...What's sort of been a unifying theme is, we're all coming at this about, "What's in the best interest of the kid?" ...And there's more conversations, more interaction, more doing things jointly. And everybody has kind of been very, very willing to come to the table.

For some JDAI created a spirit of collaboration that catalyzed justice system reforms beyond the JDAI priorities. One juvenile court judge explained that after participating in a few JDAI meetings, "I became, for both philosophical and tactical reasons, a big believer in systemic collaborative dialogue outside of the courtroom...Every opportunity I have to engage in a systemic discussion, I'm gonna try to engage."

However, broadening the range of participants engaged in juvenile justice reform for the purposes of collaboration and coordination was not without its own challenges. Stakeholders were quick to say that these negatives did not outweigh the advantages of interagency collaboration, but also felt that even years into JDAI they still needed to be addressed. At nearly every gathering I attended, one or more individuals said that either too much, or not enough information was shared between agencies. There were, as one stakeholder put it, "all these firewalls between systems." Not only did agencies have different ways of collecting information, they each had different confidentiality standards. These policies resulted in a tension between sharing information most helpful for coordinating resources and supports for system-involved young people as they moved through school, interactions with the police, the juvenile courts, and probation; and a genuine concern that information might be misused or used in ways that might ultimately disadvantage children. These conversations often centered around a single question: *Will a child be treated differently in*

*school, or any other institution, when more is known about his or her juvenile justice system contact?* One stakeholder explained this dilemma,

I think that people on its face think yes, that schools and DYS should be communicating. But I also think that there's a group of people who misjudge or not misjudge, mistrust each other's intentions and I think that's kind of one the crux of the issues. It's like I trust that social emotional portion of Boston public schools really does wanna disrupt the school to prison pipeline. I don't trust that the operations people that are responsible for the safety of the schools don't wanna exclude these kids from school. And that's the crux of the issue.

A senior official in the Department of Children and Family Services who was involved in JDAI efforts expressed a similar complaint regarding resource allocation in a newly coordinated system. The official appreciated that attempts to reduce the number of youth in detention were motivated by evidence that detention was deleterious for youth, but also expressed concerns that rather than coming up with an internal solution, DYS was simply transferring the responsibility for a high-need population of young people to DCF, which did not have any better outcomes and often lacked the capacity to safely manage youth coming from DYS.

That's been a struggle for [DCF] from the child welfare system's perspective, the JDAI, is that it's not clear to me that DYS has actually put any money into developing community services. So they turn and look at what's out there in the community, whether it's appropriate or not... The detention alternative is us, is child welfare. So they hand us youth that we're not particularly designed to handle, they're not particularly successful, and then people are very angry. We're not necessarily the right agency...A lot of times, what they're advocating for is congregate care. So what they wanna do is take them out of the DYS congregate care setting, and put them into ours. We weren't getting any better outcomes in our congregate care setting, so now you've just taken the problem off DYS and you've handed it to us.

There were also three important parties that were rarely a part of the collaborative networks of juvenile justice reform: prosecutors, families, and youth. By insufficiently engaging with these actors, young people continued to experience the justice system as capricious, despite coordinated and intentional reforms. Of the groups absent from these discussions, prosecutors were the only group whose absence was explicitly discussed by other stakeholders. As one Judge interjected during a monthly JDAI county-wide meeting, “Does this matter if the DA’s office isn’t here?” In interviews as well, stakeholders remarked that of all the actors in the juvenile justice system, prosecutors had the greatest opportunity to enact change and were largely disengaged from JDAI. Compared to all other court actors the prosecutor has the most extensive range of options at all phases from arraignment to sentencing, as they determine whether and what charges are filed, set the terms for plea bargains, and submit sentencing recommendations.

While the stakeholders I interviewed, lamented the fact that prosecutors were rarely at the figurative table, few commented on the absence of system-involved youth and their families without prompting. When a parent or a young person was invited to the roundtables or town halls that I observed, they were often alone and treated as guests or visitors rather than collaborative thought partners.

JDAI struggles with having parents in the room, whose kids are actively going through this system, because, not surprisingly, their emotions are pretty raw. [Parents] often think people in on the table don't have good intentions, and haven't treated their child well. To have a productive conversation, and to also make sure that our state system folks are trained up enough to still hear that, and see value in it, and not write it off as “that angry mom.”



This is not to say that stakeholders did not consider youth or family's experiences within the justice system. However, I noticed that rather than directly engage with them, stakeholders generally imputed what they thought the parent or youth perspective might be. Unfortunately, what stakeholders articulated reflected only a partial understanding of the youth perspectives I found in my interviews with youth that I present in subsequent chapters. Relying over-generalizations that sometimes veered into stereotypes, parents, families, and youth were portrayed primarily as being toxic. Neighborhood names were often used by practitioners as a simple shorthand for social conditions like poverty or violence or as a stand in for discussions about Black and Latino ethno-racial groups. A senior court-based administrator described the system-involved population as,

They've gotta deal with racism, poverty...In Massachusetts, they're living in neighborhoods where there's been intergenerational under-education, under-employment, over-policing, over-incarceration, the environment, untreated mental health issues, compounding trauma, so people have written about those neighborhoods as being toxic. They are toxic in that sort of metaphorical sense, but often they're actually literally toxic as well, with houses with lead paint that haven't been abated, with old, toxic waste dumps that nobody ever dealt with. A house built where there used to be a gas station. It's not a coincidence that kids in poor neighborhoods have higher rates of asthma, and other kinds of issues.

The almost uniform characterizations as types of people and types of places using deficit languages, identified by what they lack, created distance between stakeholder actors engaged in redesigning the system and the children and families who would be directly impacted by those changes. Here, stakeholders have begun to acknowledge the social

conditions that shape young people's development but are simultaneously overlooking what youth and families see as good and worth capitalizing on within their lives.

## **A System in Which Youth Can Thrive: Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice**

*We know that nearly all youth, as part of typical adolescent development, engage in delinquency. Unfortunately, data reflects that the Massachusetts Juvenile Justice system impacts youth of color more often, and more harshly, at nearly every decision point than is does for white youth in our communities.*

(Massachusetts JDAI, 2018)

In addition to facilitating interagency collaboration, JDAI increased the visibility of two bodies of research within the juvenile justice policy and practice environments: evaluations of the positive youth development (PYD) model for engaging with young people, and research on neurological development during adolescence. The above excerpt from the introduction to a JDAI workshop on racial and ethnic disparities, exemplifies the discourse that accompanied the implementation of JDAI. I will show how the knowledge of the apparent inequalities in the juvenile justice system, and research on PYD and adolescent brain development, coalesced into a new approach to juvenile justice that borrows from the golden rule of medicine, "do no harm."

The Positive Youth Development model emerges out of developmental science and reflects the insights of scholars and practitioners who aimed to improve intervention programs targeting children and adolescents (Lerner, et al., 2005). While PYD was designed

to support all youth, the three beliefs that guide the approach are especially applicable to young people who are justice system involved. The first resonates with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (see Chapter 1), and maintains that human development is dynamic and occurs through bidirectional interactions between people and their environmental contexts (Jenson, 2013). The second states that the most effective way to prevent and address negative behaviors among youth is through strengths-based approaches that build on youth's positive attributes, rather than focusing on deficits (Lerner, et al., 2005). The final premise of PYD asserts that young people, their families, and communities are important participants in facilitating a young person's development (Benson, 1997).

In both interviews and observations, stakeholders frequently referred to PYD as the philosophy underlying both their personal and professional orientations toward juvenile justice. As one senior official in the probation department told me, there was a common interest in "creating the conditions so that [youth] can thrive." However, collaboration between the justice system agencies and the related organizations that provide related services to young people, how they should work to transform that shared interest into a reality was still hard to envision. One stakeholder remarked, "What does PYD look like when a child is locked up, and they cannot go outside, and they have to ask to go to the bathroom? Is [a question] that I think we still struggle with." While another who held a senior position in the the Youth Advocacy Division (YAD) of the Public Defenders' office used a metaphor to illustrate a similar point. Likening the juvenile court process to a child who did not know how to swim and was alone in rough waters, he said

And so, when that kid comes into court, and all we do is say, "You damn well better start swimming, or else," that doesn't really do anything. And especially when we say, "And by the way, while you're learning how to swim, you're going to see your probation officer once a week, you're gonna go to school every day, you're gonna follow all school rules, you're gonna keep a curfew, you're gonna write a letter of apology, you're gonna pay all these probation fees, you're gonna do community service, you're gonna go to anger management." There's a kid who's already drowning, nothing in there teaches them how to swim or helps hold him up.

In addition to frequent references to PYD and other behavioral theories of adolescent development, juvenile justice system stakeholders were also well-versed in research linking adolescent brain development to the youth crime and delinquency. This research, which was featured prominently on JDAI brochures and presentations, analyzed fMRI scans and found that brain development in the prefrontal cortex continued through age twenty-four (Thompson, et al., 2005). There were three implications of this research that were referenced regularly in both the JDAI literature and in my interviews and observations: “adolescents are (a) less able than adults to control impulses through reason, (b) disposed to overvalue short-term benefits as compared to long-term consequences, and (c) immensely susceptible to negative peer influences.”

The references to adolescent brain development among Massachusetts juvenile justice stakeholders mirrored the rhetoric increasingly common in national juvenile justice conversations. Taking into account adolescent neurological development, gained traction within the juvenile courts following the Supreme Court decision in *Miller v. Alabama* (2012), which ruled that mandatory life sentences without the possibility of parole imposed a cruel and unusual, and thus unconstitutional, punishment for juveniles. In Massachusetts, the

Supreme Judicial Court extended *Miller* and barred *discretionary* sentences of life without the possibility of parole for juveniles in *Diatchenko v. District Attorney for Suffolk District* (2013). In both of these decisions, the respective courts drew extensively on the same “science and social science” that JDAI popularized in Massachusetts.

Through interviews and observations, I found that justice system stakeholders believed that a developmental approach to juvenile justice built around PYD and neuroscience, provided an alternative to the punishment and rehabilitation models.

In the juvenile justice arena, people like to debate, "Should the system have a punitive focus or a rehabilitative focus?"...From a PYD perspective it really needs to have a developmental focus...You don't start off talking about them needing to be rehabilitated when they're just starting the process of habilitation. And they're not all broken. But you need to experience healthy development.

## Chapter 3: Schools, Child Welfare Agencies, and the Construction of Institutional Distrust

*“What precisely is the school to prison pipeline?”* I scribbled in the middle of my notebook page. I had been wondering about how to answer that question for quite a while, but as I sat in the audience of a conference entitled, “Ending the School to Prison Pipeline,” that had been organized by the Civil Rights Unit of the Massachusetts U.S. Attorney’s Office, I found myself growing frustrated. A stakeholder participant suggested I come along as an opportunity to hear more about juvenile justice in the state and potentially recruit additional practitioners to participate in the study. At the conference I observed something that I had previously noted in both the scholarly and public discourses on the topic: as a term, “the school to prison pipeline” functioned as a sort of catch-all referring to various points of overlap between the education and justice systems. These ranged from the more literal descriptions of children being arrested at school for a school-based offense and subsequently held in detention centers or jails; to arguments that contemporary schools too closely resembled correctional facilities; to commentaries about the high volume of students in public schools under correctional supervision. Some defined the school to prison pipeline by the disturbing trend that both suspensions and expulsions disproportionately impacted black and Latino youth and those in special education. Others remarked on the increased accuracy with which academic and behavioral outcomes could be used to predict justice system involvement. Amidst these conceptions of the school to prison pipeline, conference

panelists articulated a shared understanding that zero-tolerance school discipline codes and the increased presence of police officers in schools in the wake of the mass shooting at Columbine High School were the primary engines of this increase in social inequality.

As conference participants spoke about the school to prison pipeline and offered ideas for reforms in education, policing, and the courts, I recalled my conversations a few months prior with Luis. When I first met Luis, it had been ten months since the eighteen-year-old had aged out of the Department of Youth Services facility where he had spent most of the previous year. Many parts of his life experience resonated with the conceptions of the school to prison pipeline that emerged at the conference. At some point in elementary school—though he did not recall exactly when—he was diagnosed with an attention disorder that manifested in disruptive behavior in his classes. Misbehaviors resulted in frequent suspensions. Suspensions accumulated into four expulsions by the end of middle school. He eventually was arrested at age sixteen. For Luis, this formal contact with the justice system corresponded to his life increasingly spiraling out of control. In quick succession, he was arrested multiple times, assigned to probation, held in DYS custody, and stopped attending high school.

However, there were other portions of Luis' experience that highlighted the need for greater refinement in understanding how a school to prison pipeline might operate and the consequences of such a phenomenon. Of his four arrests, only one involved his school, and even that was indirect—so how should we understand the link between his extensive disciplinary record, his arrests, and his relationship to schooling and formal education

following his arrests? In their studies of low-income, Black and Latino youth, sociologists Victor Rios (2011) and Carla Shedd (2015) advance the concepts of the “youth control complex” and the “universal carceral apparatus,” respectively. These closely linked ideas describe social conditions in urban communities in which schools, community-based organizations, and even parents are co-opted into doing the work of the justice system by criminalizing young people’s behavior. In the construction of both a youth control complex and a universal carceral apparatus, it becomes clear that terms used to negatively label young people result in a narrowing of opportunity.

When I attended the conference, I had not yet met Raymond, a young man who had spent much of his childhood bouncing around group homes and residential treatment centers. However, I was beginning to recognize that alongside the attention to schools, there needed to be a similar consideration of the child welfare system as another public institution historically outside the justice system, that now operated as an instrument of carceral control. As the child welfare agency serving Massachusetts, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCF) oversees the well-being of about 50,000 children, approximately 10,000 of whom live in out-of-home placements (DCF, 2018). Aside from one panelist’s remark, “we shouldn’t forget about the dually involved kids,” there was a conspicuous lack of dialogue on ways to stem justice system contact among children already engaged with DCF, a population often referred to as dually-involved, cross-over, or multi-system youth. Children involved in the child welfare system experience a heightened risk of justice system contact because child abuse and neglect, which are concentrated among these young people,



increase the likelihood of youth arrest by as much as 55 percent and of engaging in a violent crime up to 96 percent (Widom, 1989).

Raymond, too, had many of the characteristics of a dually-involved young person. As a child, he was also diagnosed with an attention disorder. He was disruptive in school, struggled to stay on-task in his classes, and was expelled from a parochial elementary school. When he was a boy, a non-parental adult abused Raymond and his older sister and the trauma associated with the fallout of that experience manifested in rage and destruction. Before the age of ten, Raymond was diagnosed with a mental illness, which led to his ultimate removal from his family's home and long-term placement in residential institutions. As an adolescent, his behaviors escalated and became violent, which resulted in multiple arrests.

In his book *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, Michael Lipsky (2010) illustrated that interactions with so-called “street-level bureaucrats”—teachers, police officers, social workers, public defenders—are a salient component of attitudes towards the government. These encounters are often citizens' most direct experiences with the government and social policy. The young men I interviewed, for the most part, characterized their interactions with those working in schools and child welfare institutions as being contentious, violent, and impactful. For Luis and Raymond, there were striking similarities in their experiences of social control and resultant “disciplinary careers” across the various microsystem and mesosystem contexts of their development (Shollenberger, 2015). The coupling of the justice, education, and child welfare systems did not go unnoticed by the young men and reinforced a widely held sense

of distrust of public institutions. I argue that this distrust manifested in acting out and delinquency. These behaviors should be simultaneously understood as developmentally typical adolescent conduct, and actions born of resigned acceptance to the belief that public institutions were not equipped to be responsive to the realities of their lived experiences.

In what follows, I chart the disciplinary careers of Luis and Raymond through the education and child welfare systems. I focus on how these young men interpret their extensive histories of adversarial contact within these systems. I highlight the decades of suspensions, expulsions, and fights with teachers, perceived dishonesty by social workers, and sanctions at group homes the young men experienced before their arrests. Here, I am less concerned with whether the experience of school exclusion or placement in residential treatment center caused arrests, but instead, how the young men's experiences with public institutions formally outside of the justice system, shaped their interpretations and responses to their arrests. I argue that the behavioral labels ascribed to youth as they proceed through both educational and child welfare institutions do more than limit a young person's choice set—they instill essential lessons for understanding one's place in the world. As children and adolescents, the ways in which these systems responded to their diagnosed attention disorders and mental illnesses led them to be skeptical, but being on the receiving end of what they perceived to be illegitimate discipline calcified their skepticism into institutional distrust.

## Too Many Suspensions to Count

Each of the interview activities involved a fair amount of writing, so I gave each participant a choice as to whether they or I would do the writing on their life history graphs. Luis was the only young man who wanted to write himself, “Yeah, it’s probably easier if I do it,” he told me as he grabbed one of the pens I had laid out on the table and hunched over the desk to write. We sat together in silence save for Luis’ absent-minded tapping of the pen on the desk as he paused to recall the events of his last 18 years. While he wrote, I tried to appear busy organizing papers, but I mostly was attempting to observe Luis out of the corner of my eye. I noted that his curly light brown hair flopped to one side and that he had changed from his work uniform into a nondescript black hoodie, grey sweatpants, and a pair of pristinely maintained white Nike Air Force 1s.

The third event Luis recorded on his life graph, was “First Expulsion” in a spot that marked that he was eight years old at the time. Before that expulsion, Luis had been suspended from school multiple times. Suspensions occurred so regularly throughout his educational history that when I suggested marking each of his suspensions on his life graph, he shook his head, “No. There’s too many to remember.” Those which he did recall, tended to have happened in the lead up to an expulsion, and in each instance, a hated teacher featured as a recurring motif. He explained,

**Luis:** When I was younger, my ADHD was a lot more serious than what it is right now. My first expulsion was just being suspended too many times. The last time I got suspended in third grade was because I had thrown a chair at the teacher.

**Abena:** Why'd you throw the chair?

**Luis:** I didn't really like the teacher, and then she had said something to me. I can't quite remember what, but she said something that got me heated, and I just threw the chair at her. Then, eventually, they expelled me and just sent me to [another elementary school] for the rest of third grade, but I had got expelled there too. They expelled me because I threw a rock at a teacher's car, and then I spit in his soda.

**Abena:** Why did you throw the rock at the teacher?

**Luis:** I was feeling a bad vibe from the teacher. He had also said a lot of things that weren't very encouraging to me throughout the third grade. Like I said, people called me a smart kid. I just didn't agree with half the stuff that he was saying about me needing to be in [special education]...Then after doing that, they didn't send me to another public school for about like a whole month and a half.

**Abena:** So, you were just at home?

**Luis:** Yeah...waiting for a transfer. Then my mom finally got the transfer, and they moved me to [another school].

While statewide data detailing school- and district-level school exclusion practices have only been available since the enactment of a new Massachusetts law on school discipline in 2016, both national and local studies conducted consistently find that Black and Latino students are more likely to be suspended than their White or Asian peers and that students assigned to special education were more likely to be suspended relative students in mainstream classrooms (DOE, 2016). Analysis of recently released school discipline data, found an annual statewide suspension rate of just over 4 percent, though these rates were higher in urban districts and districts with the highest proportion of Black and Latino students (Enwemeka, 2014). Suspension rates in those districts remain far lower than the reported number of suspensions among the young men I interviewed. Of the 26

participants in the study, 22 were suspended three or more times before they began high school. The overrepresentation of young people who had been suspended in the study sample is to be expected, given that I selected the sample on having been arrested as a minor, a strong correlate of suspension. While Luis' behaviors tended to be more, to use his word, "devious" than his counterparts', across the sample, two typical behaviors culminated in suspension: talking back to their teachers or fighting.

While Luis was able to complete third, fourth, and fifth grade at the fourth elementary school he attended, he continued to have contentious relationships with his teachers. In one incident, as a consequence for prior misbehavior on the school bus, Luis was instructed to sit alone on the bus with six empty rows separating him and the other students. Luis felt that this was an unfair punishment and "threw a tantrum." He opened the rear emergency door and ran off of the school bus and back into the school building. In our interview, Luis gleefully recounted how he ran up multiple flights of stairs, through hallways, and in and out of classrooms while being chased through the school. He spoke with something akin to pride in his voice when he said, "Eventually it took about three police officers, and [the Assistant Principal], and one of the teachers to restrain me." His tone quickly changed to anger and dismissal, however, as he described that once the adults had restrained him, he spent the next six hours undergoing psychiatric evaluations at the nearby Boston Medical Center. In fact, Luis was one of a handful of young men who disclosed that at some point in their lives they had been subjected to what they, or their families, considered to be unwarranted psychiatric evaluations during early or middle childhood.

Luis' early experiences with discipline in school were formative in socializing him into the notion that schools and public institutions are extremely fallible. With the exception of the trip to the hospital, which he minimized as an unimportant footnote, Luis recalled the event positively. The school suspended him for three days and through an agreement between the school and his parents he never took the bus again. Instead, his mother drove him to school in the mornings, and his father picked him up in the afternoons, which he liked. He enjoyed the epic chase through the school and viewed the psychiatric evaluation as a small price to pay for what was ultimately a very enjoyable suspension: "That was like one of my best childhood memories." His family felt that Luis should not have been separated from the other children on the bus and also felt that the school should have anticipated that Luis would react as he had. He spent his three-day suspension at an older sister's house watching movies and playing video games with his niece and nephew who were around his age. "Only because you was right in that suspension that I'm going to let you do this," Luis' mother told him. Thus, while the school interpreted Luis' suspension as a consequence, he viewed it as a reward.

Instances in which the young men recalled schools administering consequences that were seen by the young man and their adult family members as unfair or wrong, were quite common. In a similar instance, Dougie, now 20 years old, recalled the time in elementary school when a teacher left him alone in a locked classroom after dismissal as punishment for what he admits was disruptive and disrespectful behavior. The teacher intended to scare Dougie by misleading him into believing that he would have to stay alone in the classroom

overnight, while in actuality she went to inform his grandmother, who worked in the same school building, about his misbehavior.

**Dougie:** I was misbehaving in class, and my grandma was the lunch aid there, and [my teacher] knew that so she locked me in the class after school and everything, and told me I was staying in there overnight. Then she went to go just grab my grandmother and stuff, but by the time she got back, I destroyed the whole classroom.

**Abena:** How old were you at that time?

**Dougie:** I don't know, I was in second grade, but I stayed back in first grade, so I was probably like somewhere around a third graders' age.

**Abena:** That teacher locked you in the room?

**Dougie:** [*Nods head in the affirmative.*] Told me I was staying there all night.

**Abena:** Do you remember how you felt?

**Dougie:** I felt scared. Then I just started destroying everything.

**Abena:** What happened when your grandma came back?

**Dougie:** They caught me trying to break the window, trying to get out. Then the teacher never reported it, because my grandmother said...she didn't have no right to lock me in that room.

By aligning with Dougie in the face of his teacher's disciplinary sanction, his grandmother's response reinforced that there were valid challenges to his teacher's legitimacy as well as the school's. He related this experience to other examples from his life when he felt unjustly wronged or provoked into an outburst by another teacher's or student's actions. Much like Luis' mother's affirmation, "only because you was right," these types of familial responses to encounters with school discipline responses validated the young men's

adversarial engagement with schools, and also prompted the young men to view their families as allies *against* their schools or other institutions of social control. As I discuss in further depth in chapter 5, for those young men who did not have families or whose families viewed the school discipline practices as legitimate, their high volume of suspensions often left the youth feeling hopeless and isolated.

## Raymond's Family Falls Apart

Raymond is three years younger than his sister, Natalia, and six years older than Jamie, the baby of the family. Their parents immigrated to the United States from Guatemala before the children were born. In the early years, the family, which also included Raymond's maternal grandmother and uncle, lived in a small apartment in Somerville, Massachusetts. A few months before Jamie was born, the family won a spot in the Mystic Public Housing Projects. Raymond's parents and sisters continued to live together in that home; however, Raymond has lived there only intermittently since the Department of Children and Family Services assumed custody of him at nine years old.

In the course of recounting their life histories, certain young men highlighted particular moments as events that "changed everything." For Raymond, his life was full of turning points. Some were things that happened to him, while others were choices he made while growing up, which in retrospect he regretted, "Sometimes I wish I could go back in time and just fix some dumb shit that I did." Raymond organized his life around two significant



events, both of which were traumatic. The first was the afternoon when he, an eight-year-old, witnessed his uncle raping his sister, Natalia. The second was the meeting in which he, at age fourteen, was informed by his DCF caseworker that rather than transitioning to live at home with his sisters and parents, he would remain in DCF residential placements until his eighteenth birthday. Raymond perceived the former as the catalyst for his involvement with DCF, and the later solidified his distrust of DCF as an institution, which initiated a series of juvenile arrests.

Exposure to trauma and violence is deleterious, and especially so for young children. While Raymond's parents worked, his uncle's household responsibilities included supervising the children and it was during one such occasion that Raymond entered a bedroom and saw his uncle raping his sister. After walking into the room, Natalia begged Raymond not to say anything to anyone. When he tried to talk to her about what his uncle had done she'd tell him, "mind your business," but this did not make sense to Raymond. He tried to tell his parents about what his uncle was doing but said that they did not believe him. Then, after it had been happening for a while, his parents found his sister in bed visibly having been sexually assaulted. His uncle disappeared that night, and his parents never reported him to the police.

As adults, Raymond and his sister continued to have a strained relationship. They never spoke about her sexual assault. During our interviews, it was evident that for Raymond the entire situation was still raw. He was upset because his parents did not believe him. He was upset because after he knew what was happening his uncle became physically abusive

toward him, regularly administering harsh beatings. Additionally, it was hard for Raymond to square his sister's warnings to him to "stay out of it," with what he perceived as her "[playing] the victim role" once his uncle's actions had been revealed and acknowledged by their parents. His uncle's abusive actions destabilized Raymond's family. Of the fallout, Raymond said, "My parents they... the whole family went down the drain, I guess. Like, we all started fighting. I started not believing or trusting my parents."

Alongside the loss of trust in his parents, within months Raymond was expelled from his parochial school. In the year before his expulsion, Raymond struggled academically and behaviorally. He rarely did his work, had been suspended on a few occasions, and had been required to repeat his first-grade year. Shortly after his uncle left, his behavior worsened. "I started acting up," Raymond said. He shook his head, "doing stupid shit and getting suspended from school and all that." There was not a single event that Raymond recalls prompting his expulsion; much like Luis, his expulsion was in response to increasing frequency of his suspensions. His behavior was "destructive" and included flicking crayons across classrooms, throwing spitballs, and swearing. For the final two months of his second-grade school year, Raymond attended a local public school. His behavior was an issue there as well, as he told me, "I was sent to the principal's office all the time." However, Raymond did complete the remainder of the school year without any additional suspensions or expulsions.

That summer Raymond went to a day camp in a nearby town. At the camp, he continued to "act up." One day he and a few other campers were placed in time out. The

timeout area was unsupervised, and Raymond opted to “be out.” He encouraged the other children to leave the circumscribed area with him, but none did. He snuck into a nearby cabin and found matches and set the cabin on fire.

While the fire Raymond set did not harm the other campers or the staff, it caused a significant destruction of property, which engaged both the police and fire departments. He was transported from the camp to a hospital for a psychiatric evaluation, where he was asked a series of questions, including whether or not he experienced hallucinations, and Raymond replied in the affirmative.

I told them I was seeing things. I didn't really see things, but I wanted to see what the hospital was like. In my mind, I envisioned going to the hospital was you laying in bed getting fed all day. My dumbass was just like, “Yeah, I'm seeing things. I think I need to stay overnight.” That overnight led me to seven years in freaking programs.

Raymond remained under psychiatric supervision in the hospital for three months. He remembered that he primarily slept and watched television while there but did not recall many specifics from his stay. During that period, DCF assumed residential custody for him. From the hospital he went to live in a residential treatment program in Jamaica Plain, a neighborhood on the other side of Boston far from his parents' home in Somerville. Following his hospitalization, Raymond never returned to a traditional school setting.

## The Behavior School

In middle school, Luis continued to have challenging interactions with teachers. He clowned around and was disruptive in his classes, and his teachers were ill-equipped to address his behavior. Before he was expelled from his first middle school, three of Luis' teachers harshly criticized him, "One of them actually told me that I had no hope, that I wasn't going to pass, that I'm not worth it as a student." One of the regular substitute teachers made a similar comment and said to him, "Oh, you're not going to pass if you keep acting like that. You're such a dumb kid. You keep making dumb decisions." Regardless of these teachers' intentions, the comments were poorly received by Luis, and he told me that they "really ticked me off." Each time a teacher spoke to him in this manner, Luis responded by "spazzing out"—a set of behaviors which included yelling, cursing, and ultimately escalated to flipping classroom desks.

School discipline practices were understood to be illegitimate not just because consequences were deemed unfair or disproportionately harsh, but also because they were rarely aligned to the realities of young people's experiences. The second middle school Luis attended was a temporary alternative educational program. Many of the young men I interviewed attended the same alternative school at points in their lives, which they all simply called, "The Behavior School." Students attended this school only after having incurred significant disciplinary infractions. Unlike Luis' previous traditional public school, at The Behavior School police officers randomly scanned the middle school students with wand

metal detectors. For Luis, his experience here was mixed. On the one hand, he completed the seventh grade with only three suspensions and no expulsions, a far cry from the suspensions that were “too many to count” during elementary school. On the other hand, while Luis’ prior schooling included a great deal of fighting with adults, it was around this time that Luis began to have additional difficulties with other students. Two of his suspensions while at his alternative middle school involved fighting with other students.

There were always fights in those [behavior] schools... It was one of those schools where it was like a whole bunch of kids like fighting and just doing a whole bunch of other shit... After like seventh grade, I just started telling kids, ‘If you want to fight me, just fight me outside of school because I’m not trying to get suspended anymore.’

Youth attempts to regulate their behavior often fell flat. Despite his request that fights occur outside of school, Luis found himself in yet another disagreement with a classmate. The boys were about to begin fighting when his teacher stepped in and attempted to break up the altercation. Luis pushed the teacher. The teacher considered pressing charges against Luis, but ultimately elected not to and Luis was suspended instead. In truth, Luis only narrowly got through the alternative middle school without being expelled. In eighth grade, Luis began carrying his older brother’s knife. He was not sure who reported the knife, but one day a security officer attempted to search him. Luis ran out of the building and tossed the knife into nearby bushes before the school security officer caught up to him. He re-entered the building, and the officer searched him but did not find anything. Still, he was suspended for leaving the building without permission.

## System Raised

When Raymond was twelve years old he was allowed to move back home: “I was doing good at the programs, and they just let me go home, but I was still a day student there.” A van shuttled him and other day students from their homes to the Jamaica Plain location for school and treatment programs. At home, he spent as much of his time as possible outside, a true contrast to his time in the program where he “was just always inside.” While at home he had freedom, whereas in the program he felt as though he’d been “locked up early.” However, this lasted for only a month. While at his neighborhood basketball courts, Raymond had an altercation with another boy. Raymond felt that the other boy was disrespectful to a girl who he had a crush on, and punched him. The boy’s mother called the police and wanted to press charges. In lieu of juvenile court involvement, police and his DCF case manager negotiated Raymond’s full-time return to the Lawndale residential placement.

One year later, at age thirteen, Raymond aged out of Lawndale and went to live at a larger residential treatment program for boys in a Boston suburb. During the days he would go to school, and in then in the afternoons and evenings he played sports, watched television, and played video games. Raymond did not like living there and wanted to be at home with his family. They continued to visit during most weekends, and he would sometimes get overnight passes during which he could go home. Behaviorally, Raymond continued to struggle. He fought with the other boys. When he got into trouble, one

response from the program was to take away his overnight passes. But he also believed that he received the same punishment at times when he was not misbehaving, which felt unfair, “I don’t know what their concerns were. I really don’t even know why they did it, but there was sometimes they would be fucking with, taking my passes away. They would just do dumb shit. I don’t know, they just did it for no reason, honestly.”

As an institution, DCF subscribes to a model that engages young people and their families in goal setting. Throughout his time at Lawndale, Raymond felt that he understood the facets of his treatment plan. He was working towards being able to transition back to home, but he also recognized that having punched another person while living at home was a setback on his path toward reaching this goal. He had been placed at Cherry Hill, another residential treatment program because his actions suggested that he was not yet ready to be at home permanently. After one year at Cherry Hill, Raymond, his parents, his caseworkers and other service providers met to share updates on his progress. It was at this meeting that his case manager informed Raymond that he now had a new goal. Rather than returning home to live with his family and Somerville, he would remain in residential programs until he aged out of DCF at age eighteen. For Raymond, this moment was another huge turning point in the narrative of his life. Angry, Raymond threw the chair and tables. His parents pleaded with him to stop and listen to the DCF staff, but Raymond refused, “I was just like no. I’m not going to respect them. They keep me here.”

Following that meeting, Raymond repeatedly ran away from Cherry Hill. Raymond estimated he ran away from Cherry Hill about nine times. These attempts to run away were

rarely fully fledged. He wanted to get back to Somerville but knew that DCF would find him if he went home. He mused that maybe some of the boys who he'd met in programs would allow him to crash with them for a few years until he turned eighteen-years-old. During one attempt, he and a friend were picked up by state police as they walked along the side of the highway.

I told them the story, like 'Yeah, me and boys we got in a fight with our mom and we were on our way home.' They were like, 'We heard that there was two kids that ran away from Cherry Hill. We're going to call them and see. We're going to bring you guys in there and see if that's you guys, and if it is. If it's not, then we'll bring you wherever you have to go.' We got caught.

On another occasion, after being unable to convince any of the other boys to accompany him, Raymond made it as far as the small city of Framingham, Massachusetts. He walked around the city alone, having little money and not knowing anyone. At night he would sneak into buildings and sleep in the hallways. After five days, tired and hungry Raymond called Cherry Hill, and they sent a van to retrieve him. When he got back they took his shoes away and for two weeks Raymond was forced to go everywhere in socks and flip-flops, it was unclear if that was intended to punish and make a spectacle of him or to ensure that he would not go far.

In addition to running away, Raymond went from "goofing off...getting in fights with people...and just being the class clown" to being a "violent person" with multiple juvenile arrests. His first arrest occurred after he punched one of his teachers at Cherry Hill. A classmate made a joke about Raymond's mother. Raymond became angry, and the boys began to argue. Raymond's teacher sent him out of the classroom to take a timeout. When



he returned to the classroom ten minutes later, the other student continued to hassle Raymond.

At that point, I threatened him. I was like, ‘Yo. I’ll fight you right now.’ Blah, blah, blah. That’s when my teacher told me to go back and take a timeout. I said some shit to him like, ‘Nah, fuck that. I’m sick of you getting mad tough.’ That’s when he ended up coming near me or whatever. I was like you know what? Fuck it. I’ll go. I told him straight up, ‘If you touch me again, if you touch me, bro, I’m going to fucking punch you right in your face.’ Then he touched me on my shoulder and was like, ‘Go ahead, you spick.’ I started to turn around and just punch him right in his eye. After that, they called the cops, and they just came, and they told me I was getting charged with... assault and battery.

While many of the young men reported arguments and physical altercations with teachers, Raymond—the only participant who attended schools within his residential treatment programs—was the only young man who faced charges after such an incident. He had multiple court appearances during which his clinician from Cherry Hill accompanied him, but his parents never attended those court dates. Following this incident, the staff at Cherry Hill decided that while he would continue to be a student in the Cherry Hill school, Raymond would begin living at a nearby group home.

Shortly before turning sixteen years old, he moved in at the Archmont Home, which offered the opportunity for a residential program environment that encouraged a more independent lifestyle: “I could do more [activities] there. I could go out into the community by myself. I could have cell phones. There’s more stuff that I could do there.” During the seven months in which Raymond lived at Archmont, he continued to violently react when he was displeased and run away. In one instance, Raymond believed that the program’s director

had excused him from certain activities. When another staff member informed him that he could not participate in a trip to the beach--his favorite location--because he had opted out of the same activities he believed he was excused from, Raymond became angry. Raymond attempted to argue his case, but when he was unable to convince the staff member otherwise, he "just turned around and punched him in his eye." The punch broke the staff member's eye socket, and Raymond was, once again, sent to a hospital for a psychiatric evaluation. Following this hospitalization, he was provisionally allowed to return to Archmont. He ran away, generally misbehaved and continued to get into fights. After another particularly violent fight with another teenager, Raymond was hospitalized yet again, and the program refused to allow him to return. He spent the night in the hospital with an escort from the program and in the morning appeared in court. His attempts to run away, fights, and punching of the staff member violated the terms of his probation, and he was placed in DYS custody for the next three weeks.

What is most significant here is not whether Raymond should have been allowed to return home earlier, but rather how Raymond's perception of whether or not he should have been allowed to return home shaped his orientation toward public institutions. By considering Raymond's life from his perspective, a logic not often attributed to young people who have been in comparable positions emerges. He understands that burning down the cabin at his day camp was a dangerous action that warranted intervention. However, in the aftermath in his out-of-home residential placements, he often felt that punching teachers and staff members were contextually justified, because the behavioral expectations were not

aligned, in his view, with his lived reality. Each time he was arrested or kicked out of placement the disconnect between Raymond's experience of the world and what DCF required of him allowed developmentally typical skepticism of authority and adults to mature into a deep-seated sense of alienation. This sense was reinforced after a two-week stay in DYS, which he felt closely resembled his experiences in DCF residential placements, "Like I can go to jail like because I'm used to being institutionalized, but I don't know if I want to live there my whole life. I already know, shit's, it's just crazy. Like, once you go through like the shit, I been through as a kid, going to jail is nothing because you're already used to structure. But after a while it gets depressing."

## Luis Drops Out

After years of fights with teachers, high school served as a reprieve for Luis. He began high school at the start of his eighth-grade year and remained at the school into his junior year. Over three years at one school set the record for Luis' continuous enrollment in a single school. What led this schooling experience to be different for Luis? According to him, it was because for the first time he had authentically positive relationships with some of his teachers. "The main thing I liked was that I always had the teachers' support in any class that they put me, whether it was [special education] or mainstream classes. I always had their support. I just needed to put in my 50 percent." Luis was suspended several times during high school for goofing off and being a class clown, but his behavioral issues substantially

declined. His grades improved. He switched from smaller special education classes into traditional mainstream classes. He received school-wide recognition for his performance on the state physics exam.

The positive momentum that Luis established at school came to an end after a series of arrests and interactions with the police. For Luis, his arrests have a great deal to do with the fact that he started “hanging out with the wrong people.” Specifically, Devonn and Jalen, two other students at his high school who he initially believed were his “boys,” but who he ultimately concluded did not have his best interests at heart. The first time Luis was arrested he was with Devonn and Jalen in Downtown Boston. The boys were walking through a central shopping area after school one afternoon. At the time Luis did not have a personal cell phone, and this was a huge burden on his social life. Not only was a cell phone in and of itself a salient marker of social status, but it also enabled access to Facebook and other social media platforms that Luis and his peers used to communicate. One’s “clout” and ability to “make a name for yourself” were contingent on active engagement with social media and that required a cell phone. Luis lamented the fact that his mother had refused to purchase him a new phone after he had lost his previous one a few weeks prior, and his friends were also aware of this. While hanging out in Boston, Devonn pointed out a man who was standing nearby using his cell phone.

Then my man’s, [Devonn], he was like, ‘Yo, bro, you always say you wanted a phone, right?’ I was like, ‘Yeah.’ He was like, ‘You see that nigga right there with the [iPhone] 5S in his hand?’ I was like, ‘Yeah, bro. I been peeped that.’ He was like, ‘Yeah, that’s a come-up right there, bro. He ain’t gonna do nothing.’ I’m just sitting here like, ‘It’s nothing. I could run from this guy easily. Damn, I want that phone.’ It was on, and it

was unlocked. So, I pushed [the man]. I grabbed [the phone]. I showed my knife, but by the time I showed my knife, I was already starting to run. I guess he didn't see the knife. If he did, he wouldn't have run after me. He was like, 'Hey, that guy stole my phone!' I started running, running, running, running. The only thing I remember other than running was getting hit by something on my back that caused me to fall. It was somebody on a bike who jumped off his bike to grab me because he wanted to be the hero of the day. When I got up, I cracked him in the helmet, and then he just laid there. I was looking for the phone, but by the time I saw the phone on the floor all the way across the street there was already like paddy wagons in front of me, and there was a cruiser right behind me, and then there was an officer standing like right there just watching me, looking for the phone. They eventually cuffed me and then took me down and booked me.

While the police only arrested Luis that day, Devonn and Jalen's presence was a contributing factor. Devonn's comment, "that's a come-up right there, bro," underscored that within Luis' peer group both having an iPhone which had been procured by force would doubly boost Luis' clout. Developmentally, adolescence is a life stage during which young people are especially vulnerable to peer influence. In our interviews, it was clear that Luis was aware of this as well. Though he felt responsible for himself and his actions, he also struggled with feeling as though his friends contributed to his bad decision. "I was going to blame it on both of them, but then I was like, "Nah, because it was my decision to try to take the phone in the first place," but then again, it *was* peer pressure that led me to take the phone."

Following his arrest, Luis's mother bailed him out later that day. His relatives were disappointed with him, which they made clear through ignoring him or telling him that he was "dumb for getting arrested." His peers at school and online were far more receptive to his arrest. He noticed a perceptible rise in his notoriety and began receiving additional

attention from girls. Though Luis did not share the details of his first arrest with the staff at his school, the school learned about Luis' juvenile record soon after when it played a role in his second arrest.

Some weeks after Luis' arrest, an older man was severely beaten by a group of teenagers while riding the subway. The teenagers were on their way home after the school day. According to the young people, the older man was visibly intoxicated and yelled at them without provocation. An argument ensued that rapidly escalated after the older man spit on one of the teenagers. Some of the teenagers responded by repeatedly punching and kicking the man, and others took out their cell phones and began excitedly videotaping the beating.

The day after the incident on the subway, the dean of discipline approached Luis and said, "I heard something happened on the train yesterday." Luis denied any knowledge of the previous afternoon's events, to which the dean replied, "You sure? Because we have videos of you." In describing the event to me, Luis maintained that while he was on the train, he did not participate in the assault. He witnessed the altercation and was among the students who recorded videos rather than intervening. The video that the school administrators gained access to corroborated Luis' version of events. He was seen with a phone in hand filming the fight and providing commentary and then exiting the train car as the beating continued. After extensive questioning by school administrators Luis was allowed to go home. As he walked out of the room where he had been questioned, he ran into Jalen, one of the two friends he had been with when he was previously arrested in downtown Boston. Luis instructed Jalen not to say anything to the school administrators or the police,

as Jalen had also witnessed, but not directly participated in, the assault. “I was just trying to tell him how to get through with it, but he didn’t listen. He snitched on me and the other kids that actually [did the] thing. But he was trying to say that I hit the old guy. I didn’t. I never hit the old guy,” said Luis. That afternoon six police officers arrived at Luis’ home with a warrant for his arrest. His mother bailed him out that evening.

These arrests compromised his relationships with his parents and his dealings at school. Each arrest also meant that Luis missed a few days of school as is typical for students involved in the justice system (Balfanz, et al., 2003). His behavior was increasingly disruptive, and he was less and less focused on his academic work. At the end of the school year, he found out that he would have to repeat the eleventh grade. Luis began selling marijuana during the summer for extra money. He made it through the fall semester without any arrests, but his relationship with his parents had become increasingly strained. He had been sentenced to probation after his first arrest for attempting to steal the iPhone. His probation included the standard condition, “obey home rules.” However, Luis continued to stay out late drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana. One night, after missing his curfew, Luis attempted to climb up his parents’ house and sneak in through his third-floor window. His parents, who thought that someone was trying to break into their home, called the police. When the police arrived, Luis attempted to hide but was caught and arrested. His parents, frustrated with his behavior, waited three weeks before bailing him out.

Two weeks after he was released, the police returned to his parents’ home once again to arrest Luis, this time for malicious destruction of property after he broke a television. Luis

returned to DYS custody for two weeks. Soon after, he was arrested again and sentenced to two more months in DYS. His already fraught relationship with his parents was approaching untenable. His father was no longer speaking to him. He and his long-term girlfriend broke up after he found out that she had cheated on him quite publicly. He felt depressed. Soon after, he found out that he his parents were not his biological parents, and that they had adopted him when he was about two months old. At the time that this information was revealed, Luis also found out that his biological mother was dead, that a host of people he thought were family friends were actually his blood relatives, and that he was the only person in his adopted and extended family who had not known the truth. Feeling increasingly out of sorts, Luis invested more energy in the streets, “wildin’ out” and initiating an aggressive altercation with a police officer that culminated in a six-month commitment to DYS.

Luis’ arrests all occurred during the school year, which posed additional complications. He missed weeks and then months of school and then, realizing that he would not pass eleventh-grade for the second time, stopped going to school entirely.

**Luis:** The year when I was getting arrested and arrested and arrested over and over and over again eventually led to all my credits going down. I had no type of credit for that school year, so I stopped going for the last two months.

**Abena:** When you were in DYS, were you in school?

**Luis:** I did do the school over there, but it didn’t transfer, and I was just sitting here like, “Why didn’t it transfer?” Eventually, later on when I got committed, which was when I was seventeen to eighteen, that’s when those, the credits that I did for the six months, those transferred over, but it still wasn’t enough for me to pass, so I still got kept back again. Now I’m on my third time ... in the eleventh grade because I



haven't passed it... eleventh grade wasn't that hard for me. It was just me getting locked up was the situation that eventually led to me getting kept back.

In the year that Luis was arrested four times in quick succession, he said that his school, on the whole, showed him more support. Except for one of the principals, who Luis felt “was looking at me like I was a criminal and not a student,” after each of the shorter times in DYS the school offered him additional help and extra-credit. Such offers did not offer a plausible way to academically stay on track given the proportion of the school year Luis missed. As he put it, “I started losing knowledge about the stuff that they was teaching because I was missing out on classes, on weeks of classes, and it was hard for them to keep me up to date as well as teach the class.” These were, however, incredibly meaningful to Luis, particularly given his previously tumultuous experiences with teachers and his tense relationships with his family. Having his teachers’ “support” and “full cooperation” allowed for “much more of a connection than just teaching.” Luis spoke positively about the support his teachers provided to him. However, he still experienced the same trajectory of most youth who have been arrested. As Balfanz and colleagues (2003) found, “each year after their return to high school from incarceration, fewer and fewer of these students continue in their quest to obtain a high school diploma” (p. 78).

Luis’ appreciation for the supportive responses he received from his high school after his many arrests seemed to grow in the year since he dropped out and when we met to discuss his life. While he welcomed their pep-talks and offers for extra-credit assignments, in the midst of his hearings and stints of being locked up he was unable to trust them. His early childhood years of suspensions and constant fighting with his teachers who had “bad

vibes” taught him to be cautious of schools and the adults who worked in them, as did the school’s involvement in his arrest following the assault he taped on the train. “So, it was like they tried to reach out to me, but I was just a person that just shut everybody out. And I still am, but at that time it was serious. I didn’t talk to nobody about none of my problems. I always kept to myself.”

Luis took ownership of his inability to return to school. Indeed, many young men interpreted their educational outcomes as being their fault, despite the multiple and interrelated contexts of disadvantage in which they exist and the structural barriers to their education that they encountered following their arrests. Rick, a 23-year-old young man, provides another example. After Rick had been arrested and detained as a teenager, he and his mother went to his high school to re-enroll. Rick does not recall the school definitively replying to their enrollment petition. Instead, “They never really got back to me,” he told me. The non-response was not challenged or followed up on by Rick or his mother, who at the time was heavily using drugs, and up until he entered CHANGES Rick had not received any additional educational support.

**Abena:** Okay. What do you think would have made that process better?

**Rick:** Nothing really. It was all up to them.

**Abena:** Do you think that the schools are at all responsible for you?

**Rick:** No.

**Abena:** Why not?

**Rick:** Because it was my fault that it happened... I knew right from wrong from that point. Can't really blame anybody for how they acted or how the school reacted... They're not going to pay attention to one kid when they have so much things on their plate... There was nothing they could do. It was basically all me. The responsibilities was not the school's, it's on me.

Jamal echoed this perspective. Jamal's father and older brother were shot and killed in separate instances of gang-related violence during the first eight years of his life. His mother was addicted to crack and sold the family's food stamps each month for money to pay for drugs. Jamal did not eat every day. They moved frequently, and landlords regularly evicted the family for lack of payment. At any given time, at least one of the core utilities (heat, water, electricity) was probably shut off. With all that, this is the advice that Jamal says he wished he could give to his younger self.

Stop worrying about what people saying and just do what you gotta do. Cause I was the type of dude, I used to worry about what people was thinking about me. The reason why I wasn't going to school, I ain't have no clothes--or get my haircut and ... I used to always just care about what people think... Just don't worry about nobody. Stay in school. Find a job. That's it. Don't rely on nobody. That's what I would tell my younger self.

Luis, Rick and Jamal's comments are illustrative of an adaptive response to exclusion from their schools, in which they learned to accept that their schools will not provide adequate and responsive supports to them. I describe this as an adaptive response because as they become resigned to an experience in which the public institutions are hostile towards them or are unwilling or unable to accommodate their circumstances, they also experience a leveling of expectations about those very public institutions. When faced with imagining what schools could have done to create an alternative educational experience, Luis, Rick,

Jamal and the other young men struggled to envision a different set of circumstances. And, as was the case for Rick when he had difficulty attempting to re-enroll or Luis after he was able to re-enroll but when his credit transfers did not go through, accepting and expecting lousy treatment rarely results in advocating for a different set of outcomes.

## Chapter 4: Capricious Justice and the Acceptance of Institutional Misrecognition

Kyle sat across the table from me as he studied my face with equal parts of impassivity and incredulity half-way through our final interview. Kyle was among the participants who kept up with CHANGES for special programming opportunities and semi-regular check-ins with his youth worker but had stopped working there a year or so prior. We met for interviews on the days when he did not get staffed at his part-time job in the warehouse of a nearby Home Depot or was not able to find off-the-books work as a mover. After a decade in and out of DYS facilities, jails, and prisons, Kyle could only find work doing what he called “physical jobs,” which often left him sore and achy and made it difficult to get out of bed most mornings. In both demeanor and appearance, Kyle came across as much older than his 24 years. Heavy drinking, drug use, and chain-smoking had taken their toll on his skin and teeth; and he winced subtly after sitting or standing for too long, having suffered from chronic pain since he injured his back in a car accident as a teenager. Though Kyle liked to chat with me before and after each interview, during the interviews he would sometimes grow frustrated when I posed questions that asked him to expand on his characteristically brief responses.

On this occasion, he was exasperated because after he replied with a disgusted, “Fuck them,” in response to my inquiry about his feelings toward the police, I asked him to further explain why he felt that way.

What do you mean why? They're police. They're so dirty, they get away with shit, they're killing us, and they get on paid leave. It's just a whole bunch of bullshit. I never trust the cops... I remember one time, I got arrested in Revere. I had this mace on me I stole from a cop car, and they pulled us over, we were in a stolen car, and he found the mace in my pocket. He, [the police officer] was like, 'Does this work?' I said, 'I don't know.' He said, 'Oh, let me see.' He sprayed the shit out of me, and I was shocked. I was like, 'What the fuck?'

When the police officer sprayed the mace in Kyle's face, he was already handcuffed. He was adamant in his retelling of the events that he had not been fighting with the officer or resisting arrest, merely sitting on the curb. At the time, Kyle decided not to mention the incident to anyone. He explained, "I don't want to be a snitch...I don't think nothing would've happened. I was like fourteen. I didn't know what could've happened if I said something. You know, it wasn't like he beat me up, it was just like he maced me." This explanation reveals Kyle's strategic thinking and rationalizations—as a child—regarding how best to interact with the police. Much like Luis who off-handedly remarked, "there is always gonna be polices, and there is always gonna be us," Kyle took for granted the notion that the police act in abusive ways contrary to what is fair and just. Despite his youth, he also believed it was a given that individuals had little recourse when encountering injustice perpetrated by the police, and instead should be grateful that his experience had not been worse.

Kyle's response showcases his legal socialization, or the process by which he developed his orientation towards the law and legal actors. His invective, "Fuck them," signals a blunt, negative characterization of the police, which, not incidentally, was shared by every young man who participated in the study. Within the broader field of legal socialization,

institutional legitimacy and legal cynicism are the two mechanisms through which legal socialization is thought to influence youth delinquency. Institutional legitimacy refers to the whether or not individuals view the rules of the legal system as valid. Identifying the factors that contribute to the perceived legitimacy of the justice system has been significant because of the documented relationship between whether or not one finds the legal system to be legitimate and whether one acts in accordance to the laws. Building upon psychological studies that show links between one's moral values and one's actions during adolescence and adulthood (Blasi, 1980), research on legal socialization consistently finds that those who see the laws and legal actors as legitimate are more likely to comply with the law than those who do not (Fagan & Tyler, 2005; Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Huo, 2002). The related concept of legal cynicism is "the sense in which laws or rules are not considered binding in the existential, present lives of respondents...[legal cynicism items] tap variation in respondents' ratification of acting in ways that are 'outside' of law and social norms" (Sampson, & Barusch, 1998, p.786). The belief that one need not adhere to the laws and norms of the legal system because these entities are illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill equipped to ensure public safety (Kirk, & Papachristos, 2011), is associated with criminal activity among adolescents (Fagan, & Piquero, 2007) and a decreased likelihood that crimes are sanctioned (Kirk, & Papachristos, 2011).

Legal socialization is a developmental process, which can also be understood as taking shape in the broader social ecology. One's orientation towards the legal system, and its actors is a function of both direct and vicarious experiences (Piquero, et al., 2005). This is reflected

in Kyle's assessment of law enforcement, which drew on his direct experience of being maced, referred to the pattern of fatal police shootings of Black people that was featured in the national news at the time, discussions with his family members, and his knowledge of other interactions with the police in his community. Skogan (2006) finds that direct experiences which, like Kyle's, are negative play a more significant role in how one perceives the justice system, than those which are positive, "[n]egative events are given more weight, people pay more attention to negative cues, the lessons they carry are learned more quickly, and negative experiences have more impact on behavior" (p. 116). Research also indicates that attitudes towards the justice system are susceptible to social contexts, such that there are substantial correlations between parents' and children's notions of the justice system (Cavanagh & Cauffman, in press), evidence of neighborhood effects (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998), and peer effects (Fagan & Tyler, 2005; Nivette, Eisner, Malti, & Ribeaud, 2015).

In this chapter, I consider the legal socialization processes experienced by the sampled street-involved youth to better understand how these young people understand and interpret their arrests. I present evidence of the three concerns that young people articulated about the justice system: (1) that the system intentionally disrupted community cohesion; (2) that legal actors, particularly the police, routinely misused their power and authority; and (3) that justice was not central to the legal system, but instead a preoccupation with exacting fines and punishment. Young men were resigned to living in world organized by what they viewed to be a capricious justice system. Moreover, like Kyle, the youth I interviewed felt that there



was no possibility for any alignment between the realities of their circumstances and the laws and enforcement procedures of the justice system. Where the legal socialization scholarship consistently finds persuasive evidence of an association between legal cynicism and conduct, I find that the reasons underlying negative assessments of the police and the courts are, at least subjectively, unrelated to the behaviors that young men engaged in that prompted their arrests. That is, being in the streets and thus participating in delinquent and criminal activities, had little to do with the perceived legitimacy of the justice system. Instead, young men found themselves caught between two codes, the code of law—which they saw as non-responsive to the true conditions of their lives—and the code of the streets—with which they needed to comply for their safety and livelihoods.

## Disrupting Social Bonds & Exposure to Risk

For the young men in this study, the police were often the most visible and commonly encountered embodiments of the justice system. As such, how young men felt about the police is arguably the most salient factor of their legal socialization process. Though most scholarship examining public perceptions of the police has focused on adults, the rise in juvenile crime and arrest rates throughout the 1990s and 2000s prompted additional research identifying youth attitudes towards the police as well as their antecedents. In particular, scholars have examined the relationship between contact with the police and youth and adult perceptions of law enforcement, given that whether or not an individual has had contact

with the police is the most reliable predictor of their attitudes (Cox & Falkenberg, 1987; Hagan et al., 2005). Efforts to distinguish between how different forms of police contact shape beliefs about the police have produced mixed results. Some studies find that people rate the police more favorably following public service encounters as opposed to law enforcement interactions (Brown & Benedict, 2002), and others find that asking for police assistance had no relationship (Webb & Marshall, 1995) or both positive and negative (Jesilow, Meyer, & Namazzi 1995) relationships with perceptions of the police. The young men who I interviewed, uniformly expressed almost entirely negative opinions about the police. While more extreme than an average sample of youth, this is generally consistent with prior research indicating that young people report negative feelings toward the police that are more critical than comparative samples of adults (Hurst et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2001).

At seventeen-years-old, Elijah moved from New York City to Massachusetts. At that point, he had been involved in his gang for about five years and decided that continuing to live in the Bronx was too much of a risk. When I asked Elijah, who was twenty-four-years-old at the time, how he felt about the police as a child, his past and current perceptions were hard to disentangle. He responded, “They assholes, they pieces of shit. I don’t like police.” He further explained, “They’re supposed to protect the community. You know? They’re there but [they] don’t. They’re not my cup of tea.” As evidence of this failure to protect the community, Elijah drew upon his on two facts of his own life: the incarceration of a generation of his male relatives and his personal involvement in the streets.

From Elijah's perspective, if the police were genuinely interested in protecting, rather than disrupting, his community, then he would have been raised with his family intact.

The majority of the male figures in my family [were] locked up throughout the time I was younger. My father was locked up for nineteen years. My uncle was locked up for twenty-two years in federal prison. My cousins was locked up. One did fifteen to life. One did seven years. So, it was like, they was all gone. Those were the ones that was actually the men...the father figures in my life.

From a very early age, Elijah was keenly aware of police and prisons. His grandparents took him to various correctional facilities to visit incarcerated relatives, thus revealing the presence of the criminal justice system throughout his familial network. Elijah's high exposure to familial incarceration laid the foundation for negative views of the police.

As he progressed through adolescence, his direct experiences further evidenced his perspective that policing practices intentionally disrupted social bonds. Near the end of his eighth-grade year, Elijah became a part of a gang that was active in his neighborhood. In contrast to conventional conceptions of gangs in which violence is conspicuous and indiscriminate or where there is active participation in drug dealing, the older members of Elijah's gang expected him to attend school and stay out of trouble. As he put it, this gang prioritized, "The real cause of gang-banging. Meaning, for your community. Keeping violence out of the community. Keeping outsiders of your community...I care about the cause of [gang-banging]. I'm for the cause. That's my purpose for joining [the gang] in the first place." Through the gang, Elijah saw himself and his fellow gang members as supplying security and service in a manner that was not offered by the local police.

In contrast to providing community safety, Elijah perceived the police as working to disrupt the social bonds within the community. The older members of his gang hoped to keep Elijah oriented towards school and away from criminal activity. However, this proved difficult for Elijah who found a group of peers outside of his gang with whom he committed robberies. On one such occasion, Elijah and two other boys attempted to rob a woman and brandished a gun to scare her into compliance. The police arrived in the area quickly, and the boys dispersed. Elijah, realizing that one of his friends would not be able to get away altered his appearance and hid the gun and returned to the area. He and his friend were found and arrested by the police. The boys, though both fifteen-years-old, were held overnight in the police precinct, and were released the next morning. Elijah speculated that they had been released because the police were unable to recover the gun, or possibly because the boys were too young to have been held in jail overnight without being transferred to a juvenile facility. Whatever the reason, the police did not want to release him and later that day Elijah was arrested again. He was hanging out in front of his house when a police cruiser drove up. The officers searched him and found a butterfly knife with a blade longer than his palm, which was illegal under New York City's knife laws. The police officers informed him that he could be charged with carrying a dangerous weapon, "they took it out of my pocket [and] they dropped it on the floor. They said, 'When we walk away, pick it up and continue with your day. 'When I went to go pick it up, they cuffed me.'" Rather than taking Elijah directly to the police station or notifying his guardian that he was in police custody, the officers drove him around his neighborhood. "So, they bringing me around the

area asking me who the drug dealers were, stuff like that. I wouldn't give them the answer...[They said], 'If you tell us this, that, and the third, we'll let you go.' And just 'cause I didn't cooperate with them. I stayed there for like a good 'nother four hours until my stepfather came and got me." Ultimately, Elijah did not face charges related to the butterfly knife.

The attempt to extract information from a young person about criminal activity in the neighborhood was uniformly unwelcome. No snitching is a commonly held cultural code in heavily policed low-income neighborhoods and held especially important among street-involved youth. However, this cultural practice is quite frustrating for law enforcement who may come to regard bystanders as complicit in criminal activity due to their unwillingness to relay information to police.

For many of the study participants, the no snitching rule was instilled in them from a very early age. When J.R. was ten-years-old, he witnessed a violent crime for the first time.

**J.R.:** I was in a car with my mother and her friend, and I was looking out the window, and I seen some dude walk up to some dude and shoot him in the back of his head. Like he was just on the floor like just ... I guess like the nerves like making his body like shake and see like a big bubble of blood coming out.

**Abena:** What happened next?

**J.R.:** The police was like did we see anything. My mom was like, "Tell them you didn't see nothing. Don't say you seen anything."

**Abena:** Did she tell you why she told you to say that?

**J.R.:** Yeah, she told me. She ended up telling me why. Basically, that's when I found out about snitching and stuff like that. Like you wasn't supposed to like say certain stuff if you seen like a crime happening.

J.R.'s mother went on to explain that disclosing what they had seen, would expose the family to additional danger.

## Deliberate Misuse of Power and Authority

While police tactics that intended to disrupt social bonds between family members or within the community, were often socially unacceptable to the young men, they were understandable as a means of collecting information. Less comprehensible to the young men were the instances in which they experienced police conduct which they saw to be a misuse of power and authority. In what follows, I present four emblematic accounts of what young men viewed as ordinary and everyday examples that the police were disreputable and not to be trusted. These subjective retellings by young men who were involved in delinquent or criminal activity, provide an actionable lens into the factors that structured their engagement with the justice system in the aftermath of police contact.

### **J.R.'s Daily Stops**

When he was about twelve-years-old, J.R. joined the same neighborhood gang as one of his older cousins. J.R. was first arrested at age fifteen, but before that he had extensive negative police contact. Every day when he was walking around his neighborhood with his

same-age gang members, the pair of police officers stopped and searched the group.

According to J.R., this went on for four years. I asked how he handled this,

I would get pissed off. I would get pissed off. I would start emptying out my pockets like, 'I don't got nothing. You search me every day...I don't got nothing. I'm tired of you searching me.' Stuff like that. Before they would start to pat me and frisk me, I would just be mad and just start emptying out my pockets and stuff like that. But, I stopped because my people was telling me like, 'You gotta stop doing that because then they probably think you're like reaching for something and they'll try to shoot you.'

Here, we see the juxtaposition between how J.R. interprets the police presence in his life, and how he interprets the presence of gang members. The police are adversaries. They were not trying to get him away from or out of the gang. By searching him everyday, they demonstrated that their intention was to find any cause to punish him and lock him up. His “people,” a reference to other gang members, on the other hand, gave him advice for alternative behaviors that would try to keep him safe. Half of the respondents, including J.R., described instances in which they responded to perceived police aggression by fighting or otherwise antagonizing police officers.

### **Aramis' Seventeenth Birthday**

Aramis spent his seventeenth birthday in jail. A week and a half before his birthday a friend of his coaxed him into a plan to rob someone. “I didn't want to do it, but at the same time, I did because I was in need of money because my grandmother wasn't giving me

money anymore. I had to go get it for myself,” Aramis told me during our first interview. The victim called the police, who drove him around the area to see if he could identify the assailant. Unable to get into his locked apartment and without a place to go to evade detection, Aramis rearranged his clothing and waited on the front steps of his building for his grandmother to come home. Eight police cruisers pulled up in front of his house. The police photographed him, and the victim confirmed that it was indeed Aramis who had robbed him.

When Aramis was arrested, he was sixteen-years-old and technically a juvenile. However, upon realizing that he was only a few days away from his seventeenth birthday, after which he could be charged as an adult, the arresting officers decided to hold Aramis for ten days. At the time, Aramis did not understand what was going on and no one explained it to him. His voice was heavy with frustration as he recounted his experience, “I don't know how they did it or how they processed it, but...I stayed in jail until I turned seventeen, for like ten days or four days and they ended up charging me as an adult for my case. I was sitting there for a little while.” Immediately following his birthday, he was then sent to Boston's Nashua Street Jail where he was “the youngest person in that facility.”

### **Will Gets Stitches**

The third time Will was arrested he was 18 years old. He and a group of friends were out late at night drinking alcohol and breaking into cars. Around the time the group started



to head back to Will's house they were stopped by the police and arrested. "It's blurred, but I guess in the police station I was exchanging words with [an officer] and he grabbed my head and slammed it into the wall like four or five times and I split my head open." An ambulance arrived at the station, and an EMT stitched Will's wound closed. Will thinks he lost consciousness for about an hour. He remained in a holding cell until the next day when he went to the courtroom for his arraignment and met his court-appointed lawyer for the first time. Will shared with his new lawyer the events of the previous evening and advised Will not to pursue charges against the officers. His version of events differed from the official police record. The police report stated that Will had been intoxicated, was injured while being necessarily subdued, and refused the offer to be transported to the hospital. However, Will felt wronged and enlisted his mother's help to file a complaint with the police chief. But there he was told once again that he would not win and eventually decided to leave the incident alone. Will was not surprised that an officer would slam the head of a handcuffed individual into a wall, nor was he surprised that it happened to him, "I was expecting [it]...because I was always getting arrested and... [run] my mouth a little too much."

Despite being angered by their respective experiences of getting maced and needing stitches, Kyle and Will were resigned to this being an anticipated reality of a street-involved life. As Will explained, "That stuff...it happens, whatever." Both young men were far more troubled by what they both saw to be a widespread pattern of racialized violence by police against people of color. "Everything you see on TV, you know? All these cops killing people and getting away with it. Especially people of color...I don't understand how they work."

They need to get trained better. Stop hiring racists. They're just hiring anybody and everybody. Really," Kyle told me. Will too expressed grave concerns about information news reports about police that evidenced pervasive misuse of police authority, "You see the stuff on the news and you know like innocent black people are getting shot and stuff or like ... I seen something a couple of weeks ago, a cop pulled over a black kid who was s, and he asked him to see his license and registration and the kid went to go get it, and he shot him. I mean I think they're scumbags. That's all I think about them. I have no respect for police at all... All the stuff on the news that I see, I feel like it's every other day... It's always a black kid too. Young too. Like sixteen, seventeen, eighteen-year-old black kid getting shot. That's heartbreaking and sickening. For no reason too."

### **Shawn is Racially Profiled**

Shawn was one of the only young men who ever had positive associations with the police. As a child, he "thought they were like the best people in the world." A conclusion he drew from television shows in which the police were "depicted as people that saved people and didn't hurt nobody. They were like justice." Unlike his friends who would almost reflexively say, "fuck the police" when walking by a police station or seeing a police car, Shawn saw the police as "just another part of society. Like, they [do] their jobs, and I just live my life as a citizen. They just there to serve and protect, that's what their motto is about, serve and protect." However, two things happened around the same time that led Shawn to

see the police as a negative force. The first was the shooting death of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown, which sparked uprisings in Ferguson, Missouri. The media coverage of Brown's death included discussions of police brutality and racial profiling. After attentively following the news surrounding Brown and the uprisings in Ferguson, Shawn gained a new language and perspective through which he interpreted his experiences, "Cause that's when I started getting profiled. I'd be walking on the street, and I'd be wondering, 'How am I getting pulled over by the police? I don't even look like I got nothing on me.'" And, that's when I just started learning that that's what profiling means.

By the time he was seventeen years old, police officers were regularly stopping Shawn. During these stops, officers would frisk him and ask him a few questions before allowing him to continue on his way. In one instance, he was stopped and patted down by a "mad aggressive" officer while walking from his home to the Burger King around the corner. Shawn had initially spotted the police cruiser upon exiting his building. He realized that the officers were watching him, which caused him to panic. He pulled up the hood of his sweatshirt and began walking faster, hoping that they would leave him alone once he got inside the Burger King. Before he reached the fast-food restaurant, the officers stopped him. "He was over-aggressive like it was to the point that it was just unnecessary. He like pushed me against the fence, and was saying that I did a crime or something. I'm standing there wondering, 'What did I do?'" The force with which the police officer threw him into the fence was remarkable enough that a number of passersby took out their cell phones to record the event. The fact that witnesses were recording the interaction put Shawn more at

ease, and he noticed slightly less aggression from the police officers as well. After searching his name for outstanding warrants, the officers questioned him about his prior arrest and accused him of being in a gang, which he vehemently denied. Then, a bewildered Shawn was uncuffed and the police drove away. Within thirty minutes, Shawn developed a newfound disdain for the police. “To me, after that happened I was like, they assholes, boy, they were really assholes. The shit that they is for what? For what? It don’t make no sense.”

### **Black and Latino Cops as an Exception to the Rule**

When Shawn decided to pull up his hood and begin walking faster it was in part because of the racial composition of the interaction, “two white police officers [in a car and] I’m a black kid walking.” It was common for street-involved Black and Latino young men to use the police officer’s race as a proxy for how they would be treated, drawing from their own experiences. The rare exceptions to the negative characterizations of the police were from youth who remarked that they had interacted with Black or Latino police officers. This was a distinction Shawn made after I asked him, “What, if anything, have the police done that was helpful to you in the period since your first arrest?”

I ain’t gonna front. There’s some police officers I met were actually cool. Like they actually care. The funny thing about it is that every police officer that I think that’s cool they either Black or Spanish, that type of ethnicity. But when it comes to the white cops, they’re literally, well I feel like they’re literally racist. Like I don’t care if you don’t want to say it, I think they’re racist. They don’t like black people or like people of color like they be power tripping.

Benjamin was first arrested at seventeen-years-old, but it was not until he was twenty-three that he had any interaction with the police that he thought was in any way positive, which hinged upon a Black lieutenant intervening into the situation. One night, while on his way to the store, police officers stopped Benjamin and informed him that he fit the description of a suspect who the police were pursuing in the area: a six-foot-tall, Black male in a plain black hoodie. Coincidentally, Benjamin was also wearing a black hoodie that evening, though his had distinctive design. Benjamin was also a Black male, but at six-feet nine-inches, he was considerably taller than the description. The officers handcuffed him and questioned him. When it became clear that Benjamin was not their suspect, he felt that they were still hesitant to allow him to leave the scene. They began to ask if he had witnessed anything suspicious or had any information about the night's events. Benjamin informed the police that he did not have any information, but they still did not let him go and began to ask him questions about his presence in the area and route to the store. Benjamin recalled feeling agitated and distraught.

Thank God the Lieutenant pulled up...The Lieutenant told me like, 'This time of the night, you should be somewhere either working or in a house doing something productive. I don't know why you outside right now because to keep it honest with you, they don't like black folks to progress...You being a big black man and tall, they'll take that as an intimidation. You was in the wrong place at the wrong time.' So, he was like, 'I'm going to take these cuffs from you, take these cuffs off of you and make it home. Go home. Straight home. Don't go to the store. Don't go anywhere. Don't even try to meet up with your friends, go straight home.'

Lionel had a similar experience when at seventeen-years-old he and a few friends were caught drinking underage and smoking marijuana. At that time Lionel had begun selling

marijuana to fellow students in his suburban high school and crack cocaine to residents of a nearby low-income neighborhood.

The cop arrested me, and then he found a little bit of weed and a little bit of crack on me. Because I started selling a little more than just weed at that point. And then he took the crack, and he said, “You’re a young man. Don’t fuck up your life like that.” And he says, “You’re going to be in trouble for the open container, but that I’m going to keep on you, and I’m not going to tell my partner. “ So, that cop kind of made ... I’m thinking about it now, that was actually one of the best things that ever happened...It just gave me an idea of what the world really consists of and what I could possibly get myself into without knowing.

Lionel’s account also showcases one of a handful of instances in which a young person experienced a form of police diversion.

## Justice is Not a Priority

Alongside their interactions with police officers, direct experiences in the courts and youth corrections were an essential factor contributing to young men’s legal socialization. Through contacts with the courts, young men came to view the justice system as being only marginally invested in the pursuit and administration of justice. Instead, they characterized the justice system as being “money hungry” after finding themselves facing mounting fines and fees following their arrests. Most frustratingly, young people recognized that while court involvement was supposed to be a pathway to supportive resources, accessing effective programs or interventions was rarely a straightforward process.

## A "Money Hungry" System

After missing a court date, nine-year-old Jamal was arrested and subsequently spent a week as “the youngest dude on the unit” in the DYS Harvard Street facility. He was not at Harvard Street because his outstanding juvenile court case had been adjudicated and he had been committed to DYS. Rather, Jamal spent the week in secure confinement because following his arrest his bail amount was more than what his mother could afford. Jamal believed that because he was years younger than the other boys at Harvard Street, DYS staff were concerned for his safety. “I was downstairs. I couldn’t really say [that unit was] for like gooder kids, but that’s not the unit with all the peoples fighting and stuff like that.” Jamal was unsure as to how much the original bail amount was, but it was not until his DYS caseworker who told him, “You shouldn’t be here. You’re the youngest person in here. I don’t think you should be here,” successfully advocated for a bail reduction that his mother could afford to pick him up.

Scholars have begun to document the ways in which court fees and fines represent a severe burden for the poor adults in the criminal justice system (Harris, 2016), and in speaking to young men it became increasingly apparent that while there tended to be lower dollar amounts attached to court fines and fees in the juvenile courts, they still posed a significant hardship. As juveniles, the principal financial hardship for the young men I interviewed was bail. Many reported that they would “sit” or “do sitting time” in DYS until their families and friends pooled together the necessary amount. The fact that families

shouldered the burden for a young person's bail is more complicated than one might expect. In some instances, like Jamal's, it meant that children were in DYS facilities solely because they were poor. During the most recent juvenile justice system reforms, responsive judges increasingly set bail at \$1.00 to reduce the financial burden on system-involved youth and their families.

Surprisingly, few, if any participants, paid monthly juvenile probation fees which typically ranged from \$50 to \$65 in Massachusetts. These fees were likely waived due to the high poverty within the sample; though, this finding runs counter to what the judges who I interviewed even anticipated. As one judge explained, "Massachusetts is a state in which a portion of the budget allocated to the judiciary comes from what they call 'retained revenue.' Probation supervision fees which are statutorily required, unless waived upon showing of a hardship, in which case you work community service." There were still other costs that the young men incurred, such as fees associated with mandatory programs. For example, at around ten-years-old, Chris was required to pay a \$350 registration fee for a court-mandated course on fire safety after he was arrested for throwing Molotov Cocktails in an abandoned lot with a friend.

When he was sixteen-years-old, Jamal joined a neighborhood street gang. Though Jamal had previously elected not to join a gang, at that point he believed that gang membership would result in both an economic and social windfall, "the crew would live by money. They was getting to the money, and I wasn't really doing nothing. They were the type of dudes to be in all the parties, have all the females. You know, the people that you see on Facebook



with like a thousand likes with a picture or something. I just wanted to live like that.” Despite his initial perception that joining the gang would mean “a quick come up,” or rise in status, many of his fellow gang members also lived in deep poverty. Like Jamal, his peers in the gang experienced bouts of parental neglect and homelessness, and often relied on each other to meet basic needs, “We were just going through a lot, but we was keeping each other up [and that] made our relationship really close.” While Jamal’s gang membership meant that his peer network kept him fed, clothed, and housed, it also resulted in him being “in the streets hard.” The little money that the boys pooled together was obtained illegally through their drug sales, car thefts, and muggings.

Arrests between ages seventeen and nineteen especially underscored the hazards of being poor and justice system involved. Unlike the other young men I interviewed, after his arrest at age nine, Jamal was not arrested again until he was eighteen-years-old. The fact that he avoided arrest for nine years was remarkable, given Jamal’s level of street involvement and his reported weekly stops by the police throughout his teen years. At the time of his arrest, Jamal and fifteen members of his gang were fleeing a shootout from a rival gang that took place at a community block party. The gangs had been embroiled in a year-long exchange of violence that involved multiple fatalities and serious injuries. “We was just chilling, drinking, smoking when dudes just started coming through shooting. They start shooting everywhere, so I start running ...I’m just trying to get to safety.” Jamal made it to a fellow gang member’s car, but as he was running, he realized that one of his friends had been fatally shot. Once in the car, Jamal and the others huddled low as gunshots shattered the car’s windows. Within

minutes Jamal and the other members of the crew were pulled over by the police, “The rear window was shot out. They stopped us for the window being shot out.” The police searched the vehicle and the young men. When they got to Jamal, they found a stash he had hidden in his pockets, “a whole bunch of weed that was bagged up. They was just like, ‘Yeah, you can’t have that. You got to go to jail.’” The police questioned Jamal, but he refused to “be a snitch. I was like, ‘I don’t know nothing.’” Jamal gathered that if he had assisted the police, the drug-related charges against him would have likely been dropped, but that exchange would have required him to place himself in danger and violate the code of the street.

In the aftermath of this arrest, Jamal’s perspective of the court system changed. His experience as a nine-year-old had been a lesson in the disadvantage of being poor and involved in the justice system, and this arrest underscored just how true that was, “it just showed me that the system was really money hungry.” At the time of his arrest, Jamal was carrying “\$150 in cash and like \$200 worth of weed.” That night, the same day Jamal had been shot at and witnessed the death of a close friend, he spent the night in jail. The next morning, he was arraigned, and his bail was set at \$150. The police seized Jamal’s money along with the marijuana they found on him, which meant that he could not post bail for himself. His older sister and friend, Wade, teamed up to pay his bail.

Wade was like really there. Because that night I got arrested, he called the police station, like... “Is Jamal Henderson there?” Asking about my bail, all that. So, that just showed me like, you know, I got a real friend that care... Like my bail was \$150 and my sister only had a \$100, he did the rest... If he didn’t come, I would have still been sitting there... I know he got a kid and all that too, so it’s like \$50 from a person with a kid... that just showed me like ...I do got some real friends.

While out on bail, Jamal decided to enter a plea agreement with the district attorney that required him to be on probation. “I understand what I did was wrong. I got caught red-handed,” he said. However, when he made that decision, he did not fully comprehend the financial consequences it entailed. “Probation just showed me like it’s a money system. Like I got caught with like \$200 worth of weed. All my fines and stuff added up together, added up to like \$1,500.” Jamal had never had anything close to that amount of money. After his arrest, Jamal immediately “cooled it” from the gang and stopped selling drugs, but from age sixteen through eighteen the gang had been his only source of income. He applied for jobs, but had no success and was unsure of how to address his increasing financial stress.

My girlfriend was pregnant around the time, and it was hard. It was so hard like I paid my witness fee but, I couldn’t keep up. It was getting me so scared. I’d go see my [Probation Officer], and she used to always ask me, ‘Did you pay your fee? Did you pay your fee?’ She didn’t even care if I was in school or if I’m still in my job. She’d just go, ‘Did you pay your fee?’ And I’d be like, ‘Nah.’ And she’d be like, ‘Oh, you know, you can go to jail for that.’ She used to always tell me that. I used to be like, ‘Damn. The system is money hungry.’

Jamal articulated the view that the probation and court system was primarily interested in collecting fees and only minimally concerned with helping him transition out of a street-involved lifestyle. Nearly all of the young men in the sample expressed a similar opinion. Jamal’s fears regarding what might happen to him because he was unable to pay his court fines and fees impacted his emotional well-being. He became paranoid and developed insomnia, the refrain “my fees, my fees, my fees, my fees” played on a loop in his head. Afraid that he would be arrested for non-payment at one of his mandatory meetings with his

probation officer, Jamal begged his mother to start coming to the meetings with him, perhaps to convey that she was also unable to contribute to his payments.

Jamal's participation in CHANGES, however, intervened. At one of his court appearances, a youth worker from CHANGES successfully appealed to the court to waive his outstanding fees and shorten his probation period. "They went in there with like, his life is hard right now like, just let him get off probation and it got me off probation!" Having a representative of the organization was an incredible boon to Jamal, for which he was tremendously grateful. However, even in relaying his relief and, he said once again, "But it just showed me that the system was really money hungry."

## **Surveillance without Support**

At seventeen-years-old, Chris had the faint beginnings of a mustache and a few hairs on his chin. Chris stopped regularly attending high school after ninth grade and has been on and off of probation since an incident when he was about ten-years-old. Since he had not been in school, Chris was supposed to come into CHANGES every day at around 7:00 AM, though he rarely did. He found it hard to get to work on time, but he did stop by most days—even when he did not make it in time for a full shift. On the day of our third interview, Chris was standing in front of CHANGES as my cab pulled up to drop me off. I had not seen him during the previous week and was hopeful that he would agree to meet for the final interview. He casually glanced at the car but did not appear to pay close attention to

it or me. Wanting to take advantage of the chance to wrap up my interviews with him, I exited the car and made a bee-line for him.

With a big smile, I said, “Yes! I am so hyped that you are here!”

As he realized that I was approaching him, four subtle things happened in quick succession. Chris’ body tensed, his face blanked over, he took a step back, and his eyes darted from left to right. I was startled by his reaction and stopped short a few feet away from him and made what must have looked like a puzzled expression. A few beats passed until Chris was able to recall who I was. His mask transformed into a half-smile and he visibly relaxed.

He continued to survey the street and casually said, “Oh! Yeah. Whats up?”

“Did you think I was somebody else?” I asked.

Chris explained, “You look like the DYS lady. I thought you were DYS.”

It had been two weeks since my second interview with Chris, and during that period he spent five days in a secure DYS facility. Later that afternoon, he explained that a few days after we had last spoken he had a meeting with his mentor. As was a standard part of those meetings, his mentor called his DYS caseworker for an update. His caseworker informed his mentor that Chris had an outstanding warrant for his arrest. While this was Chris’ first notification that he had a warrant, he was not surprised. In his short life, Chris had accumulated a number of arrests, including three separate charges for stolen motor vehicles. He had spent over ten months in secure DYS placements. When we first met, Chris had

been released from DYS a few months prior and had been assigned to juvenile probation. Among the conditions of his probation was an 8:30 PM court-mandated curfew. Each night at 8:30 PM he would receive a call to confirm that he was home. There were also nights when officers would go to his apartment to check and see if he was at home on time. Chris estimated that he missed curfew four or five times before an arrest warrant was issued for violating his probation. Immediately after speaking with his DYS caseworker, his mentor drove him to Harvard Street, the regional processing hub for DYS located in Boston about an hour away. From Harvard Street, he was transported to Taunton, Massachusetts where he spent the next five days in a DYS revocation unit for young people who had been remanded to secure confinement following a violation of their conditional release.

It was not uncommon for young men to be pulled back into DYS as juveniles (in the adult system this process is more copious, and when a person gets picked up for violating the terms of their probation they will likely be locked up for months or years, not the day and week-long DYS stints). Of the sixteen young men who spent time in a secure DYS facility, these periods of confinement came to mean different things. Young men described DYS in varied ways. It might be fun, chill, boring, just ok, scary, or lit—a reference to exciting fights. Some reported substantial issues with corrections officers, while others might say that the staff was nice.

Since turning fourteen-years-old, Chris was placed in DYS four times. The first time was for two months after he and a friend stole a taxi intending to sell it to a chop-shop who paid cash for stolen cars that would then be dismantled for valuable parts. Chris was driving

and when he realized the police had spotted them he panicked and attempted to flee the area. He ultimately crashed the car, and then the boys tried to escape on foot. They both had been injured in the crash, but Chris' friend who had not been wearing a seatbelt was seriously injured having gone, "face forward to the windshield." The boys did not make it far before they were arrested and taken to the hospital. When Chris got to Harvard Street that first time, he had what, by his estimation, was a typical reaction, "I was like everyone, I just wanted to go home." He was quick to volunteer that "there was nothing bad, just I wanted to go home." Soon after he was released, the entire scenario occurred again. Chris and a friend stole another taxi. He surmised that someone thought it was suspicious that the two boys were in a car and called the police. Rather than running away, Chris tried a new approach and tried to "push the car to a hiding spot" but the police caught them and arrested them. Following that arrest, Chris spent another two months in DYS. He was placed in the same unit and did not recall anything that he perceived as remarkable or noteworthy about this time in DYS.

The next time he was in DYS, "it was hard" Chris tells me. He once again had stolen a car and this time was involved in a hit and run. Chris was vague on the details but commented that the person who he had hit "was safe." Following that accident, Chris had driven to pick up marijuana and cocaine that he and his friend intended to sell. As he walked back to the car, police officers, who were driving by spotted him and the car and instructed Chris who "was a known person in the area" to put his hands up. They searched his pockets and found the keys to the car and arrested him. This was Chris' third arrest, and his charges

were more serious than in the past. He was committed to DYS until his eighteenth birthday and ended up spending nine months being transferred around various secure DYS facilities.

The five days that Chris spent in the revocation unit between our second and third interviews, also stood in contrast with his other experiences in DYS. Chris understood that he was missing curfew, he also realized that “getting pulled in” was a serious possibility for him. In this way, while Chris’ behavior was similar to the risk-taking that is developmentally typical among adolescents—his reflections of the calculations he was making are distinct. “Before I got locked up, I wanted to get locked up because I wasn’t myself and I think the only way to get my mind clear was like going back into DYS and just thinking.” It was difficult to parse if this plan was operating at a primarily subconscious level, but this statement highlights what Chris saw to be the beneficial elements of that time in DYS—a respite from the streets where he could get his head back on straight. It was also not coincidental that Chris felt the need to reset in that moment summer was coming to an end, and for Chris, this meant, “It’s time to stop fooling around and start getting money now.” During that week Chris played basketball with the other boys in DYS but kept to himself and “was in the cell just thought about what I could with myself better in the environment when I get out.”

Why is that Chris, at seventeen, believed that a week in secure DYS confinement was something that wanted? Like many of the young men who I interviewed, this was primarily because Chris’ years of justice system involvement left him with the perception that it was a system of surveillance and not a system through which he could get support. For most of



his adolescence and throughout his repeated arrests Chris had the same probation officer. He was first assigned to her years before his first custodial placement in DYS when he and friends had been arrested for setting off Molotov Cocktails in an abandoned lot. Since then, whenever he was not in DYS custody, he was required to meet with her every Thursday. When I asked Chris about his relationship with his probation officer, he interjected even before I had finished asking the question, “awful” and added, “mean personality.” Their weekly meetings lasted all of five minutes. She would ask Chris about his school attendance and whether he was staying out of trouble. Chris viewed her questions as perfunctory and met them with equally perfunctory responses. However, the thing that most angered him about his probation officer was what he described as her attempts to “talk behind my back to my mom.” Chris felt that calls to his mother in which his probation officer would say, "Tell me the truth, what is he really doing?" were mean-spirited attempts to get him into more trouble. While it is possible that his probation officer intended to cause difficulty for Chris, it is also possible that these actions may have been his probation officers attempts to increase parental engagement in the supervision process, which has been documented to improve youth outcomes. What is important here, however, is not necessarily his probation officer's intent, but Chris' interpretation. His subjective experience led him to view the system as one primarily concerned with surveillance, rather than his success and this interpretation was the basis of growing alienation following each arrest.

## Institutional Misrecognition

Benjamin poignantly articulated the consequences of childhoods and adolescences characterized by adversarial relationships with the representatives of public institutions. Benjamin's mother was a nurse, and his father was a lawyer. As a child, he grew up in a public housing project, but after his father completed law school and passed the bar, the family moved to a middle-class area in Hyde Park. When I asked Benjamin about how his arrests have impacted his life, his response began with the consequences for his educational trajectory. As was the case for most young men, his arrests, court appearances, and periods of incarceration disrupted his schooling. He believed that his public high school had unfairly pushed him out once they had found out about his arrest and that the subsequent schools he attended intentionally made it difficult for him to remain a student. Benjamin had always planned to go to college but felt that dream was out of reach once he had a felony record. Benjamin rolled his eyes and sucked his teeth, when I asked him, "What, if anything, could your schools have done to help you out after your arrest?" After a few moments, he looked directly into my eyes and said,

America's fucked up. The system saying that they have cops to protect us, [but they] do not fucking help at all. It fucks us up. It's messed up how they can just mess up somebody's record. They don't know what [a person's] been through to try to survive or take care of their family. They messed up that person's record and smack them with all this different type of fines. It's messed up. I really don't like America right now. I despise it. I despise America...I'm just gonna say I just felt like Hell is empty and the demons is on Earth. That's how I feel. That's how I feel. That's exactly how I feel. Hell is empty, and the demons is on Earth...There ain't no devils in Hell. The

devils is already on Earth. They look just like us. They look like us. They look like they're human.

These remarks, in response to a question about school, demonstrate how young men made sense of their adversarial experiences across public institutions. They viewed the fights with teachers that occurred in childhood as a manifestation of institutional misrecognition, much like the large sums of court fees and fines attached to unemployed and exceedingly poor young adults. Benjamin's comments encapsulate, the nihilism that some--though not all--participants felt as they reflected on the role of public institutions in their lives. In the next chapter, I turn to young men's private lives, and how they understood their arrests within the context of their familial and peer networks.

## Chapter 5: Youth Arrest as a Test of Loyalty and Status

A few weeks after I last met with Benjamin, I sat down to analyze the transcripts and audio recordings from our interviews. I flipped through the folder that held his life-graph, daily logs, and social network maps and skimmed over each page. I reread the hastily written notes I had scribbled during each interview and then the longer field notes I had written later on about the days when we had met. As I listened to the audio recordings and checked the transcript for errors, I found myself returning to the segment in which he described how it felt to experience institutional misrecognition in both the education and justice systems. “They don’t know what [a person’s] been through to try to survive or take care of their family,” he had said. At the time of the interview, I had written down “angry about America” and circled the word “angry.” In my field notes, I had also commented on the anger that radiated off of Benjamin during the interview. However, in re-playing and re-reading Benjamin’s words, I recognized they should be understood alongside comments in which the young men attributed some behavior or belief to “how I grew up,” “what was around me,” or “the way things was.” In situating themselves and their experiences within the broader context of their social environment, the young men expressed the central holding of the ecological systems theory: human development is situational and contextual. For Benjamin, the inconsistency between what was required of him given his particular neighborhood, school, and interpersonal contexts and how the schools, police, and courts operated, was a source of anger.

What Benjamin described as “what [a person’s] been through to try to survive or take care of their family,” encompassed certain events that scholars and practitioners would typically refer to as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). In what is widely regarded as the preeminent epidemiological study of the consequences of negative experiences in childhood, a team of medical doctors identified links between the experiences and conditions common in the early lives of the young men I interviewed, and an increased risk for early death and serious medical problems in adulthood (Felitti, et al., 1998). The ACE study focused on seventeen indicators of childhood adversity, which were grouped into three types of abuse—psychological, physical, and sexual— and four areas of “household dysfunction”—substance abuse, mental illness, mother/mother-figure treated violently, and criminal behavior within the household. In the decades since the first iteration of the ACE study, scholars continued to build upon those initial findings by identifying other potentially traumatic events likely to have enduring effects, documenting the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences, and demonstrating links between childhood adversity and trauma and social and behavioral outcomes.

Indeed, the correlation between adverse childhood experiences and criminal involvement has not gone unnoticed by those working within the justice system. In an interview, one prosecutor likened his process for setting charges, bail and sentencing recommendations, and plea negotiations to those used in validated risk assessment tools used in corrections.

I think more about the ‘Why did this person end up here?’ than ‘What did they do to get them here?’ Looking at background factors and making a judgment based on those factors: mental health history, trauma history, substance abuse history, adverse childhood experiences. What’s their home life like? What’s their academic life like? Are there community organizations they’re involved in?

Like Benjamin’s comments, this prosecutor’s remarks offer a normative claim that trauma and adversity one experienced as a child are contextual features relevant to the justice system processes. This is a sentiment that resonates with articulations of juvenile justice that prioritize rehabilitation over the administration of punishment. As discussed in Chapter 2, justice system policies in Massachusetts and throughout the U.S. have iterated between formal and informal methods that account for exposure to trauma as a mitigating factor and techniques that explicitly disregard such considerations.

In this chapter, I consider early trauma and adversity in a different light. I show how exposure to trauma and adversity in early and middle childhood also served as a useful context for young people’s meaning-making about their arrests in relation to their social networks and their interpersonal relationships. Against a backdrop of poverty, abuse, and neglect, families rarely had the capacity to show up for the young men in the ways that they expected after an arrest. Similarly, peers ended up serving as a source of support in ways that public services and families could or did not. This underscores that while adversity and trauma in early life may have contributed to criminal behaviors among the young men I interviewed, those features should also be taken into account when considering youths’

understandings of their arrests and the impact of their arrests on already strained social networks. Ultimately, I find that because of the precariousness of their early lives, young men interpreted how their peer and family networks responded to their arrests as an indicator of loyalty. A loyal friend or family member was one who contributed to bail or showed up to court appearances. On the other hand, disloyal or “fake” friends and family did not make an effort towards communication or failed to deliver on promised supports.

## Trauma and Adversity in Early and Middle Childhood

Will’s maternal grandmother committed suicide four weeks before we met for the first time and it was clear that he was still reeling from her death. Everyone in his family was taking it hard. His younger sister who found her body, after his grandmother intentionally overdosed on twelve morphine pills. His mother who was close to her. His younger brother, Jason, who was currently in jail awaiting trial. Along with his grandfather, who would no longer be able to make payments on their house without his grandmother’s financial contribution. In talking about his relationship with his grandmother and her death, I recognized a recurring theme: his grandmother had routinely intervened in Will’s life, and the lives of his family members, to provide housing and other forms of support when his mom was unable to provide a stable living environment for Will and his siblings.

Will was born in Malden and raised in Revere. His mom was sixteen-years-old when she had Will and still lived at home with her parents. The next year she had Jason. Shortly

after Jason was born, Will's mother and her two boys moved into their own apartment not too far from Will's grandparents. Will loved growing up in Revere because it ensured proximity to his extended family. He and Jason attended the local elementary school with, Aaron, one of their cousins. The three boys often played together, but also got into far more serious trouble than was typical for their age.

The first time Will was picked up by the police he was seven-years-old. He, Jason, and Aaron had snuck out of school and were walking around the neighborhood, "My mom would drop us off at school, we'd eat breakfast and then leave." Will explained that the boys were in search of excitement but did not have very much intention about their actions. "I don't think that we understood that we shouldn't leave school." His elementary school suspended him for sneaking out of school, but the boys continued to do so regularly. The day that the police officer picked the boys up, he told them it was dangerous to sneak out of school and drove them back to the school. The police intervention prompted DCF to assign a caseworker to the family. These interventions signaled to Will the seriousness of sneaking out of school, and the trio stopped leaving the school during the day. While leaving school and truancy are hallmark behaviors of street-involved youth and was nearly universal within the sample, other young men reported a later onset of this behavior than Will. Most often, youth began cutting school as twelve- and thirteen-year-olds nearing the end of middle school or in high school.

While his encounter with the police put an end to Will's sneaking out of school, he continued to misbehave and get in trouble at school and at home. He rarely listened to his



mother or his teachers. At school, Will would not complete his classwork, and he would talk back to his teachers. Will also faced serious juvenile court charges in juvenile court after bullying a classmate.

I was bullying this kid who came from Argentina. I was just bullying him every day with my friends. Then one day he hit me with his belt in the locker room in the gym, so I beat the shit out of him. They tried to charge me for a hate crime, but it got dropped in court.

While the case was eventually dropped, Will was expelled from the school.

At home, Will's mother was increasingly overextended. The year that Will, Jason, and Aaron were brought back to the school by the police, she gave birth to Will's younger sister, Lena. The following year, she gave birth to twin boys. His mother, a single parent with five children, struggled to keep tabs on Will and Jason. The boys developed a habit of sneaking out of the house, not to return until late into the evening. Will described his neighborhood as a "troubled area." Will only vaguely described what he and his brother would do during those evenings, and told me only, "Me and my brother would just get in trouble with hanging out with other kids."

Just before Will's eleventh birthday, his mother, seeking a fresh start for the family, decided to move the family out-of-state to Nashua, New Hampshire. "My mom said that she didn't want to be around Revere or Massachusetts... I guess to just get away from everybody basically." Will and Jason, the two school-age children, enrolled in their third elementary school. However, after six months in Nashua, his mother moved the family back to Revere.

They shuffled between a few apartments over the next year, and then his mother disappeared, “I think she walked out on us.”

All five siblings went to live with Will’s grandparents, but within the year the twins were placed in foster care. DCF had remained involved in the family since Will and Jason snuck out of school and while Will is not entirely sure of the details of the custody decisions, he believes that the family’s unstable housing situation played a role.

**Abena:** So, you and all of your siblings moved in with your grandparents?

**Will:** Yeah.

**Abena:** But, some of your siblings ended in foster care. What happened?

**Will:** That I don’t really know. What I think is that my mom couldn’t take care of all of us. We’ve always had DCF in our life since we were little. I think that they told my mom that if she signed over temporary custody, when she stops moving around so much, gets a job, they’ll give them back to her. That’s what I think. We’ve always had DCF in our life since we were little. I think that they told my mom that if she signed over temporary custody, when she stops moving around so much, gets a job, they’ll give them back to her. That’s what I think.

Later that year Will also was placed in foster care for six months. Following his return from Nashua, Will’s middle school required him to repeat his seventh-grade-year. By the time Will was in eighth grade, he had stopped attending school altogether. It is likely that his school filed a Child in Need of Services (CHINS) petition with the juvenile courts. Families and schools used CHINS petitions to request support services for children who were displaying high risk and dangerous behavior or who were habitually truant. The temporary foster care placement was in Will’s words, “all right I guess.” Around that time he started to

play football and returned to regularly attending school. Shortly thereafter, he moved back in with his grandparents.

Will's mother resurfaced and rented a house across the street from his grandparents' home. Will, Jason, and Lena moved back in with her; however the twins—the youngest members of the family—remained in foster care and were eventually adopted into another home. Though reunited, things remained rocky for Will's family. Money was tight and Will resorted to illegal activities to obtain his own money. Most often he would break into cars and steal money that people left in their vehicles. If pressured by his friends, he also mugged people. Will found this type of crime too risky and did not like to take from people directly, but he feared that his peers would think he was a “buzz kill.” His relationship with Jason was complicated. The brothers were close and usually spent their time together; however, they also often became angry with one another and could be quite violent. The first time Will was arrested, he was as a fifteen-year-old and was initially charged with assault and battery following an altercation at home with Jason. While arguing, the boys exchanged barbs about each other's girlfriends. In the course of that argument, Jason disclosed that Will's girlfriend had cheated on him after which Will “just snapped and I started hitting him.”

This instance was not the first time Will injured Jason during a violent altercation. When the boys lived in Nashua, Jason picked up a chair, and right before using it to hit Will, Will kicked Jason with such force that he broke one of his younger brother's ribs. Will also recalled another instance, when the family lived in Revere, “I wanted to go to sleep, and he

wouldn't get out of my room. I told him to get out of my room, and he kept saying, 'Make me.' So I punched him in the face a couple of times." Will's punches fractured Jason's nose.

What distinguished the night Will was arrested, from previous fights with his brother was that the fight was serious enough and lasted long enough that his mother felt that it warranted a call to the police. By the time the police arrived, Will had not cooled off and "mouthed off to the police."

The cop was like, 'I have better fucking things to do than come to your house for two little boys fighting...' I was already mad, so I was just like, 'Shut the fuck up. Get out of my house.'...He gave me a couple of warnings, but I didn't care. Then he arrested me. He said put your hands behind your back.

Will thought that he probably would not have been arrested that evening, if he had not cursed at the officer. Ultimately, this arrest resulted in little upheaval in Will's life or his family's. He was taken to the police station and quickly assigned a \$40 bail. Within thirty minutes, his mother had posted his bail, and he was released. His brother did not press charges, and the case was dropped. The arrest tested the social equilibrium within Will's family, and this event was not destabilizing.

In the year following Will's initial arrest, he began to smoke marijuana and drinking alcohol. As was the case for many of the young men, once Will began smoking marijuana he quickly fell into selling it as well. The vast majority of young men reported selling marijuana at some point during their adolescence; however, the degree to which they sold drugs varied. Close to 60 percent of the young men said that they "flipped a little," or sold marijuana at next to no profit, but to sustain their daily drug use. Of the remaining 40 percent, just over

half self-identified as “drug dealers,” meaning that they sold marijuana for a subsistence income, and the rest reported never selling marijuana. Within a year, Will went from “flipping” to mid-level dealing. While any participation in the illegal drug trade was a risk that exposed young men to violence, a key indicator of the degree to which a young man was engaged in the drug trade was whether or to what extent they were targeted for robberies. At seventeen-years-old, Will had a gun put to his head, “I was hanging out with my friends after school, and kids that we knew just came in the house with guns and robbed us of drugs, money, [and electronics].” Will and his friends retaliated by jumping each of the boys who had robbed them. This event did not entirely dissuade Will from selling drugs. He sold less and was more cautious about operations out of the family’s home; however, he also began to sell and use pills including Xanax and Vicodin. Like most young men, Will was never arrested for selling drugs.

Will continued to live with his mother for the next few years. At eighteen-years-old, Will stopped attending school, “I drank one night with my friend, and then I didn’t go to school the next day because I had a hangover. I just stopped going after that.” The school called, but Will knew that he had missed too many school days to pass the grade, and the prospect of repeating the year deterred him from returning to high school. He was arrested again that year. Will’s next charge was as an adult for breaking into cars with a group of friends, after another night of drinking. He received a suspended sentence and was placed on probation. His mother decided that she needed a change, once again wanting to escape the toxicity she associated with Revere. She moved to Weymouth, a nearby city with a more

suburban feel. Will and Jason elected to stay in Revere and moved back in with their grandparents. For the boys, this stint was short-lived, as they both ended up in jail within the year. Will was arrested following an argument with his girlfriend, who, at the time, had a restraining order out against him. Not only did that arrest violate the terms of his probation, Will was both drunk and high at the time, which also violated his probation. After a six-month term at the South Bay correctional facility, Will was released to a detox facility. He was supposed to stay in detox for twenty-one days, but on his first day he found out that his grandmother had died. In violation of a court order, Will went home.

Will's grandmother's death highlighted how precarious housing remained and had always been for Will. He lost his spot in the detox facility and was then assigned to living in a "sober house," or group home for individuals recovering from addiction. Will did not have any problems with the sober house, but staying there was a substantial financial burden. The rent and fees associated with his housing were between \$600 and \$700 each month, which was about 90 percent of Will's income. Once he accounted for the costs of transportation, there was not really any money left. "It's just really frustrating that I work to pay them when [I sleep four hours there]. I can't save any money because it all goes to the sober house, so it's just frustrating." By the time I met Will, the terms of his probation supervision no longer required him to remain at the sober house, but he also did not have many strong housing alternatives. His grandparent's house was no longer an option, and he had no feasible way to commute from his mother's home in Weymouth to his temporary job at CHANGES. He considered trying to get a spot in the shelter run by the Salvation Army in Cambridge. While

the shelter would not have minimal financial costs, its inflexible requirements would cost Will in other ways. Living in shelter came with strict entry and exit hours that would inhibit his autonomy and potentially strain his relationship with his girlfriend. Additionally, it would still be difficult to reach CHANGES relying on public transportation. As Will put it, “I’m kind of like stuck in my situation where I have to do something, but my options are limited.”

## Adolescent Individuation and the Rise of Peer Influence

Al moved to Lowell, Massachusetts with his mother and two brothers right before he started fifth grade. They joined Al’s older brother who had moved to Massachusetts a few years earlier and lived in a house Al’s father rented with his new girlfriend. Prior to that, Al and his family had lived in Caguas, Puerto Rico. His mother and father’s relationship had long been rocky, and shortly after Al was born the two permanently separated. The family lived in a public housing project and, as Al recalls, were desperately poor, “Back in PR, we didn't have nothing. The light used to be off, either the light was off or the water was off or we had no food. That was it.” Like many of the young men, Al's experiences growing up in contexts of extreme poverty also meant the omnipresence of violence. As a child, in response to their exposure to these correlated forms of adversity, Al, his brothers, and their mother were a tight unit spending all of their time together. However, as I will show in this section, as an adolescent, Al withdrew from his family and opted to spend more of his time out with friends. This individuation process, while developmentally typical of adolescents,

had additional consequences for young men, like Al, who were growing up in neighborhoods with high rates of poverty and violence.

Growing up in Puerto Rico, Al and his brothers would often hear gunshots and would “just see a lot of violence around.” In one particularly vivid account, Al described a scene that played out his bedroom window when he was about four years old.

I'm telling you, in Puerto Rico, like for as long as I remember, I'd been hearing gunshots and stuff like that. I can say the memory that I can really talk about that I remember and I know for a fact was this time that I'd seen the Big Guy coming down. You know he is the Big Guy, because he has a big SUV. I'm still awake, it was nighttime. I see another SUV coming from the back, another SUV coming from the front and they were trying to trap him [in the alley]. So I'm like, ‘What are they doing?’ And then all I see is his car door open and he started running like, he just started running. (*Al moves his arms as if running in a sprint*). Right after he takes a least like three steps, I just hear gunshots. *Pew-pew-pew-pew-pew-pew*. (*Mimicking gunfire from an automatic weapon*).

Like many of the young men whose lives included high exposure to violence, Al's recollection of the Big Guy, a high-level local drug dealer, is told with a certain distance. Young men described the violence that they witnessed as children living in their communities matter of factly and in the same manner that they told me about scenes from movies or books. For Al and others, this violence was a signal that their neighborhoods were “really bad” as they had “too much violence.”

Alongside Al's high exposure to violence in his neighborhood, there were also frequent fights at his school, in which he was a frequent participant. In our interview, seemingly for the first time, Al realized that much of what he enjoyed about his early elementary school experiences were times when he bullied other students.



Well, looking back and it's like, it's messed up, but in the moment I felt like, 'Yeah, I'm having fun.' I was, I called myself ... No, I was a bully. I was like, a bully. I don't know. I was just ...We'd just go around and like, bully kids. I don't know, that's messed up.

Al was shorter and skinnier than most of the other kids in elementary school and would find thick twigs, and use them to hit the larger boys. When his mother heard about his behavior either from the school or from the mothers of boys Al and his friends bullied, she would yell at him, but this did little to deter his misbehavior. In third grade fighting became commonplace, "the whole year I would just fight and stuff." During one especially memorable fight Al's finger bled after he was bitten.

Immediately following the family's move to Massachusetts, the chaos that surrounded Al in Puerto Rico gave way to calm. He enrolled in school that he liked and said was "good." The things that were new and different about Massachusetts were awe-inspiring. He adjusted quickly to hearing Spanish spoken with a Colombian accent, to the ethnic and racial diversity in his school, and to saying the Pledge of Allegiance. He picked up English pretty quickly, and was soon able to help his mother with translations.

The family's fortune took a turn for the worse when Tomás, Al's six-year-old little brother, was seriously injured in a car accident. Excited about his first Halloween in Massachusetts, Tomás ran into the street and was hit by a car. The car accident was a turning point for Al and his family, "That changed everything. That changed *everything*." Though Tomás survived the accident, he sustained serious injuries and remained hospitalized for about six weeks and required extensive treatment once he was released. Al, his mother, and his brothers moved to Boston to be closer to the hospital. Over the next five months, none

of the boys returned to school. At first, they lived in a hotel and then a family-friend helped them find an apartment. “Because of [the accident], we’d just stay together and wouldn’t really go out and stuff like that.”

Having missed much of his fifth-grade year, when Al and his brothers eventually enrolled in schools near their new apartment in Boston, he was required to begin the next school year as a fifth-grader once again. During his second fifth-grade year, the family lived in three different apartments. The boys and their mother were all so relieved that Tomás had survived, that they remained a closed and close-knit group. Life for Al was “school, home, school, home.” The family was the center of gravity.

The shift from a singular focus on his family occurred gradually over the course of Al’s time in middle school. In sixth grade, he developed an interest in the “cool kids” and “started copying” what he saw and became a class clown. He began to get in trouble with his teachers. On the bus home one day, he and another boy got into a fight over a girl they both liked and ended up suspended for five days. In seventh-grade, at age thirteen, he began to hang out with a group of older boys who he met at the park near his apartment. The boys introduced Al to marijuana. He started to walk to school with the “cool crowd” who would sometimes smoke marijuana on their way to school. There were five occasions during his seventh- and eighth-grade years when Al was sent home from school for smelling like marijuana or being visibly high. In eighth-grade, he and his group of friends had been in trouble so often that while they were promoted to the ninth grade, they were all banned from participating in the school’s graduation ceremony.

Being excluded from the graduation festivities served as a sort of awakening for Al. Despite becoming a class clown who rarely listened to his teachers and frequently misbehaved, Al also sought affirmation and recognition from the adults in his life, including his teachers and his mother. On the day of his graduation, he walked over to the school building in an effort to convince himself that he did not care about being excluded, “That’s why I walked by, I felt like it didn’t matter. It just didn’t matter, it was like, ‘Okay, I’ll just go to McDonalds [instead].’” However, when Al got there, he felt differently. He began to consider the impact of his behavior at school on his mother: “I was thinking about, ‘How does my mom feel right now? Looking at all those kids...’”

Al carried that insight into his freshman year of high school and “focused the first term.” He passed all his classes with a few As and some Bs and Cs. However, the next term, which would ultimately be Al’s last semester as a traditional high school student, was very different. He had kept to himself most of that first term reverting to a life that centered school and family. However, during the second term he befriended students in the “cool crowd” and—just as had been the case in middle school—Al soon fell back into the role of the “class clown.” Al found himself once again enmeshed in a close group of peers. On a typical day, he and his friends would smoke marijuana on the way to school. They would arrive late and attend morning classes, most of which they all had together. He would interrupt to make jokes and critiques at the expense of his teachers. Between classes, Al and his friends would travel as a group, often “goofing off” in the hallways. A few days a week, the group would “skip out” after the lunch period and hang out in one boy’s basement

where they would practice boxing, play video games, invite girls over for parties, drink alcohol, and smoke marijuana. The boys mostly relied on pooling their small allowances to fund their activities, but on the occasions when they ran out of money for marijuana or alcohol, they would engage in illegal ways to get fast money, “We'll just either steal iPhones and sell them, things like that. Those type of stuff, it would be once in a while. Not doing that every day.”

Al and his friends' disruptive behaviors, produced a disciplinary conundrum for his school's teachers and administrators. Al was suspended two to three times a month. Teachers reached out to him, “They would tell me ‘Yo, I see it in you. You got talent, this and that. You're smart. What are you doing?’” Al, as was developmentally typical of adolescents, was not interested in appeasing the adults and was not responsive to their overtures, “I would just argue.” Rather, he oriented his actions toward the cultural practices of his peer group. After a boy who was new to their school began hanging out with Al and his friends, the boy shared that the school's Dean had warned him away from hanging out with Al and referred to the group using a pejorative ethnic label. Al did not recall the Dean's exact words but remembered that it was a reference to many of the boys' Latino ethnicity. Al initially did not believe that an adult would make such a remark and asked his new friend, “He say that for real?” As he recalled this comment years later, it is clear that it continued to very much upset and bewilder Al. Following that interaction, Al “went all out.” He stopped caring about his grades and no longer saw school as a place to learn, but rather as what Anderson (1999) described as a staging area, “Like, you see me as a clown? I'm not doing anything else. All

right, that's what I'm going to be. That's what I decided.” Notably, Al’s language is highly evocative of labeling theory’s internalized delinquency hypothesis. There is, however, a very subtle difference. Al did not begin to truly see himself as clown or internalize a deviant self-concept; he described shaping his behavior to perform the role expected of him by his Dean, which he saw it as an act of resistance because it created additional frustration for the Dean and was entertaining to him and his peer group.

Al’s growing attachment to his friends from school came at the cost of his relationships with his family. His mother tried to establish rules for Al, but he was dismissive. He continued to stay out late drinking, smoking, and "being in the streets." His oldest brother tried to talk to him, but he would not listen, “He’s always been the tough love brother. At the time, we wasn’t really clicking.” At fifteen-years-old Al was arrested. To expedite the process he plead guilty, "so they didn't drag me on," and was assigned to community service and probation. Al's arrest was heart-breaking for his mother and she blamed herself. "When that court stuff happened, [she] would say, ‘What did I do? How did I raise you? I didn't teach you those things.’”

His arrest placed additional strain on his family because there was not any marked change in Al's behavior, despite the threat of additional and more severe legal consequences. In the year following his arrest, he was "pulled back in" for multi-week stints in DYS custody on three separate occasions for violating the terms of his probation. He habitually missed his twice-monthly required meetings with his probation officer and rarely showed up to his

community service. Al said simply, “I forgot.” As he recounted the three times when he was called into court and then detained for missing his appointments, I grew incredulous.

**Abena:** Why did you not go see probation?

**Al:** I would miss the days.

**Abena:** What would you be doing?

**Al:** Forget. That's what I was doing.

**Abena:** Wait.

**Al:** I would forget.

**Abena:** For real?

**Al:** Yes, literally. Like, I would be, ‘Oh, tomorrow I got to go to court [where the probation office was located].’ But, tomorrow I'd do the same thing I was doing today. Like, you know, so I would forget. Then it would be like, right after that I would remember, like, ‘Damn, it's 3:00 PM?! Damn! Let me call my PO.’ Every time he wouldn't answer. I think he knew it was me.

His family, too, grew increasingly frustrated with Al's inattentiveness to the gravity of this situation. His brothers stopped talking to him entirely, “We'd be in the house, we wouldn't talk to each other.” Unsure of what to do, his mother contacted Al's probation officer. However, Al interpreted this act as a betrayal. She even kicked him out of the house for a short time. He turned to a friend who took him in and he continued with his peer-oriented lifestyle. By the time I met Al he had gone a far way to repair his relationship with his family. “The third time I got locked up... I just thought about my [family]. When I came out, I just, I just started actually talking to them more and all that.” He also realized that he

had been heavily influenced by his friends in a way that left him uncomfortable: “I got to stay away from those people.”

## Mutual Dependency in Peer Networks

Víctor, who was twenty-years-old when I met him, was born three months after his father’s death. He did not know much about the circumstances of his father’s death but told me about his mother’s death five years later. His mother, who worked as a prostitute, died from AIDS-related complications after living in a hospital for many months. “She didn’t know if it was sexually transmitted, or through drugs, [because] my mother was a heavy addict,” Víctor told me during our first interview. Víctor was born in Boston and had both methadone and crack in his system at birth. When his mother entered the hospital shortly before her death, Víctor and his brother, Angel, who was two years his junior, entered foster care. In the ten years following his mother’s death, Víctor lived outside of Boston in nearby foster homes, group homes, and for a short while with an adoptive family.

At eleven-years-old, Víctor “started chilling with the wrong people.” While living at a group home in Chelsea, he met a group of older boys from the neighborhood who taught him how to break into cars. As Víctor reflected on this period in his life, he noted the absence of guiding parental force, “I just was going through it. I didn’t even know what was going on in my life. I didn’t have my mother there.” From then on Víctor would sneak out of his DCF programs at night and break into cars hoping to find money and small items that

he could use or sell. A few years later when he was fourteen-years-old, Víctor and a younger friend, who he had taught to break into cars, were out doing just that when they encountered the police. The boys fled, but Víctor soon realized that his friend had not kept up with him.

We was both running. We got in a chase with the police and I got away and he wasn't with me no more. I turned around and he was gone. So, right then and there, I'm like, 'He probably got picked up.' I was waiting under a car, waiting for an hour or two, [but he didn't come back]. I wasn't too far from the police station, and I walked to the police station to turn myself in.

When Víctor decided to “snitch on himself,” he did so because he felt responsible for his younger friend, “I just felt bad for my boy. He's younger than me. I brought him out there. I just felt guilty as shit, and I was scared and shit.” At that age, however, he had only limited information about the justice system and was quite afraid. What he knew was only what he had learned from watching the show *Cops* and from conversations with the other boys in his group home. Those boys desired to appear tough and had exaggerated their own experiences, “trying to say it's like jail and shit.” Based on those sources, Víctor assumed that he would be sent to jail with adults. “I didn't know they had juvie at the time...I was just scared, honestly, on my first time. I cried in the booking cells and the holding cells. I cried when I got to DYS.”

Around this time Víctor met his girlfriend, Isabel, through Facebook. Social media served as a conduit to romantic relationships for young men who were not attached to schools and embedded in predominantly male peer groups. Isabel lived in the nearby city of Malden and was one year younger than Víctor. Her family was sympathetic to his situation and was quite welcoming. In a few short months, Isabel's mother “became like a mother



figure to me” and was approved by DCF for custodial guardianship of Víctor. “People had to come to the house, make sure the house is okay, make sure I have a room, a bed ... it was a crazy-ass process.” When the family moved to the Dorchester neighborhood in Boston a few months later, Víctor moved with them as well.

Around the time they arrived in Boston, Isabel, still fourteen, realized that she was pregnant. Her mother “wasn't for it” and began to treat Víctor differently. “It was more people talking *at* me, versus talking to me or talking *with* me,” Víctor recalled. It was clear to him that he had disappointed Isabel’s mother, “She kind of lost respect for me because in some way I disrespected her by doing what I did.” Víctor lost even more favor in the family when, very early in Isabel’s pregnancy, the police caught him breaking into cars in Boston. He was arrested and charged with grand larceny, assault and battery, and possession of burglarious tools. His arrest constituted a violation of Víctor’s probation, and he was remanded to the Harvard Street DYS facility for eight months. Víctor ended up staying in DYS for two additional months after his sentence was extended twice for “fighting and not doing [the] little shit you were supposed to,” which included attending therapy classes. When he told me, “I missed my daughter being born, because I was in DYS,” his voice was heavy with regret.

Moving to neighborhoods with high crime rates was often a turning point for young men. New to the area, the teenage boys recognized that it was vital for them to quickly learn socio-cultural geography. Understanding who was cool with whom and where and when one could safely hang out was essential knowledge. Once Víctor moved to Boston, everything

was “kind of downhill from there,” because the move accelerated and deepened his involvement in the streets

My mindset has changed, but honestly, I've seen people get real money, like a lot of money-type shit and just seeing it, it just fascinated me, the shit that went on in my hood, I don't know why, I just liked it...it's just exciting.

He met an older boy, Taz, who served as a cultural ambassador and explained neighborhood rivalries and acceptable ways of being, “[Taz] took me under his wing... He kind of showed me the people to be around, people I shouldn't be around, people to date.” This knowledge also came with a responsibility to take on the problems or “beefs” of others. After his release from DYS, Víctor began to drink with greater frequency. He withdrew from Isabel and her family and prioritized spending time with Taz and his street-oriented peer group. While Taz provided Víctor with knowledge and associations that helped him navigate Dorchester, he also exposed him to risk and violence. The threat of violence reinforced the necessity and gravity of these relationships, such that people who Víctor did not know just a few years prior came to be “my family, my brothers-type shit.” This is the untenable dilemma of street-involved peer groups, that was true for many of the young men I interviewed. As adolescents, they believed that they had to be allied with a crew, gang, or even friend group for protection and because participating in the street lifestyle appears to be appealing. However, through that very group affiliation they were exposed to additional risks and only then began to recognize the strain of living under constant threat of violence. In Víctor's case, he believed that he had been more susceptible to this predicament having

grown up in the child welfare system, “I ain't never had no mother to be on my back, saying ‘You can't do this, you can't do that.’”

In the two years following his release from DYS, fights, stabbings, and shoot-outs became a not-uncommon feature of life for Víctor and his friends. The term “smoke,” likely derived from gun smoke, referred to an instance in which a person is supposed to immediately shoot, stab, or beat another person upon encountering. When I asked Víctor to define smoke, he said candidly, “‘Smoke’ as in murder. So it's like somebody's getting hurt. Somebody's going up.” Two of his close friends were shot and killed in his neighborhood, which Víctor described as a “murder swamp.” Similarly, those deaths ignited a back and forth between the young men in Víctor’s neighborhood and rivals in the adjacent neighborhood. Víctor explained, “I got smoke with people I've never even met before.”

In reflecting on his life experience, Víctor acknowledged the limits of mutual dependency in street-involved peer groups. For Víctor, this manifested in increasing tumult in his relationship with Isabel, which prompted Víctor to acknowledge his growing discomfort with the reality that he was out of control of his own life. When I first met Víctor, his daughter was five-years-old. She and Isabel were living in a homeless shelter, and Víctor was living separately in another. A few months prior, Isabel’s family had been evicted for non-payment from the Dorchester apartment. Víctor and Isabel are not married, and his name is not listed on his daughter’s birth certificate, so they did not have a real chance of being placed in a shelter as a family. Around the time we met, Víctor’s schedule at CHANGES enabled him to pick up his daughter from daycare and drop her off with Isabel

at their shelter, but in the year-and-half, since he was released from DYS, there had been a few times when Isabel cut off communication with Víctor.

I've had serious conversations with my baby's mother [about how] I'm never going to see this kid again....never going to see my daughter. I didn't see my daughter for almost two months after waking up to them every single day. Waking up with my girl and my daughter every single day. Basically, enjoying my days with them. To go to them and not see my daughter for two months. I'm not seeing her for three or four weeks at a time. Because of the choices that I make. 'Why you spending your time with your niggas and be with people who don't care about you?' Her thing was that I'm choosing the streets, choosing my hood over my daughter, and in my mind, that wasn't the case, but in reality, that's what it was.

Víctor furrowed his brow and was visibly distraught when he recalled the periods where he had no contact with his daughter. While she is his “motivation for life,” he simultaneously feels trapped by his limited income, homelessness, and the street-involved peer networks that he relied on for much of his life.

The streets is just all I know. I've been in the [streets] my whole life. To kind of change that now, when I'm barely 20 years old...For me to completely change myself around. It's like I *want* to do it, but it's hard, because my environment will pull me back then, because I'm still living here, I'm still living there ... in that situation.

## Arrest as Test of Loyalty

Eleven days after his birth in Puerto Rico, a hospital called Aramis' maternal grandmother to inform her of his existence. In our first interview, he shared the story of how he came to live in Chelsea, Massachusetts, and be raised by his grandmother, which had

become family lore. “Literally, they called my grandmother to say, ‘Come pick your grandson up if you want custody because they’re going to put him into foster care. We don’t have another option.’ She took the first flight to go get me.” Aramis’ mother had at least nine other children, none of whom she raised. His seven older sisters were “scattered around in foster homes” in Puerto Rico, and his older brother was already in Chelsea where he had been living with their grandmother since he was twenty-four-days-old. When he was born, both Aramis and his mother had drugs in their systems, and when he was fifteen-years-old, she died of a drug overdose.

Aramis broadly defined the term family. It referred to both his biological family—his grandmother, who he called “Mom” and his brother, aunts, uncles, and cousins—as well as his “circle.” When I asked Aramis to explain what he meant by his circle, he responded, “My family. My close, close friends who I grew up with since second grade and up or fifth grade and up. That’s my circle.” Throughout our conversation, he spoke about these individuals as his brothers, his boys, and his friends.

When the boys started high school, the circle evolved into a gang. The transition had not been intentional but was what they boys thought was necessary because their individual criminal activities exposed the group violence.

**Aramis:** We were a circle at first, and it was never meant to be a gang.

**Abena:** What was it meant to be?

**Aramis:** Like a pack of brothers... who party, stuff like that. But, people started exploring things. One became a drug dealer. Another one became a drug dealer... I

sold drugs too, but not as long as they did it. Little by little, we started coming up with a name for ourselves, you know?

**Abena:** Why do you think that change happened?

**Aramis:** Because we started beefing with other gangs and stuff like that, so it was just bringing us heat. So, we were like, ‘Alright, so these people are looking for us and we got to stay as a pack, you know, not let anybody get touched or anything.’

Aramis and his friends reacted to the threat of violence from others by coalescing into a street gang. As a gang, they had a responsibility to “defend our territory and protect our people,” but they also engaged in extensive illegal activity that included selling cocaine, opioids, and marijuana as well as “getting involved with buying guns.” One evening, the circle was ambushed by a member of a rival gang as they walked through their neighborhood. Alexander, a member of the crew, was shot but survived and Aramis said that the event “brought us even closer, you know? It makes us value who we love and who we don’t. It made us want to be together all the time.”

Soon after the shooting, another member of the crew, Oscar, was arrested. Following Oscar’s arrest, the crew banded together to support Oscar and his family.

We used to go by there all the time, give his mom money to put on a cell phone for us. Give his mom money. See if she’s good inside the house, even though she was already good ‘cause she bought her own house... But just made sure his little brothers were doing the right thing, making sure they go to basketball practice, stuff like that until he got out. Then when he came out, we took care of him. We gave him money, clothes, whatever he needed.

Aramis’ response to his friend’s arrest and detainment that underscores the familial bond within the group. Despite being only sixteen-years-old, there was a shared expectation

that while Oscar was in DYS, the circle should do everything to minimize the impact of his absence on his family.

A few months later when Aramis was arrested, he was both hurt and confused by how the crew responded to his arrest.

Before I got arrested I used to show up at my friends' house, make sure they're good, make sure like they got what they need. If they needed money or if they needed anything, I'll do the best to my abilities to try to get it for them, if I can't get it I'll ask somebody. [I would] make sure their moms is okay, everybody in their family. But when I got arrested, nobody went to my house. Nobody asked my mom how I was or how she was doing, or if she needed something. Nobody sent me money, put the phone on, or anything like that. So, in my head, I'm like, 'Damn, I used to do so much for you guys. You guys can't come visit me, check up on my mom, see how I'm doing or if she needs help or anything?' So, when I came home, it made me realize like, made me look at everything different like ... Like, 'If you're so-called my friend then like why weren't you there?'

His friends wrote him letters, but he interpreted the lack of emotional and financial support offered to him and his mother as evidence of his friends' failure to act loyally. Much like the other members of his circle, Aramis' family relied on the money generated from his illegal activities to pay for household expenses. At as young as fourteen, he would "make sure there was food in the house, make sure my mom doesn't go hungry, make sure I buy milk 'cause I would like to eat cereal at night and stuff like that. Go and buy her coffee." While he was in jail, he worried about the family finances, and he expected that the friends to whom he had always been loyal, would have responded in kind.

Other young men shared similar stories of betrayal and disappointment after their friends did not behave loyally in response to the arrests, detainments, and incarcerations. For example, Elijah also spoke about how he felt about his friends' response to his arrest,

Some [of my friends] crossed me. When I was locked up ...my ex-peers, they used to send me letters like, 'Yeah. We got you. We're going to send you bread. We got you with court clothes.' I didn't see not a dime. I didn't see not a pair of clothes...When I came home, they [said], 'Come see me.' Like, 'No. You didn't do shit while I was locked up.' ... It's like, 'What for? Why be around me if when I'm at my lowest, you're going to leave me?' While, on the other hand, I basically put my life on the line for them.

As Elijah described, when he returned home after a period in jail, like most of the young men who felt betrayed, he ended his relationships with those who had not provided the forms of support he anticipated. In contrast, when Aramis was released from prison, he opted to re-engage with his circle. Though Aramis' never discussed his disappointment with how the group had not looked after his family or sent him money over the course of his two-and-a-half-year sentence, it was implicit that after his release Aramis would receive financial support from the circle.

They splurged me...Whatever I needed they got it for me. They were spending their money on things that I wanted, for the simple fact that they wasn't sending me money in jail for my canteen or anything like that...So they put me on. They gave me drugs to sell when I came out. Anything that I needed or wanted I would have got it.

As Aramis listed the various forms of financial support his peers offered to him to facilitate his post-incarceration re-entry, he spoke with an air of entitlement. He equated his gang with family, and thus believed that he was entitled to certain forms of support both while he was incarcerated and upon his release. Accordingly, the fact that his circle



responded to his release in an appropriate fashion lessened but did not eliminate the sting he felt about having been neglected while in prison. While he readily accepted the money, clothes, and drugs the circle provided, he still resented the group's response to his incarceration, "little by little I started distancing myself from them." Aramis told me that, "when I came home it made me look at everything different."

## The Consequences of Failed Loyalty Tests

### **Generalized Interpersonal Distrust**

At the end of our third interview, Shawn stayed put in his seat. He was sitting on one side of the grey folding table in a small basement classroom at CHANGES, while I sat on the other. He had put the envelope containing a twenty-dollar bill into his pocket and signed and returned the receipt for his compensation. I thanked him for his participation in the study and informed him that I had learned a lot from him and was grateful for his time. I began to collect his life history graph, social network maps, and daily logs, all of which I had laid out on the table at the start of our interview. I glanced up and realized that he had made no move. Usually lively and animated, Shawn seemed dejected. I was not sure if he realized the interview was over, and so I said, "You're all set!" my voice overly chipper.

"I know. I'd just like to sit here for a little bit," Shawn replied.

"Okay. Do you want me to stay, or do you want me to go?"

“Doesn’t matter. If you want to, you can stay?”

“All right, I’ll stay.”

We sat in silence for almost a minute before he spoke again. I noted that his ordinarily booming voice was soft and apprehensive. “I be feeling like I could possibly like, I could be a big impact on the world, I just don’t know how to go about it sometimes...I mean, I just be like lost.”

I listened as Shawn described feeling both inept and lonely. He shared an idea for a business that he had been thinking about for a while, and that he believed in but had no one—aside from me—that he trusted enough to with whom he could discuss his ideas. As a teenager, Shawn had been popular and well-liked. He had been close to forlorn when he talked about all the expensive clothing and jewelry he had purchased with money he had obtained from selling marijuana and breaking into houses and cars. However, when I met Shawn, at age twenty-one, he felt isolated and lived at home with his mother and his father, neither of whom trusted him much following his arrests and time in jail. Shawn—like many of the other young men—told me that talking to me had been a rare opportunity to think about and discuss the impact of his arrests on his life. I got the sense that he was saddened that these conversations were coming to a close and also felt unsettled by his reflections on the interpersonal consequences of his arrests.

Each of Shawn’s arrests impacted him and his relationships differently. His first arrest occurred when he was seventeen-years-old. It was a few months before the Massachusetts state legislature voted to raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction, and as a result, Shawn

was arraigned in adult criminal court after which he was held at Nashua Street Jail. Though he “never really talked to” his public defender, he opted to plead guilty in exchange for a reduced sentence. Shawn articulated a sense of responsibility for his criminal activities and the circumstances surrounding and following his arrest caused him to narrow his social network. Shawn had been arrested at his high school. As a part of his plea deal, he admitted to participating in the theft of school laptops as well as theft of a teacher’s personal effects, though Shawn maintained that he had not participated in the latter. Before they called his parents, the school administrators and the police questioned Shawn and told him that if the teacher’s personal items were returned, charges related to that portion of the crime would be dropped. Shawn was able to persuade his accomplice to return the teacher’s items, but those charges were filed anyway. For Shawn, this outcome taught him an important lesson about trust: he had engaged in it too freely. He withdrew further into a smaller friendship network, cutting ties with “associates” who he believed were not truly his friends, and spending more time with one person, his friend Quincy.

Shawn met Quincy the first day of high school. The two quickly bonded over “class clown shit,” like starting paper ball fights in class. Shawn dubbed Quincy his “right hand,” and the fact that the boys’ mothers were friendly with another strengthened their friendship. Together Shawn and Quincy joined forces in a “hustle,” where the boys sold marijuana to their classmates. Before Shawn’s arrest, the pair hung out in the public housing projects close to the school building after school or would sometimes head to the nearby predominantly

White neighborhoods to steal cash out of unlocked cars or break into homes and steal larger items.

Shawn and Quincy were eventually arrested for breaking and entering and larceny. Shawn anticipated that at some point they might get caught but felt that risk of arrest was acceptable given the thousands of dollars the boys obtained every few weeks after they pawned the stolen items. What Shawn did not expect, was that after they were arrested, Quincy would take a deal that included implicating him. Years later, Shawn's voice conveyed an evident bewilderment at Quincy's decision, "I never thought he would do no shit like that. He was sleeping at my house, and I used to sleep at his house. He used to be my best friend. Like I said he was my right hand. That was like my guy, my bro..." Just as his previous arrest encouraged his attachment to Quincy, this arrest also re-mapped Shawn's relationships.

The first time Shawn had been arrested, his parents had been unable to come up with his bail and had taken up a collection at church. During the eight months that he spent in jail following his guilty plea, his mother and father both visited him often. However, his second arrest altered Shawn's status within his family. When he returned home from jail this time, Shawn recognized clear signs that his parents' perceptions of him had changed. He explained, "Like before I used to be able to be trusted in my house when they're not there. Like now, they don't even want me in the crib." Though his parents allowed him to move back in, they refused to give him a key. Having to coordinate his schedule with his parents, who were increasingly short and dismissive of him, was difficult for Shawn. A few times

when he called them to ask them to open the door, Shawn believed they intentionally did not pick up his calls. After being locked out a few times, Shawn got into the habit of “snapping windows”—a skill he developed alongside Quincy when they would break into homes—to get into the family’s apartment. This angered his parents, who interpreted this as a sign that Shawn was “going back to his old ways” and responded by promptly nailing all the windows shut.

Shawn’s deteriorating relationship with his parents after his second arrest was not only attributable to their lack of trust in him, but also to his growing skepticism of them. Shawn described the spillover of animus and distrust from Quincy’s betrayal into his interactions with his family.

That whole situation with [Quincy] ratting on me, I don’t know if I’ll trust nobody... that whole situation changed how I interact with my parents, you feel me? I don’t share shit with them, I don’t trust them ‘cause I heard it from their mouths, you feel me? If you do certain shit, we’re going to rat on you...I mean, like if I can’t depend on you at my worst moments, then I don’t want to fuck with you. Like I don’t want to fuck with you no longer... If you’re my mother and the police comes in the house and the next day saying, ‘Oh, we’re looking for Shawn.’ And you know I’m upstairs, and you tell them, ‘Yeah he’s upstairs, go get him.’ I will not fuck with you. I don’t give a fuck if it’s the right thing to do, at the end of the day you’re my mother. You’re supposed to ride out for me until let me prove to you that I’m innocent. Fuck what the police are saying. Let me prove to you the right way that I’m innocent...That’s not loyalty, you feel me? Like what type of shit is that?

Moreover, following both arrests in which Shawn felt that his male friends had wronged him, he also reevaluated the gender composition of his social network. Once he was released, he decided to “cut off all my friends that was guys and I just re-upped on friends that’s all girls.”

Unlike Shawn, Aramis and Víctor, eighteen-year-old Malcolm told me that he had tended to keep to himself throughout childhood and adolescence. He explained, “I’ve always been socially awkward, so I’ve been a loner.” This is not say that Malcolm did not have any friends—he did—but his network did not include many casual acquaintances. Malcolm was adopted by his mother when he was three-years-old. When he was a child, Malcolm regularly met with behavioral therapists to address the fact that he “got mad easily.” He also would often get into trouble for “being a disturbance” in his classrooms. At school, other students bullied Malcolm and in one instance a group of boys pushed him off the rear of the bus through the emergency exit door.

As he entered middle school, his behavior became increasingly difficult for his mother to manage. She grounded him and punished him by limiting his television and video game privileges, but Malcolm would leave the house, or, in one instance when he was twelve-years-old, he punched a door. Unsure of how to address his behavior, his mother called the police. When they arrived at the house the police attempted to restrain Malcolm, but he tried to fight them, “Yeah, as they’re trying to restrain me, calm me down, I wasn’t having it... I went to the hospital, and they had me checked out, psychiatric check out.” Following this incident, Malcolm’s mother filed a CHINS petition with the Boston juvenile court. The family appeared in court, where his mother said that she could not handle him and did not know what to do to parent him effectively.

**Abena:** What did you feel at that time?

**Malcolm:** I didn't care. At that time, I really didn't care.

**Abena:** What were you thinking?

**Malcolm:** Okay.

**Abena:** What was the plan in your head?

**Malcolm:** I don't know. I can't tell you my exact plan, but it was the streets.

**Abena:** What about the streets?

**Malcolm:** I was just out there.

By the time Malcolm was thirteen-years-old, his mother and his aunt, who also lived in the house, decided that Malcolm could no longer live with them. He was given a DCF placement at a nearby group home but he did not like want to live their either. Malcolm described the first year after his mom kicked him out as a period when he was homeless. He crashed on friends' couches and when he did not have a place to stay he would spend the night walking around the city because he thought that he might be victimized if he fell asleep on a bench. The next year, Malcolm received a new independent living placement in a DCF program in nearby Somerville, which he liked and where he lived until he aged out on his eighteenth birthday.

Up until his arrest at sixteen-years-old, Malcolm continued to go to school most days including through his period of homelessness. In middle school, mother had enrolled him in the METCO busing program, in which Malcolm and his close friends Beko and Tevin traveled from their predominantly Black neighborhoods to attend school in a predominantly

White Boston suburb. Over the years, the boys slept over at one another's houses, played on the same intramural basketball team, and, once they had been old enough, commuted together on the MBTA buses and trains. On Malcolm, Beko, and Tevin's two-hour trips between school and their homes, the boys occasionally got into arguments with other commuters or fought with students from other schools. Occasionally, the three impulsively decided to steal someone's purse, wallet or cell phone.

When Malcolm was first arrested at sixteen-years-old, he ended up spending three months in pre-trial detention at a secure DYS facility before he was bailed out. During this "sitting time," Malcolm never heard from either Beko or Tevin. The fact that his friends had not reached out to him during this period had changed their relationships once he was released.

**Abena:** Do you think your arrest changed your relationship with any of your friends?

**Malcolm:** Yeah.

**Abena:** In what ways, and with which friends?

**Malcolm:** Beko and Tevin. We've grown distant due to the fact that I'm just a outlaw, whatever. They're still striving in school... But, it was like when I was down and it was bad, where was y'all? I can't hold that against them, but that's just how it's been. It's just left us distant.

**Abena:** Okay. What do you think would have changed that?

**Malcolm:** A letter. For real, just a letter or something, a phone call.

Where Aramis expected his friends would step up monetarily for both him and his mother, Malcolm expected his friends to maintain their emotional relationship. Malcolm



found his arrest to be especially painful because it also led to his expulsion for high school. To him, Beko and Tevin's silence "seemed like they didn't really care," and this led him to pull back from those relationships. He explained, "I talk to them but it hasn't really been at a level where that trust has been present."

Rick, a twenty-three-year-old young man, provides an extreme example of the generalized interpersonal distrust that followed failed loyalty tests. Though he had engaged in criminal activities with peers, he was firm that he was not close to those individuals and was adamant that there had not been anyone in his life that met the criteria for inclusion on his social network map.

**Abena:** So, the next activity is about the people who you felt close to or who you might trust enough to talk to about difficult things.

**Rick:** Nobody.

*Rick shakes his head in the negative.*

**Abena:** No one?

**Rick:** I don't trust no one.

**Abena:** You didn't?

**Rick:** I don't.

**Abena:** You still don't.

**Rick:** Still don't.

**Abena:** So, who do you talk to right now about things that are difficult?

**Rick:** Probably the therapist, but not too much of anything really.

**Abena:** But when you were younger, there wasn't a therapist or somebody that you would talk to?

**Rick:** No.

**Abena:** So what would you do?

**Rick:** Keep it to myself, keep it bottled up.

At an earlier point in our interview, when Rick described his typical day at age sixteen, he described being in the company of others. Boys would come to his house where they would smoke marijuana and play video games. The majority of his cases involved co-defendants. At the same time, Rick rationalized that while he spent time in the company of these individuals, he did not trust them, nor did he think that they placed much trust in him, "people [who I trust] just don't exist in my life."

Following the failure of male peer groups to display emotional care, young men who had female friendships placed greater weight on those relationships. Girls would often appear closer on post-arrest social network maps. Sometimes emotionally supportive girls and young women were involved in romantic relationships, but often they were not. Having female friends prior to one's arrest increased the likelihood that a young man would have friends in attendance at court dates, receive letters, or be sent money. For Malcolm, what Beko and Tevin did not do, his friend CiCi did. Malcolm first met CiCi at a church camp when he was 11 years old. While they did not live in the same neighborhood or attend the same school, CiC was a positive constant throughout his life. Following his arrest felt closer to her: "She checks in on me. Checks on my well-being...At hard times, she's just there, even when I'm not even looking for her. She's just there." He spoke of CiCi reverently, saying that

he believed she had been sent by God to look out for him. Malcolm said of the letters she sent to him while he was in DYS and in the years since his release, they “helped my spirits.”

## **Going it Alone**

Largely operating with minimal public and private sources of support, young men located the responsibility for their circumstances within themselves. The narratives of individualism are consistent with what Sandra Susan Smith (2007) dubbed defensive individualism in her study of unemployment among poor Black people. Like Smith, I also find that the belief that one should go it alone, influenced young men’s behavior and decision-making. In light of their adversarial relationships with public institutions, few of the young men consulted with resources, even when they were available. For an example of this, we can return to Will’s conundrum about where he should live following his grandmother’s death. At the sober house, where he was living when I first met him, he liked the conditions, had his own space, and was staying sober, but could barely afford the rent and fees. At our second interview, Will told me that he had spoken with his mom, and she had agreed to move back to Revere with Will’s grandfather and sister and take over the payments on his grandparents’ home. Though he has never been able to stay sober while living with his family, Will said that he decided that he is going to leave the sober house and move back to Revere with them.

**Abena:** Did you come up with that plan with your sober coach? I know we talked about that.

**Will:** I tend to make my own plans and then ask people what they think of them. I don't usually ... I just ... I don't like people deciding things for me and stuff. I feel like I know what's best for me. Paying \$800 a month for [a room just to sleep]—it's not in my best interest.

Will previously mentioned that he liked his sober coach, so it is not the case that he did not respect the coach as an individual. Instead, I argue that the confluence of adversarial histories with street-level bureaucrats, distrust following arrests, and early life instability led Will to that decision. Following their arrests, the young men made decisions of high consequence about the optimal conditions for their sobriety or whether they should take a plea deal or go to trial, and they did so on their own.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

The juvenile and criminal justice system has become a regular feature of life for low income, black and Latino, male youth in urban communities. As the proportion of the national population under justice system supervision grew over the 1990s and 2000s, a body of scholarship emerged that provided important information about the risks and consequences of arrest, detention, and incarceration. Over the years, researchers have been able to determine with increasing precision not only the demographic and social conditions of those individuals most likely to be arrested as juveniles, but also the behavioral antecedents of arrest like early truancy, extensive disciplinary records in school, and non-compliance with home rules. Alongside knowledge of the variables that contribute to a heightened risk of arrest, is a well-documented account of the life outcomes of those who have been arrested prior to turning eighteen years old. This formal justice system contact is associated with myriad forms of social disadvantage, such as low educational attainment, social isolation, unemployment, and persistent criminal involvement. While such information is instructive with respect to which populations are in need of targeted intervention, and what the focus of those interventions should be, it is less informative in terms of identifying the mechanisms through which justice system contact results in adverse adult experiences for youth. In *It's on Me*, I have argued that a nuanced understanding this process is a precondition for more effective intervention and support for this segment of the population.

Among sociologists and criminologists, there are two dominant frameworks, both under the umbrella of labeling theory, for understanding the relationship between youth

arrest and undesirable outcomes during the transition to adulthood. While the first explanation emphasizes youth culture and behavior, the second emphasizes social structure and the institutional responses to arrest. In the first, upon being arrested a young person internalizes the label “delinquent” or “criminal” and develops a deviant self-concept, wherein they come to see themselves as a delinquent or a criminal. The theory posits that this perception of self leads to the adoption of an oppositional stance towards the laws and legal institutions and continued criminal involvement. In the second explanation, once arrested a young person is labelled “delinquent” or “criminal” and the stigma associated with those labels results in reduced access to opportunities for youth. Findings indicate that employers are disinclined to hire individuals who have been arrested, school policies often introduce numerous hurdles into the re-enrollment process for youth who have been arrested, and law enforcement engages in additional surveillance of those previously arrested.

While both of these theoretical frames offer compelling explanations of the mechanisms that exacerbate social disadvantage following arrest, I began this dissertation by arguing that they required additional consideration as these frames and their empirical tests exist as a part of a tradition that overlooks and undervalues the perspectives of young people who have been arrested. The absence of the voices of those in the midst of navigating life post-arrest, carries the implication that how one understands their experience is not central to what happens. This, however, is a falsehood that stands in contradiction to both logic and extensive research in sociology and psychology. In the introduction, I argued

that the methods traditionally used by sociologists and criminologists contribute to the tendency to explore the structural patterns flowing from youth arrest. Indeed, a great deal more research has looked at whether and how institutions interact with previously arrested individuals, than whether and how young people internalize their arrests. In this dissertation, I have centered the subjective experiences of young men who have been arrested to better understand the ways in which interpret this formal contact with the justice system. In doing so, *It's on Me* represents a departure from prior scholarship on youth contact with the justice system both methodologically and conceptually. Using a phenomenological interviewing technique to collect information that mapped on to an ecological model of human development, revealed the deep interconnections between peer networks, families, and institutions both those within the juvenile justice system (e.g., courts, probation) and outside the juvenile justice system (e.g., schools, child welfare) in the minds of system-involved young men.

I identified a set of related processes that influence young men's self-concept and decision-making in the aftermath of justice system contact. Adversarial relationships with the frontline workers of public institutions that began in early childhood, bred institutional distrust and left young men feeling alienated from the support services typically understood to form the "social safety-net." Given distrust of public institutions, youth came to rely more heavily on peer and family support after they were arrested and peer and family responses to an arrest were interpreted by young men as indicators of loyalty and status. However, many families had a low capacity to adequately respond to the young person's

arrest and the mutual dependency at the heart of many peer relationships also rarely withstood the strain of arrest. Institutional distrust alongside failed displays of loyalty from peer or families, contributed to a growing sense of being responsibility among young men who have been arrested. Moreover, this subjective account of life for youth who come into contact with the justice system is substantively different from what stakeholders articulated.

## Towards an Integrated Labeling Theory

When it comes to how young people understand and make meaning of their arrests, my research reveals a set of factors not adequately reflected in the labeling theory literature. By connecting youth responses to arrests and personal developmental histories, I show the long run consequences and salience of factors like early exposure to violence or contentious interactions with public service frontline workers in what ultimately ends up happening to young people. In this regard my findings provide further evidence for research that adopts a developmental approach to criminology (see for example Sampson & Laub, 2005).

My research also clarifies what it means for youth to internalize the delinquent or criminal label. Rather than expressions of a deviant self-concept, arrests led young men to increasingly believe that there were few trustworthy or loyal people in their lives and that they alone were responsible for taking care of themselves and their loved ones. It was often after misguided attempts to act responsibly that young make decisions that ultimately put them at greater risk for rearrest, isolation, and school failure.



Most importantly, *It's on Me* demonstrates that rather than two independently functioning processes or alternate explanations, the two strands of labeling theory are interdependent. That is, it is not simply that young people who are arrested are labeled “criminal or deviant,” but that their meaning making around arrest structures their capacity to handle the more commonly researched structural responses to those negative labels.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

In the introduction, I argued that investigating the underlying mechanisms that sustain associations between youth arrest and adverse outcomes in adulthood, would lend insight into opportunities for change. In the third interview, I asked each participant a series of questions about the resources and supports that would have been helpful to them in the aftermath of their arrests. I was initially surprised at how difficult it was for young men to respond to this question. However, as I analyzed these interviews, it became evident that the prospect of a different experience in school, with their families, in their peer groups, in DCF, with the police, in the courts, and with DYS and probation was not something that they had had the opportunity to imagine. The adversarial dynamic between these young people and the various public institutions hampered their trust in public institutions. Moreover, the multiple forms of social disadvantage they experienced as children constrained their social networks' capacity to offer adequate private support. Though the young men did not provide concrete action plans, our conversations suggested two important priorities for

interventions, assistance re-establishing prosocial and supportive peer and family networks and fostering trust in public institutions.

### **(Re)-Establishing Prosocial Peer and Family Networks**

Given that young men systematically interpret their arrests as a test of loyalty, I recommend increased efforts to establish and sustain prosocial networks following an arrest. In order to sustain existing networks for young people interventions that engage peers and families, may be more effective than those targeting individuals. The findings of this work illuminate a distinction between how parents, for example, typically handle arrests and what may be more advantageous. In a focus group for an updated probation model called opportunity-based probation, Sarah Walker and colleagues, found that parents often felt that programs that included incentives or rewards were too lenient and often advocated harsher punishments for their own children. However, my research indicates that a family member following this logic is well poised to fail the loyalty test. Restorative justice practices, can be used to repair relationships between not just those at the center of a conflict, but family and friends who are secondarily impacted.

Stakeholders also offered a few ideas about what considerations should guide these efforts. The first is inviting parents into justice system process. In response to the question “What would it look like in your view to have high quality family engagement?” an administrator from DYS advocated for an approach in which families “part of the

restoration, they're part of the process and part of the conversations and part of the incentives and part the conversation and consequences and I think that when the system is able to make decisions in partnership and not as an authority.” The second is equipping families with new ways to handle a young person’s friends, which they may view as harmful influences. A senior level official in DCF described how she might counsel a parent, “Do not blame their friends. That is not helpful. Even if you believe it, even if it's real, even if it's true, that is not helpful because that is not the way you intervene between friends.”

## **Fostering Trust in Public Institutions**

Following an arrest, young people are disinclined to look for help outside of themselves, because in their experiences help has never been forthcoming. To address this, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners must tackle what is fundamentally a civic question: How do you grow faith in public institutions among a distrusting youth population? While an answer to this question is beyond the scope of this dissertation, my analysis indicates that future research might find promise in interventions that improve clarity and access to information for young people and encourage those who work at the frontlines of public institutions, and regularly interact with young people to re-imagine their professional identities.

### *Clear and Accessible Information*

Young people’s skepticism of their schools, social services, and the justice system was often accompanied by confusion regarding processes. In fact, one participant shared that he

felt that his probation officer intentionally withheld information so that he would “mess up” and she would be able to “violate me and send me back up.” Making sure that young people and their families have access to information—particularly about procedures and what to expect from public institutions is necessary foundation to improve this dynamic. The Youth and Families Engagement Coordinator of a Greater Boston Area police department described an informational intervention at the local high school.

Right now, as part of the efforts to strengthen youth-police relations, I developed, implemented, and I'm teaching a class up at the [high school] about community justice. Except it's based on what happens in [our city]. And we have police officers come in and talk. They teach the kids about amendments, and what happens if you're stopped, stop and frisk. And we had a K-9 officer come in. And next week, we're having a gang unit detective come in, and speak to the class. This makes the kids know who's out there, and what the city's doing to protect them and the community. And it shows in the way that the police officers and the students relate to each other in the classroom. Usually when you talk to kids about police, always there's the, 'Uggggh.' But then you can already see a change in the class, towards the officers. We have a couple kids who are like, 'I wanna be an officer,' and they're already volunteering to intern for us next year.

Though the majority of the young men I met with were disengaged from school by the time they began high school, similar partnerships might be effective in elementary or middle schools, alternative educational programs, or even at programs like CHANGES. Future research, should consider additional creative opportunities to build information-sharing networks that would appeal to young people in ways that account for their direct and vicarious experiences of institutional misrecognition.

*Re-negotiated Professional Identities*

The police-school partnership course above, is also an example of an expanded conception of police officers' professional identities. Benjamin's incisive social commentary at the close of Chapter 4, provided a window into how young men make sense of childhoods and adolescences in which the public institutions that organize their lives do not understand what they "go through" to protect themselves and take care of their loved ones. The resignation to and acceptance of this institutional misrecognition, should be understood as an adaptive response that has deleterious impacts on these young men. The individualism and internalized responsibility that young men consistently expressed, is evidence that their teachers, social workers, police officers, and the other adults that they encountered as they moved through life acted in ways that failed to convey that as the representatives of these public institutions, they each had a professional responsibility to create contexts in which young men could thrive. When, in Chapter 2, Rick said of his experiences in school, "There was nothing they could do. It was basically all me. The responsibilities was not the school's, it's on me," he is articulating this very belief.

There are many ways that public institutions can demonstrate their responsibility to these young men. While observing a JDAI regional conference, I learned about another police department's approach that involved examining and re-negotiating what policing entailed. The officer described how he and his colleagues honestly discussed how they viewed and interacted the youth in their community and held listening sessions with local youth, including young people they had previously arrested, to learn about how the young people perceived the police. This practice led the police officers to reflect and adapt their

community-based strategies. Future research might examine the efficacy of similar professional identity reflective exercises for fostering young people's trust in schools, child welfare agencies, probation and other public institutions

While there remains a great deal more that scholars and practitioners must understand about how to most effectively support young people after their arrests, this dissertation does show that young people themselves must be an integral part of those efforts. In conducting this project, I spoke with both those who work in Massachusetts' justice system and are active in it shepherding in a new wave of reforms, and a group of young men who did much of their growing up under the supervision of justice system. While both groups agreed that the justice system was imperfect and in need of reforms that better support young people, they did not always have the same perspective on what those flaws were and how they needed to be addressed. This is missed opportunity. Though juvenile justice stakeholders have, for the last decade, been advancing an intentional agenda, my research leads me to believe that those efforts can only be fruitful if more is done to bridge the distance between the actors and the acted upon. After years of adversarial interactions with those working at the frontlines of public institutions, cultivating trusting relationships between young men who are heavily involved in the streets and those very institutions will not be an easy process, but it is an important first step.

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# Appendix: Interview Materials

## Interview 1 (Life History) Materials

### Part 1: Greetings and Establishing the Interview Focus

#### **PRIOR TO INTERVIEW REVIEW ASSENT FORM WITH EACH P.**

**SAY:** *Hi, [NAME]! Thanks for meeting with me today! I know that I am going to learn a lot from our conversation. The reason I want to speak to you is because I am interested in what life is like for young people who have been arrested. Today, I'd like to hear about what your life was like up until now. It's probably helpful to think about this as conversation, rather than strict question and answer interview. I have some activities to get us started and I have a few questions in mind, but I am really interested in hearing about whatever you are willing to share. Any questions?*

### Part 2: Life-Graph Activity

**SAY:** *The first thing I would like you to do is to make a life-graph.*

#### **PLACE THE LIFE GRAPH AND MARKERS IN FRONT OF THE P.**

**SAY:** *When I say life-graph I mean a timeline that goes from when you were born to now. On your life-graph I would like to see: when important events in your life happened, how long they lasted for, and how they made you feel. The numbers on the timeline represent how old you were at the time.*

**SAY:** *You should fill in this blank life-graph however you'd like. After you have worked on it for a bit, I would like for us to have a conversation about what you have on your life-graph. Any questions?*

#### **WHEN P INDICATES S/HE IS DONE, PLACE THE INSTITUTIONS SHEET IN FRONT OF THE P.**

**SAY:** *Your life graph has a lot of great [INSERT]. Before you tell me about it, take a look at these institutions. If you haven't, make sure that you have included important events that have to do with each of these institutions on your life. Let me know if you have any questions about what I mean by any of these institutions.*

#### **AFTER P INDICATES S/HE IS DONE.**

**SAY:** *Thank you. It looks like you have a lot to teach me about your life!*

**PROCEED THROUGH EACH OF THE EVENTS RECORDED ON THE LIFE-GRAPH USING THE INTERVIEW GUIDE AS APPROPRIATE.**

Part 3: Potential Life-History Interview Questions

1. 1. Tell me about [INSERT]. What happened when [INSERT]?
2. 2. What else was going on in your life at the time [INSERT] occurred? When [INSERT] happened were you still [INSERT]?
3. 3. What people stand out for you when you think about [INSERT]?
4. 4. How did [INSERT] impact your life?
5. 5. How did [INSERT] impact other people who were important to you?
6. 6. What feelings and/or thoughts stood out to you about [INSERT]?
7. 7. Is there anything else I should know about [INSERT]?

Part 4: Wrap Up

**SAY:** *[NAME], I've really learned a lot from you today, and I really appreciate your time! Our conversation makes me aware that there is a lot more that I can learn from talking to you again! I'd like to review my notes and have another conversation with you in a few days. If you'd like, my number is [FIELD PHONE NUMBER] so you can contact me to let me know how you are doing. Before we finish, is there anything else you want to share?*

## Interview 2 (Details of Experience) Materials

### Part 1: Greetings and Establishing the Interview Focus

#### **PRIOR TO INTERVIEW REVIEW ASSENT FORM WITH EACH P.**

**SAY:** *Hi, [NAME]. Thanks for meeting with me again today! Last time we met, I learned a lot from our conversation, and am excited to learn from you again. You might remember that the reason I want to speak to you is because I am interested in what life is like for young people after they have been arrested. Today I'd like to hear about what is going on in your life, at the moment. It's probably helpful to think about this as conversation, rather than strict question and answer interview. I have some activities to get us started and I have a few questions in mind, but I am really interested in hearing about whatever you are willing to share. Any questions?*

### Part 2: Social Network

**SAY:** *Last time we spoke, one of the things you told me about was the people who have played an important role in your life.*

#### **PRESENT P WITH SOCIAL NETWORKS SHEET.**

**SAY:** *The first thing I want to do today is build a diagram of your social network. For this you can think about a social network as the people who you come in contact with regularly and who play an important role in your life. Your name is in the at the center of this page. You can use nicknames, initials, or descriptions (like ex-girlfriend or youth worker) to fill in this chart. The idea is that you write down the people who you feel closest to today, closest to your name on this diagram. Any questions?*

#### **WHEN P INDICATES S/HE IS DONE, PLACE THE INSTITUTIONS SHEET IN FRONT OF THE P.**

**SAY:** *Your diagram has a lot of great information, [INSERT]. Before you tell me about it, take a look at these institutions. If you haven't, make sure that you have included people who play an important role in your life from each of these institutions. Let me know if you have any questions about what I mean by any of these institutions.*

#### **WAIT UNTIL P INDICATES S/HE IS DONE.**

**SAY:** *Thank you. It looks like you have a lot to teach me about the people in your life!*

### Part 3: Social Networks Interview Questions

**PROCEED THROUGH EACH OF THE INDIVIDUALS RECORDED ON THE  
ROOTS & BRANCHES DIAGRAM USING THE INTERVIEW GUIDE AS  
APPROPRIATE.**

1. 1. Tell me about your relationship with [INSERT], at the moment. What do you like about your relationship with [INSERT]? What would you like to change about your relationship with [INSERT]?
2. 2. When you see [INSERT], what kinds of things do you do? What kinds of things do you talk about?
3. 3. How do you feel when you see [INSERT]?
4. 4. How do you think [INSERT] feels about you having been arrested?/ How do you think [INSERT] would react if they found out that you had been arrested?

Part 4: A Day in the Life... Activity

**SAY:** *For the next activity, I want to hear about a typical day, from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to sleep.*

**PRESENT P WITH A DAY IN THE LIFE HOUR BY HOUR SHEET.**

**SAY:** *To begin, briefly write down what happens during each of the hours of your day.*

**WAIT UNTIL P INDICATES S/HE IS DONE.**

Part 5: Potential A Day in the Life Interview Questions

**SAY:** *I am excited to hear the details of your typical day! Can you take me through your typical day and describe what I would see if I were to film your life?*

**PROCEED THROUGH EACH HOUR OF THE SCHEDULE.**

1. 1. What would I see if I was filming you?
2. 2. Where does [INSERT] take place?
3. 3. Who else is around when [INSERT] is happening?
4. 4. What types of things do you think about during [INSERT]?

Part 6: Wrap Up

**SAY:** *[NAME], I've really learned a lot from you today, and I really appreciate your time! Our conversation makes me aware that there is a lot more that I can learn from talking to you again! I'd like to review my notes and have another conversation with you in a few days. If you'd like, my number is [FIELD PHONE NUMBER] so you can contact me to let me know how you are doing. Before we finish, is there anything else you want to share?*



## Interview 3 (Reflection on Meaning) Materials

### Part 1: Greetings and Establishing the Interview Focus

#### **PRIOR TO INTERVIEW REVIEW ASSENT FORM WITH EACH P.**

**SAY:** *Hi, [NAME]. Thanks for meeting with me again today! Last time we met, I learned a lot from our conversation, and am excited to learn from you again. You might remember that the reason I want to speak to you is because I am interested in what life is like for young people who have been arrested. Today I'd like to hear your reflections on how having been arrested impacts your life. It's probably helpful to think about this as conversation, rather than strict question and answer interview. I have some activities to get us started and I have a few questions in mind, but I am really interested in hearing about whatever you are willing to share. Any questions?*

### Part 2: Reviewing Previous Activities

**SAY:** *The last two times we spoke you filled out a life graph, a diagram illustrating the people who played and play an important role in your life.*

#### **PRESENT P WITH HIS/HER LIFE-GRAPH, ROOTS & BRANHES, AND DAY IN THE LIFE ARTIFACTS.**

**SAY:** *Take a moment to look over these documents.*

#### **WAIT UNTIL P INDICATES S/HE IS DONE.**

**SAY:** *In our conversation today, I am going to ask you some questions based on what you've shared in our other two interviews.*

### Part 3: Potential Reflection on Family & Household Composition Interview Questions

1. I've been thinking about what you said about your relationship with [INSERT] during our last interview. You told me [INSERT]. Has anything changed in your relationship since you were arrested? Why do you think that is? What are your feelings about that? How does this compare to your other friendships?
2. You mentioned that you live with [INSERT]. You told me [INSERT]. Do you think that having been arrested made anything different in terms of what goes on in your home? What are your feelings about that?
3. When you think about your future, what role do you think having been arrested will play in your relationships with your family?
4. Not only thinking about your own family, what do you think the families of young people who have been arrested need to understand?

#### Part 4: Potential Reflection on Peer Relationships Interview Questions

1. 5. Last time we spoke, you told me [INSERT] about [INSERT]. Since you were arrested have the things you talk about/ do when you hang changed? Why do you think that is? What are your feelings about that? How does this compare to your other friendships?
2. 6. When you think about your future, what role do you think having been arrested will play in your relationships with your friends?
3. 7. Not only thinking about your own friends, what do you think the friends of young people who have been arrested need to understand?

#### Part 5: Potential Reflection on School Experiences Interview Questions

1. 8. Last time we spoke, you told me [INSERT] about [INSERT]. Has anything changed at school since you were arrested? Why do you think that is? What are your feelings about that?
2. 9. When you think about your future, what role do you think having been arrested will play in terms of your education?
3. 10. Not only thinking about your own school, what do you think teachers, principals, security officers and guidance counselors who work with young people who have been arrested need to understand?

#### Part 6: Potential Reflection on Arrest Interview Questions

1. 11. If you were talking to a 14 year old who was thinking about doing something that would get them on arrested, what would you tell them about how their actions would impact their lives?
2. 12. In your own words, based on everything that we've talked about, what do you think it means to be a teenager who has been arrested?
3. 13. What do you think police officers, lawyers, judges, probation officers, etc. who work with young people who have been arrested need to understand?

#### Part 7: Potential Reflection on Miscellaneous Topics Interview Questions

1. 14. When you told me about [INSERT], one thing that I thought was [INSERT]. How does that sound to you?
2. 15. I've been talking with other young people who have been arrested. One pattern I've observed is [INSERT]. What do you think about this?
3. 16. I've also been talking to people who have experience with young people on who have been arrested. One pattern I've observed is [INSERT]. What do you think about this?

#### Part 8: Wrap Up

*[NAME], I've really learned a lot from you today! As you know my research project was for three interviews, so this is our last interview. I am going to spend a lot of time listening to our conversations and I*

*might have other questions for you, would it be okay if I called or texted you about them? I really appreciate all the time you've spent sharing about your life with me. I also would love to keep in touch and hear about how your life is going--if you'd like you to talk or have any questions about the research project you can always email me at: [asm790@mail.harvard.edu](mailto:asm790@mail.harvard.edu). Before we finish, is there anything else you want to share?*

### **Informational Interview with Expert Stakeholders Materials**

#### Part 1: Greetings and Establishing the Interview Focus

##### **PRIOR TO INTERVIEW REVIEW CONSENT FORM WITH EACH P.**

**SAY:** *Hi, [NAME]! Thanks for meeting with me today! I know that I am going to learn a lot from our conversation. The reason I want to speak to you is because as a/an [INSERT] you have insights into what life is like for young people who have been arrested. Today, I'd like to hear about your background and your experiences and interactions with youth who have been arrested. It's probably helpful to think about this as conversation, rather than strict question and answer interview. I have a few questions in mind, but I am really interested in hearing about whatever you are willing to share. Any questions?*

#### Part 2: Potential Professional Background Interview Questions

1. 1. Tell me a bit about role as a \_\_\_\_\_ .
  - a. a. What do you do?  
How long have you had this role?  
How did you come to have this position? Why did you decide to pursue/accept this position?
  - b. 2. What are the most important aspects of your work? The most difficult? When your work is going well, what does that look like?
  - c. 3. What aspects of your job do you find most rewarding? Most challenging? What are your plans for your career?
  - d. 4. What are your aims for your work with youth in contact with the justice system? How will you know that you have succeeded?

#### Part 3: Potential Family Relationships Interview Questions

- a. 5. In your capacity as a \_\_\_\_\_ how, if at all, do you interact with or observe the families of a youth who have been arrested?
- b. 6. How do you think having youth arrests impacts families?
- c. 7. What are things that you have observed families do to be helpful to a young people after an arrest?
- d. 8. What are things that you have observed families do to that were harmful to a young people after an arrest?

#### Part 4: Potential Peer Relationships Interview Questions

- a. 9. In your capacity as a \_\_\_\_\_ how, if at all, do you interact with or observe the friends or peers of a youth who have been arrested?
- b. 10. How do you think having a young person arrested impacts his/her friends?
- c. 11. What are things that you have observed friends or peer groups do to be helpful to a young people after an arrest?
- d. 12. What are things that you have observed friends or peer groups do to that were harmful to a young people after an arrest?

#### Part 5: Potential School/Education Interview Questions

- a. 13. In your capacity as a \_\_\_\_\_ how, if at all, do you interact with or observe the schooling or educational experiences of a youth who have been arrested?
- b. 14. How do you think having a young person arrested impacts his/her school experiences and educational trajectory?
- c. 15. What are things that you have observed friends or peer groups do to be helpful to a young people after an arrest?
- d. 16. What are things that you have observed friends or peer groups do to that were harmful to a young people after an arrest?

#### Part 6: Potential Arrest Interview Questions

- a. 17. In your capacity as a \_\_\_\_\_ how, if at all, do you interact with or observe additional contact between youth who have been arrested and the justice system?
- b. 18. Over the years, are there patterns you recognize in how young people experience life after having been arrested? How do you think this compares to detention?
  - a. a. What consistently seems to go well? What consistently seems to be a challenge?
- a. 19. Tell me about your opinions on the benefits of coming into contact with the justice system for young people.
- b. 20. Tell me about your opinions on the challenges of coming into contact with the justice system for young people.

#### Part 7: Wrap Up

*[NAME], I've really learned a lot from you today! I am going to spend a lot of time listening to our conversations and I might have other questions for you, would it be okay if I contacted you about them? I really appreciate all the time you've spent sharing about your insights and experiences with me. I also would love to keep in touch. If you'd like you to talk or have any questions about the research project you can always email me at: [asm790@mail.harvard.edu](mailto:asm790@mail.harvard.edu). Before we finish, is there anything else you want to share?*