The "Hustle": Socioeconomic Deprivation, Urban Drug Trafficking, and Low-Income, African-American Male Gender Identity

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ABSTRACT. *Objective.* **Drug trafficking seems to be both prevalent and associated with considerable morbidity and mortality among inner-city African-American males. Survey data has indicated the possible importance of economic need in the rapid emergence of drug trafficking in this population. In the present study, an historical-cultural approach is used to examine this economic relationship further and to explore the role that drug trafficking plays in a society that has permitted its successful and rapid growth.**

Methodology. **Data were obtained from interviews of approximately 600 African-Americans residing in inner-city neighborhoods in Washington, DC and Baltimore during nine drug- and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome-related studies conducted over 4 years.**

Results and conclusions. **From the perspective of the study participants, the need to provide economic support for one's family as well as to achieve some sense of status, respect, and reputation among one's peers are two core constructs of masculine identity in the United States. The historical and worsening inequities in access to economic resources and power by African-American males are viewed as significantly reducing the opportunity for economic success through more social or legal enterprises. Pursuit of nonmainstream activities (such as drug trafficking) is perceived as offering an opportunity for economic advancement and for establishing a power base for individuals who have been denied access to mainstream opportunities.** *Pediatrics* **1994;93:1050–1054;** ***culture, history, economics, drug trafficking, African-American, adolescent.***

THE PROBLEM

Drug trafficking is increasing in prevalence and seems to be highly correlated with the increase in violence witnessed during the past decade.[1] Homicide is currently the leading cause of death of young African-American males between the ages of 15 and 34.[2] Further, drug trafficking seems to be associated with other high-risk behaviors.[1] These observations lead to an important public health question: Why is drug trafficking and related violence prevalent among young African-American males at this time?

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Portions of this paper were presented at the University of Maryland at Baltimore conference, "Securing Our Future: Towards a Comprehensive Strategy to Protect Youths from Drug Trafficking," November 18 through 20, 1993.
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Quantitative survey data indicate that, beyond living in areas with high rates of drug trafficking and/or violence and associating with friends and family members who engage in these activities, certain perceptions also seem to be associated with an increased risk of engaging in drug trafficking. Specifically, attitudes toward employment and the legal system seem to be highly correlated with drug trafficking: the perceptions that it is important to earn money, that drug trafficking is the only way a youth can make money, and that being arrested is respected among one's peers.[1,3-5] Although such data provide some insight into the phenomenon of drug trafficking, they still do not permit a comprehensive understanding of the role that drug trafficking plays in the local culture and thus would not necessarily lead to the development of successful intervention strategies.

THE BIG MAN-LITTLE MAN COMPLEX

Rather than restricting our analyses to current and local urban neighborhoods we believe that an enhanced understanding of the role of drug trafficking in society can be obtained by examining the phenomenon in an historical and cross-cultural context. By clarifying the societal "niche" that drug trafficking fills, we may gain a greater understanding of how and why this practice has grown so rapidly among African-American adolescents and young adults.

In a series of newspaper articles in 1989, young, incarcerated inner-city drug traffickers were quoted as articulating sentiments such as: the desire to be a "big" man; initiating fights to demonstrate "strength" and to develop a "reputation"; establishing one's reputation, gaining respect, and reaching a level of "bigness" (elevated social status) after gaining possession of a gun; and, having to use the gun as a way of maintaining one's reputation, respect, and social status. These words seemed very similar to those noted by the senior author (T.L.W.) while conducting ethnographic research in the 1970s in a small sugar-cane town in Jamaica. In this Jamaican town, "little men" (low in socioeconomic status) often talked of becoming "big" by establishing a "reputation" through the exhibition of masculine "strength" characterized by demonstrating "gamesmanship" skills in such behaviors as seducing women through sweet talk, paternity, winning at games such as dominoes and cards, and in such physical activities as wrestling or boxing, or drinking rum. "Reputationally" strong men were also those who were tough, exhibiting such authority-defying behavior as "raising hell" or "bucking the masse" (a slave period metaphor expressed in

contemporary times by defying a "bigger" or more powerful man).[6-8]

Reputational and respectability attributes were analyzed as two categories of masculine strength in this Jamaican context. Respectable masculine strength included such attributes as legal marriage, maintaining an economically and sexually stable home, demonstrating superior intellect through "talking pretty" (speaking standard English rather than dialect), and worldly knowledge. Little men had limited resources and therefore they had a difficult time achieving attributes of respectability.

Whitehead came to believe that a similar gender construct might be functioning among US urban, African-American drug traffickers.[9,10] There are historical parallels between the two study areas: these include long periods of plantation slavery and persistent poverty from post emancipation to the present day, and perceptions of lower status vis-a-vis the English and Euro-Americans in both Jamaicans and African-Americans. During the 1970s, drug trafficking was widely rumored on the island as the vehicle by which recently arrived big men had achieved their economic status. Finally, just as violence emerged as a major problem in the United States during the past decade, violence was perceived by Jamaicans to be racking the island during the mid-1970s. Furthermore, historically, there was a continual flow of people and products between Jamaica and North America, and the North American consumers were a primary market for Jamaican drugs, "ganja" or marijuana during the 1960s and 1970s, and crack cocaine through the 1980s. In the present paper, seeking to understand the rapid emergence of drug trafficking among low-income, urban African-American men, we examine the concepts of respectability, responsibility, access to money, and drug trafficking.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on data collected since 1989 from nine drug- or acquired immunodeficiency disease syndrome-related ethnographic studies conducted in Baltimore and Washington, DC by the Cultural Systems Analysis Group, an applied research and technical assistance unit of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maryland, College Park.

The methodology of data collection has included open-ended, group, and ethnographic interviews, and full neighborhood ethnographies. Subjects have included young African-American male and female clients of clinics for sexually transmitted disease, African-Americans living with HIV in Baltimore, outreach workers and other staff who provide prevention and human immunodeficiency virus care services to inner-city neighborhoods, vice policemen, young drug traffickers, and African-American youth and adult inner-city residents of Washington, DC and Baltimore. Through these studies Cultural Systems Analysis Group staff and associates have interviewed more than 600 men and women residing in the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan areas. Because this paper focuses more on the social marginality of African-American men, the data from male interviews was utilized to a greater extent. The ages of the males we interviewed ranged from 10 through 49 years, with most between 14 and 29 years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Economic Capacity as a Core Attribute of Ideal Masculinity in the United States

In both Baltimore and Washington, DC, adolescents and young adult men responded to our questions about drug selling, their neighborhoods, and their family and peer relationships with discussions concerning issues of employment for African-American adolescents and young men. During an interview, a 17-year-old who had been involved in drug trafficking described both his and his father's unemployment status, ". . . if your parents ain't no big time money makers, and you know, you see people with clothes and stuff, you know, with new stuff all the time, and you know you want stuff like that, but you know you ain't old enough to get no job, first thing you gonna do, well the first thing I done was try and sell drugs...my father didn't have no job. . . ."

Historically, inadequate employment opportunities are well documented to have contributed to the social marginality among African-American men in the United States. The classic urban ethnographies of the 1960s and 1970s[11-15] all reported on the social marginality and perceived loss of sense of respectability among lower income African-American males. These undesirable outcomes were attributed to chronic employment difficulties. More recent work has documented the same.[16-18] As a consequence of employment and economic difficulties, low-income, African-American men have often perceived "hustling" as a viable path toward achieving economic needs, social respectability, and a sense of self as a man.

Historically, patterns of enslavement, racism, and economic inequality have limited opportunities of African-Africans to participate in the economic structure of mainstream society. During the antebellum period, although the master had control over all the slave's life chances, including his or her labor, the slave utilized every aspect of his or her environment to supplement the food provided by the master.[19] In post-slavery years, in both rural and urban settings, mainstream society, often backed by Jim Crow laws, limited employment opportunities of African-Americans to low-paying manual labor, or so called "negro work". As African-American men and women migrated north to the large industrial cities, they faced a fragile employment market coupled with racism and violence, so that, even when individuals obtained employment, they were the first to loose their positions during economic downturns.[20] During the 1980s, urban economies were suffering from a decreased tax base. The political climate of privatization and conservative ideology further damaged an already precarious "safety net."[21] African-American men were loosing their positions in industries that during the 1960s had allowed men with a high school education or less to afford the trappings of a middle class family. The contextual and historical antecedents to life for African-Americans in the 1990s is conceptualized by a life-long street hustler when he stated: "All black men in the United States (U.S.) have to know how to hustle. 'Cause a nigger will always be seen as a nigger...Hustling has been the only way that black men have been able to make it in America."

For low-income, African-American men in US cities during the 1980s and early 1990s, the achievement of respectability was farther away than ever, as young men were presented with less opportunity for entering the middle class than the partial opening available

to their fathers. Into this period of declining economic opportunity, during the mid 1980s entered crack cocaine as a vehicle for the young African-American man to achieve respectability through his hustling skills (vide infra).

"Hustling" and Other Male Work in the American Cultural Context

Our male study participants believed that African-American men have always had to hustle to make it economically in America and to have respect. Study participants defined "hustling" as a complex of money-making activities including: (1) the willingness to work long hours; (2) holding multiple employment situations; (3) taking risks which have the potential for yielding maximum economic returns for minimum effort of input; and (4) in scarce economic environments, the willingness to take advantage of whatever economic opportunities are available in that environment, some of which may be defined as illegal by the wider society. They also strongly believed that *all* American men must hustle if they want to make it economically—unless they are born wealthy. They believed that white men "rip people off" and engage in both legal and illegal hustling for much more money than do African-Americans; but, whereas African-American men are likely to be jailed for hustling, white men are rewarded, even for illegal hustling. These sentiments may be best summarized by the following comments:

- "... every man in America hustles if he want to be something. Not to hustle is un-American."
- "Those hustling on Wall Street and Capitol Hill ... we are no different from the Boeskys, the Oliver Norths, the George Bushes ... they all hustle ..."
- "Hustling is American ... just that I got less room and less money to hustle as the white boy. While I only have two blocks in Southeast Washington to do my business he has the whole world".

Participants in our research perceived that this willingness to hustle, to work long hours to achieve the American dream of economic security, is a value shared by all segments of American society. Young African-American drug traffickers may be viewed as demonstrating a version of the "American work ethic." In a recent study by the Rand Corporation of drug traffickers in Washington, DC,[22] two thirds of those interviewed stated that drug trafficking was a second job. On their primary or legal jobs, the men's median income was $7.00 per hour or about $800.00 per month; these respondents stated that selling drugs part-time they made up to $30.00 per hour or as much as $24 000.00 per year. They compared their work with that of professionals who perform lucrative consulting on the side.

For both the drug trafficker and the professional consultant, hustling is a means of enhancing their economic status. For urban, low-income, African-American men, however, legal means of securing economic status and security are limited by the decline of job opportunities in urban areas and continued patterns of discrimination in the job market.[23,24] Because young drug traffickers do not see themselves as different from any other entrepreneur, they explain their activities as simply "business," and themselves as "small businessmen." Thus their decisions on certain actions cannot be based on emotional factors, but should be understood in terms of what makes "good business sense." They show genuine concern about the impact of drugs and guns on their own communities, but say they are not the ones who bring in the drugs, and there is nothing that they can do to stop importation of drugs. Moreover, drug and gun trafficking are the only means left for them to be able to take care of their families. They view themselves as the "small fish" in the world economic sea of drug trafficking and gun smuggling. Thus, a young man of 22 reflected on his ownership of a gun: "Hey, I got a gun that can do more damage than the next guy... like George Bush who showed he had a bigger gun than Saddam Hussein."

Our study participants interpret the difference between themselves and white hustlers as a function of: (1) differences in accessibility to economic, political, and social resources; (2) differences in opportunities for discretion; (3) entrenched racial prejudice and discrimination patterns that maintain the differences to access; and, (4) social and linguistic structures that reproduce and maintain all of the above and contribute to these young men's cognitive structuring of drug selling. In summary, their argument seems to be as follows: All American male children historically have been socialized to hustle by American institutions, from traditional family and school systems to current mass media productions. However, there have been marked racial differences created in the accessibility to opportunities for successful hustling. Yet, the values are the same, whether they are the values of the African-American street hustler in southeast Washington, DC or the corporate executive. The difference is how, where, when, and with whom, the behavior resulting from the value is expressed. Inaccessibility to resources contribute to the street hustler being relegated to a playing field of a few city blocks, whereas, according to our study participants, the corporate executive plays any place in the world that economic opportunities become available.

Reporting in the *Washington Post* (January 13,1991:C1), McCall commented that in urban America where there has been an ongoing decline in employment opportunities, the drug trade has become the inner city's answer to capitalism and "the American Dream." He quotes an attorney, Johnny Morrison, from his hometown of Portsmouth VA: "The drug trade is one of the few places where young, uneducated blacks can say, I am the boss. This is *my* corporation."

One of the ways that human groups create and recreate a sense of cultural, ethnic, class, racial, and gender boundaries is through the use of language[25] and the differential meanings attached to semantic categories. *Ideational* (linguistic and cognitive) structures act to maintain a sense of a moral difference between African-American and whites at the same time that African-Americans have less access to economic resources and opportunities for legal hustling. Thus the

term "hustling" is usually associated with African-Americans, and given socially negative connotations such as cheating, exhibiting criminal behavior, or having attributes of antisocial or low moral behavior. Successful mainstream corporate executives, expressing behaviors that at some levels are very similar to those of street hustlers, are conducting the socially valued "competing successfully."

CRACK! A Vehicle for Reconciling a Long Fragmented Gender Self

In human societies, one's personal identity is highly influenced by society's ideal gender definitions.[9] The concept of "fragmentation of the gender self" is a reference to the idea that both reputational and respectability attributes are part of the cultural ideal of masculinity in America, but that respectability traits have long been denied to African-American men in America, leaving their sense of gender self fragmented. Because of the dependence of respectability on a man's economic capabilities, the reconciliation of the gender self for African-American men is dependent on providing economic opportunities that will "make a man feel like a man."

As discussed earlier, during the 1970s and 1980s, economic opportunities for most inner-city, African-American men declined. Not only were there fewer opportunities for mainstream employment, but there were fewer opportunities for both legal and illegal hustling. The latter improved with the increased popularity of crack cocaine that American cities began to experience in the early 1980s.

Crack became very marketable in the lower income inner-city communities by the mid-1980s because it was very inexpensive to make.[26] Being inexpensive to make, it was also inexpensive to sell, and could be produced in much less expensive units than other drugs. Thus, in some cities, a unit of crack could be obtained for as little as three dollars.[27,28] The low cost of crack units made it very accessible to poor populations,[29] and the method of producing it could mean a return to the street hustler of sixty dollars on twenty dollars of cocaine. Moreover, the drug is said to produce an intense euphoric high, which is short lived (3 to 5 minutes), followed by a strong craving to regain the high.[27]

Such properties also expanded the possibilities of illegal hustles beyond simply the selling of the drug. For example, the low unit prices, powerful, short-lived highs, and strong cravings to repeat the high, have given rise to expanded and new forms of commercial sex. Poor women with little more to exchange for the drugs than sex have been drawn into the commercial sex industry once they are hooked on the drug.[30] Because of the strong smell of the drug, violent attacks on the streets, or the threat of policemen, have resulted in the proliferation of "crack houses" sometimes being sought as safe havens for acquiring and using the drug, and in some cases a place for sex-for-drug exchanges. Such factors have given rise to different types of crack houses operating in some cities, which offer varied types of services. Other illegal hustles spawned by the crack epidemic are jobs in the organizational structures of successful crack dealers, people who rob crack users and dealers, burglaries, etc.[26,29,31] In summary, the crack epidemic increased the illegal opportunities for hustling in the inner city, as legal possibilities for economic income declined during the 1980s. It provided an alternative for men to enhance their economic status, and thus to achieve the American masculine ideal. The cocaine epidemic gave rise to the "Yo Guy."

In the Baltimore discussion groups in the late 1980s, the "Yo Guy" was defined as a young man who wore expensive gold chains around his neck, designer name brand sweat suits and sneakers. These symbols of money and power may change over time, and may often vary between cities, and even between neighborhoods. However, the symbolic association between type of clothing, drug trafficking, money, defiance, and risk taking is particularly potent. Participants suggest that a non-Yo is at a disadvantage in the male game of sexual competition, particularly in seeking a woman's affection, when a Yo is around:

> Young girls go for that type [Yo's], they figure he got money, they can get Jordache pants, Calvin Klein, leather jackets, gold. The way they use monies they don't have monies to save, they have money to buy $95 shoes, or they have to buy the gold rings for $120 or whatever, so its all material, everything is clearly material. So girls might say, 'well his material is going to be my material', it's basically what might attract them.
>
> The . . . [Non-Yo] he . . . spends his money thinking responsible, a girl can't get no money out of him, she rolled out, if he ain't going to spend it on her, she don't want to be with him, she don't want to share, she just wants the guy to do [pay for] everything.

Nor is it simply the reputational success that drug trafficking brings a young African-American male, but also the core respectability attribute of a man's ability to provide economically for his family. Young adolescents may need to provide resources for his/her family, and/or provide drugs to family members. As one young woman stated: "And some [drug dealers] just they either take care of theirself or take care of like their family. Like if some got children, take care of their kids . . . And you don't want to see your parents out there trying to do whatever they can to get drugs. So, you try to take care of them or you try to support their habit, or help them."

In his classic ethnographic study of young drug traffickers in New York City, Terry Williams[17] observed that most of the large quantity of money that 14-year-old Max made in 5 years was sent back to his family in the Dominican Republic. This rush by young men to take on the adult role of economic provider has also been observed in the Caribbean[7] and in US rural settings.[30] Young African-American boys learn very early from family and society that respect and status come in response to his earning capacity and his ability to provide his for family. The role played by illicit drug trafficking in accelerating this "rush to manhood" for the African-American boy is exemplified in a statement from a young man who had sold drugs and had spent time in jail for it: "When they took me off to jail, I did feel good that I had bought stuff so that my family was taken care of."

The reconciliation between the fragmented masculine respectability and reputational attributes is best

embodied in this statement made during a focus group interview with a young adult (late 20s) drug seller in Baltimore, who wore an expensive leather coat, gold chains, and had three gold teeth in front of his mouth with one of his initials on each:

> Look man, two years ago, I didn't have anything, I couldn't buy anything, couldn't get a woman . . . and my family thought that I was worthless. Now, I have clothes, money, cars, and women living in 20 different houses. I provide for them. They don't have to turn to nobody else. I did it all myself. And nobody messes with me! You know why? Because I have scratch [money]."

SUMMARY

Quantitative surveys have indicated the importance of economic factors in the rapidly expanding role of drug trafficking among low-income, urban, African-American male adolescents.[1,3,23,32] These findings have been both validated and placed in an historical-cultural perspective in the current analysis.

Within an historical pattern for African-Americans of limited access to education and jobs, in the 1980s large urban centers in the United States experienced an accelerated decline in resources as industries moved either out of the United States and/or into outlying suburban areas. Illegal economic resources thus became increasingly important both as a means for meeting needs and as a means of (re)creating gender identity for many lower income, African-American males. With the arrival of crack cocaine, the field of drug trafficking enabled enterprising young African-American men to engage in the 1980s–1990s arena of power, entrepreneurship, and consumption. Young men who engaged in drug trafficking were able to contribute to their reputational status, as well as their respectability, because they were able to provide for their families, at the same time as they were increasing their status and reputation "on the street."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper includes data from research supported in part by Health Resources and Services Administration (CAN 2–3703030); The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (H13 8P06060); the National Institute of Mental Health (U10 MH48068); the National Institutes of Health (RO1-HD27114); The Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (U01) H507392; the National Institutes of Drug Abuse (subcontract); the Centers for Disease Control (several subcontracts and consultations).

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