

**The Impact of Racial Segregation on the Education and Work
Outcomes of Second Generation West Indians in New York City**

by

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Recent writing about the outcomes of the second generation of post 1965 immigrants has hypothesized that some members of the second generation will face downward social mobility relative to their parents or segmented assimilation into a disadvantaged position in American life (Gans, 1992; Portes and Zhou, 1993, Zhou, 1997). This literature suggests that two factors could adversely affect outcomes among the second generation. First, members of the first generation may find the unskilled jobs that their immigrant parents are willing to take unacceptable for themselves. Second, these second generation youth may not have the skills necessary to qualify for the better jobs that they feel willing to accept. If both conditions are present, then second generation young adults will do worse in the labor market than their parents. Lacking the educational skills to qualify for "good" jobs, they will also lack the cultural willingness to work at "bad" jobs. They are at risk then of dropping out of the labor force or becoming involved in illegal activities.

Both the theoretical writing on this issue and the few empirical studies which have been conducted argue that race matters in these outcomes. Black West Indians, and Hispanics and Southeast Asians with dark skin colors are posited to do worse than lighter skinned second generation members (Murguia and Telles, 1996; Rumbaut, 1996). In this paper I describe one of the distinct ways in which being black matters in the school to work transition for a group of second generation West Indians I studied in New York City. Their status as blacks in American society matters in three distinct yet interconnected and reinforcing ways.

First, the second generation West Indians develop a different cultural response to race than their immigrant parents have and this affects their willingness to accept the same jobs their unskilled

parents are willing to do. Many, but not all, of the second generation develop a racial identity that includes an "adversarial" or oppositional stance which is reinforced in adolescent peer groups, especially among young men (Waters, 1994, 1996). The second generation West Indians differ from their parents in that they expect and experience far more interpersonal racism and discrimination and they are less likely than their parents to believe that they can overcome racism through individual initiative and educational credentials. The experiences and belief systems of these teens and young adults leads to a very strong concern with issues of personal respect and autonomy from whites which often leads them to reject any service job which requires showing deference or obedience to a white person in authority over them.

The second way in which their race directly affects their entry into and success in the labor market is through direct employment discrimination from employers. Elsewhere I have argued that white employers report being more "comfortable" with foreign born blacks as opposed to American born blacks (Waters, 1997). To the extent that employers actively discriminate against black Americans, in favor of nonblacks, or in favor of black immigrants, the second generation will be at a disadvantage if they are seen to be black Americans.

Finally the ripple effects of racial segregation and the concentrated poverty that results in black neighborhoods has long lasting effects on the acquisition of skills among the second generation. Institutional disinvestment in highly segregated black neighborhoods means that second generation West Indians grow up with worse schools and more neighborhood violence than other second generation groups. The failures of schools in these neighborhoods can be linked to racial attitudes and beliefs in the city as a whole. Graduating from neighborhood schools in segregated black

neighborhoods almost guarantees that students will not have the skills they need to successfully complete college or qualify for a highly skilled, well paid job; regardless of their attitudes or behaviors about race.

The literature about the second generation has paid the most attention to the role of identity in influencing how the second generation understands and reacts to racial discrimination, focusing on whether adversarial or oppositional identities develop and prove counterproductive to both school achievement and to overall assimilation. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which ongoing racial discrimination functions to limit opportunities for the second generation, independent of the ways in which they respond to it.

Elsewhere I have argued that employers do favor immigrant blacks over native blacks because of the greater ease they feel with immigrants around issues of race (Waters, 1997). This discrimination, if widespread, could have serious implications for second generation youth who appear to employers to be "American" and who could be passed over for low level service jobs in favor of newly arrived immigrants. I have also argued that second generation youth who adopt an "American black" identity are more likely to exhibit oppositional and adversarial stances towards doing well in school which undermine their chances to succeed academically and to acquire the skills necessary to get "good" jobs in the American economy.

In this paper I focus on the third way in which race matters to second generation outcomes-- ongoing institutional racism and the detrimental effects of racial segregation. I would like to suggest that while the cultural and identity reactions of second generation youth are important in determining their labor market outcomes, the structural constraints facing these youth have large independent effects. In other words, even the most non oppositional, un-race conscious, ambitious, school-

identified youth would face a very uphill battle to avoid crime and violence, do well in school, and get enough education in a local school to actually complete college. The literature on the second generation, including some of my own writing, has stressed the cultural and structural strengths of immigrants and their children and how they are able to overcome barriers which have crushed some native minorities in the US. However these barriers and the racial discrimination that sustains them are real and these real deprivations create failure among some youth.

This paper is based on an in depth ethnographic and interview study of first and second generation West Indians in New York City in the early 1990's. After a brief description of the research I concentrate on the ways in which neighborhood and school segregation function to limit opportunities in school and the labor market for second generation youth. I hope that this description of the ways in which race matters to the second generation will flesh out the "black box" mechanisms by which race remains correlated with extreme disadvantage in our society even among the children of new immigrants.

The Study

In 1990-1992 I conducted a field study in New York City of black immigrants to the United States from the Caribbean. The overall study was designed to explore the processes of immigrant adaptation and accommodation to the United States, as well as to trace generational changes in adaptation and identification. Interviews were conducted in two workplaces--a food service company whose workers were generally unskilled and poor, and New York City public schools where the immigrants and their co-workers are college educated and middle class. The entire study included 212

first generation immigrants, 27 whites and 30 native born black Americans in the two workplaces, as well as 83 adolescents who were the children of black immigrants from Haiti and the English speaking islands of the Caribbean. These adolescents were drawn from three sources designed to tap the range of class backgrounds and class trajectories from these teens. They include:

1-The Public School Sample: teenagers attending two public inner city high schools in New York City where I did extensive interviewing and participant observation. (45 interviews)

2-The Church School Sample: teenagers attending Catholic parochial schools in the same inner city neighborhoods as the public high school (although most of these students were not themselves Catholic). (14 interviews)

3-The Targeted Snowball Sample: teenagers living in the same inner city neighborhood in Brooklyn who could not be reached through the school--either because they had dropped out or would not have responded to interviews conducted in a formal setting, (15 interviews) and teenagers who had ties to this neighborhood who were now living there and attending magnet schools or colleges outside of the district, or whose families had since moved to other areas of the city or suburbs (9 interviews).

The young people we talked to therefore include teens who are facing very limited socio-economic mobility or downward social mobility (the vast majority of the inner city public school students and all of the street group), and those on an upward social trajectory who have a high chance of going to college (the majority of the church sample), and teens whose families are doing well, and who themselves would seem to have bright futures (the snowball sample). The 83 adolescents interviewed for this study included 34 (43%) who comprise the classic second generation--born in the United States of immigrant parents. Another 10 (13%) immigrated to the United States before age 7, but had been resident in the United States for at least 5 years. The rest of the sample included

35 young people who immigrated after age 7, and who had spent at least three years in the United States. The actual age at immigration for these more recent immigrants varied from 7 to 15.

I use the term second generation broadly here to refer to adolescents who were either born in the United States, or came to the United States before age 7.

52% of the adolescents interviewed for this study were female, 44% from single headed households. They ranged in age from 14 to 21, with an average age of 17. Overall 22 students were age 14-16; 37 were age 16-18 and 24 were age 19-21. The students were from 12 different countries; including Jamaica (31%); Trinidad (21%); Guyana (16%); Barbados (10%); Haiti (10%), Grenada (5%); and a few each from the smaller islands of Montserrat, Saint Thomas, Anguilla, St. Lucia, Dominica and Nevis.

The Effects of Segregation

Because West Indians are black immigrants the vast majority settle in neighborhoods that are predominantly black. This has profound implications for their lives. Racial segregation for blacks is unlike segregation for any other ethnic or immigrant group (Massey and Denton, 1993:2). It is far more extensive in scope, and it is not mitigated by class--segregation is just as severe for middle class as for poor blacks. In their book American Apartheid Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton describe the segregation indices for black Americans in many US cities, including New York City as constituting hyper-segregation--indeed an American form of the racial separation of apartheid.

A voluminous literature has developed on the effects of residential segregation, concentrated poverty, and inner city residence on individual outcomes of American minority group members (Wilson 1996, Massey and Denton 1993, Jencks 1992). Massey and Denton (1993) show that active discrimination and institutional racism lead to declining city services and declining private investment in residentially segregated neighborhoods. They conclude that "quantitative research shows that growing up in a ghetto neighborhood increases the likelihood of dropping out of high school, reduces the probability of attending college, lowers the likelihood of employment, reduces income earned as an adult and increases the risk of teenage childbearing and unwed pregnancy." (Massey and Denton, 1993:13)

This is partly because racial segregation of the type experienced by black Americans concentrates poverty and its effects, and subjects all ghetto residents to the cultural and structural effects of such poverty:

The quantitative evidence thus suggests that any process that concentrates poverty within racially isolated neighborhoods will simultaneously increase the odds of socioeconomic failure within the segregated group. No matter what their personal traits or characteristics, people who grow up and live in environments of concentrated poverty and social isolation are more likely to become teenage mothers, drop out of school, achieve only low levels of education, and earn lower adult incomes. (Massey and Denton, 1993:179)

The people we interviewed lived in the predominantly black Brooklyn neighborhoods of Brownsville, Bedford Stuyvesant, East New York, Flatbush and East Flatbush. These neighborhoods all exhibited many of the most common problems of segregated neighborhoods. Some of the West Indian teachers we interviewed lived in the upper middle class West Indian neighborhoods of Cambria Heights in Queens or suburban towns such as Hempstead on Long Island or Mount Vernon in Westchester. While these suburban areas were safer and had better housing, they were also

predominantly black. In the past when white ethnic group members achieved middle class status they were able to move out of racially segregated neighborhoods. In effect their socioeconomic mobility allowed them to purchase residential mobility. Blacks in the US have not been able to convert their socioeconomic mobility into residential mobility. Blacks in the US are "equally highly segregated at all levels of income" (Massey and Denton, 1993:11). In New York, for instance, in 1980, "black families earning under \$2500 per year experienced an average segregation index of 86, those earning more than \$50,000, experienced an index of 79" (Massey and Denton, 1993:87).

Because of the concentration of poverty in black residential areas, this segregation of the middle class also means that middle class blacks have more reason to worry about the influences of their neighborhoods on their children than do comparable middle class members of other groups: "Compared with children of middle class whites, children of middle class blacks are much more likely to be exposed to poverty, drugs, teenage pregnancy, family disruption, and violence in the neighborhoods where they live." (Massey and Denton, 1993:178).

Some of our respondents did live in mixed race neighborhoods--such as Crown Heights, Canarsie and Midwood. Crown Heights is an area that has long had a middle class black population and a long standing West Indian immigrant population, as well as a strong Hasidic Jewish population. It was the scene of racially charged riots in the summer of 1991, the summer before my study. Canarsie and Midwood are predominantly white neighborhoods which are currently receiving an influx of middle class black residents--the vast majority of whom are West Indian.

But the majority of the people we spoke with lived in all black neighborhoods, although the

vast majority of people said they would prefer living in an integrated neighborhood, often because they associated black neighborhoods with "bad" neighborhoods:

I have yet to see a really nice all black neighborhood. Oh, there are some parts that are not all that bad. You know what I mean? Like East Flatbush ain't all that bad. But there are more fucked up black places than white places. Have you ever seen a white ghetto? So think about it, why is that? And you don't see white people living in black people's ghettos. Cause black people's ghettos are all black. So where are all the poor white people? [19 year old Haitian male, born in US, Tape 46A]

Most people were very dissatisfied with their neighborhoods--most particularly with the level of crime and fear they lived with. The reasoning that the teens give about why their neighborhood is good or bad tells a lot about the kinds of conditions people get used to living with. For instance this 19 year old Bajan respondent describes her current neighborhood of Flatbush as very good because she has not yet witnessed open shooting on the streets:

Flatbush is better than Bed Stuy. To me, there are more West Indians living here than Americans. When I was living in Bed Stuy it was so bad. I mean I can just look down on my window and people downstairs, they'll be shooting all over the place. I was looking through my window one day and I look across the street and there's this guy--this man walked up to this other guy and shoot him, just like that. [19 year old Barbados female, 4 years in US, Tape 33A]

Indeed respondents describe their neighborhoods as fair or good despite conditions that most Americans would find absolutely intolerable:

Q:And how would you rate Crown Heights as a place to live?

A: I wouldn't call it terrible, but its somewhere close to that because on my specific block, its not bad. They do have drug dealers at both corners. But that tends to keep the neighborhood peaceful from anybody starting trouble or anything. But its not like its a safe neighborhood. There are shootouts and a guy got shot like right in front of our door downstairs. A stray bullet came through our window, and my mother got mugged a few blocks away. [16 year old Jamaican male, 7 years in US, Tape 79A]

Q:How would you rate your neighborhood?

A:Its fair. You do your business, no one will bother you. Its gotten worse, though. There's a lot more open violence. You just step outside, you see a stabbing across the street, see something down the block. And all of that. Over the stupidest things, too. [17 year old Grenada male, 14 years in US, Tape 63A]

I live in the Brownsville area. My neighborhood. Its very scary.

Q:Why is it scary?

A: It is, because you are coming home at night and you can just hear pow, pow, pow. You are coming down the street and there's nobody you are seeing and then you just see people appear from nowhere. Like in alleys. yards, schoolyards. Mugging, robbing you. I have been robbed twice since I have been living here. They take everything I had. I had my green card, my social security, my money for rent, everything....I would give anything to be in a good neighborhood. The building that I live in, its so much. They have people that don't live there and they come in there and they smoke crack. The super, he don't care. You living in a house, the pipes leaking. You know its things like that. And the neighbors are not that nice. They are up to eleven o'clock having a party. OK, my boss tell me take a cab home. The cab drop me off in front of my building. I come up. Turn the key, when I go in, the elevator's stuck. I keep pressing and pressing and pressing, when I do realize after like a half an hour it come down, there's two crack heads in there smoking. Its so bad. [Guyanese Female Worker, age 26, in US 10 years, Tape 277].

Seeking a Better Neighborhood

The experience of many families is that they seek out integrated neighborhoods or all white neighborhoods which they see as desirable places to live, but then as soon as they move in, the neighborhood starts to go down hill. The whites move out, more blacks move in. The classic tale I was told from these working class students was that they lived in core neighborhoods of Brooklyn--Crown Heights, Flatbush, Bedford Stuyvesant when they first arrived. Then after a number of years their parents could afford to buy a house or pay higher rent, and so they moved to East Flatbush, Canarsie and Midwood sections of Brooklyn--areas with more single family and two family houses, backyards and lawns. But the peace and security the families were seeking were elusive--red lining

and white flight meant that the quiet, integrated neighborhoods the families were seeking were not stable. And the blacks who move in were not like their own families--they were the "wrong" kind of people:

Q:And how is your neighborhood as a place to live?

A:East Flatbush is a good place.

Q:And in the future is it going to get better or worse?

A:I don't really see it getting better. Its going to get worse. Cause you got like the wrong kind of people moving in to the area. And when they come, they bring like trouble, violence and stuff. Cause they come with their guns and they just hang out on the corner. And its a nice area, you know. A lot of nice houses and everything. Its mostly white, but you have a lot of blacks living there now. [18 year old Guyanese female, born in US, Tape 5A]

I moved here from Tobago when I was in the sixth grade. We lived in Flatbush and boy, over there it was very bad. Neighbors would play blasted music and they didn't have no consideration for anybody else and people were driving crazy and a whole bunch of things were happening. So we moved over here. We live in East Flatbush. When we first moved there it was very quiet and peaceful but things are starting to act up, you know? Accidents are happening and late at night you will hear gun shots. It seems as far away as you move from it, you always--bad things always come and catch up. So right now it is bound to get worse.

The experience my respondents report with racial change and its socioeconomic and social consequences is far too predictable. Middle and working class immigrants seeking better schools, services, housing stock and less crime, spend their hard earned money purchasing housing in predominantly white neighborhoods. At first they are successful--the neighborhood is much better than the ones they left behind. But individual white prejudices about living near blacks as well as institutional discrimination in the form of bank red lining and discrimination in credit leads to white flight, declining property values, and decreasing investment in the neighborhood. While many people-

-white or black--caught up in the experience are likely to see this process as an inexplicable "inevitable" decline due to the behaviors of black people, Massey and Denton (1993:132) describe the structural forces and decisions which underlay this decay:

To the extent that property owners perceive a decline as possible or likely they have little incentive to invest in upkeep and improvement on their own buildings, because money put into neighborhoods that are declining is unlikely to be recouped in the form of higher rents or greater home equity. As a result of the initial disinvestment by a few owners, therefore, others are led to cut back on the money they invest, it becomes increasingly likely that others will reach similar decisions, even if they are otherwise disposed to maintain their buildings. At some point a threshold is crossed, beyond which the pattern becomes self-reinforcing and irreversible. Racial segregation makes neighborhoods where blacks live particularly vulnerable to this sort of disinvestment and decay. Poor blacks are more likely than the poor of any other group to be trapped in neighborhoods caught in the grip of such downward spirals, because segregation acts to concentrate poverty and all things associated with it. (Massey and Denton, 1993:132)

As the cost of owning or renting a house in the neighborhood drops and whites are no longer interested in moving into the neighborhood, poorer blacks are now able to afford living there. The middle class black "pioneers" in the neighborhood watch helplessly as the "undesirable poor" former neighbors they had moved away from follow them into the new neighborhood. As the tax base declines, the crime rates increase, the housing stock deteriorates and the neighborhood "spirals downward"; the middle and working class black residents once again suffer the consequences of concentrated poverty and re-segregation.

We just moved. We lived in a neighborhood--Flatbush--where there were drug dealing, and gun shots and you coulda heard. But we moved to another part [East Flatbush]. And right now, we are convinced that we made the best decision moving because you know, around here, it is quiet. Reminiscent of Trinidad...Its about 60% West Indian, and forty percent black American.

Q:And in the future what will happen?

A:In the future its probably going to get worse. Because as people move in and out you can have an infusion of people, reckless people. You know, violent people, loud people. [18 year old Trinidad male, 4 years in US, tape 11A]

The changes which happen in the neighborhoods make these teenagers sound like old timers as they

reminisce about "the way things used to be back in the good old days" when they first moved into the neighborhoods they now live in:

Over the years the neighborhood has gotten worse. Like when I was smaller, you know, we coulda go outside anytime, you know, without anything happening. We couldn't hear gun shots. Now like, when I am getting old, its like people shooting you know? [15 year old Guyanese male, born in US, tape 43A]

Q:Over the years has your neighborhood changed as a place to live?

A: Yes. Cause I remember a couple of years back my neighborhood was very quiet. Then we had some guys who moved on our block and they sell drugs. And I know two people who got robbed and one woman got raped. Its changing a lot. Cause I remember when it used to be safe walking down our block late at night. But now you can't do that. Cause a lot of things be happening. And you don't know when its gonna strike you. So you gotta be careful. My mother got mugged too, two years ago. She got mugged with a gun. And since then she was promising me that when I become seventeen she is gonna move cause she doesn't want me growing up in this environment. [18 year old Haitian female, born US, Tape 56A]

Ironically the only neighborhood that was described by a few respondents as getting better, rather than getting worse, was Crown Heights. The Crown Heights riots had happened the summer before our interviewing. Because of the riots a number of new programs had been started in the neighborhood for youths--including basketball leagues, and the Crown Heights youth initiative--which included after school activities for black youths and discussion groups for black and Jewish kids.

While many respondents were angry as they described better treatment by the city of Hasidic Jews than blacks, the residents of Crown Heights did benefit from increased police presence, as compared to other neighborhoods our respondents lived in. The decision of the Hasidic Jews to collectively stay or move into Crown Heights despite the black population that lived there creates an anomaly in the world of American apartheid--a relatively demographically stable integrated

neighborhood.¹

The Importance of Schooling

Living in an all black neighborhood can increase the pressures on West Indian families--exposing them to concentrated poverty, declining private investment, and a declining tax base for city services. Yet perhaps the most important consequence of living in these neighborhoods for West Indian families is the exposure it brings to the neighborhood schools. The hopes of these immigrant parents for a better future for their children hinge on the children doing well in school. Schooling has always been seen as the path to upward mobility for immigrant children and the children of immigrants but one can argue that the stakes are even higher now, because of changes in the economy.

The children and grandchildren of the European immigrants who arrived in the peak years of immigration at the turn of the century benefitted from the spectacular expansion of the U.S. economy between 1940 and 1970. Bluestone (1995: 82-83) describes the conditions that shaped the success of the European second and third generation:

In the U.S., real average weekly earnings [grew] by 60 percent between 1947 and 1973. Median family income literally doubled... And over the same period personal wages and family incomes became tangibly more equal...Along with growth and greater equality, poverty declined across the nation.

The existence of secure, well paid manufacturing jobs meant that blue collar workers with a high school degree or less could attain a stable and secure middle class life style during this period. They managed to do this even though many Southern and Eastern European immigrants and their children did not acquire much formal education. Berrol (1995:36) notes that first and second generation Poles

usually did not go beyond the sixth grade. It was not until the 1950s that Poles and Italians began to accept the idea that their childrens lives should be improved through formal schooling. In the early twentieth century historian John Bodnar found that "while 60 percent of native born white children began high school, less than a third of the German and less than a quarter of the Italians did so. He also found that by 1910, less than 10 percent of the Italian, Polish, and Slovak children stayed beyond the sixth grade in Buffalo, Chicago, and Cleveland." (Quoted in Berrol, 1995:p. 55). The post war economic growth created a great deal of well paying blue collar jobs which paid a family wage to workers who may not have a formal education. Thus a working class and middle class lifestyle was available to the children of European immigrants during the twentieth century. This economic growth also helped to close some of the wide gap between blacks and whites from the end of the depression through the early 1970s (Jaynes and Williams 1989, Smith and Welch 1989, Farley 1993).

This level of economic growth and widening opportunities was not sustained after the early 1970s. Over the past two decades, the U.S. economy has been "restructured" by a shift from manufacturing to services and rising inequality between rich and poor, especially in the nation's urban centers (Phillips 1990, Levy 1987, Harrison and Bluestone 1988, Sassen 1990). Some have described the result as an hourglass economy, with many jobs for highly skilled workers in professional services and information processing, and many unskilled low level jobs. The unionized blue collar manufacturing jobs that supported middle class lifestyles have become scarce. One result has been to increase the value of formal education in the labor market:

In 1963, the mean annual earnings of those with four years of college or more stood at just over twice (2.11 times) the mean annual earnings of those who had not completed high school...By 1987, the education to earnings ratio had skyrocketed to nearly three to one (2.91) (Bluestone, 1995:83).

These disparities intensified in the 1980's. During this decade, the average real wage of male high school dropouts fell by 18 percent, while male high school graduates suffered nearly a 13 percent real earnings loss. Only men with a masters degree or more registered an increase in inflation adjusted earnings, while college graduates stayed about the same (Bluestone 1995: 83). This happened partly because all the employment growth in the economy during the 1980s came in the services sector, where wages polarized between high school dropouts and college graduates four times faster than in goods producing industries (Bluestone, 1995:85).

These changes in the economy mean that the economic ladder that allowed earlier immigrants to climb slowly from poverty to a middle class life style has been changed. In effect the ladder is missing the middle rungs.² Low skilled immigrant parents can barely get by on the wages they earn from low level service jobs. High paying service jobs are available for workers with college and graduate degrees and specialized training. But middle level factory and other blue collar jobs are scarce. This means that the second generation of today's immigrants must achieve a great deal of educational success relative to their parents backgrounds. The children of West Indian food service workers and nurses aides must either finish college and get well paying jobs in the high end of the economy or they face the same job prospects as their parents--without the characteristics of being an immigrant that makes those jobs attractive. The guidance counselor at the high school where I did my most intensive field work, Eisenhower High School describes the situation well:

The parents feel like there's a job out there [for their kids]. Because you can always go and do someone's housework, or you can be a nurse's aide, or you can help out. But these are youngsters now coming up and they don't want a job like that. And they don't have the skills for other things, so they may have a child themselves. They may get pregnant, have a child and then they go through the welfare syndrome. Teenage pregnancy, foodstamps, that has been happening to quite a few of them. [Guyanese female teacher and guidance counselor, age 42, in US 22 years, Tape 1B]

Unlike the Poles and Italians who could drop out of high school and still achieve socioeconomic mobility, the West Indians have to reach the top half of the hourglass economy through formal education. Yet getting the education they need is even more difficult given the neighborhoods the immigrant families find themselves in.

Neighborhood Schools

The high school system in New York is built around neighborhoods. Students are supposed to attend their neighborhood high school, unless they apply to and are accepted to any number of the special magnet high schools. These magnet high schools include some of the best high schools in the country--Stuyvesant High School, The High School of the Performing Arts, the Bronx High School of Science, as well as lesser known but still specialized high schools such as Brooklyn Technical High School, and the Edward R. Murrow High School, with a specialization in Broadcasting.

The academic standings of the neighborhood high schools, not surprisingly, generally follow the socioeconomic status of the surrounding community. The two high schools where I interviewed students, Truman and Eisenhower³, were both schools which had changed a great deal in the last few decades, as had the neighborhoods surrounding them. Eisenhower had been a top ranked neighborhood high school with a very good reputation up until the 1960s. Truman had an average reputation, and had had less academic distinction earlier, but had a number of illustrious graduates who had gone on to fame and fortune.

Both of these high schools were now ranked very low--in terms of both academic achievement and the amount of violence present in the school. They were both named as among the five most

violent high schools in New York City during the period of my field work. There were murders of students, stabbings and killings, at the school entrances at both schools in the last few years. They had official drop out rates of 60% and 48%, but the actual graduation rates were much lower, as all of the high schools in the city play statistical games to reduce their official reported drop out rates. In other words, Eisenhower, a four year school with 2600 enrolled students, graduates 175 seniors each year.

These schools were places of great heroism among teachers, and student success despite the odds, as well as of despair, and fear and resignation to extremely low standards. The neighborhood problems of poverty, drug use and violence did not stop at the school doors, and in fact the schools were generally much worse in these terms than the immediate surrounding neighborhoods because both schools drew some of their students from even worse off neighborhoods that were close by.

Savvy parents, many of them middle class, who lived in these neighborhoods did their best to keep their children out of these schools. This meant sending them to private or parochial schools, or to the city wide magnet schools. Several students from these mostly West Indian neighborhoods attend Harvard University each year. But none of these students have attended the local neighborhood schools, they come from private schools or from the premier city academic schools like Stuveysant or Hunter. The teachers at Eisenhower and Truman blamed specialized high schools for some of the problems at the neighborhood high schools:

Syphoning off by the specialized schools kills every other academic school. I think that if we had the 100 kids that are zoned to come here but go to those other schools, they would be the movers and the shakers of the school. They would do the plays and the things that would get the other kids involved. If we had those really dedicated, high level kids, we would have more things to offer all the kids. They would kind of like drive the system to offer them various activities. That's the dream. The reality is that we don't have that certain segment of kids who choose to go to the specialized high schools. [White male teacher, age 45, Tape 5B]

Some teens end up attending Truman or Eisenhower not out of choice, but because their parents cannot afford Catholic or private school, and the students failed to win admission to the competitive high schools. But many of the students attend the local schools because the parents do not understand the system, and fail to understand the problems their children face in the local schools. Many immigrant parents are under the impression that their children are much safer attending local schools, because they will not have to travel on the subways or into neighborhoods the parents do not know at all. The teachers and parents we spoke with stressed the trust that immigrant parents had for teachers and the schools. The West Indian parent generally holds a great respect for teachers. That respect and trust means that many parents believe they do not have to be very involved in the schools. While they will respond if they are contacted by the teacher, they trust that their children will be educated well and taken care of in the schools.

Even though I had read a great deal about the problems in inner city schools and I thought I had a good sense of how many serious issues there were to deal with in urban high schools, I was still deeply shocked by my experiences in the two schools where I did field work, most especially Eisenhower High School, which was in worse shape than Truman. Both schools had been plagued by violence and they were among five schools designated that year by the New York City Board of Education as the most violent in the whole school system. Despite the efforts of a number of excellent teachers and guidance counselors, the general situation in Eisenhower was quite shocking--the level of fear and violence was strong, the number of weapons entering the school was enough to color all interactions between teachers and students, the academic standards of the vast majority of classes were not enough to prepare a student for a competitive college, the problems of teen pregnancy and

drug and alcohol use were widespread, and the odds of a freshman graduating four years later were less than 50-50.

How did the school descend to this level of violence, chaos, and deteriorating academic performance? Race certainly plays a major role. Both Truman and Eisenhower High Schools are among the seven high schools in the city that the Board of Education calls "racially isolated"; in other words, they are segregated schools that are all black. In a 1990 column in *The New York Times*, Sam Roberts commented on how there had been a public outcry in South Africa when statistics were released showing that only 42% of black high school students there were not passing their competency exams. Roberts pointed out that among the seven "racially isolated" high schools in New York the failure rate for basic competency exams was worse.⁴ In the high schools where I did fieldwork less than 2% of the students who were afforded a diploma received a New York State Regents Diploma, the diploma that signifies a strong academic program of college preparation courses. Citywide, 23% of graduating public school students received a Regents Diploma. (Roberts, 1990)⁵

The guidance counselor at Eisenhower estimated that among those who actually receive a diploma, about 70% go to college and ten percent go into the military. Of those who do go to college, 40% go to a two year college, and 60% go to a four year college. She had no statistics at all on how many drop out of college and how many finish. Anecdotally she knows that a number of students never even finish their first semester of college.

Parents who drop their children off at the school door every day and pick them up at the end of the day often have no clue about what is going on in school all day. In a small Caribbean school

it would be impossible for a teen to arrive at school and spend the day there but never attend class, yet that is precisely what some of the troubled students at Eisenhower did. They spent day after day hanging out in the hallways or right outside the school. Their parents thought they were getting an education but they were just marking time, and disrupting the school atmosphere for the other students and teachers.

Sociologists of education have stressed that one of the reasons middle class children do well in schools is that parents have the "cultural capital" to reinforce what is learned in school, as well as the resources and know how to closely monitor the school's performance. Some West Indian parents, including the teachers we interviewed who had children in the system, did know how to monitor their children's performance. A number of teachers told us about intervening with a school guidance counselor or teacher who was not encouraging their own children to do well, or who had assigned their children to a lower academic track, or who had let students choose too few rigorous college prep courses. But many of the West Indian parents do not know enough to be so involved in their children's education. Working class parents often don't know the difference in the kinds of academic courses their children are taking. Middle class parents often erroneously believe that their children's schools are like the schools they attended back in the islands.

In Jamaica the parents, they don't really participate because they trust the teacher to do this type of job. And here when they come they have the same impression that OK well I am sending my child to school and I know the teachers going to do the best. And its not like that. A lot of teachers they are like "Oh really, these West Indian parents, they don't really care about their kids because I don't see them involved". But they don't understand these parents they say "Well you know this is the teacher's job and I trust that the teacher knows how to do the job well." So they put all their trust into the teacher. [Guyanese female teacher, age 48, in US 20 years, Tape 501].

Another teacher echoes this sentiment by comparing West Indian parents with American black

parents:

Many of the West Indian parents believe that the teacher is right always. So if you find that you are in trouble with a teacher, and although you might be right, you have a difficult time explaining that to an old fashioned West Indian parent. I find that many of the black American parents, many of them, children of the sixties and the seventies, they tend to be a little harder on the teacher, a little more suspect. But the old fashioned West Indian parent is difficult to get them to believe, well, possibly the teacher might be wrong. [Barbados male teacher, age 43, born in US, Tape 10B]

The trust that the parents have that the schools are looking out for their children is often a misplaced trust. So, even though as one student put it, the reputation of Eisenhower is that "only stupid and bad kids come here", many of the students said that their parents insisted that they attend the local school because they did not want them traveling on buses and subways.

I want to transfer from here (Truman). I want to go to John Dewey High School or Graphic Arts. Dewey has a whole class for drama. My grandmother said, I should work with what Truman has. I shouldn't try to go to a school that has the things I want. I should stick with a school that has the things I don't want. She was trying to scare me. She was like, "Oh, if you go to school by Coney Island or Manhattan, you know they have guns there." Always trying to scare me. And Truman's not even that good. They have guns here. [15 year old Trinidadian female, born in US, tape 30A]

Teachers Expectations

There is an image in the popular culture of West Indians as the "model minority". Sowell (1978), for instance, argues that second generation West Indians do better in terms of education than African Americans. We asked the white, black, and West Indian school teachers we spoke with about differences between West Indian students and African American students. While the teachers noted differences in discipline and behavior, and in attitudes towards race, they did not generally conclude

that West Indians were better than their African American peers in terms of school work at the present time. Instead the teachers described a range of abilities among the immigrant and native born students. The distribution of the immigrant students in terms of achievement was bipolar--the newly arrived students were by far both the best and the worst students in the school.

A number of older teachers did say that the stereotype of the West Indian as the better scholar fit their experience in the late 1960's and early 1970's. However beginning in the mid 1980's until the time of my fieldwork, the early 1990's, the distribution of West Indian students was bipolar. This reflects changes in the migration stream to the US. The earlier immigrants who arrived in the late 60's and 70's were often coming under occupational visas--a great many of them were recruited RNs. The stable mostly white middle class neighborhood surrounding Truman High School did not have many black families. The few Caribbean black families who bought houses in the area at that time were very well educated middle class families. They had students who excelled in school.

As the immigration stream diversified over time, the class distribution of the immigrants changed, and a number of poor and working class immigrants entered the United States. In central Brooklyn, the 1970's saw a great deal of white flight, and the area around Eisenhower changed to an all black neighborhood, with a still sizable middle class population of West Indian immigrants, along with poor people who came in after real estate prices fell, and after a number of apartment buildings fell into disrepair and lower rents. The class mix of the students at Eisenhower and at nearby Truman changed downwards, and the diversity in the class origins of the West Indian immigrants increased.

Indeed the long time teachers at Eisenhower all described the past few decades as a "downward spiral" in terms of the academic quality of the students, the discipline in the school, the overall distribution of the teachers who choose to work there, and the academic standards in the

classes they teach. These teachers most definitely tie this downward spiral to the changing racial composition of the school--not to the influx of immigrants per se. Black and white teachers alike believe that the Board of Education had a conscious policy in the 1970's and 80's to try to preserve some white and integrated schools in Brooklyn, by opening a new high school in an all white neighborhood, and by changing the neighborhoods that high schools which were in black areas drew their students from. These teachers state that the changing demographics of the immediate Eisenhower neighborhood would not have resulted in an all black school if the Board of Ed had not decided to "save" other schools in white neighborhoods by changing the feeding patterns of all of the high schools. As a result of these changes Eisenhower abruptly lost middle and working class white students who were rezoned into high schools in all white areas, and began to be assigned poor black American students from the neighborhoods of East New York and Brownsville, as well as the changing (in terms of class distribution) population of black immigrant students from Flatbush, East Flatbush and Crown Heights.

As one teacher described the changes in the late 1970's, early 1980's, "In the beginning the American black kids were tougher. The West Indians were very, very refined... We had a lot of tough American black kids that wouldn't think twice of throwing the teacher out the window" (Tape 2B) The middle class West Indian students began to transfer from the school when the discipline problems became acute after the inclusion of poor American students from rough neighborhoods.

In the middle 1970's they opened [another high school in a white neighborhood] and many of the white students just bolted from the school. Bolted. And as a result the school was left with middle class black students, you know, who were doing quite nicely. However there began inclusion into the school of students from East New York and other neighborhoods, poverty stricken, and these students were performing rather poorly on basic competency tests,

this encouraged other middle class black students to opt for other schools--these students traveled many, many hours to go to other schools. And this, therefore, continued the basic decline. [White male teacher, age 40, Tape 7B]

In addition the West Indian students themselves also got more diverse as poor and working class West Indians began to migrate into the area:

In 1979 a lot of the students we got were students who had been to school in the West Indies and who came from very stable homes and they were well prepared to do academic work. But there was a change on the part of faculty and there was a change on the part of the students because every year, the quality of the students became poorer and poorer. And we were beginning to get, not students who came from the cities and who came from private schools, we began to get students who came from the back woods, who barely spoke English, who spoke what they called "English Creoles" who could not read and write at the same level. Students, some of whom had only third grade educations and had not been in school in years. At the same time the staff had to change what we taught. We had a new chairman who felt that those children could not cope in terms of reading level or experience with what we taught before--we used to teach the classics, Dickens, Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy. We taught Sinclair Lewis. When I came back [from maternity leave in 1979] we taught Paul Zindel, which is about a fifth grade reading level. It was very different. [White female teacher, age 47, Tape 11B].

In Math the same changes occurred, a school that used to offer all kinds of advanced math classes, found its remedial math classes overflowing and struggled to keep a calculus class for the handful of students who were able to take it. This caused some of the best teachers to want to leave the school for a school with better students:

Most teachers who come here, really want to teach math. If they wanted to teach remedial math, they would have become elementary school teachers. You know, they want to teach trigonometry and they want to teach all this stuff. And you give them a program and they have three or four classes of remedial math, they get bored. They look to get out. The tradeoff is of you get the people who don't really want to teach math, but are in teaching cause they need the job and the money, they like teaching the remedial math, because they can handle the math. They're perfectly happy.

The downward spiral feeds on itself, because as Eisenhower develops a reputation among teachers as a dangerous and unsatisfying place to teach, it becomes a very unpopular choice for any individual teacher. Since the schools award teaching choices based on seniority, and on which teachers are in demand by principals, good teachers who have some experience will get the opportunity to leave and teach at a better school. Thus schools like Eisenhower and Truman, which have students who need the best teachers available, often get young inexperienced first time teachers or burnt out poor teachers who have no other options. These teachers are either not motivated enough to seek another job in the system, or not good enough to be offered one. They go through the motions of teaching but no longer have much energy or spirit for their students. They are often referred to as the "dead wood" of the system:

There are teachers in the school who I know from the inside don't do anything. I can walk up and down the halls and see them doing nothing. As much as my students say hey, give us a free period, I hate babysitting, but they are getting free periods in other classes during the day.

Q: You mean teachers sit there and don't teach?

A: Yeah they teach for maybe ten minutes, and then they stop. There are card games going on in the back of the classroom. Not by subs, this is the regular teachers I am talking about. When I see some of the dreadful teachers they are giving some of these poor kids, I said if I were one of these kids, I wouldn't go to class either, you know. I think that we've got some real dead wood. [White male teacher, age 45, tape 5B]

Students speak in disdain of teachers who are afraid of students and stoop to academic dishonesty:

I don't think that it is right for teachers to help kids out on tests. I think he was scared of the kids. Cause they would curse him out. In order for them not to--he was scared so that he would give them the answers to the test so they would go home and study, and during the test the next day, he would leave the classroom and then the kids would cheat--well nobody was in the classroom to stop them, so they would cheat and stuff. And when report cards came he would ask them what grade do they think they deserve on their report card? [17 year old Tobago female, 7 years in US, tape 27A]

There are many reasons why teachers would get to the point where they do not care about

teaching and about their students--hard and dangerous working conditions, school and district politics, relatively low pay and prestige, difficult students and the like. And according to both teachers and students alike there are many burned out teachers at both Eisenhower and Truman who do not care about teaching anymore and who do not keep this a secret from their students.

Because these schools are completely segregated with an all black student body, and because the rest of these students lives are also likely to be highly segregated, white teachers are often the only "representatives of their race" these kids know in person. And the interpretation some students have of why these teachers do not care about them is that it is because the teachers are white and the students are black. The students had been told by a number of teachers that they did not care about the students because the teachers would still get paid whether the students learned or not.

From what I am hearing I hear from other students that the teachers just don't care. All in all they just, you know, because it is a black school. That is what the kids say. [18 year old Trinidad female, 4 years in US, Tape 16A]

The black teachers in Eisenhower they care a lot because you know they are saying well, we know what you are going through and everything. We want you to get ahead. But there's a lot of teachers in here they are like, yeah, we care and everything. But behind your back, oh, those black kids, they don't know anything... White teachers are like, they come and they tell you, I don't have to teach you. I get paid anyway. They'll sit there and let you do anything. They say, bang your heads on the wall, kill yourselves, I don't care. Its like if they have a few students who have a discipline problem they say there acting up, they can't control the class, so they finished our class. See, that's how you are. I ain't gonna bother to teach. For a whole week I went to class without a teacher. There was no teacher. And they getting paid? But no black teacher would do that that. It was like, you and you, to the Dean's office. The rest of the class, those that want to learn, stay. Those who don't they can leave. And the white teachers, most of them in this school, they don't care. As long as they get their paycheck. [18 year old Haitian female, born in US, tape 17A]

Two of the West Indian teachers also told us that it was clear to them that many white teachers did not have the same standards for black kids as they did for whites:

Just about 25-30% of the teachers are minority. In an all minority school, Okay? And the kids and them know it. They say, Oh the teachers, as soon as school is over they jump in their cars and they drive out to Long Island and they don't care about us. [Trinidad male teacher, age 41, in US 18 years, Tape 9B]

Many of my colleagues and myself share the opinion that the public school system is not doing as much as they could for these kids. Their perception is that these are minority kids and therefore their expectations are lower...The parents like me, who look out for their children, can not get walked over. I'm talking about a parent who is a nurse's aide, and trusts the schools totally to handle the welfare of the child. And the child gets channeled into various programs and classes. And they say its not as true anymore but I think it is true to a certain extent... [Guyanese female teacher and guidance counselor, age 42, in US 22 years, Tape 1B]

There are some dedicated, experienced master teachers in these schools and they are the real heroes of this story. They truly believe in what they are doing with their students. They know how to teach students of all ranges and abilities. They go beyond the call of duty--spending extra hours helping students, and spending their own money to help students who need carfare or to buy lunch. They talk to parents, they help students with personal problems, they respect their students as people. The racial and ethnic backgrounds of the teachers made little difference in who the students identified as the really good teachers. They are white, black, and West Indian. The teachers who really made a difference in their students lives combined a respect and true affection for their students, with a very firm sense of standards and goals and discipline. Unfortunately for the students however these teachers were rare in both of these schools.

Differences in School Systems

The fact that West Indian students were both the very best and the very worst students in the

high schools reflects the difference in the educational systems in the West Indies and the United States. The West Indian educational system is modeled on the British system. It is a pyramid in structure and while all students get a primary education, only a select group of students can proceed to high school and beyond.⁶ There are also vast differences in quality among the primary schools, generally with urban schools offering better educations than rural schools. The islands also differ. Barbados has a very good reputation for its school systems. Guyana may have had a good school system for some of its students in the past, but the economic decline of the last decade has led to severe problems in its school system. Jamaican and Trinidadian students from urban areas generally have good preparation, those from rural areas are much less well prepared.

The influx of these unprepared students also contributed to the downward spiral of the high school because they lowered the standardized test scores that savvy middle class parents use to assess the schools they consider sending their children to:

A kid comes in, because the kid is fifteen, sixteen years old, we put them in the tenth grade, which is one of the grades they use to rate the school. Comes June, the kid takes the Regents Competency and fails. Kid was in my school for six, seven months. OK, I have to make up for all that. The kid fails. Now they have a statistic which shows that so many percent of the kids have failed. So now they take all the kids in the school and they put out a list showing that only 37% of the tenth grade is gonna achieve competency in math. And the chancellor wants 70 percent to achieve competency. And you get a principal who comes in or an administrator who comes in who doesn't have the slightest concept of the difficulties we're facing with these kids, what's coming in. And they don't want to hear from me. All they know is that their boss is looking for that percentage to go up....The clamor for statistics means that they don't really have a concept of the difficulties that the kids and the teachers face. And they want an easy way to rate schools and departments, and it doesn't exist. Especially with the problem we're discussing, with the immigrant mixtures. [White male teacher, age 45, Tape 14B]

The students who do attend the two neighborhood schools where I did fieldwork encountered the best and the worst aspects of the American school system, with both happy and tragic outcomes. Instead of the restricted and structurally elitist British system they left behind, the West Indian teens encountered the free flowing, unrestricted, democratic, yet also deeply flawed American system. The newly arrived students from the best schools in the Caribbean were able to take the honors courses still offered at the high school. Teachers who are starved for responsive and bright students lavish attention and hopes on these students; and every year Eisenhower graduates approximately ten students who get scholarships to private schools like Syracuse and NYU or who get into branches of the State University of New York like Stony Brook or Albany. Once every year or two there is a memorable student who qualifies for a highly competitive college--in the last ten years Eisenhower has sent a student to MIT, to University of Pennsylvania, and to Columbia. Almost every teacher I interviewed told me about these students by name, with the pride that every teacher everywhere takes in a student who excels. Most of these very successful students have not spent their entire schooling in the New York school system. They are recent immigrants, who had at least their primary schooling back in the islands. Occasionally a West Indian origin American born student will also be in this group. Usually these students are from middle class families who provide a strong support to the efforts of the schools.

But the average and below average students from both the islands and the US can just as often be victims as beneficiaries of the New York school system. The strengths of the system--the opportunities it offers to all students, regardless of ability, the democratic nature of the schools, the wide variety of subjects and activities in the schools, and the special programs offered for students of low abilities and bad academic preparation are balanced by the weaknesses of the system, which

include the lack of control and discipline in the schools, the presence of weapons and the resulting fear, the racial segregation and prejudice, the large size and resulting bureaucracy and the spillover into school of the social problems of the kids.

The strengths and weaknesses of the school system are intimately and hopelessly intertwined--the reason there are opportunities and hope for all students is because no one is turned away. This is also the reason that teachers have to struggle with students with severe problems that disrupt their classmates, and that teachers have to teach to a lower level of comprehension. The democratic nature of the schools and the freeflowing interaction between teachers and students and among students leads to more creativity, spontaneity and even fun in learning for many students. Yet it also contributes to the discipline problems and perceived lack of respect of students for teachers, and students for each other that plague the schools.

Violence and the fear of violence dominated the experience of the school for the teachers and the students at Eisenhower and at Truman High Schools. Both schools had recently been named in the local press as among the five most violent high schools in the city. In the ten years preceding the study both schools had seen students killed on school grounds. Both schools had experienced mass disturbances with students rampaging through the building and police being brought in for crowd control. While the reported incidents to the Board of Ed were high for both schools many incidents also contributed to the fear in the school but happened just outside of school grounds. Classmates of students in both schools had recently died off campus in shooting and stabbing incidents. Drug dealers were present near school grounds every day so that students who walked to school needed to walk past them.

Some students were ashamed of the fact that they go to one of the most dangerous schools in New York, and they defend their school against its reputation:

Its like when I first came to Eisenhower I was scared because of what I had heard. When I got to Eisenhower, I loved Eisenhower cause you know I liked what it had to offer and because of the diverse programs they had. There's violence everywhere you go. You know, typical frightening--nobody ever got shot that I know of. Nobody ever got killed or stabbed. If they got killed--not killed but if they got stabbed it was by an intruder from another school. So I was like, that never happened. I mean, yeah, the typical bookbags being stolen and, but that happens everywhere. Its that you can't trust everybody. [18 year old Haitian female, born in US, Tape 17A]

Yet despite the desire to be "true to your school", the incidents described by the students are very frightening, and you can see clearly why most students described being afraid at school:

Q:Do kids bring weapons into this school?

A: Just last week on Thursday there was a whole bunch of crowding on the second floor. There was a fight here and a fight there, people were pushing each other, running to see the fights. And then you would break up one, the next one would start. So I don't know. One guy pulled out a gun. And start pointing it on the second floor, right? Then another guy pulled out another gun, and started pointing it. So everybody was running down the hallways, back and forth and back and forth. And eventually they didn't catch the guy. They took everybody outside. Everybody came outside and there was still fights going on outside. People fighting, beating up. They were jumping kids. About thirty people would jump some poor person. And the police are standing right there, looking and they didn't do anything. One Haitian boy, by himself, got jumped by a whole bunch of kids. Got slashed. got his face scarred up from the pavement...And so then everybody just left and went home. I don't know, everybody wants to leave this school. Nobody wants to stay here anymore. On Friday half the kids weren't in school case they were scared. [17 year old Trinidadian female, 7 years in US, Tape 27A]

The fear was ever present for these kids, and definitely affected their ability to learn:

Its like every day you come in here, you are wondering, oh, are you gonna make it through another day of school or something.

Q:Really?

A: Because you have kids who get stabbed. Then a lot of things. Fights break out over

nonsense. You know, "Oh she looked at me funny", or you know, "Oh, he stole my girl:. Some real nonsense. Its like it makes no sense. Its just not necessary...People have knives and stuff like that. Guns. But nobody get shot in here, but we have people who have been stabbed. They set a girl's hair on fire. Craziiness in this school. [18 year old Guyanese female, born in US, Tape 5A]

You face drug dealers right outside the doors of the school before you went in there. They were selling marijuana right outside the door before you would go into school. I got mugged twice.

Q:And you are a big guy.

A:I was a little smaller then. I was pretty good size. And you would get mugged. It was like an adventure going to school everyday. You never knew what was gonna happen. [22 year old Jamaican male, 14 years in US, Tape 75A]

The metal detectors that come to these schools on a random basis do not reassure these students very much. Most students we talked to wanted the metal detectors to be permanent--not just there one or two days a week. This was said with some sadness as more than a few students thought that it made them feel like they were in jail. As one student put it, white kids don't have to go through metal detectors to go to school.

There are no statistics on how many students actually carry weapons but for an inner city school, it is very common, Indeed, in a nationwide survey conducted by the New York Times 31% of white teenagers surveyed and 70% of black teenagers reported knowing someone who had been shot in the last five years. In this nationwide survey 54% of black teenagers reported that they worried about being a victim of a crime, and the crime they are most worried about is being shot.⁷

The unpredictability of the violence comes through in many of the students accounts. Walking through the hallways is dangerous because of the danger that you might inadvertently bother someone with a weapon:

I touch this guy by accident. It was like right there in the hall. (he points to the hall outside of the room we are interviewing in) All the kids are right there. And I touched him, I brushed against him. He said, why you hit me? I said, I ain't hit you. I just kept on walking. And he came behind me and then I stopped. I got to the classroom upstairs and I stopped in front of the door and he grabbed me. And I said I didn't hit you and I tried to walk away and he hit me in the face. It was a black American guy. And the Jamaicans, my friends, they see this happen and they stopped the guy...But because of what happened I had to come home that same day early. I missed like two classes because my face was all red and everything. My nose was bleeding.

Q:Had anything happened to you before this?

A:When I first came out of freshman year--it happened to everybody. It was really, really bad. You walking in the hallway and you see two kids, you don't think about them. You walk past them, they might touch your bag like, give me a dollar, give me a quarter...In summer time its really bad too because the kids are outside. My friend, he walked outside. He stepped outside and the door locked behind him. Three kids backed him up against the door and started going through his pockets. Stuff like that always happen. And its never ever West Indian kids. Its always a black American kid, looking for trouble. [18 year old Jamaican male, 3 years in US, Tape 24A]

This young man was very short and doing very well in school. He was a prime target for kids who wanted to harass him, and after we turned off the tape recorder for the formal part of the interview he admitted that he carried a gun for protection. He said that while most kids carried knives you never knew when you would come up against someone with a gun:

You brush up against the wrong guy and you can just feel that lump. You're like, Oh God, I hit the wrong guy and you turn back quick. Most of the guys carry knives. You probably see seventy five percent of the guys carry at least a blade or a knife or something.

Q:Where do kids get guns?

A:Oh Miss, I could buy you anything you want. If you just know the right guy.

Q:I don't want anything.

A:yeah. right. You don't want nothing. I mean anything at all, for the right price, you can get anything.

Q:How much does a gun cost?

A:It depends. Like cops in New Jersey, they carry darks. That's porcelain guns that are made of--do you know about guns Miss?

Q:No, I really don't.

A:Its a gun that's made of porcelain. It can't be picked up by a metal detector...And if you want that its like six hundred dollars for that. But if you just want a regular. Do you know where the Junction is in Flatbush?

Q:yes.

A: If you went down there, I mean you'll see a good number. And you'll see the right guy and he just stop and he's like, yo. Its like what you want? And its as easy as that. And like this guy I know, no names (after the tape is turned off it turns out to be him) he bought a 22 for \$38.00. He only want it one time, that's all he wants. The guy sells it to him for \$38.00. He only want to use it one time.

Q: Why did he get it?

A: I think somebody kept on following him or something like that. I think he just wanted to be safe. [18 year old Jamaican male, 3 years in US, Tape 24A]

The teachers are also very frightened by the weapons that are in the school and the degree of violence and disruption, and it frequently came up in the interviews:

For the first time in eleven years I felt myself making decisions. Should I walk up the stairs and walk to the cafeteria, which was the safest of the two? And I feel, well, the cafeteria, because you know if you get food thrown at you, well it washes off, its done right?...I know we had a lot of fires, and I doubt there was every any report to the Board of Ed because there was never any fire personnel here. The last two fires have been reported because there have been fire personnel here. [White female teacher, age 58, Tape 2B]

Some teachers deal with this danger by trying to avoid dangerous situations. Teachers walked each other to their cars after school and tried to avoid situations where they thought they were most at risk:

I would rather not walk out of the school during lunch periods when some of the riff raff is sitting around on the stairs, steps...I know just by going to the Dean and knowing what goes on here, there are weapons that are confiscated from the kids. Weapons, I mean, there's one thing having a knife fight, there's another thing having a gun in the building...One of the things I have learned over 20 years is that one way of not dealing with things is by not getting out in the halls and confronting kids. And that's one of the reasons I like my job (doing scheduling). I can escape the chaos and sit in front of the screen. [White male teacher, age 45, Tape 5B]

Conclusion

Even families with the best intentions and the most ambitions for their children face difficult structural forces that affect their children's chances for success. In this paper I have examined the effect of neighborhoods and neighborhood schools on the experiences of the second generation. West Indian immigrants and their children are funneled into inner city neighborhoods where families are exposed to declining city services, crime and violence and declining housing stock. Racial segregation means that working class West Indian immigrants are likely to find themselves either in or in close proximity to concentrated poverty neighborhoods. Middle class immigrants are also likely to end up in neighborhoods that are predominantly black. Even people who try to move to better neighborhoods seem to be followed inexorably by a cycle of neighborhood re-segregation and economic decline.

And just at the point in history when formal education is most crucial to future economic and occupational success, these immigrants also are funneled into declining inner city schools. The New York school system struggles valiantly to provide the American dream of equal opportunity of education for all youth, even the academically unprepared. Yet the particular problems of academically unprepared immigrant youth and of an increasingly armed and violent society which does not stop at the schoolhouse doors conspire together to make it very difficult for these immigrant children to achieve that dream.

While the literature on the second generation stresses the fact that some second generation youth do well despite their nonwhite status, and stresses the fact that those youth who do not do well exhibit elements of an "oppositional identity", this emphasis on the cultural beliefs of youth themselves only explains one part of the sorting process that occurs as people move from school to work. It explains why some youth may succeed in bad schools and it explains why those who do not

succeed are less likely to accept the low skilled jobs their parents work at. It does not explain why black immigrants face worse schools and neighborhoods than other immigrants and why black immigrants experience higher degrees of segregation than other immigrants. This paper has described the ways in which first and second generation West Indians experience neighborhood and school segregation and the ways in which this segregation dashes the hopes of some families that their children will acquire the skills necessary to get the kinds of jobs they want.

Notes

- 1.This residential integration does not integrate the schools because the Jewish children attend religious schools.
- 2.The historian Joel Perlmann first suggested this image to me in a conversation we had on the topic.
- 3.These are pseudonyms for the public high schools where I did my fieldwork.
- 4.As Roberts rightly points out, it is difficult to compare the two figures directly since South African students who do not make it to their senior year in high school don't get to take the exams, whereas a larger percentage of students in New York would at least get to take the exams. Nevertheless the black-white disparities in New York are very disturbing.
- 5.Sam Roberts, "Low test scores jar South African and US blacks" New York Times, February 12, 1990. Section B, Page 1, Column 1,
- 6.Gopaul-McNicol (1993:13) notes that in Jamaica only 25% of potential students obtain a free high school education. She estimates that in the other islands the percentage is 30-40%, "except for the very small islands, where the population is so small that all students receive a free high school education". The students who do not gain entrance to the academic high schools can attend programs which are mostly vocational.
- 7.New York Times, Sunday July 10, 1994 page 16.

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