

AN EXAMINATION OF PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE AND AWAY FROM CRIME

AMONG YOUTH RESIDING IN SINGLE-MOTHER HOUSEHOLDS

LOCATED IN AN AT-RISK COMMUNITY

By

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Among Youth Residing In Single-Mother Households

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Dangerous communities that are filled with poverty present youth with obstacles to escaping the at-risk community such as high crime rates, failing schools, and community violence. Children living in these disadvantaged neighborhoods also suffer a multitude of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) including parental separation and divorce, leading to the child being raised in a single-mother household. The extant literature on single-mother households describes the host of problems that children from these families have, but fail to address how children from single-mother households can escape the at-risk community and achieve academic success. This investigation explores the methods in fostering success among a sample of college students and graduates who grew up in Camden, New Jersey. Respondents (N=41) shared their perceptions of how their mothers helped them become academically successful while also shielding them from the crime, drugs, and poverty within their homes and neighborhoods.

## Introduction

Today, more children than ever live in single-mother homes (Vargas, et al., 2008). Studies have found that single-mother families are associated with greater school underachievement, delinquency, drug use, teenage pregnancies, poverty, and welfare dependency (Amato & Anthony, 2014; Brown, 2010; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Pong, 1997). Researchers have examined the link between family structure and educational achievement and delinquency. Much of this extant literature indicates that children from single-mother homes underachieve academically in comparison to their peers and are more likely to have behavioral and delinquency issues (Amato & Anthony 2014; Brown, 2010). However, there are few prominent studies that have considered what tactics or behaviors allow single mothers who live in high-risk areas to create a pathway to success for their children including college attendance, which reduces the risk of delinquency and criminal behavior (Amato & Anthony, 2014; Pong, 1997; Vargas et al; 2008). Although family structure and parenting is a critical and frequent variable in studies of delinquency, exploring this structure specifically with single-mother households is important as these types of parents have a harder time establishing an environment of control due to one less parent to monitor, supervise, and discipline the child (Amato, 2005; Pong 1997). The purpose of the current study is to assess respondents' perceptions of what tactics or behaviors their single mothers in high-risk situations utilized to enable their children to succeed academically and avoid involvement in gangs, drugs, and crime.

## Literature Review

Historically, the research conducted on outcomes for children that are a product of single- mothers suggests these youth are at increased risk for many negative outcomes (Vargas, et al; 2008). The National Longitudinal Adolescent Health Study conducted in 1994-1995 provided data that revealed that children from a single mother home are more likely to be associated with the following behaviors: repeated grades, suspensions from school, delinquency (including damaging property, shoplifting, breaking into a building or house to steal, and stealing something worth more than \$50), violence (defined as engaging in a physical fight as a result of which the opponent had received medical attention, or a fight involving multiple people, or using a weapon to threaten someone), therapy, smoking, thoughts of suicide, and attempted suicide (Vargas et al., 2008).

Brown (2010) also found that children living with two biological parents within married families tend to enjoy better outcomes educationally, socially, cognitively, and behaviorally and that these outcomes can even extend into adulthood. Divorce, on the other hand, is significantly associated with declines in youth's reading/math scores, a positive approach to learning, interpersonal skills, and self-control, with increases in internalizing and externalizing problems (Amato & Anthony, 2014).

Several theories as to why single-parent families put children at risk are at play in Camden City. The economic hardship caused by only one parent financially supporting a family leads to a lack of books, computers, and private tutoring (Amato, 2005). Furthermore, this economic hardship also leads single-parents to live in low-income areas (such as Camden), which consequently has low quality (traditional) public schools. Pong

(1997) affirmed that findings regarding the underperformance of children from single-parent homes were largely due to the low socioeconomic status of single-parent homes. The U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) conducted in 2016 estimates that the percentage of children living only with their mother is up to 12.9% while children living only with their father is at 4.8%. As such, the majority of single-parent homes are single-mother homes.

Low quality of parenting may be another reason why single-parent families put children at risk. With only one parent available, there is less emotional support, fewer rules, less discipline, and less supervision (Amato, 2005; Pong, 1997). Pong (1997) also found that there was a lack of involvement with the child's everyday life for single parents and subsequently less of an ability to monitor the child's schooling. Moreover, Roche, et al. (2007) reported that punitive parenting was strongly associated with a decline in delinquency and school problem behavior when the mother perceived the surrounding community to be dangerous and socially disorganized. A lack of supervision and disciplinary parenting may correlate with delinquency in children raised in a single-parent home.

Furthermore, consistent with what we initially observed in the subsample for this current study of single-mother households, there was a lack of male figures in the lives of these at-risk respondents in Camden. Compiling information from a nationally representative study of children in junior high and high school, Amato (2005) also found that students were more academically successful when there was a male figure, even if he did not live in the household. This may be attributed to the fact that without a male

figure, a female single-parent lacks parental authority as she has no “back up” with which to discipline the child (Pong, 1997).

Finally, single-mother households, especially those that are exposed to a hostile separation between mother and father, and their children have a higher exposure to stress (Amato, 2005). For example, in certain situations there is conflict and hostility between the mother and father and the child could be caught in the middle. The factors that lead parents into a hostile separation may also be the factors that negatively affect children (Amato & Anthony, 2014). If a separation forces the child to change households, there may be additional stress that comes from children moving around and having to adjust by making new friends or going to different schools (Amato, 2005).

In a single-parent household it is likely that less resources are available since there is only one income to depend upon. Resources can refer to measurable facts such as economics and money, or intangibles such as social capital and skills (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). Scarce resources can become spread especially thin for women. Men are still earning more than women in the workplace, putting additional strain on the economic resources of the single mother. Moreover, not only are the women earning less than men in the workforce, but because they also assume the large majority of childcare, women are even more financially taxed by covering those additional costs (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). Finally, women also bear the children that they care for, and as a result, miss time from work and potential earnings from that time period off as well. The economic strain on any single-parent is great, but for women, the situation is worsened by additional factors including current pay rates, costs of childcare, and maternity leave (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008).

Further to the economic strain, women, including mothers, grandmothers, and aunts, who care for children have less time for their own leisure and relaxation, which exacerbates an already stressful situation (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). As noted by Amato (2005), a stressful environment can have negative impacts on a child. The mental health of the mother figure has effects on how she parents and therefore, the overall well-being of the child.

However, controlling the elements that Amato (2005) and other researchers have noted (which arise as a consequence of being in a single-parent home) can help mediate the relationship between family structure and child well-being. Economic resources, parental socialization, and amicable family relations have all been found to support a child's well-being, even in a single-parent situation (Brown, 2010; Pong 1997). Coming from a single-parent family is half as detrimental as a decrease in family income, indicating that socioeconomic status may be the greatest mediating factor (Pong, 1997). As such, Pong (1997) establishes that it is not only the simple fact of coming from a single-parent home which leads to negative consequences, but rather, the additional consequences, such as limited time, money, and other resources, which are all detrimental to a child's well-being.

Additionally, amicable family relations and involved fatherhood have been particular areas targeted by governmental programs aimed at stabilizing marriages and consequently, improving child outcomes (Brown, 2010). These programs focus on the maintenance of the family, with the hope that a stable family will lead to better child outcomes. The policy implications question whether education programs can facilitate

healthy relationships, i.e. marriages, among populations where marriage rates tend to be low and non-marital childbearing rates tend to be high (Brown, 2010).

People who succeed in high-risk areas have attributes that allow them to succeed despite the environment that surrounds them while growing up. There are three broad categories of protective variables that have been found to promote resilience in childhood (Garmezy, 1982). The first variable is individual dispositional attributes. These include personal characteristics such as temperamental factors, social orientation, responsiveness to change, cognitive abilities, and coping skills. The second variable is familial milieu. This includes family characteristics such as a positive relationship with at least one parent/parental figure, cohesion, warmth, harmony, supervision, and the absence of neglect. The third variable is extra-familial social environment. This includes such external characteristics as the availability of external resources and extended social supports. Familial milieu is an area of a child's resilience that can be prioritized and heavily impacted by parenting. As one of the three major areas of protective variables, researching parenting should be emphasized as a priority in trying to understand the circumstances and outcomes for youth coming from a single-parent home, especially in areas with high crime rates and community violence. Other resilience measures that protect urban youth from destructive behaviors and delinquency include: academic motivation, academic competence, family structure, parent/family relationship, religiosity, and self-esteem (Stoiber & Good, 1998). These resilience factors, which were studied among urban youth in the upper Midwest, were found more frequently in resilient youth that lived with two parents. The resilient youth identified tended to have higher academic competence, intact families and were less involved in steady romantic

relationships compared to high problem behavior youth (Stoiber & Good, 1998).

Additionally, a greater percentage of the high problem adolescents reported living in single-parent or foster homes (Stoiber & Good, 1998). This Stoiber and Good study adds to the extant literature that high problem adolescents typically come from broken homes instead of a traditional two-parent stable home.

O'Brien et al (2013) was also interested in explicating the factors that draw youth towards and/or away from delinquency via gang membership as they conducted a review of studies revolving around youth gang membership. The review acknowledged that research on protective factors against gang membership is still in its infancy. However, some protective factors identified include: (1) increased parental monitoring and youth coping strategies, (2) social skills, interactions with prosocial peers, and beliefs in moral order, (3) commitment to school, attachment to teachers, and parent expectations for school, and (4) strong parental involvement and family cohesiveness (O'Brien et al., 2013). Annunziata, et al., (2005) also found that when parental monitoring (a protective strategy) was relatively high, adolescents from cohesive families were more engaged in school. This finding only related to school engagement, not performance in particular, but the encouragement of being involved in school is a positive first step.

Urban youth are inevitably more at-risk as they are more likely to be confronted by negative influences. Walker, et al., (2007) studied at-risk youth and parents in Los Angeles, California to see if there was a direct relationship between "broken families" and violent behavior. The hypothesis was that parenting characterized by warmth (family closeness and parent attachment) and control (monitoring and discipline) would be associated with lower rates of violent adolescent behavior. Instead, Walker, et al., (2007)

found that parenting styles alone did not exert any independent effects on violent behavior, but that parenting styles did interact with different races. Latinos with high reports of parental attachment had lower rates of violence while African-Americans who reported the highest degree of parental attachment also had the highest levels of violent behavior (Walker et al., 2007). Within this study, the caretakers of African-American youth were made up proportionally more of single mothers than the caretakers of Latino youth (Walker et al., 2007). This suggests that single mothers of African-Americans with a high degree of parental attachment may have trouble keeping their children from delinquency as these children had the highest levels of violent behavior.

In a similar study, Gonzales et al. (1996) examined the combined effects of parenting, family, peer, and neighborhood influences on the school performance of African-American junior high school students from diverse neighborhoods in Seattle, Washington. The parenting variables considered were maternal support and restrictive control. The family status variables considered were family income, parent's level of education, and family structure (number of parental figures in the home environment) (Gonzales et al., 1996). The study found that combined parenting variables and family status did not predict GPA. However, Gonzales et al. (1996) found that the parenting variable of maternal support had a positive effect on grades and that this positive effect is consistent with the idea that a warm, affective parent-child relationship is an important influence on academic success. Moreover, in high-risk neighborhoods, maternal restrictive control was positively associated with grades and in low-risk neighborhoods, maternal restrictive control demonstrated a strong negative causal relationship with

grades (Gonzales et al., 1996). When assessing maternal restrictive control, identifying whether the neighborhood is low-risk or at-risk is crucial.

The maternal restrictive control that works as a deterrent in at-risk, urban communities is detrimental to parenting in low-risk environments. This distinction is vital as the environment in which a child is raised may be the ultimate factor in determining which parenting strategies are effective. As such, parenting strategies should be tailored not only to individual children but the environment that the child is being raised in. Here, we are specifically looking at parenting strategies in Camden, New Jersey – an at-risk, urban community. The occurrences outlined by the participants, which may at first glance seem harsh, could be identified as reasons for the participant's success. For instance, participants said things along the lines of, "I had no friends" and "I wasn't allowed out of the house". These statements seem negative at first glance. However, with the lens of maternal restrictive control as a positive in urban environments, these statements now have a different meaning in our analysis.

Using the Chicago Longitudinal Study where 75% of participants lived in a single-parent or non-married home, Smokowski et al. (2004) examined the longitudinal relationship among childhood risk and protective factors and academic, social, and mental health outcomes in late adolescence. The probability of high school or GED completion was significantly increased by: preschool intervention, parent(s) participating in the child's early elementary school experiences, satisfactory elementary school grades, and the child's ability to be task oriented (Smokowski, et al., 2004). Parental participation in a child's school activities and participation in the Child-Parent Center in particular increased the odds of completing high school (Smokowski, et al., 2004). The

longitudinal examination demonstrated that protective factors (internal and external resources that modify or buffer the impact of risk factors) were stronger predictors of adolescent outcomes than risk factors (Smokowski, et al., 2004).

Parent and teacher expectations of students can directly impact their scholastic achievement. African-American children from low-income area of Chicago who feel that their parents expected them to do well in school score significantly higher in reading and math achievement (Gill & Reynolds, 1999). The more educated the parent, the higher the expectations will be for the child (Gill & Reynolds, 1999). Conversely, Dennis, Phinney and Chuateco (2005) found that the strongest predictor of college attendance in a longitudinal study of minority college students was personal motivation and intellectual curiosity. Family expectation and motivation were unrelated to any outcomes in this longitudinal study, which the researchers commented was a surprising finding (Dennis, et al., 2005). However, in the present study, family expectation, motivation, and encouragement were frequently cited by participants as reasons for their success.

This study will look at respondents' perceptions of how their single mothers living in impoverished and crime-ridden neighborhoods were able to counteract many of the negative outcomes outlined above. Respondents describe in their own words how their single mothers fostered their resilience while protecting them from harm. The study aims to learn if some of the commonalities in these studies such as the lack of finances and the shortage of time are interpreted more positively in the lives of the resilient youth in Camden who were interviewed as part of a larger study.

## Theoretical Framework

Although quantitative studies have advantages in analyzing relationships between variables, a qualitative study using grounded theory can show the range of parenting processes that occur in real families with a richness and depth not possible in quantitative work. Qualitative methods are ideal when the goal is to discover the emotional and social relevance of the circumstances surrounding an area of interest. With qualitative methods such as interviews, the participants themselves can describe their perception of the phenomenon being studied. Furthermore, grounded theory is most effectively used to explore understudied areas. Grounded theory is a good theoretical approach to this project because it explores an understudied area – youth’s success, resilience, and desistance from deviance while residing in extremely risky circumstances. The fact remains that far more studies have been conducted about the connections between at-risk youth, crime, and academic failure than at-risk youth’s desistance from crime and their academic success. As such, the grounded theory approach was chosen both for its ability to explain complex social phenomenon from the perspective of the participants of the research as well as to explore an understudied area (Charmaz, 2011). The larger trends found in the initial review of the research are outlined in the results section below.

With grounded theory, rigorous research and study leads to the emergence of conceptual categories. These categories are related to each other and become the theoretical explanation of the actions that answer the research question (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2011). As researchers review the data collected, repetitive ideas, concepts or elements become readily apparent and then are coded (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2011). These codings

are then grouped into higher-level analytic categories, and later, frequencies, which helps to paint an overall picture of the subsample to develop a theory. The coding schema used in this analysis is discussed in greater detail in the methods section.

A review of the success of the youth interviewed in this study is crucial as it involves two highly relevant factors in studying desistance from crime. First, the respondents live in an at-risk community in Camden, New Jersey, a city with a disproportionately high poverty, violence and drug-usage rate. In 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) estimated that Camden, New Jersey was the poorest city in the United States (U.S. Census, 2012). In 2014, the rankings calculated by CQ Press from FBI Uniform Crime Reporting 2012 data, released in Fall 2013, found that Camden, NJ had the highest crime rating of cities with populations of 75,000 to 99,999 people (CQ Press, 2014). Even more recently, the U.S. Census Bureau's ACS in 2016 found that 38.4% of the residents in Camden live in poverty (U.S. Census, 2016). Both high crime and high poverty are elements that make Camden an at-risk community.

Beyond the crime and poverty indicators, the education level of the citizens in Camden, NJ is also remarkably low with only 8.2% of its citizens earning a Bachelor's degree (U.S. Census, 2016). The public school systems in Camden are also worrisome as the New Jersey Department of Education reported the city's public schools graduation rate trend between 47 and 66%, while the New Jersey state average was 90.1% (NJ Dept. of Ed., 2016). Between the crime, poverty, and low education achievement, Camden is an at-risk community and the danger of falling into delinquency for the children who are raised here is high.

Second, family structure is a critical variable in studies of criminal justice. For these particular 45 respondents, family structure is also a risk factor. For example, as noted women who are single heads of a household have a harder time establishing an environment of control, such that the youth from these households are more likely to be delinquent (Amato, 2005; Pong, 1997). Generally, studies have found that single-mother families have led to greater school underachievement, delinquency, drug use, teenage pregnancies, poverty, and welfare dependency (Amato & Anthony, 2014; Brown, 2010; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Pong, 1997). In 2016, the U.S. Census found that 37.7% of households in Camden were single-mother households (U.S. Census, 2016). This figure is nearly triple the national average of around 13% single-mother households (U.S. Census, 2016). Theoretically, this too is a risk factor for youth.

In addition to the many community level risks in Camden such as gang activity, open air drug markets and shootings, respondents experienced many traditional Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Collectively, their risk exposure included living in close proximity to drugs, extreme poverty, substance abuse, family violence, parental incarceration, frequent residential moves, and other detrimental occurrences. The ACEs present in the subsample will be described in greater detail in the upcoming pages.

The respondents in this study are doubly at-risk first, due to the economically distressed, crime-ridden community they were raised in, and second, they were raised in single-mother households, which the extant literature says results in greater delinquency and less academic success. Thus, the guiding research question that is reviewed in this investigation pertains to perceptions of the protective strategies used within female single headed households (e.g., mothers) to keep youth in extremely at-risk areas (such as

Camden City) in school and out of trouble. More specifically, the objectives are to examine what protective factors, tactics, and behaviors may have been utilized by single mothers in Camden City that, from the youths' perspective and narratives, encouraged their academic and personal success in an at-risk environment. The themes outlined are all reoccurring examples of instances where the participant's perception of their mother's actions was identified as something that helped the participant avoid dangerous, high-risk situations and achieve higher education.

### **Research Methods**

This study utilizes secondary data. Dr. Michelle Meloy of Rutgers University-Camden directed an original study of interviews and surveys with respondents (N=160), who grew up in Camden City and went on to attend college. This was a quasi-exploratory study, as the researchers did not know what factors would be associated with their resilience, risks and their desistance from crime or deviance in this at-risk community. The questions asked in the semi-structured interview were directed questions with probes and an opportunity for open-ended discussion. The questions inquired as to the person's childhood, schooling, friends, extracurricular activities, neighborhood characteristics, family life, and many factors related to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). This was a retrospective study as interviewers were asking questions to adult respondents regarding their childhood, which may have included recent events, but also events that took place decades ago. Although the interview consisted of structured questions, participants were able to elaborate on their answers and often told stories to illustrate their points. Participants were also advised they did not have to answer any question and that they could skip question(s) if they chose.

Upon an initial review of these interviews, there was a trend of single-parent families, specifically headed by mothers. There was also specific commentary from the participants about how the mother who headed this household was instrumental in their success in an at-risk environment. The resilience of this sample is impressive because they face at least two at-risk situations – one being the single-parent household and the other being the at-risk neighborhood. Given that these respondents spoke of their single mothers as a primary source of their success rather than as a risk factor as is often indicated in extent literature, I decided to focus on this facet of the study as the topic seems in need of further exploration.

The total sample included 160 respondents 45 of whom said that they had been raised by their single mother when asked “Who raised you?” Further analysis revealed, however, that although 45 respondents viewed their mother as a single parent, four of these 45 cases included evidence that their mother was still legally married even though the father was not residing in the home or participating in the parenting of the child. In an attempt to be as precise as possible, only those cases where the respondent indicated he/she was raised by a single mother and also where that mother was not legally married or cohabitating with the father were included. Therefore, the inclusion criteria for this subsample were that the respondent was raised by a single mother who was not otherwise married or cohabitating with the father. Out of 160 total respondents, 41 met these criteria.

[See Table 1 in Appendix]

As you can see from the above tables, the subsample compares very similarly to the overall sample in terms of demographics. The male to female ratio is similar as well as the distribution among racial and ethnic groups. There is a slightly higher percentage of Hispanic/Latino respondents in the subsample with 53.7% compared to 50.0% in the CDC study. Furthermore, the African American percentage is slightly greater with 41.5% compared to 40.0% in the CDC study. Lastly, the mean age is comparable with the CDC study's mean age at 30.99 years old and the subsample's at 29.12 years old. The two populations compare almost equally.

With regard to the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Table 2 (below) shows the responses from the semi-structured interview guide that contained questions about many traditional ACEs and other risk factors that could potentially be present in the respondent's childhood and adolescence such as their exposure to community violence. The table includes a comparison to the total data set of the CDC study. All of the respondents in the subsample (100%) reported parental separation or divorce (i.e., inclusion criteria was single motherhood). Household separation may include those parents who have never lived together, those who have lived together and are now separated, and parents who were once married and then divorced. In addition to the household separation or divorce, 82.9% reported having an incarcerated household member with 70.7% also reporting household substance abuse. Though the entire subsample was exposed to at least one adverse childhood experience due to the parental separation or divorce, 14.6% of the subsample reported 2 ACEs, 31.7% reported 3 ACEs, and finally 46.4% reported 4 or more ACEs.

[See Table 2 in Appendix]

As you can see, the respondents in the subsample experienced an abundance of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) including dangers that are outside the range of what is usually measured in the extant literature, such as community violence, close proximity to drugs, and gangs. The exposure to these risks and challenges is likely to have heightened the importance of single-mother parenting on the respondents' successes in desisting from crime and achieving academic success. The following excerpts include qualitative examples of respondents sharing examples of the community violence and other Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) they witnessed while growing up in Camden.

For example, Sean<sup>1</sup>, a 39-year old Hispanic male describes an experience with community violence that he had when he was a teenager. Sean reported that while walking down the street from his house, he witnessed a shooting victim. Apparently, the offender became jealous of his girlfriend's attention toward the male victim, so he shot him. Here is the event as described by Sean.

Sean: ...we go half a block up the street and here's this poor kid's laying in front of a house, shot.

Interviewer: Wow

Sean: ...a girlfriend had her boyfriend over [to the house]. She was sitting in his lap. This [other] boy comes over, and she checks him out. She thinks he's cute.

Interviewer: Right

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<sup>1</sup> All participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms. The purpose of this change is to protect the participants' anonymity and privacy.

Sean: Her boyfriend tells her, 'if you do that again, I'm going to shoot him.' She goes, 'You won't do that.' So the boyfriend gets up, grabs a shotgun out of his car, and blows a hole in his [male that was walking by the house] chest.

Another example of an adverse childhood experiences is an incarcerated family member. Tanya, a 23-year old African-American female explains her exposure to this condition,

Interviewer: did anyone in your immediate family get arrested or go to jail or prison?

Tanya: My dad.

Interviewer: for what?

Tanya: Domestic violence, DUI's, fighting cops.

Along with incarceration, witnessing domestic violence can be traumatic as well. Stacy, a 20-year old Hispanic female explains the domestic violence by her father prior to her parents' separation. This is how Stacy responds to the question about whether there was any domestic abuse in her home,

“Especially my mother, when me and my brother was smaller like he [father] would beat my mom for nonsense. A lot of times, if my mom didn't cook or if my mom was late getting home, my dad would just physically assault her.”

These types of stories and risks are among the challenges of growing up in Camden, New Jersey. Challenges of poverty, household incarceration, parental separation, and violence increase the importance of quality parenting, and more specifically, single-mother parenting in this community. Effective parenting in Camden,

New Jersey likely has a greater positive influence on the participant's deviation away from crime in an at-risk community as well as their successes in an academic sense.

The interviews for the 41 respondents in the subsample were then analyzed further for overall themes, similarities, and differences. The data for the themes was coded using NVivo 11 data management and analysis software. The data collection and analysis procedures were meant to extract meaning and commonalities from the information gathered, making sense of the phenomenon of youth shifting into higher education despite two circumstances that often deter youth from success.

Grounded theory argues that the coding should emerge from the data itself, not from any preconceived theory (Bringer et al., 2006; Holton 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Though reading was done prior to the evaluation of the interviews, the literature review did not fully form any theories to test in this study. Instead, the interviews were read multiple times, in depth, and reviewed line-by-line for similarities and differences between participants. The coding process in grounded theory is defined by grouping together similar stories in the data to form themes and later, concepts and categories (Bringer et al, 2006). Charmaz (2014) indicates that focused coding can take place after themes begin to continually reappear during reading.

The coding began with an overall reading of these data to generate ideas. Memo-writing is a part of the grounded theory process by which a written record is made of themes, categories, and theory development. As such, copious notes were taken on the identified similarities and differences by using an open coding process before the line-by-line coding process began (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). With open coding,

the data was reviewed several times. Tentative labels were created in the Memo feature of NVivo. These memos summarized what was happening within these data, though not based on any existing theory, to create themes for the data. As reading of the interviews continued, ideas for coding were linked to existing memos to consolidate the evidence behind creating a theme.

After review of the memos, themes were identified by the ideas and examples linked to the memos. Once themes were identified, the data was re-reviewed and coded with a line-by-line coding process in NVivo with the identified reoccurring themes. This process continued until the point of saturation was achieved. Briefly stated, saturation occurs when reading the data no longer provides any new theoretical insights or reveals any new properties of the themes that have already emerged (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After re-reviewing the data multiple times and concluding that all stories and details regarding the participant's single mother had been exhausted, coding was concluded.

After the final coding, the codes that related to a common theme are grouped together and identified as a category (Allan, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For instance, the codes "mother kept respondent in the house" and "mother accompanied respondent everywhere" were grouped into the same category of "restrictive parenting." These categories are analytic as opposed to descriptive; they do not simply describe the event but interpret what the occurrence is actually related to (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, these categories are then analyzed for deeper meaning as they relate to the theory building behind the single mothers that have enabled their children to desist from crime in an at-risk community and find success academically.

## Results

The coding was undertaken with the goal of distilling the retrospective perceptions of respondents' youth from Camden without losing their original voice. The intent of the format of the interviews was to maintain a rich narrative and the quotes used below help to illuminate the themes that were coded.

### **Restrictive Parenting**

The qualitative accounts researched in this study identify specific parenting strategies that protect children from the dangers of the neighborhood. The first strategy is that of parental monitoring or supervision, which reflects the mother's efforts to limit her children's potential exposure to the larger influences of the at-risk neighborhood. Twenty-eight out of the 41 participants in the subsample (68.29%) noted instances of restrictive parenting, which included isolation of the child and chaperonage.

Isolation of the child is used to separate the child from negative adult and peer influences in the neighborhood (Jarrett, 1995). In at-risk neighborhoods the most extreme form of isolation is used: keeping children confined to the household. However, physical confinement to the household may be impractical, especially as children age and begin to regularly leave the household to attend school. Thus, this strategy is used more commonly with younger children.

Frequently, the isolation of the child is more subtle than complete confinement to the household. A mother may discourage her children from playing with peers who she deems dangerous or a bad influence. Alternatively, the mother may create her own groups of children for her child to play with, including their siblings.

A similar strategy is that of chaperonage. A mother will accompany her child around the at-risk neighborhood, to school and other places (Jarrett, 1995). By constantly staying with the child, the mother is able to control the negative neighborhood influences on the child. The strategies of isolation and chaperonage are known together as forms of restrictive parenting. Below are some examples, in the participant's own words, of restrictive parenting.

Julia, a 26-year old Hispanic female, lived in a row home with just her mother. Despite the fights and yelling that regularly occurred outside her home, her mother was able to shield her from being exposed to that environment. Julia explains how her mother was extremely overprotective and how her view on this overprotectiveness changed as she got older,

“I didn't play outside a lot and my mom didn't really want me to. Like I said, my mom sheltered me from a lot and she didn't want me to come across things. I still remember I use to resent her a little bit for it, like I would be sitting in my bedroom and I could see the kids playing in the pool in the backyard and I couldn't go. But now that I'm older, I understand why.”

Eventually Julia and her mother ended up in college together. The above quote illustrates Julia's growth in understanding why her mother tried to keep her from seeing certain things in the community. Given the risks associated with where she lived, the avoidance of socialization with others in the community also served as a deterrent from getting involved with the delinquent groups she saw in the neighborhood.

Tony, a 19-year old Hispanic male, spoke about his father's drug dealing which kept his family on the run when Tony was young. After Tony's father was deported, his mother

bought a hair salon to help support the family. His mother's rules are described below, which stated that he had to stay close to home in order to stay out of trouble.

“I could not cross the corner. I couldn't pass the corner like if I was riding bikes, I would go from corner to corner. And if I went anywhere farther then that then I would probably get my ass whooped.”

Tony learned how to follow these rules, even when his mother was taking night classes to learn cosmetology. He followed the outline his mother set, and expected his three younger siblings to do the same. Eventually his mother's business was successful enough to establish some stability in the home after being on the run.

Brian, a 39-year old Hispanic male, describes his mother's belief in sheltering him from the outside world. His father was “out of the picture” as he calls it. He explains that his father loved cigarettes and beer, which led to a tumultuous relationship with his mother that eventually ended. Here, he explains his mother's disciplinary tactics to keep him and his siblings on the right track,

Brian: My mom brought me up in a sheltered world. Um we weren't allowed to go anywhere. Put it this way, I mean I didn't get to see a movie until I got into college...That's how mom managed to get us past all that. It was major lockdown over there....We didn't know anything outside our doors. We knew home and work...My mom's rules were ‘you live here, nobody else does.’ Therefore, you're the only one would can walk through that door...At school you know you can talk to whoever you want. Come 4 o'clock, your ass better be home.

Interviewer: Wow, um the next set of questions kind of deal uh with your, your friends. Did your parents know um who your friends were?

Brian: No because I didn't have any...My mom was very strict, we weren't allowed to go out. The first time I went to a movie was when I was in college. The first time I had friends that I could actually hang out with, was when I was in college...you come home, you sit down you do your homework, you do your chores, and go to sleep. Bed by 8:30. And I'm glad she did. Again, **otherwise I'd**

**be either using drugs, in jail, or dead** [emphasis added]. Again, we were secluded. My mom did a good job at protecting us from the outside world.

The discipline described in this interview was to a level of intensity where Brian did not have any friends. His mother believed that keeping him on lockdown would minimize the chances of exposure to drugs, gangs, and other bad influences that were to be found in the local parks or on the corner. While the lack of friends may seem to be a negative in other communities, we can understand how Brian's seclusion from the outside world likely protected him from the dangers of the community. He described it best in his own words – "otherwise I'd be either using drugs, in jail, or dead".

Rachel, 45-year old Hispanic female, shared details of her life growing up in Camden with six brothers and sisters, and a single mother. Her father was remarried and moved to Puerto Rico. She claims that her mother should get an "award" for raising seven kids alone in Camden and not one of them has any criminal history or drug use, and all are employed. With regard to her mother's parenting style, she explains how she was never allowed outside. Her description shows how her mother used chaperonage as a tactic to keep her safe:

Rachel: The way that we were raised, we didn't see night fall. We were in the house. We weren't allowed to go outside

Interviewer: At all or just at night?

Rachel: At all! Mainly at night but we had to go to school so of course we got to go out. And another thing my mom did was she walked us everywhere we needed to go. What mom does that? I mean she was overprotective, walked us. Um, which I used to think was crazy like, "Can I walk by myself please?"

Rachel's embarrassment at being chaperoned everywhere by her mother is palpable.

Every child reaches a point where he or she believes that he or she is old enough to do things by themselves and doesn't need the supervision of a parent any longer. Usually

this is merely a source of embarrassment for a child. In a community like Camden, however, this chaperonage may have changed the course of a child's life in a very positive way.

The restrictive parenting referenced in the participant's interviews exhibited itself by these single mothers exerting control with physical restrictions on where the participant was allowed to spend his or her time. This control manifesting itself in multiple ways including curfews, restricting the child to "the stoop," or only allowing the child to play in their own backyard.

As these quotes demonstrate, overprotective, restrictive parenting was an effective way of keeping the participants away from high-risk activities. As Brian noted above, with the advantage of reflection and introspection, the respondents now appreciate that without this discipline, there is a high probability that they would be in jail, using drugs, or deceased. These are harsh realities to face and the mothers that utilized the tactic of restrictive parenting were cognizant of these risks. The mothers described above kept their children within a close distance of their home, limited exposure to dangerous situations by accompanying him or her around Camden, and created an aura of discipline that kept the participants on the straight and narrow.

### **Educational Encouragement and Support**

Educational encouragement and support manifested itself when the single mothers pushed the child to do his or her homework, rewarded him or her for grades, or created the perception that the child had no choice, but to go to college. Twenty-seven out of the

41 participants in the subsample (65.85%), noted instances of their single mothers making education a priority.

Michael, a 26-year old Hispanic male, explained that his mother grew up in Camden and wanted him to break this cycle as she wished for better things for him. Michael had other family members who were incarcerated and relayed his disgust with their life choices. From his perception of his mother, Michael explains the lack of choice regarding education as his only life choice.

“My mother always stressed to me that it was important and that she didn’t want me to be like her [with limited options]. So, it was very important for me to go to school. It wasn’t just an idea; it was something that needed to happen.”

Here, Michael defines a key element to his mother’s parenting -- the belief that attending college was mandatory. This idea, put into a child’s head at an early age and repeatedly, can metamorphose into a necessity as the child becomes older.

Kathy, a 24-year old African-American female had a son at an early age. Kathy’s mother helped her attend college while she was working to raise her son at age 19. Kathy explained how she developed her reading and studying habits as she was growing up,

Interviewer: Did you spend any time studying when you were growing up?

Kathy: Yes, I was really into school because it was really nothing else for me to do. My mom said I couldn’t go outside, she would always make me read in the summer. I would have to read at least one book a week and I would have to tell her what it was about.

It was mainly my mom who wanted me to go to college. At first, I did want to go to college, but then I got pregnant and I just felt like everything changed. But my mom was the one that was like, ‘Look at me. I worked two jobs since you were all

born. You don't want to have to work two jobs. You have to go to school and get an education, so you can work one job, a really good job and retire.' She is like, 'I'm going to have to work for the rest of my life, you don't want to have to do that. You want to have a good life. Now that you are having a baby it's not about you anymore but what you do now is for your son.' So, when you [her mother] put it like that, I have to do better.

These words of wisdom, along with her reading habits created early, allowed Kathy to complete school. By pushing her daughter, even when she had a baby on the way, Kathy's mother was able to help her succeed academically.

Noah, a 32-year old African-American male, has two older siblings and has never met his father. He spoke about his closeness to his mother and his siblings as they fought to survive the rough Camden environment together. The reality of their neighborhood included the omnipresence of drugs and prostitution. Despite the often chaotic circumstances around them, his mother always prioritized his education. Here Noah describes his mother's belief in education and how that has impacted him:

Interviewer: What kind of books? Or just reading in general, any or anything?

Noah: Anything I could get my hands on.

Interviewer: Ok. Where did you get the books?

Noah: My mother.

Interviewer: Ok. She encouraged it?

Noah: My mother encouraged it... her biggest thing, her mainstay was education. She went to college she graduated with a two-year degree from Temple University, she studied child psychology. She was very adamant about our studies.

My mother was always the reason I did what I did in school. To date, I have never been less than A... my lowest may have been a 3.8. Graduated cum laude at A level, the works. But here is the deal - for me I always wanted to make my mother happy and as a child her mainstay was education. Ergo I needed to bring home

those grades. We didn't grow up getting money for an A or anything like that. It was just I remember emphatically what my mother's face would look like when she would look at a report card. So old habits are hard to break and by the time I got to college as long as I could still get that one look on her face that is what really mattered to me. There were times that I had seen things and dealt with things that almost derailed me from the things that I was able to accomplish in life. And if it wasn't for my mother's words, and her putting her foot up my ass then no I wouldn't have accomplished anything.

Interviewer: And she had what kind of impact on your education or your decision to attend college?

Noah: Everything. She told me if I don't go to college she would kill me.

Interviewer: And you believed her?

Noah: Yes. She was the hulk.

Noah's description of his mother as "the hulk" is a comedic reference to her intimidating posture in his life. The deeper relevance of the statement reveals his mother's prioritization of education and her regimental tactics were extremely effective with Noah. Furthermore, his mother's rules clearly served as a protective measure for Noah as well based on his statement about his potential derailment off course. This deference to his mother is the reason he stayed on track and avoided the drugs, violence, and other risks Noah described in his neighborhood.

Krystina, a 32-year old African-American female, talked a lot about her single mother and noted that as a child her parents never lived together. She had a realization as she got older that she could have used a father but was grateful to her mother for the opportunities she gave her. Here, she describes her mother's insistence that she finish school despite having a child,

Krystina: When I got pregnant she was like, ‘You’re finishing school. ...You’re going to finish school. Like that, ‘YOU’RE GOING TO FINISH!’ (emphasis original)...It was partly because she didn’t finish [school]...

Interviewer: Right.

Krystina: She had my sister, and, she then she started working. She never went back to finish. So, it was like ‘I didn’t finish, so YOU’RE GOING TO FINISH!’ (emphasis original) So (quitting school)...

Interviewer: Wasn’t an option...

Krystina: Was **not** an option.

Here, again, we see a mother who did not meet her own educational goals but was constantly encouraging her daughter to do so. With Krystina, and many others, getting a good education was a necessity driven by their single mothers, not a choice.

These quotes most prominently identify parenting behaviors that specifically facilitate the educational development of young children in an at-risk community. The single mothers created an environment at home which encouraged education, bolstering what teachers at school expected from the children (Jarrett, 1995; Jarrett, 1997). The single mothers might help the child with his or her homework, or reward the child for good grades. In addition, some single mothers created the perception that there was no alternative for the child other than to go to school and later onto college.

### **Emotionally Supportive and Encouraging**

Emotionally supportive and encouraging behaviors manifested itself when the participant’s feeling toward their mother in this theme indicated that she was emotionally supportive and encouraging in the child’s journey to higher education. This theme

manifested itself when the participant recalled that she was “always there for me” and “available,” encouraging them to be better than their surroundings, as well as lifting the participant’s spirits in times of doubt. Twenty-five out of the 41 participants in the subsample (60.98%) recalled moments when their mother was emotionally supportive and encouraging in the participant’s pursuits.

Joe, a 20-year old African-American male, grew up in an apartment complex in Camden with his mother and his two siblings. Eventually he attended a creative arts school in Camden. He shared examples of his mother’s emotional support throughout his life,

“She was always supportive, always a nurturer, always picked me up when I was down. She loved me when I didn’t love myself.”

Joe reflected on his struggles, growing up in an impoverished area, coming to terms with his sexuality, and adapting to new schools and friends. In an environment where children may encounter negatives in their everyday lives, the support of a mother to “pick him up” when he was struggling, seemed essential. This type of maternal support may be helpful in stopping a child from getting dragged down into the negativity of an at-risk environment.

Sophia, a 20-year old Hispanic female, moved from Jersey City to Camden after her mother and father separated. Sophia emphasizes throughout her interview that although there was a void to in her life due to the absence of her father, her mother has always been a support system.

“I’ve always have my mom. She’s always been a really big support system for me...My mom, I can talk to her about... I can literally talk to my mom for hours

at a time, even though the most I've ever gone without seeing my mom is like two or three days. Every other day I see my mom, I talk to her as if I didn't see her in like 3 years because I just tell her everything. I'm so comfortable with my mom. I just tell her everything."

The emotional closeness described here between Sophia and her mother was powerful and encouraged her forward and met her emotional needs despite not having her father in the home.

Steven, a 29-year old Hispanic male, grew up near the waterfront in North Camden with his mother and two brothers. He stated that the only male "role models" he saw in his world were gang members. Thus, similar to Sophia, the love and support of his single mother was especially necessary to his resilience and pathway to college,

"Besides the worship of my Lord and the caring of my son, she's [his single mother] the reason I breathe...She has raised three boys. It was very challenging for her....In our neighborhood, you would see things that you wouldn't necessarily see in other households. She would always give us advice on the "good" and the "bad." She was very supportive...I never...never in my life felt rejected, disapproved, disliked, abused, neglected, ever. My mother has always told me how much she loves me, how handsome I (laughing)...So, I had a very supportive household. Although with just one (parent), she was enough for everybody. Yes."

The idea that a single mother of three male adolescents growing up in a crime ridden city "was enough for everybody" may be surprising to some as children demand large amounts of attention even without the added element of an at-risk community. Clearly, the level of emotional engagement, support and connection between Steven and his mother must have been strong to push back against the strains and struggles of his childhood such as gang members as the only "role models" Steven can recall from that time in his life.

Nicole, a 30-year old white female, grew up in the Fairview section of Camden in a single-family home with her mother. She describes the neighborhood as going steadily downhill as she recalled an ever-growing presence of drugs and crime near her family home. Still, she became emotional when talking about her mother's support despite juggling multiple jobs.

Nicole: All three jobs were flexible, so that she —she never missed, ya know, an important baseball game, or a school play, or anything like that. She was always there for me.

Interviewer: Oh wow. Amazing. So, she was—do you think she was supportive, nurturing, anything like that?

Nicole: Oh god, yes. Yep.

Interviewer: Um, did you uh—do you think she gave you the support and guidance you need to live the li—to become the woman you are today, like going to college, and everything else.

Nicole: Oh yeah. She—she paved the way for me to be, ya know, the person I am today. If I'm half the mom she was, I'm doin' alright. So—sorry [sniffing].

Interviewer: No, you're fine.

Nicole: It's an emotional interview. She...gave my life structure and ya know, she...made it...ya know, great. Like, I didn't—I didn't really care that my dad wasn't around. She fulfilled that role and everything like that. And if I didn't have that structure and that push to succeed, and push to get, ya know, have a better life that she was trying to provide for us. Like, if she didn't give me that example, I couldn't tell you where I'd be right now.

Nicole again highlights the fact that she felt her mother was able to fill the role that her father left behind. She brings up the idea that even with only one parent, her mother found a way to be at all of her activities and provide an example of how to succeed in life. This support was said to be very important to Nicole's resilience and academic success.

This theme of deep and unconditional emotional support is especially remarkable considering that a single mother is singlehandedly responsible for the child's well-being. Although the mother may have received help in some form or another, these single mothers were single-handedly responsible for parenting the child, making him or her feel loved and supported.

### **Financial Security**

In addition to parental monitoring or restrictive parenting strategies, which protect the child from the dangers of the neighborhood, the mothers also must provide resources for the child to be successful – financial or otherwise. Financial security was noted when participants recalled that their single mother worked multiple jobs or made other types of contributions to help pay for items the participant needed, such as food and books. Twenty-two out of 41 participants in the subsample (53.66%) noted that his or her single mother took these types of actions to ensure financial security.

Tara, a 21-year old African American female, lived with her mother and two siblings in an attached rowhome in Camden. Her mother worked many overnight shifts during which she and her siblings would take care of each other. Tara explained how she could focus on her academics because her mother never asked that she get a job.

“I never worked. I never had to work through like high school and like at all. People got like jobs at 16, I was never that kind. I never had to. And like my mom wanted me to focus more on my grades, my academics. So I only worked during the summer time. Like little summer jobs and stuff.”

Although this is not a possibility for many in Camden, this type of financial security allows students in low-income areas to truly focus on their education. Here, Tara's mother puts emphasis on two techniques to allow her to succeed – financial security and educational encouragement. This combination may have allowed Tara to escape delinquency in an at-risk community.

Amy, a 32-year old African-American female, describes how much of her nuclear family has used or is actively using drugs. In stark contrast to the drug-riddled lives of her extended family members, Amy instead describes having music lessons and participating in summer camps. Amy recognizes that her mother's hard work allowed them to have opportunities that others in the community did not have,

“So, yeah, a single-parent home. At different points in time I know my mom had to work two jobs, you know, to support us. You know, we... I feel blessed because ... my mother ensured that we had a lot of opportunities that I don't think a lot of other young people who grow up in these types of neighborhoods get an opportunity to get exposed to.”

Again, this financial support combined with another tactic, enrollment in activities, allows children from an at-risk community to be exposed to a world outside of the crime that resides in their neighborhoods. Amy recognizes the availability of these opportunities to her, which were not available to others.

Daniel, a 39-year old Hispanic male, explains that his father was out of the picture early on. He and his mother moved around a lot due to her still having family in Puerto Rico. At times, they would go back to visit. Despite this instability, he explains how she always took care of him,

Interviewer: At any point during your upbringing, did you, was there ever a time that you were hungry because there wasn't food in the house?

Daniel: I wouldn't say me, no, but my mom, yes. There were times when she would feed us rather than feed herself.

This story of sacrifice is noteworthy. The fact that Daniel's mother would go hungry in order to make sure her children were taken care of is remarkable. Children can suffer when there are not enough resources in a household, but here, Daniel's mother made sure that was not the case.

Jose, a 32-year old Hispanic male, relayed how his father was in jail for most of his life and had children with women other than his mother. He describes himself as the opposite of his father as he is there for his daughter and has never been to jail. Jose explained how his mother made sure he was cared for:

Interviewer: Ok, and how did your mom help you? I know we talked a little bit about that before, but if you...?

Jose: Just her presence. Just seeing her work every day. Working her tail off to, well,... We didn't need anything. We never needed sneakers. We never needed coats. We never ... The lights were always on and we always had food. Just seeing her work so hard for us to not need anything.

Interviewer: She was a good provider?

Jose: Yeah.

Interviewer: She looked out for you?

Jose: Yeah.

Interviewer: Made sure.

Jose: Made sure our cousins were there to, you know, (look after us). She had to work two jobs at night. She made sure our uncle was there or, you know, our cousins were there to make sure they were taking care of us...that we weren't there by ourselves.

Jose describes another scenario where a single mother worked two jobs to make sure her kids were cared for. He describes several important points here: she had more than one job, how hard working she was, as well as the fact that she took pains to make sure the kids were looked after and not left alone.

Respondents in this sub-sampled described single mothers who did whatever was necessary to make ends meet. These sacrifices manifested in multiple jobs or putting the child's needs as a priority over things for themselves, whether that be food, education, or new clothes.

### **Engaged with Schooling**

Engagement with schooling was marked by the participant's recollection of his or her mother helping with homework, checking in on how school was going, meeting with school teachers or counselors, or attendance at other school activities. Thirteen out of 41 participants in the subsample (31.71%) remembered points in time where their mother was engaged with their schooling while they were growing up.

Eric, a 28-year old African American male, grew up in a townhome in Camden with his mother. He described his uncles as being involved in local drug dealing and other crimes. He explained how his mother was involved with his educational pursuits, specifically how she took him out of the (traditional – feeder) public school system and was involved with his activities in school,

“My mother—my mother was, she was like the general. She's just like kept me, if I got in trouble in school she was there, you know. She disciplined me she talked to me, she was just always in my ear about you know, doing the right thing and doing what I had to do. She has kept me on that path. She-- she made it a point to

put me in (a charter school). She was a really-- really involved parent to the point where she actually ran my campaign. When I ran for school (politics)—school (politics) in (redacted) grade, and I won.”

Here, Eric describes involvement in school in several capacities. His mother disciplined him, took him out of the public school system, and encouraged him by helping him stay involved in school activities. These behaviors all combined helped Eric to stay on the right path despite the fact that there were those in his family who were involved in crime.

Tiana, a 25-year old African-American female, lived with her mother and her two siblings who were “thick as thieves”. She described her childhood as loving as she and her siblings would fight but all come together at the end of the day. Tiana explained her mother’s views on the value of education as well as her mother helping her with her homework,

Interviewer: When you were doing your homework who would help you?

Tiana: My mother. She was very disciplined. She was a no-nonsense woman. When you came home there was no TV. Ok you came home whatever time it was and we all had to go to the table and it created a lot of time for us to bond. And my mom she was good at screening the nonsense in the world as she would say. So, I grew up with the best childhood. Bar none. I would come home and I would sit at the table and books out, bam. So, we are doing homework and we would always smell dinner.

The description of the after-school routine is touching. The scene is idyllic although it takes place in Camden, New Jersey, defying the stereotypical assumptions many people have about family life in an economically distressed community. The scene of all siblings sitting down to the table to complete their homework while their mother cooks dinner is the epitome of a middle-class child’s after-school routine. This scene is not what observers might expect in a single-mother household within an economically

distressed community with high crime rates and assumptions about the chaotic or disengaged parenting versus the overinvolved and highly structured middle class parenting we typically expect. Providing this scene for her children in an environment where risk factors are prevalent in the community is impressive.

Christopher, an 18-year old African-American male, explained that his father had a few children with women other than his mother. He describes the time after their divorce as chaotic. Despite this, his mother made a very specific school choice,

“Yes, well uh my ma said-she just told me cus I was going to Sharp at the time because my previous elementary school didn’t go to 5<sup>th</sup> grade and she was like, “Oh I applied for you to go to school, I think you’re gonna like it. It’s from 8 to 4.” My face dropped. I was like “What? It doesn’t end at 2:55 like my other school? What are you talking about 4 o’clock?” And she was like, “The bus is gonna pick you up.” ‘You not gonna drive me to school anymore??’ It was like a culture shock when she told me that she was applying—but then she said, “Well you’re not actually in it yet, you have to get in it by a lottery.” I’m like, “Lottery, what do you mean? Like isn’t it a public school?” She’s like, “Yes but they get so many applicants that, you’ll be lucky to get in.” I’m like, “Can I be lucky not to get in?” [laughter] and unfortunately I got it.”

We can see that Christopher did not want to go to this school at first. However, his mother’s time and energy in making this choice, despite his objections, may have enabled him to avoid delinquency and the other risk factors in the community.

Taylor, a 21-year old African American female, eventually ended up going to the Medical Arts High School. She relayed how her sister also went to a charter school and explains her mother’s influence on her education,

“My mom for the most part helped me with my homework and stuff. Where I’m at and stuff like with the college process, with the applications and stuff. Um takin’ me to college fairs.”

This encouragement with applications and college fairs is crucial to a student growing up in Camden. Without exposure to colleges or exposure to the process of applying to colleges these children may not have made it out of the at-risk community, especially when their parents were not highly educated themselves.

These quotes illustrate the intense involvement that these single mothers had with their child's schooling. The participants make it clear that education was not only a priority, but that their mothers wanted to ensure the schoolwork was being done.

### **Enrollment in Activities**

Participants recalled enrollment in local activities as a deterrent to delinquency. In these cases, the mother would enroll the participant in local sports, activities or clubs. Examples included Big Brother, Big Sister, Little League baseball, after school programs, or local library programs. Eleven out of 41 participants in the subsample (26.83%) noted instances in which their single mother made them participate in local activities as a means of staying out of trouble.

Carlos, a 19-year old Hispanic male, grew up on the east side of Camden, which he considered not as bad as some other areas. He describes his mother's general support of him and his siblings, despite a father who was heavily involved in drugs. Here, he specifically shares how his mother pushed him to stay involved with baseball.,

“My mother was a very supportive mother...I remember at one point I wanted to just quit baseball forever. Mind you, baseball was something that I saw as my outlet to everything. I just wanted to quit because people were horrible and making fun of me and bullying me. And telling me that I suck. It was at every practice. I left and started crying. She (mom) told me not to quit. She would take me to practice, even if I cried and just leave me there. At one point that taught me

that sometimes things aren't going to come your way and you just have to either get better or deal with it. You know, and I got better. And that is when people started respecting me in the game of baseball. Like out here people started respecting me because I wasn't a bad player, you know, I was short standing up to 5 foot 3 and you know I was batting 485 in high school. I was a top 25 batter in South Jersey for a while. And then I went and played in the all-star game for South Jersey and it was just, you know, she was just one of the people who pushed me to do everything."

This encouragement to persevere even when he failed is an important lesson for a child to learn. Perhaps in another case, a mother would have let her son fall by the wayside and quit baseball when they protested. However, in a community such as Camden, it was a tactic used to keep her son focused and involved in a positive activity.

Gabby, a 32-year old African-American female, grew up in a duplex with her mother and siblings. She explained how some of her family members got involved with crime in the area and are currently incarcerated. In contrast to this, she also shared how her mother kept her and her siblings busy through extracurricular activities,

"Like, we... my mother gave us all music lessons...Cause we all play instruments. You know, I... we were always in extracurricular activities. During a summer, we were always in something. You know, we weren't just allowed to just-just not do anything. So, it was always some type of program, you know, enrichment, you know, something along those lines. So, you know, I'm grateful that I had those opportunities, that I got exposed to..."

The gratitude expressed by Gabby is reflective of a positive attitude instilled by her mother. The exposure to different types of activities is a way to keep children busy and out of trouble. Gabby recognizes that these activities gave her an outlet to explore other opportunities.

William, a 20-year old Hispanic male, estimates that he, his mother, and his brother

moved around every three years or so. During this time, his father was in and out of jail due to his drug addiction. Here, he explains his mother's support of his baseball career.

“She was always, like, if I wanted to get involved in something, she would be 100% behind me, no matter what. Like, if I wanted—when I started playing baseball, she got my equipment, she did all that. Like, when I wanted to—when I didn't like my summer program, she was like behind me 100%. Sending me off on trains, planes, and all of that.”

Once again, William's mother also combined tactics here, using her financial security and encouragement to allow her son to participate in different activities. If his mother would have denied him these opportunities, he may have fallen into delinquency.

Ana, a 40-year old Hispanic female, grew up with several brothers and sisters. She relayed stories of them sharing shoes and clothes and the activity in a house with multiple children. She also explained her mother's enrollment in summer activities,

“It was like a camp, you know, you did the basketball, you did the swimming, you had your free lunch, you had um you know life skills, things going on throughout the two months that you were there, you go on trips, and that was fun. Yup. And my mom made sure that we were involved with them as well.”

Here, the enrollment in activities was both fun and educational. Life skills are important to learn as well, which were taught during summer camp. Enrolling her children in a program kept them moving in a positive direction.

### **Resourcefulness**

The qualitative accounts in this research reveal that single mothers of successful children have made use of opportunities available to them despite the lack of resources available in an at-risk community. Similar to financial security, resourcefulness was the indication that the mothers used all resources available to them in order to help the

participants and give them the best chance at success. Instances of this included working in the private school cafeteria to pay tuition, researching donations from the local church, and getting the child what he or she needed by alternative means, such as sewing or mending their own clothes, rather than buying new ones. Seven out of 41 participants in the subsample (17.01%) recalled instances of resourcefulness by his or her mother.

Other examples of these resources may include churches, community centers, working multiple jobs, or placing their children in private schools to enhance the chances of their success. Furthermore, some made use of resources located outside of Camden City, including those available to relatives who lived in higher income suburbs. With these resources, the mother was able to expose the child to alternative lifestyles and pathways.

James, a 19-year old Hispanic male, moved from Jersey City to Camden when he was in elementary school. He and his mother moved for financial reasons as Camden was seen as more affordable than Jersey City. He explained how his mother utilized local resources despite a lack of finances.

“Like a lot of our ...like we were lucky like cause we always had school you know how the school had the jacket drives? My mom would be right up in that jacket drive like, “Hey we need jackets”, like my mom was humble, she didn’t let the pride get in her way and she didn’t let pride get in our way.”

James’s description of his mother’s humility is humbling in and of itself. To allow herself not to be put off by her own pride, his mother was able to make sure James was warm in the winter and had the clothes he needed.

Maya, a 45-year old African-American female, got her first job at age twelve at a factory

in Camden. At times, the electricity, lights, or air conditioning would be off because they could not afford to keep them on. She recalls the stuffiness of all living in one room.

Here, she relays her mother's hard work when she was a child to put food on the table,

“Just growing up sometimes, you know, with trying to make ends meet and as a child noticing that and feeling like, oh wow, you know, mom had to go in the kitchen and make a meal out of flour and water. You know what I'm saying? 'Cause at times ends didn't meet, um, you know? Remembering taking the book of food stamps, going to the corner store. Mom wouldn't come in 'til 10-11 o'clock at night cause she worked 2 and 3 jobs.”

Maya's recollection of meals made from “flour and water” is salient. She also did not have the financial resources to buy the food outright as we can tell by the use of food stamps. Having the ability to make a meal, presumably from nothing, is a skill necessary when you do not have the resources to buy food on a regular basis.

Martin, a 39-year old Hispanic male, communicated his frequent movement from block to block for financial reasons. Martin hated these frequent moves as it was chaotic and unsettling. Here, he explains his mother's ability to get him and his family through tough times,

“My mother was a street survivor. And regardless of what we went through, she never left us. And we may didn't have a four-course meals but Mommy always made rice. Yes, we always had at least rice and eggs. Yes, I ate so much that my face became puffy (laughing). We shared each other's clothes. And being the youngest, some clothes were a little bigger but my mom had a way of sewing things, and she was somewhat of a tailor. Yes.”

His mother's ability to keep the family going, through her cooking and her ability to extend the utility of the clothes that they did have is important. This ability to stretch resources and reuse the resources available to the family is a skill utilized to make sure children are cared for.

Emily, a 45-year old Hispanic female, communicated how she saw many people in Camden take the “not right” path. She believes that as a Camden resident, ninety percent of your outcome is due to your upbringing. She explained how her mother brought them up right and utilized the community resources,

“She definitely did something right. And with that I wanna say um, I think that it all had to do with being grounded. My mom actually being there in whatever capacity that she could. We didn’t have the best of things. Many times she utilized community resources such as the churches, um and other places, shelters, Goodwill, and things of that nature so that she could get us what she could, meaning clothes and food. So, again I don’t know how she did it but she managed and she did pretty well.”

Emily’s mother was able to tap into the local resources to help supplement the necessities of her children. The fact that Emily says “she did pretty well” is notable. She was able to garner enough resources such that her children did not feel neglected or uncared for.

The resourcefulness of these single mothers addresses many issues that people of a higher socioeconomic status do not have to deal with. For instance, making sure the food doesn’t spoil in the refrigerator or sewing and mending clothes are all ways to stretch what few material items one may have. These quotes highlight the ability of these single mothers to recognize what resources were available to them and how to take advantage of them.

### **Discussion**

The tactics used by single mothers to engage their children and help them survive a community of violence to become resilient and successful appears unmistakable in the testimony of the 41 participants who were raised in a single-mother household. With the stories and narratives that come out of this qualitative study, we are able to identify

themes and similarities that shed light on the ways these remarkable mothers were able to help their children escape a poverty and crime-ridden community and become college students. The tactics used include (1) restrictive parenting, (2) educational encouragement and support, (3) emotional support and encouragement, (4) financial security, (5) engagement with schooling, (6) enrollment in activities, and (7) resourcefulness.

The respondents in this study were exposed to a variety of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) including, at the very least, the separation of their parents. Additional ACEs included familial drug use and incarceration. As the quotes above show, many respondents were exposed to limited food, heat, shelter, and lacked other resources while growing up in a community with extreme poverty. Furthermore, many of the respondents were direct witnesses to violent crime, with others being exposed to drug dealing and gangs on the corners outside their homes. In all of these cases, the respondents managed to desist from crime and achieve academic success by attending college.

Despite the extensive literature chronicling the negative outcomes for children who hail from a single-mother home, the participants in this particular study escaped an at-risk community, with many specifically citing their mothers as the reason why. The descriptions, stories, and perspectives offered by the participants allow us to gain a deeper understanding into the day-to-day techniques single mothers utilize to supervise their children while still supporting and encouraging them. Additionally, these mothers take on the burden of single-handedly making decisions that they believe will maximize their child's potential for success. The success of respondents in this study in desisting

from crime and successfully attending college presents a counter-narrative to the extant literature, which says that single mothers are unable to create an environment of control thereby placing their children at higher risk of engaging in delinquency.

In direct contradiction to the literature describing a lack of control, a single mother being unable to maintain order and discipline over her children, the categories outlined throughout the results section describe methods of giving structure to the lives of children who live in a chaotic, economically distressed environment. This structure creates order within the bubble of the home that exists within a disordered community. The single mothers in this study were able to successfully create a home where their children were not as susceptible to the risks waiting outside their doors. Some of these tactics were physical, such as restrictive parenting or providing clothes and food, while others were non-material, such as educational and emotional encouragement. Some of these tactics were used in combination with others. However, the common thread throughout is the creation of a structured environment for these respondents to be raised in.

Through their stories we have learned that extreme control in an at-risk community is an effective strategy for creating structure and keeping children out of trouble. Restricting children to their own house and yard and discouraging socialization may seem harsh, but from the anecdotes relayed by the respondents, we can see that this isolation turned out to be a positive for them in the long run. Restrictive parenting, while not always spoken of with reverence by the participants, should be particularly highlighted as a key tactic used to create structure while keeping children safe and away from the dangers of an at-risk community. Roche, et al. (2007) noted that when the

mother perceived the surrounding community to be dangerous and socially disorganized, this type of punitive parenting was strongly associated with a decline in delinquency and other school problem behavior. The findings in these interviews, which indicate that the participants were subject to punitive and restrictive parenting, endorses Roche, et al.'s (2007) findings. While some observers believe intense involvement in a child's life may be detrimental in suburban areas as we have seen with the rise of "helicopter moms", but in urban at-risk areas, this intense involvement can be the factor which allows children to "break the cycle" and escape the cycle of poverty.

Other tactics may be personal to the mother-child relationship, such as educational encouragement and support. Pushing education as a priority on children, even though some of these single mothers were not educated themselves, was an effective method of creating structure in the home. For example, we heard several respondents describe the timeframe for when they arrived home from school and were expected to immediately sit down and begin doing their homework. Single mothers who are able to create the perception that school is mandatory, and not optional, in an at-risk environment where many residents have not completed their schooling is a tall order. However, through consistency and regularity, these single mothers were able to encourage their children to complete school even through trying events such as familial incarceration or pregnancies at a young age

Additionally, the importance of emotional support cannot be understated. This warm, affective connection may be defined differently for each mother-child relationship. Smokowski, et al. (2004) noted that parental participation in a child's school activities was a strong predictor of adolescent outcomes. Conversely, Dennis, et al. (2005), found

that family motivation was unrelated to adolescent outcomes. The stories from this study align more closely with the former's findings with respect to parental influence and support. For the respondents in this sub-sample, emotional support created a framework in which they felt secure. Despite the chaos that may have been happening in their family life, school, or social environment, the single mothers in this study gave their children a pillar from which to establish their emotional stability.

Finally, McLanahan and Percheski (2008) did note that women, and more specifically, single mothers, have a harder time providing financially for a child, due to the lower wages for women in the workplace as well as the assumption of more responsibility in the child care role. Here, we see that these single mothers have countered this disadvantage by either working multiple jobs or by utilizing different personal and community resources. A child's life can be tumultuous when he or she is suffering from a lack of basic needs such as food, shelter or clothing. Though this can be oftentimes be the case in impoverished communities, these single mothers once again found a way to give their children the foundation of basic necessities so that they could focus on other things such as their academics. Overall, despite the limitations that prior research has established these women face, there is evidence in these interviews of the role that single mothers can play in fostering and encouraging success, both personal and academic, for children raised in a high-risk community.

As with any study, there are limitations to the applicability of the findings. First, there are only 41 participants within this subset of the study. As such, it is hard to apply the findings here to the general population of an at-risk community such as Camden. A study with more participants would only enhance the understanding of the tactics used by

single mothers to help their children escape the hazards of at-risk situations. Second, the respondents in this study are relaying a perception of their mothers that is retrospective. The respondents' memory and recollection of certain events may be inaccurate, not entirely truthful, or at the very least, not entirely comprehensive. In addition to the above stated limitations to a retrospective study, the group of respondents included different age cohorts that were contained within the sample. Not all respondents were in Camden at the same time so their experiences may have been variable. Though all did grow up in a time of trial and tribulation, their situations could have variability. Lastly, this study lacks a comparison sample of adults who came from single-mother homes and who failed, either academically or to desist from crime. We therefore cannot draw conclusions about the differences between successful youth from Camden and unsuccessful youth from Camden who both come from single-mother homes.

Due to the small sample size, it is difficult to extract policy implications on a grand scale. Nonetheless, the findings do suggest what effective parenting strategies in this environment look like. These findings are encouraging as we cannot simply prejudge every child who is raised in a single-mother household and assume he or she is condemned to a life of crime and poverty. By recognizing the tactics used successfully, we can educate women who are single mothers in at-risk communities to enhance the chances of helping their children become successful while avoiding the trap of delinquency. The importance of parenting and at-home support should not be overlooked in favor of focusing only on schools or the community at large.

## Appendices

Table 1

<b>Demographics of the Full Sample</b> ( <i>N</i> =160)		<b>Demographics of the Subsample</b> ( <i>N</i> =41)	
<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<b>Age</b>		<b>Age</b>	
Mean Age	30.99 years	Mean Age	29.12 years
<b>Gender</b>		<b>Gender</b>	
Female	63.1%	Female	60.9%
Male	36.9%	Male	39.0%
<b>Racial/Ethnic Group</b>		<b>Racial/Ethnic Group</b>	
Hispanic/Latino(a)	50.0%	Hispanic/Latino(a)	53.7%
African-American/Black	40.0%	African-American/Black	41.5%
Caucasian	6.9%	Caucasian	2.4%
Asian	3.1%	Asian	2.4%

Table 2

	<b>Subsample (n=41)<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>CDC STUDY<sup>3</sup></b>
<b><u>ABUSE</u></b>		
EMOTIONAL ABUSE	7.3%	10.6%
PHYSICAL ABUSE	19.5%	28.3%
SEXUAL ABUSE	4.9%	20.7%
<b><u>HOUSEHOLD CHALLENGES</u></b>		
HOUSEHOLD SUBSTANCE ABUSE	70.7%	26.9%
HOUSEHOLD MENTAL ILLNESS	17.1%	19.4%
PARENTIAL SEPARATION OR DIVORCE	100%	23.3%
INCARCERATED HOUSEHOLD MEMBER	82.9%	4.7%
<b><u>NEGLECT</u></b>		
EMOTIONAL NEGLECT	24.4%	14.8%
PHYSICAL NEGLECT	24.4%	9.9%
<b><u>NUMBER OF ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (ACE SCORE)</u></b>		
0	0.0%	36.1%
1	7.3%	26.0%

<sup>2</sup> 100% of the subsample had at least one ACE noted. The abuse questions were not directly asked. The affirmative responses were generated from respondents offering this information in the context of other questions.

<sup>3</sup> 63.9% had at least one noted ACE in the CDC study.

2	14.6%	15.9%
3	31.7%	9.5%
4 or more	46.4%	12.5%

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