A SAFE HAVEN OR A REVOLVING DOOR?:
EXPLORING URBAN YOUTHS' PERCEPTIONS OF A MUNICIPAL RECREATION
CENTER IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA

By

Cameron Thomas Herman

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Sociology–Doctor of Philosophy

2017

ABSTRACT

A SAFE HAVEN OR A REVOLVING DOOR?:
EXPLORING URBAN YOUTHS' PERCEPTIONS OF A MUNICIPAL RECREATION
CENTER IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA

By

Cameron Thomas Herman

Access to stable and quality institutions can determine the trajectory of young people's lives. Previous literature notes that persistent structural inequalities create disparities in access to and quality of public institutions among youth in low-income urban communities. Municipal governments are increasingly coordinating public resources to provide programs that address the disparities in these communities. While these efforts create opportunities for urban youth, young people's perspectives are often cast as silent recipients of these services. The present dissertation focuses on youth who attend a revitalized municipal recreation center in Atlanta, Georgia, to understand the ways youth in low-income urban communities utilize public institutions to navigate a social environment shaped by persistent structural inequality. Utilizing an ethnographic approach, over 300 hours of participant observations and eighteen (18) semi-structured interviews with youth ranging in age from 13- to 20-years old were conducted over the course of thirteen months to explore young people's perceptions of and experiences in the recreation center within the context of their social environment. A grounded analysis of the qualitative data revealed that youth participants viewed the recreation center as a valuable institution for young people in the community citing its capacity to intervene in young people's lives by keeping them "off the streets" and "out of trouble." Yet, their perspectives illuminate the ways interactions within the facility can operate as barriers to access, an experience that further marginalizes sub-groups of urban youth who already exist at the periphery of city life.

For my brothers –
Adrian, Anderson, Andrew and Kaleb.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am fortunate to have the support of a wide community of family, friends, and professional colleagues whose collective support and constant encouragement helped sustain me during this project and throughout my graduate career at Michigan State University. I would like to thank my parents June and Kevin Nelson for instilling the value of education in me at an early age and supporting my ambitions. Your constant, unconditional love is the foundation of all that I have accomplished. I love you very much and I hope to continue to make you proud.

I would like to thank my brothers, Adrian, Anderson, Andrew, and Kaleb, my first friends and the ones who helped me learn at an early age what it means to care for Black boys growing up in this world. Our experiences have deeply informed my scholarly work as I continue to question the ways this world creates and constrains opportunities for young people. Thank you for your encouragement and friendship. Many thanks to John, Josephine and Junior West for creating space for me to write and think during our summer in Toronto and for checking in regularly to see how I was doing and offering a kind word of support. And I would like to thank my grandmother, Marjorie E. Washington, the matriarch of our family, for lifting me up in prayer and sending surprise packages of homemade baked goods when the mood struck you.

I would like to thank my dissertation committee members who guided me to this point with their encouragement, necessary critiques, and support throughout this process. Dr. Taylor, "Doc," you have been in my corner since day one and I have learned so much by working under your tutelage throughout the years. Thank you for always providing an honest perspective and solid guidance. Dr. Stephen Gasteyer, you have gone above and beyond to support me and this work over the last year. Thank you for your commitment to bringing this work to fruition. Dr.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

On Tuesday, August 10, 2010, Kasim Reed had been Mayor of Atlanta for eight months, yet he was well on his way to fulfilling a campaign promise to youth in his city. As Atlanta Public Schools prepared to reopen for the 2010-11 school year, Mayor Reed welcomed nearly 1,000 students from Intown Academy to the newly refurbished gymnasium of the Central Park Recreation Center, in Atlanta, Georgia's Old Fourth Ward neighborhood, home of the city's most revered son, Martin Luther King, Jr. Reed was joined by members of Atlanta City Council, former Mayor Sam Massell, NBA Hall of Famer Dominique Wilkins, and civic and community leaders from around the city to reaffirm the promise he made to youth throughout the City of Atlanta, Georgia:

> Today, we are keeping a promise, addressing an urgent need, fulfilling a dream and ensuring our City is better able to provide for the safety, welfare and overall positive development of Atlanta's youth... With the opening of the recreation centers, we are providing new opportunities to the youth of this City, and I pledge that my commitment to them will continue long after the joy of this ribbon-cutting has passed (City of Atlanta 2010).

Several children joined Mayor Reed and elected officials to cut the ribbon to officially re-open Central Park Recreation Center. After announcements were made and photos taken, Mayor Reed and other dignitaries joined the kids to play basketball and hopscotch, and soccer while other children set up and knocked down bowling pins, taking advantage of the revitalized space in their community (City of Atlanta 2010; Suggs 2010).

1

Mayor Reed's vision of the recreational facilities went beyond an institutional space for youth in the city to play basketball and other games. Central Park Recreation Center was one of six facilities re-opened within a week of the start of the school year. By the end of his first year in office, Mayor Kasim Reed's administration galvanized the support of the Atlanta's City Council and recruited the financial resources from the city's business community to fulfill his campaign promise to reopen all 33 recreation centers throughout the city, two-thirds of which were shuttered by the previous administration to avert an impending fiscal crisis. Through the continued support from the municipal government and contributions from the city's business community, Reed intended to transform these institutions into "Centers of Hope," safe havens for Atlanta's youth to receive mental and physical exercise, build nurturing relationships with adults, and develop skills necessary for adulthood (Ogunsola 2010).

Municipal Initiatives for Urban Youth

Atlanta is not alone in its municipal pursuit to provide programs and services for urban youth. The Centers of Hope initiative is an example of a larger trend taking place in cities across the United States. Cities across the United States are coordinating public and private resources to provide programs for young people (Noam, Miller, and Barry 2002; Spooner 2011). For instance, "Hire LA's Youth" is an initiative led by Los Angeles' municipal government in partnership with its Chamber of Commerce that works to facilitate youths' participation in the local workforce. The goal of Hire LA's Youth is to provide 20,000 young people between age 14 and 24 with year-round employment by 2020 (Mayor's Office 2016). In Cleveland, Ohio, former Mayor of Cleveland, Frank Jackson (2006-2014), took office in 2006 and engaged in coordinated efforts with the metropolitan school district and a variety of public and private stakeholders to establish MyCom (My Commitment, My Community), a citywide coordinating entity to align

the out-of-school time (OST) offerings and promote youth and community development (Spooner 2011).

Additionally, organizations such as the National League of Cities' Youth, Education and Family Institute and the Mott Foundation's Afterschool Alliance have emerged in the early 2000s to assist municipal leaders expand learning and development opportunities for youth in underserved communities (Afterschool Alliance 2016; Ouellette, Hutchinson, and Frant 2005). Afterschool programs have received broad public support from citizens and municipal leaders as a format to deliver programs and services designed to address the needs of youth. A 2003 survey of 501 municipal officials conducted by the National League of Cities found that 22 percent of local elected officials identified afterschool programs as the most critical need for children and families in their communities.[1] Between 74 and 86 percent of parents living in communities of concentrated poverty agreed that afterschool programs could help their child develop a range of interpersonal skills and address behavioral issues at school (Afterschool Alliance 2016). Afterschool programs and the institutions that host them are commonly viewed as safe spaces and safe havens for youth in inner-city communities, offering protection from the challenges and dangers of their environment (McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman 1994; Pryor and Outley 2014). Despite the support and perceived benefits to youth and their families, municipal leaders must contend with a number of issues to provide these services to youth in their communities.

Municipal governments are launching these initiatives for youth within the context of declining support from the federal government and deepening urban inequality. Historically, city governments and administrations have been committed to providing public services and facilities for the city's populace (Kinder 2016; Miraftab 2004). Citizens could reasonably expect access to

---

[1] National League of Cities. Strengthening Families in America's Cities: Afterschool Programs, 2003.

public safety services through the police and fire departments, sanitation services, access to libraries, educational institutions and recreational facilities. Under President Ronald Reagan's administration, federal assistance to local governments was substantially reduced during the 1980s (Dreier 2011; Harvey 2005). The reduction in federal support reduced municipal government's capacity to provide basic public services to citizens including police and fire departments, sanitation services, and public schools (Peck 2012). Cities with high levels of poverty and a limited tax base that relied heavily on federal assistance to provide basic public services to its citizens often eliminated them (Dreier 2011).

Urban Inequality and Youth

As cities contend with limited fiscal support from the federal and state governments, many municipal governments no longer have the economic capital to provide municipal services on its own. These municipal initiatives are increasingly more important as inequality deepens in urban communities across the United States. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, approximately 250 million, or more 80%, of the people in the United States live in urban areas (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Additionally, nearly one-third of urban households had one or more children under the age of 18 years and 24% were living at or below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). High poverty areas across the United States have expanded since 1970 (Cortright and Mahmoudi 2014). Residents in these areas often lack some of the assets and amenities taken for granted in more affluent communities (Wilson 1987).

Youth in low-income urban communities experience the effects of inequality in ways that are normalized within their everyday lives. Concentrated poverty and racial segregation in the city tend to have the effect of concentrating a host of challenges within urban neighborhoods where members of racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to live than whites (Massey and

Denton 1993; Massey and Eggers 1990; O'Connor, Tilly, and Bobo 2001). Youth in these economically distressed communities are often exposed to violence, drugs, crime, and unemployment (Anderson 1999; Wilson 1987). Scholars note that living in impoverished community contexts constrain residents' access to resources and opportunities in mainstream society (Squires and Kubrin 2005; Wilson 1987; Wrigley and Derby 2003). Yet, when resources are available, it is common that they are of lesser quality when compared to similar resources in more affluent communities (McKenzie et al 2013). These ecological risks are not exclusive to urban America; however, their concentration in the urban context creates numerous barriers for young people's transition from adolescence to adulthood. The unifying reality among all youth is the need for support as they transition towards adulthood. Social institutions and organizations play a key role in facilitating this transition.

Institutions in Urban Communities

Municipal initiatives utilize institutions as mechanisms to connect youth in urban communities with resources, capital, social networks and opportunities that may not be readily available or accessible in their immediate environment. In the contemporary literature, social institutions have been categorized in two ways as they pertain to the lives of youth in urban communities - as vehicles for the transmission of social capital and as sites of discipline. On one hand, institutions such as the family, schools, faith institutions, and the labor force are socializing agents that provide young people with information and experiences that help them learn expected societal norms and cultivate the capital (e.g. social, cultural, and economic) needed to participate in mainstream society (Crosnoe and Johnson 2011; Norman 2004). Noted sociologist William Julius Wilson (1987) argued that the transition of inner-city economy and subsequent out-migration of the Black middle class contributed to the decline of "basic neighborhood

institutions" (e.g. local churches, schools, and community centers). These institutions were integral to providing poor urban residents with ties to social networks that could be leveraged to improve their employment opportunities and economic conditions. These institutions provided youth with access to adults who modeled middle-class, mainstream values. In the absence of these institutional ties, youth were more susceptible to turn to the streets, becoming further alienated from mainstream society (Anderson 1990, 1999; Wilson 1987, 1996).

Conversely, institutions can operate in ways that are hostile to young people in urban communities. Youth in urban areas often face difficulties entering into the labor force due to limited employment opportunities in their communities (Newman 1999; MacLeod 2009). Urban school districts are subject to increasing pressure to meet federal and state performance standards while maintaining a safe environment in which youth can learn. Further, schools have adopted zero-tolerance policies for discipline that disproportionately affect students of color (Giroux 2003; Grossberg 2001; Skiba 2014). As the United States has come to rely on incarceration as a tool to addressing crime, particularly in inner-city communities (Alexander 2011; Goffman 2014; Rios 2011), the nearly constant presence of law enforcement in urban communities has increased young people's contact with the criminal justice system to the extent that such contact is presumed a part of growing up (Alexander 2011: Rios 2011). Sociologist Victor Rios conceptualized the system of institutions in which urban youth experience ubiquitous criminalization as the *youth control complex*. Youth experience this criminalization in schools, through encounters with police and probation officers, at home within their families, in business settings, reified in the media, and in their neighborhoods, and other institutions.

Atlanta's Recreation Centers

Atlanta's Centers of Hope initiative provided a useful case for examining the role of municipal government in providing services and programs for youth. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, recreation centers are the institutional mechanisms of Atlanta's Centers of Hope initiative. Recreation centers are distinguished from other key institutions youth in urban communities (e.g. church, home, family, youth organization) may encounter in their daily lives as they have historically been funded and maintained by local government. The municipal provision of recreation activities began as a strategy to direct youth away from delinquency during their idle time as city populations became increasingly dense due to industrialization (Addams 1909, 1912; Fulk 1972; Shivers and Halper 1981).

Current research suggests the recreation center operates as site of leisure, support, skills development, and protection for youth and other members of the community (Peterson, Krivo, and Harris 2000; Pryor and Outley 2014; Ries et al. 2008; Ries, Yan, and Voorhees 2011). Youth in urban communities are more likely to use public recreational facilities than private facilities when they are available (Galaskiewicz, Mayorova, and Duckles 2013; Ries et al. 2008, 2011). Unlike school where their participation is compulsory and mandated by law, youths' participation in recreation center is a voluntary decision.

Research Problem

Existing research is replete with studies measuring the effects of youth-serving programs on various developmental outcomes (Anderson-Butcher et al. 2004; Carruthers and Busser 2000; Richards-Schuster and Dobbie 2011). Empirical studies in these fields are primarily concerned with the relationship between participation in youth programs and a variety of outcomes including academic performance, physical activity, self-esteem, fostering resilience,

7

development of social capital (Anderson-Butcher et al. 2004; Jarrett, Sullivan, and Watkins 2005; McLaughlin 2000; Rhodes and Schechter 2014) and skills competency among other outcomes. Qualitative research examining participants experiences in youth programs provide insight into the factors that facilitate continued participation (Carruthers and Busser 2000; Hirsch et al. 2000; Perkins et al. 2007).

While this body of research substantiates the relevance of afterschool and extracurricular programs in facilitating youth development, less is known about young people's perceptions of the institutions involved in municipal initiatives for urban youth. As some cities seek to secure the resources to establish citywide initiatives while others aim to expand existing programs, there is much to be learned about what aspects of these initiatives work, how they work and for whom (Noam et al. 2002). Are these institutions safe havens for urban youth or are they further alienating an already marginalized group comprising a significant portion of urban populations across the nation?

Wilson and Rios' perspectives of social institutions offer two competing ideas regarding the function of institutions in the lives of urban youth. Rios' notion of the youth control complex intrigued me particularly as I considered the implications of the Centers of Hope initiative in Atlanta, Georgia. Rios' (2011) view of social institutions' capacity to criminalize urban youth raises the possibility that young people from low income communities participating in the municipal initiative at a recreation center or other institution may have experiences that deviate from an initiative's desired impact for young people. To what extent are social institutions involved in municipal initiatives for youth capable of creating conditions that resemble the marginalization experienced by youth in Rios' study?

The Current Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of urban youth in a municipal recreation center in Atlanta, Georgia, to understand how municipal governments utilize social institutions to address the needs of marginalized groups in urban communities. Youths' perspectives are centered in this study in order to understand the social institution from marginalized perspectives. Observations and interviews are guided by two central questions:

1. Why do youth in low-income communities participate in the recreation center?

2. How do youth perceive and describe their experiences as participants in the recreation center?

Youths' collective position within the urban landscape offer a unique vantage point to understand urban communities. As a social group with limited social power, they experience the social forces and outcomes of decisions about how their environment is shaped with very little power/input to shape it in ways more consistent with their desires. Despite this unique vantage point, their perspectives are underutilized in social science research. Scholars have advocated for incorporating youth's perceptions in social science research recognizing that they are fully capable of describing and discussing the experiences within their social contexts (Fine et al. 2003; Schaefer-McDaniel 2007; Shedd 2015).

The subjective experiences of their social environment and the institutions within them have the capacity to reveal information regarding the social context that may deviate from other sources (e.g. census data, surveys and/or interviews with adults). Further, it is important to understand youths' relationship with and perceptions of these institutions in order to build upon existing programs and services aimed at serving youth within these communities. The qualitative

research on youth perceptions of their neighborhoods and institutions in their neighborhoods can inform subsequent quantitative analysis investigating the relationship between youth and their social environment (Schaefer-McDaniel 2007).

Over the course of 12 months, I volunteered with a small team of Black men who ran a tutoring and mentoring program at Hope Park Recreation Center (HPRC), a Center of Hope facility. During this period, I engaged in over 300 hours of participant observation and conducted interviews with 18 youth (age 13 - 19) who participated in youth programs offered at the recreation center. Analysis of observational and interview data revealed the contradictory nature of this municipal initiative targeting youth in low-income communities. Youth in the study experienced the institution as both a welcome option in a context they determined had very few desirable alternatives and as a space in which their presence was subject to a constant negotiation of interactions and encounters with adult staff members in the facility.

This study contributes to the sociological knowledge of urban youth and social institutions by centering youths' perspectives of the municipal recreation center as a focal point of the sociological discourse on institutions in urban communities. Beyond the role of the institution, their perspectives provide insight into the conscientious ways youth strategically utilize the recreation center to address perceived limitations of their neighborhood environments and how their use of the facility becomes an indicator of their conscientious rejection of the streets. Further, the analysis demonstrates the ways in which social institutions involved in municipal initiatives have the capacity to function as sites that reaffirms existing power dynamics in society in ways that reify the marginalization of urban youth in a space ostensibly employed for the express purpose of providing opportunities and resources to them.

Overview of Subsequent Chapters

Chapter 2 establishes the scholarly context of the study. The theoretical discussion of institutions in urban communities begins with Wilson's de-institutionalization thesis as a starting point for delineating the theoretical role of institutions in the lives of urban youth. The empirical literature draws on multiple fields of scholarship to frame youths' engagement with institutions in urban communities. This cross-disciplinary review highlights the dearth of sociology's inquiry into young people's experiences with recreation centers, the institution at the heart of this study.

Chapter 3 presents a historical perspective of youth-serving institutions in Atlanta with particular attention to those serving African American youth. Although the United States emerged from the Civil War as a politically unified nation, the United States Supreme Court ruling in the Plessy v. Ferguson case in 1895 establishing the racial doctrine of "separate but equal" re-institutionalized white supremacy preventing non-white Americans from accessing public spaces occupied by white citizens. The history of this case shaped the fabric of Atlanta for the century to follow (Bayor 1996). This chapter discusses the efforts of Atlanta's Black communities to create educational, social and recreational opportunities for African American youth throughout the city who were routinely neglected by the municipal government. This chapter establishes a specific historical context in which to understand the city's current efforts through the Centers of Hope initiative as part of an effort to address the historical legacy of racial inequality that has shaped the opportunities for Black youth in Atlanta.

Chapter 4 presents the methodological framework used to conduct the research for this study, details the rationale for the qualitative lens, and discusses the methods of data collection and analysis to create the themes presented in successive chapters. The use of an ethnographic approach with qualitative methods is consistent with the aims of this study given the exploratory

nature of this research, the focus on context as a framework for understanding young people's perspectives, and the intent of documenting the voices and experiences of urban youth of color.

Chapters 5 and 6 present an analysis of the study's findings. Chapter 5 explores youths' decisions to go to Hope Park Recreation Center. Many of their respondents' decision to use the facility is tied to the perceived lack of amenities and opportunities available to teenagers in their community. Chapter 6 presents youths' experiences and perceptions of Hope Park Recreation Center as active and engaged participants in two of programs available to older youth – Making Tomorrow's Men Today, Inc. (MTMT) and the Boys & Girls Club Teen Club. The analysis reveals the opportunities these programs provide for them as well as the challenges they experience navigating this institution that, at times, resemble the constraints they face as youth growing up in low-income communities.

The final chapter discusses the current study's core findings in the context of existing scholarly literature. The discussion highlights the key empirical and theoretical contributions this ethnographic study makes to the scholarly discourse on social institutions in the lives of urban youth. The chapter also presents a reflection on the limitations of the study and how these can be addressed in an expanded development of the project. Further, the chapter concludes with the recommendations for policymakers, practitioners and scholars based on the findings of this ethnographic study in relation to urban youths' use of recreation centers and the role of institutions in the lives of urban youth.

Chapter II

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN URBAN COMMUNITIES

The exploration of youths' perceptions of the recreation center in their lives is rooted in a theoretical and empirical discourse regarding social institutions in urban communities. The chapter begins with a brief discussion William Julius Wilson's perspective on institutions in urban communities and contemporary theories of institutions as sites of power and social control. Next, an overview of the cultural institutions historically embedded in Black communities opens the review of literature. Subsequent sections move into the existing literature on recreation facilities and youth programs to demonstrate both the expanse of knowledge on urban youths' experiences with these institutional and organizational opportunities and the dearth of knowledge produced by sociologists regarding this institution in urban environments.

Institutions and Social Capital

The sociological discourse of institutional and organizational resources in increasingly poor and black inner-city neighborhoods in the post-Civil Rights era is widely shaped by the work of William Julius Wilson. In (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson argues that the economic shift from manufacturing and production to a service economy in the post-World War II era initiated the class transition of inner city neighborhoods in Chicago. Black middle- and working-class residents left these neighborhoods as jobs moved from the city to surrounding suburbs. The outmigration of these residents increased the proportion of non-working adults in

the inner city which made it difficult to sustain what Wilson (1987, 1995) refers to as *basic neighborhood institutions*. Increasing joblessness causes stores, banks, restaurants and professional services to lose regular patrons. Other neighborhood institutions suffer as well. Membership in churches decline and their resources dwindle without the economic support provided by working families. Wilson (1995) notes that book clubs, community groups, and recreational facilities also decline in this context, leaving little behind in a neighborhood where poverty is becoming the norm.

The absence of these institutions from inner-city neighborhoods disrupted the stability of remaining urban residents who were often poor and Black. They are increasingly susceptible to social isolation, a structural mechanism of concentrated disadvantage characterized by their lack of social ties with others with higher levels of education, who are employed and have resources that could provide them with support, especially informal employment information (Wilson 1987). The loss of these social ties constricts the mobility of poorer residents and reduces the number of role models for youth.

The significance of social institutions in promoting social ties is related to the notion of social capital. Social capital is generally conceptualized as social relationships that provide positive benefits and facilitate the exchange or transfer of resources. Yet it has been conceptualized in many ways. In Coleman's (1988) view, social capital is embedded in social structures characterized by dense overlapping social networks and facilitates the actions of actors within said social structures. Actors derive mutual benefit in networks with high levels of social capital as they have access to the resources and information provided within their network.

Putnam (2000) provides a view of social capital defined as "features of social organizations, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate action and cooperation for

mutual benefit" (2000: 35-36). Putnam's conception of social capital is embedded in a community approach and include civic engagement and volunteerism. The mutual trust developed between people who interact regularly render social exchanges more efficient and allow shared challenges to be resolved more easily. Individuals engaged in active and trusting connections with other community members enhance their social capital (i.e. civic mindedness and willingness to volunteer). Further, when individual live in communities with higher levels of social capital, things can be done more easily and often more effectively.

Bourdieu's conceptualization of social capital is most aligned with the current discussion of institutions. The French sociologist defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu 1986:248). In other words, social capital is the totality of the assets available to members of a group or network. Affiliations within these groups can enhance an individual's access to other forms of capital according to Bourdieu. For instance, connecting with people possessing "expertise" can increase one's knowledge and cultural capital (the collection of symbolic elements such as tastes, skills, clothing, mannerisms, material goods etc. acquired as a member of a particular social class). Moreover, social connections can be a source for obtaining economic resources and opportunities. Institutions can facilitate the growth of these relationships, much in the ways Wilson (1987) implied in his theoretical discussion of institutions in inner-city neighborhoods.

Institutions also serve the function of maintaining social control in society. Michel Foucault's *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) (hereafter referred to as *D&P*), presents a genealogical study of the prison in which he delineates how the institution's purpose transformed from retribution to reformation and how the practice of surveillance emerged as

institution informed other institutions. The transformation of the prison's purpose changed as the brutalization and public execution of prisoners was replaced by incarceration and control as the form of punishment in modern societies. The use of incarceration and control required new technologies to achieve its stated ends. Panopticism, a concept Foucault derives from Bentham's model prison form the Panopticon, relies on the practices and technologies of constant surveillance to make individuals internalize their punishment becoming self-disciplined and docile bodies. Prisoners sit at the periphery of the panopticon while the disciplinary power resides at the center, maintaining its gaze on the subject. This direct and constant surveillance conditions the subject to internalize and accept the self-discipline as a requirement of his existence.

Foucault argues that the disciplinary practices of surveillance defining the prison's system of control have become the basis for other institutions in modern society including hospitals, schools, factories, military barracks and other institutions, all considered *disciplinary institutions* (Bevir 1999). Together, these institutions constitute a 'carceral system' in which the panopticon is embedded within and throughout society. Whereas these institutions may appear on their surface or profess a level of egalitarianism, the disciplinary processes that take place within them establish inequities as people are disciplined into different roles.

As Bevir (1999) notes, Foucault's view of institutions derives from the basis that their existence is "a consequence of being constantly recreated through a series of activities and processes which are themselves contingent and so in a state of flux" (p. 352). This perspective of the institution, as constituted through the micro-level practices and interactions, encourages the exploration of institutions from the bottom up rather than the top down. This perspective allows one to examine the ways in which disciplinary techniques operate in society to determine the

16

ways people comport themselves, their individual conduct and their relations to others (Bevir 1999).

Wilson's theory of concentrated disadvantage has continued to influence research on urban communities for three decades (see Small and Newman 2001). Nearly twenty years after the publication of *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Small and McDermott (2006)[2] raised an important critique of a central component of Wilson's framework that had gone virtually unchallenged to that point in time. Wilson's claim that poor urban neighborhoods lack social institutions and the social capital associated with them was one aspect of his theory of spatial concentration of disadvantage that received no empirical support for nearly two decades. Referring to this claim as the "de-institutionalization thesis," Small and McDermott (2006) highlight Wilson's claim is based on an entrenched study of Chicago and needed to be empirically tested. As they contend, the heterogeneity between urban contexts matter in the availability of organizational resources in low-income communities.

Small and McDermott's (2006) test of Wilson's de-institutionalization theory found that the presence of for-profit establishments decreased as the proportion of the Black population increased. "De-institutionalization is more consistent with segregated and depopulation than with concentrated poverty" (2006:1716). The findings from their study illustrated that the absence of organizational resources was more prevalent in segregated communities, echoing Massey and Denton's (1993) claim that racial residential segregation is more closely related to the issues in inner city communities than economic homogeneity.

Rutherford also tested Wilson's claim by exploring the presence of non-profits in Philadelphia neighborhoods. She integrates multiple data sets (demographic data from the 2000

---

[2] An earlier version of this paper was presented in 2004 at the Annual meeting of the Population Association of America in Boston, MA.

17

census; inventories of Philadelphia's nonprofit organizations from 1997 and 2003; and an inventory of churches in Philadelphia created by Cnaan and Boddie (2001)). Wilson's claim was not fully supported by Rutherford's analysis. Despite a net loss of non-profits in a six-year period, "ethnically diverse neighborhoods with more than 40% of residents living in poverty" had "the most extensive non-profit sectors" (Rutherford 2004: 22). Rutherford interpreted this finding to suggest that economically depressed neighborhoods had substantial institutional bases that needed support from policy-makers to become viable for their communities. Rutherford notes that the descriptive nature of the quantitative study did not permit an analysis of the quality of these non-profit institutions populating inner-city communities in Philadelphia.

Although both studies demonstrated the limitations of Wilson's claims of deinstitutionalization outside of Chicago, neither study incorporated the recreation center or other youth serving institution in their conceptualization of the institutions. To what degree do these institutions exist within inner city communities in the United States?

Based on the theoretical premises laid forth, social institutions serve to integrate urban residents into mainstream society (Wilson), serve as sites for the development of different forms of capital (Bourdieu), or to create new subjects through the articulation of disciplinary technologies of surveillance and control (Foucault). What is still to be determined is which role(s) recreation centers play in the lives of urban youth. To address this, we turn to the empirical literature to examine how current scholarship conceptualizes the social institutions relationships to the lives of urban youth.

Institutions Within the Black Community

Black communities have always been a part of American society, but the worlds of Black and White Americans have co-existed separately for much longer than they have been integrated

18

(Charles 2003; Jaynes and Williams Jr. Robin 1989). Parallel institutions developed within these segregated communities to serve similar needs of its members. Wilson theorized that the outmigration of Black middle- and working-class residents and families removed many of the basic institutions from the landscape of inner-city, a claim whose empirical basis has been contested in recent research (Rutherford 2004; Small and McDermott 2006). According to these studies, inner-city neighborhoods, populated by poor Black residents who remain either because they do not possess the resources to move or have chosen to stay, are not devoid of social institutions. A number of institutions from mainstream society overlap with the cultural institutions that are more specific to inner-city communities to provide a landscape worthy of empirical exploration.

Cultural institutions historically embedded within Black communities have often served to provide its members with a level of protection or insulation from White mainstream society. Within these spaces of community, the humanity of Black folks denied under the auspice of racism is recognized, celebrated, and nurtured. Many of these schools, churches, and voluntary service organizations predate the historical shift of the 1960s when the gains of the cumulative battles for equality that toppled the legality of segregation were first being realized (Jaynes and Williams Jr. Robin 1989). Which institutions are still present in poor, inner-city communities? How do these institutions intersect with the lives of the people who live in these communities? The following section delineates select literature focusing on the institutions in which urban youth are likely to encounter in their social environment.

The Black Church

During the pre-Civil War era, the Black church was the only institution in which the enslaved population could meet and organize without oversight from White slavers, a fact that

led Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (1963) to refer to it as the "invisible institution." The Black Church continued to grow, serving as epicenter of the Black communities since the Emancipation. It provided the moral and ethical ethos of Black communities as well as an agency of social control and organization among Black Americans. During the Jim Crow era, the Black church played a substantial role in addressing the educational, political, and social needs of Black communities that were neglected under legal doctrine of 'separate but equal' (Du Bois 1971; Woodson 1921). Theologian James Cone argues that the Christian tradition emanating from the Black Church was and is markedly distinct from the tradition practice by White Christians. Black Liberation Theology is a tradition that sees God as concerned with the weak and oppressed. Strongly influenced by Malcolm X and the Black Power movement, Cone contends that living as an oppressed group within the United States informs the Black Christian tradition and imbues it with a strong inclination to seek liberation from racism and systemic oppression (Cone 2010 [1970]).

Researchers have noted the capacity of Black churches to serve as a protective agent for urban youth. Freeman (1986) found that churchgoing helped young black males in the inner-city escape the poverty, drug use, and significantly reduced the effects of criminal activities. Johnson et al (Johnson et al. 2000) furthered this line of analysis finding that religious involvement mediates and buffers the effects of neighborhood disorder on youth participation in crime. Churches provide youth with social ties and inclusion in social support networks that provide a sense of social control beyond the church. In the post-Civil Rights era, the church continues to engage in outreach programs to serve the needs of its community (Billingsley 2003; Rubin, Billingsley, and Caldwell 1994).

While many African Americans are still affiliated with religious institutions, data presented in the Pew Research Center's *Religion Among the Millennials* (Pond, Smith, and Clement 2010) reports that religious affiliation among the current generation of young adults, or Millennials (age 18-29), is considerably less than youth in previous generations despite maintaining similar levels of religious beliefs as prior generations. It is unclear from this report whether youth under the age of 18 follow the trend of the young adults in the age cohort ahead of them. Eddie Glaude Jr. asserted in an essay first published in 2010 that Black churches "have always been complicated spaces," adding that black churches have lost their centrality in Black communities as a number of non-religious institutions have emerged and attracted the attention of people in Black communities.

Further, the growth of 'Megachurches,' religious institutions with large denominations commanding significant budgets, reflect the influence of neoliberalism in religious institutions. The rapid growth of these religious institutions is rooted in a "sophisticated business model designed to attract the maximum number of followers and offend as few as possible" (Warf and Winsberg 2010:47). They pose a threat smaller churches that cannot compete with the amenities on their religious 'campuses.' In site visits to thirty-one Black megachurches in across the United States, Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs (2011) noted the emphasis several megachurches place on community development. Their expansive budgets allow them to build modern facilities on campus that provide recreation and development opportunities tailored especially for youth. Notably, the Atlanta metropolitan area has the greatest concentrations of megachurches in the United States with 46 megachurches with nearly 200,000 attendees, over half of which are led by African American ministers (Warf and Winsberg 2010).

The Neighborhood

The conditions of urban communities often warrant youth to be aware of the potential dangers as they navigate their communities. Scholars have noted the precarious conditions youth in urban communities navigate on a daily basis as they move from home to school, from school back to the neighborhood and the spaces in-between these contexts. Aneshenel and Sucoff (1996) explored the relationship between neighborhoods and mental health among youth in Los Angeles. They found that youth living in low SES neighborhoods reported greater awareness and perception of hazards in their immediate surroundings such as crime, violence, and drug use compared to young people in more affluent neighborhoods.

Schaefer-McDaniel's (2007) study of early teens' (age 11-13) perceptions of their New York neighborhood also suggested the importance of safety in the way young people understand their social environment. When asked whether or not they thought their neighborhood was a good place to live or for children to grow up and what a young person moving to their neighborhood might need to know about the neighborhood (p.420), all of the participants discussed their neighborhood in terms of safety. They were acutely aware of places in their neighborhood where gangs were present and violence and crime had occurred in the past, deeming these areas unsafe. This information contributed to negative feelings about their neighborhoods and also informed how they moved through their community.
Urban planners concerned with the design of public space have considered young peoples' places in the environment, particularly their perceptions of space. The presence of unsupervised youth in public spaces is often negative as they are perceived as potential troublemakers and dangerous (Owens 2002). McCray and Mora (2011) examined the relationship between the types of activities low-income teenagers pursue, where they go during their free time, and their

perceptions of safety within the spaces activities take place. Most of the activities this teen population engages in do not occur in true public spaces. This group of young people could be classified as 'indoor teenagers' who socialize predominantly within the confines of homes or food shopping establishments (McCray and Mora 2011: 525)

McCray and Mora (2011) concluded that the youth in their study did not engage in activities that took place in "true public spaces" opting instead for activities in the homes of friends and families or "hanging out" at food establishments, and malls. This led the authors to conclude that "this population does not utilize public spaces like parks and recreation centers" (McCray and Mora 2011: 525). Their study did not inquire explicitly about these public spaces leading them to conclude that their apparent preference for indoor activities may be in response to the fact that they live in neighborhoods with high crime rates and found it safer to cultivate their social networks indoors (525).

McCray and Mora (2011) utilized a sophisticated data collection process that involved training the 122 participants in multiple computer programs including Arc GIS to map the scores associated with safety However, a qualitative component to this study's report may have helped understand from the students' perspectives why they did not pursue activities in these public spaces, to determine with clarity if that decision was related to crime as suggested by the authors.

Although most youth do not participate in criminal activities (Anderson 1990), they are routinely viewed as potential deviants by adult authorities. Victor Rios' (2011) ethnographic account of 40 Black and Latino males in Oakland, California, details their experiences with criminalization in their schools, neighborhoods, homes and in one particular case, a convenience store at the hands of adults. Rios describes the panopticon-like surveillance youth encounter across multiple sites within their environment as the "youth control complex," a system that

23

"treats young people's everyday behaviors as criminal activity" (2011: xiv).

Fine and colleagues (2003) surveyed 911 youth and young adults in New York and interviewed 36 participants by phone to document on urban youths' perceptions of surveillance agents, i.e., police officers, security, guards, teachers and store and restaurant staff, to understand how these interactions affected their "trust in adult society, civic institutions and democratic engagement" (p.143). Youth across race, ethnic and gender lines reported adverse interactions with and low trust of authority figures, while Black and Latino youth reported the highest rate of this sentiment. Further, these adverse interactions made them feel less welcome in 'public spaces' as well as feeling betrayed and powerless to challenge adult behavior. The findings lead Fine et. al. (2003) to conclude that these kinds of interactions with adults can raise doubt in urban youths' trust in adult society's capacity to act fairly, a factor contributing to a sense of alienation among this group.

Similarly, sociologist Carla Shedd (2015) recognized the increasing convergence of the educational system and criminal justice system that led her to dub the nexus the "universal carceral apparatus" (2015: 162). Zero-tolerance policies adopted in public schools across the United States have destabilized the notion of schools as inherently safe spaces for young people (Shedd 2015) (Giroux 2003; Grossberg 2001; Webb and Kritsonis 2006). In her mixed method study of youth navigating the terrain between home and schools in Chicago, Shedd (2015) found that youth in her study believed adults in authority positions at their schools - teachers, administrators and school-based police and security officers - were more focused on surveillance and social control than protection and education.

Taken collectively, these studies illustrate that the impact of increased policing of young males of color, particularly African American and Latino, can have adverse effects on youths'

trust in and connection to the adults and institutions in society. These increased encounters with punitive authority figures render many of the sites in their respective urban ecologies potentially hazardous to their well-being. The risk of alienation can reroute their pathway to adulthood through the criminal justice system at a young age and contribute to dropping out of school altogether. Incarceration is no longer a marginal experience reserved for society's outliers; it has become an anticipated marker of young people's transition to adulthood (Alexander 2010; Pager 2007; Shedd 2015).

The Streets

The streets are an alternative to mainstream social institutions. Today, the presence of the streets in structurally disadvantaged environments is a product of the American social structure that constrains opportunities in these communities (Anderson 1990; Clark 1965; Glasgow 1981). Useni Perkins (1975) recognized the significance of the streets proclaiming them as "an institution in the same way that the church, school, and family are conceived as institutions" (p. 26). William Oliver (2006) uses the phrase 'the streets' to refer to "the network of public and semipublic social settings (e.g. street corners, vacant lots, bars, clubs, after-hours joints, convenience stores, drug houses, pool rooms, parks and public recreational places) in which primarily lower and working-class Black males tend to congregate" (p.919). Underpinning these various notions of the street is a shared understanding that the street is where many disconnected African Americans have turned to historically when mainstream society has marginalized their existence (Anderson 1999; Taylor, Smith, and Herman 2015).

For many youth, the streets are a social place they go to "hang" out with friends, often staying out beyond any curfew set by parents or other authorities (Anderson 1990). The dearth of accessible job prospects in urban communities, either real or perceived, contributes to some

youths' decisions to forgo mainstream culture's proscribed employment pathway for the potentially lucrative earnings associated with the illicit economy (Taylor et al. 2004b; Wilson 1996). According to McLaughlin (2001), the streets and gangs offer "hazardous sanctuaries for youth who can bear no longer the hurt of neglect and their invisibility" in mainstream institutions like "schools or the labor market" (p.208). Some girls also forgo the public life and its institutions choosing the streets instead. Urban girls are also participating in gangs, finding surrogate families, protection and social belonging amidst these groups (Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn 1999; Harris 1999; Miller 2001). The streets can lure young women into the illicit economy as a viable means of economic gain. Some urban women enter the drug economy, become prostitutes, or pursue other lines of illegal activity to sustain themselves, viewing these routes of "hustlin" as empowering acts of self-determination in a society that refuses to see their worth (Taylor 1993; Taylor and Smith 2007).

Participation in the streets come with its own set of consequences. Young people's increased involvement in street life – drinking, using or selling drugs, robbing, and other illicit activities – further serves to weaken their ties to the labor market (Wilson 1996). And while the streets may be considered an exciting space for some, it is also recognized among those who spend an inordinate amount of time in this setting fraught with dangerous consequences including a diminished reputation, becoming a victim of violence or crime, or incarceration (Anderson 1999; Whitehead 2000). As discussed above, the increased contact youth and young adults in poor Black and Latino communities have with police facilitates the incarceration of this marginalized group (Alexander 2010; Rios 2011). Contact with the criminal justice system has become a normalized reality among residents of low-income communities (Whitehead 2000).

Despite the presence of this institution in low-income communities, most Black males do not center their lives in the streets or engage in street-related activities and only a small minority of youth actually become "street kids,"[3] (Anderson 1990). Still, many youths know of or have peers who are involved in street activities. Findings from Lustig and Sung's (2013) interviews with young adults in Oakland about peer relationships during their adolescence refuted claims that these peer networks facilitate participation in street activities positing instead that these relationships often helped youth navigate their communities safely.

The Recreation Center

The early development of recreation areas was part of an urban reform strategy aimed at stemming public health and crime concerns emanating from rapidly urbanizing communities in the United States (Addams 1912). Municipal parks and recreation departments began forming in the late 19th century with the mission to create spaces for communities to form. Urbanization, a growing immigrant population, and changes in child labor laws created a concern about the ways young people spent their leisure time (Halpern 2002). Ream and Witt (2004) identified the Hull House in Chicago as the precursor to the modern recreation center. Observing the disconnectedness of poor residents, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr established the first 'settlement house' on the city's South Side in 1889 to provide educational and recreational services and foster social community among the city's poor, many of which were recent immigrants from Europe. As Ream and Witt (2004) note, the development of these institutions and organizations reflected a concern for the welfare of those with access to few resources, the requisite skills or place to engage in recreation. Addams (1912) considered the formation of recreation centers the responsibility of municipal governments.

---

[3] kids without parental supervision who are left to their own devices (Anderson 1990: 4)

Wilson (1987, 1995) mentions the recreation center alongside the schools, churches and restaurants as the basic institutions that are lost in the outmigration of black non-poor from the inner-city neighborhoods. However, there is no further discussion of this institution's absence or its implications for the remaining residents. Neither Rutherford's (2004) or Small and McDermott's (2006) empirical test of Wilson's de-institutionalization thesis include recreation centers or community centers within their analysis to determine the presence of these institutions in urban communities.

Although sociologists have not, to the researcher's current knowledge, created an inventory of recreation centers available in urban communities, researchers in the health field concerned with equitable access to these institutions provide insight in the disparities facing low-income and racial and ethnic minority communities. In a study to understand the relationship between physical activity and the availability of recreation facilities, Moore et al. (2008) examined the availability of recreation centers in 685 census tracts across metropolitan areas in North Carolina, Maryland, New York.[4] Their analysis revealed that the distribution of recreational facilities reflected racial and socioeconomic disparities across census tracts. Most minority tracts (70-80%) did not have a recreational facility compared to 38% of census tracts in which White citizens comprised the majority of residents. Recreational facilities were significantly less common in lower-income and minority neighborhoods while parks were more equitably distributed across different neighborhoods. Moore and colleagues did not distinguish between public and private facilities in their study.

In 2015, Quinn et al. (2015) published a research brief reporting the availability of public recreational facilities and programs in rural and urban communities across the United States.

---

[4] The authors note that the study area was derived from a larger study of neighborhood determinants of cardiovascular risk.

Many local governments and park and recreation departments offer public recreational facilities for citizens. However, inequities along the rural-urban divide and across socioeconomic class groups exist. Quinn et al (2015) collected and analyzed data from local government offices and park and recreation departments representing 470 jurisdictions across the United States. Urban communities are more likely than rural communities to have public recreational facilities but these are less available in lower- and middle-income communities than in higher-income areas (Quinn et al 2015). While it is difficult to determine to what extent these studies validate Wilson's de-institutionalization thesis as it relates to recreation centers, what is clear is that racial and ethnic minority communities and low income urban communities tend to have less access to recreational facilities. These forms of communities often overlap in the inner-city neighborhoods.

There is a dearth of literature from sociologists regarding youths' experiences in recreation facilities, particularly within urban communities. Much of what is known regarding youths' experiences in the recreation centers and the programs they offer comes from the youth development and, to a lesser extent, public health. The youth development literature is replete with studies that provide insight into young people's participation and experiences in youth development programs, considered the traditional vehicles for facilitating youth development processes (Gambone and Connell 2004). The literature presented here features empirical research that focuses on youths' participation in youth programs.

Youth Development Programs

The unifying reality among all youth is the need for support as they transition towards adulthood. This support often comes from family, peers, and supportive adults. In addition to

these personal relationships, institutional spaces where they can engage in these types of relationships are important to facilitating their growth.

Youth development organizations are another realm designed to facilitate young people's healthy development as they transition into adulthood (Anderson-Butcher et al. 2004; Whalen and Wynn 1995). Youth development organizations encompass national programs such as the Boys & Girls Clubs, the YMCA, 4-H Youth Development, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, as well as local initiatives hosted by schools, faith-based institutions, and neighborhood-based organizations. They take on many forms to reflect the various interests of youth including visual and performing arts, academic enrichment, athletics, leadership development and recreation among others (Nicholson, Collins and Holmer 2004; Quinn 1999). Under optimal conditions, these youth-serving programs provide an environment for learning and socialization that challenges young people and opportunities to develop skills that may be required of them as members of society (Quinn 1999; Ream and Witt 2004).

Programs that provide youth with opportunities to make choices and participate in meaningful decision-making is cited as valuable component of meaningful involvement in youth programs (Carruthers and Busser 2000; McLaughlin 2000; Nicholson, Collins and Holmer 2004; Ream and Witt 2004; Roth and Brooks-Gunn 2003). Young people must feel that they are making meaningful contributions in planning and decision-making processes of their youth development program rather than following the directives of adult staff. This freedom to exercise their agency in meaningful ways reshapes traditional relationship dynamic between youth and adults towards an egalitarian approach. For young people, having a say reinforces the idea that their perspectives and ideas have value in this context, a perspective that is valuable for continued participation. The option for young people to choose the kinds of activities they

30

participate in seems to be an important factor, especially among older youth. However, many

traditional programs do not meet the needs of adolescent youth who are searching for

opportunities to make decisions for themselves and develop a sense of autonomy (Jones and

Perkins 2006).

In several studies, the idea of an 'escape' from their environment was prevalent. Youth

who participated in youth-serving programs in low-income neighborhoods often viewed the

program as their second home as it provided a safe haven from the physical dangers present in

their environment (Carruthers and Busser 2000; McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman 1994;

Nicholson, Collins, and Holmer 2004; Strobel et al. 2008). As one middle schooler in Strobel et

al.'s (2008) study, the fear of "getting beat up" or "getting hurt" diminished once inside the

recreation center. In some cases, the adults' positions as members of the community with similar

childhood experiences often reaffirmed young people's safety in the recreation centers because

they felt the adults knew how to handle themselves (McLaughlin et al. 1994).

In addition to the physical safety many young people identified with youth programs,

youth in Strobel et al.'s (2008) study noted the sense of emotional safety they felt in the

recreation centers. The atmosphere of trust made several youths feel they could be themselves

around adults and peers. This freedom helped them work out problems with one another and

share challenges they were experiencing without feeling judged of fear that their confidentiality

was being compromised. This can be a stark contrast to home environments of many youth

where communication between adults and youth may follow more traditional relationship

dynamics based on adult power and authority. Further, youth adhering to the stoicism and

coolness valued in street culture (Majors and Billson 1993; Oliver 2006) can drop these values

for the time they are in the youth programs. The safety provided in these spaces relieves young

people of the dangers that may exist in their normal environments. This safety facilitates ongoing participation in youth programs and has implications for the development of interpersonal skills.

Caring relationships between youth and adult staff members was highlighted in several studies as a valuable aspect of youth's experiences in programs and activities hosted in recreation centers or afterschool settings (Carruthers and Busser 2000; McLaughlin et al. 1994; Ream and Witt 2004). McLaughlin et al.'s (1994) early research highlighted the significance of the adult staff and volunteers, or 'Wizards,' in community centers. In their study, one young person, Tyrone, carries the sentiment of his peers as he describes his relationship with Reggie, the leader of their gymnastics team: "'Reggie's the only father I've ever known. I'll never walk away from him because I know he'll never walk away from me…'" (46). For many young people, the adult staffers take on parental or guardian roles for youth who may be searching for additional adult support beyond their home environment (Anderson-Butcher et al. 2004; McLaughlin 2000).

Youth program staffers and volunteers also serve as advisors, confidants, supporters, and role models to young people in the programs. For young people whose home life do not provide an optimal environment, nurturing relationships with caring adults transformed youth programs into second homes providing them with a sense of belonging (Carruthers and Busser 2000; Nicholson et al. 2004). These adult figures consistently put the young boys and girls participating in the programs first, a meaningful act in a society that routinely overlooks them or pushes them aside, leaving their needs unheard and ultimately unmet. Regardless of the program or activity, recreation centers offer a space where young people can seek out and typically find adults interested in building caring and nurturing relationships with them ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs are addressed.

Less is known about the reasons young people choose not to participate in youth development programs and activities. Attracting and retaining young people is a common challenge for many youth programs (Serido, Borden and Wiggs 2014). Youth-oriented facilities and programs are challenged to find the balance between creating an enjoyable atmosphere and providing youth with opportunities to develop skills that will aid them in their transition to adulthood (Quinn 1999). However, there are factors beyond the programs that prevent some youth from making it to the facilities.

There are structural barriers to participation, particularly in low-income communities where facilities are less likely to be present than in affluent communities (Quinn 1999). Quane and Rankins (2006) found that neighborhood-level factors such as availability of local organizations has an indirect effect on youth outcomes. Participation rates in youth organization are higher in communities where youth organizational resources are more available. Ream and Witt (2004) note that secure and sustained funding is often a hurdle for making these opportunities available in urban communities. Other fiscal matters may take political or economic priority over these kinds of services and demand a larger portion of the budgetary resources. As Quinn (1999) rather cynically noted, investments in youth development programs are viewed as "nice but not necessary," employed most often as a corrective when youth have veered off course (107). Some youth still encounter barriers to participation when programs and facilities are available in urban contexts. Roth and Brooks-Gunn (Roth and Brooks-Gunn 2003) found that associated costs, transportation, and limited interest in using leisure time to participate in these programs were common barriers to participation facing young people. Fees for services or participation may prevent interested youth from low-income families from participating in these programs.

Some researchers have explored young peoples' perspectives of the barriers to participating in youth-oriented development organizations and programs. Perkins and colleagues (2007) conducted focus groups with young people in a recreation center program and asked their opinions on why their peers may not participate. The young people reported that their friends might be too busy or disinterested in the youth program's activities. This is feasible considering many youths spend their time elsewhere afterschool and have other responsibilities that preclude their involvement in recreation center programs. Serido et al. (2014) examined the demands of participation as perceived by youth that may operate as barriers to continued participation in a 4-H Youth-Adult Partnership program. They found that racial and ethnic minority youth were more likely to experience the limits of their effectiveness within the program at making a change in the larger community as a barrier to continued participation. However, they may seek new opportunities to use and strengthen the skills they developed in their initial program. In this regard, Serido and colleagues noted that youth might benefit from the program and still drop out. Serido et al. (2014) noted that their analysis of perceived barriers to participation is limited by only speaking to youth in the program, a methodological decision shared by Perkins et al. (2007) study.

Aging out was among the most common reasons researchers found for the absence of older youth in youth programs. Researchers in multiple studies found that young people's participation in youth-oriented programs declines as they age (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome and Ferrari 2003; Carruthers and Busser 2000). As youth get older, they must navigate increasing academic and social demands as well as changing family roles at home (Eccles et al. 2003). Quinn (1999) reported that youth participants are finding the program activities less useful in their daily lives or less interesting. Conversely, Anderson-Butcher et al. (2003) found that an

increase in age was associated with increased alcohol use and decreased enjoyment and effort at school (Anderson-Butcher et al 2003). These findings suggest that participation in youth programs and activities could potentially operate as a protective factor youth from engaging in risk and problem behaviors as youth get older, when they are more likely to engage in these activities. For one reason or another, older youth tend to participate less in activities provided through community and recreation centers even if they held status as a participant earlier in their adolescence. This process of *aging out* is a reflection of the particular needs of older youth who are transitioning into early adulthood, a period marked by entrance into the workforce and, in some cases, pursuing further education (Arnett 2004; Arnett 2006).

The dearth of available youth programs in urban communities is a structural barrier for urban youth. African American youth are underrepresented in youth development programs compared to White youth (Quinn 1999). Middle- and upper-class youth tend to have more access to structured extracurricular opportunities beyond the school environment than youth in low-income communities. Research suggests that people of color are more likely to live in neighborhoods with higher rates of poverty which limits their access to recreational facilities and level of participation in leisure activities (McKinley et al. 2013; Quinn 1999). In urban communities where youth development organizations are in short supply, publicly funded community and recreation centers may be one of the few institutional options for young people to pursue development-related activities.

Municipal governments are playing an increasingly important role in creating out-of-school time (OST) opportunities for youth in urban communities (Ouellette et al. 2005; Ouellette and Kyle 2002). Rather than managing or funding individual programs, local governments are coordinating partnerships between government agencies, local schools, nonprofit organizations

and private sector to provide a wide range of afterschool opportunities for youth (Little et al. 2010; Spooner 2011). Recreation centers, particularly those operated and staffed by municipal parks and recreation departments (PARDs), are experiencing a period of reinvestment in cities across the United States. Recreation centers have become important sites in many cities' efforts to provide programs and services for young people as they are often embedded within contexts familiar to residents (Whalen and Wynn 1995).

In public health research, the recreation center is a site of health intervention for youth and adults alike. Public health research investigating youths' use of recreation facilities are concerned youth are not meeting the minimum levels of regular physical activity and are at risk of mental and physical health risks including hypertension, obesity, and cardiovascular disease (Quinn et al. 2015; Ries et al. 2008, 2011).

Drawing data from a cross-sectional study examining multi-level factors impacting physical activity among adolescents, two studies led by Amy V. Ries led two studies, one qualitative (Ries et al. 2008) and one quantitative (Ries et al. 2011), to investigate urban youths' use of recreational facilities for physical activity. In the qualitative study, In Ries et al.'s (2008) qualitative study, 48 African American youth between ages 14 and 18 were recruited to participate in in-depth interviews to determine the environmental factors that contribute to urban youths' use of recreational facilities for the express purpose of physical activity. Youth were asked about their neighborhoods and recreational facilities and to describe their neighborhoods, identifying any characteristics that influence their use of recreational facilities and to describe their experiences using the recreation facilities.

Their analysis revealed several environmental factors that informed their use of recreational facilities. Participants in the 2008 study felt that recreational facilities were designed

for younger children rather than to attract teenagers who preferred sports facilities (i.e. basketball courts, open fields, swimming pools, and tracks). As such, teenagers had a higher presence at parks that offer more athletic facilities. Additionally, the closer the facility, the more likely youth were to use it, especially if it was within walking distance, an important factor for teen's participation (also highlighted in Ries et al (2011)). However, the outdoor facilities increased youths' exposure to potential environmental risks. Safety was a major determinant of facility use among youth in Ries et al (2008) study. Adolescent males expressed concerns about getting caught up in drug related activity by nearby dealers who used outdoor recreational spaces (e.g. parks, playgrounds, and basketball courts) to do business (p 47). Young girls were most concerned about becoming victims of sexual assault in these same outdoor spaces, a particularly risk associated with adolescent girls and women in urban neighborhoods (see Popkin et al. 2010).

Ries et al (2011) examined the relationship between recreational center availability and urban youths' physical activity. Researchers collected several types of data to examine urban youths' use of public and private recreational facilities among a sample of 350 youth recruited from a cross-sectional study in Baltimore, Maryland. Objective measures of recreation center availability were created by geocoding participants' addresses; youths' physical activity data was collected using accelerometer device worn by participants for a period of 7 days; and perceptions of youths' perceptions of recreational center use and availability was collected via an online survey administered in school computer labs.

Statistical analysis of the data found that the difference in the use of public and private recreational facilities was informed by factors beyond availability including facility quality and social influences i.e. peer and family use of the facility. However, youth perceptions of private facilities were more positive than their perception of public facility quality in regard to

amenities, staff size, maintenance and safety. Again, cost was perceived as a barrier. Ries et al.'s (2011) findings reveal that urban youth are more likely to be active in public than private facilities because they were perceived as more available despite youths' perceptions the former are of lower quality (p 647).

Although the two studies are exploring the same phenomenon (urban youths use of the recreational facility and physical activity), the studies differ Researchers also engaged in direct observation of recreational facilities to develop a broader view of the recreational facilities as "activity settings" (p 44). The observations focused on the physical activity of young people's physical activity, which is only one facet of the recreation center experience. This is a singular focus on the utility of the recreation center as a site for urban youth. It has the potential to mean so much more to youths' lives than a place to engage in physical activity. This can best be learned by incorporating their perspectives into the data collection process.

Further, direct observation is a method of observation that watches the subject in their environment without attempting to alter the environment. It is unclear from the analysis if the researcher participated in the activities observed or engaged youth participants in the course of their observations which may have provided additional insight into the subjective experience of physical activity at recreational facilities. Yet, the qualitative nature of this study, when compared to the 2011 survey study, provides far more insight into the ways young people view their experiences within recreational facilities.

The public health research contributes to the study's awareness of the terrain of scholarship on recreational facilities, and in the case of Ries et al. (2008), the environmental factors urban youths consider in their use of these institutions. However, the public health's view of these institutions is narrowly conceptualized in terms This narrow focus resembles much of

the literature on youth programs in the field of youth development. While insightful, examining institutions from the perspective of a narrow band of outcomes can delimit our understanding of the institution itself, reducing it to an intervention site with very little interrogation of how that space or experience is understood by the young people at the center of the study.

Henderson and King (1999) viewed recreation facilities as potential leisure spaces for teenagers. In their evaluative case-study of two teen clubs located in a Southeastern city in the United States, Henderson and King combined field observations at two teen clubs in a Southeastern U.S. city and data from peer-conducted interviews with nine (9) former youth members (age 12 – 15 years old) to understand the meanings young people assign to teen spaces and to provide insight into the ways recreation programmers use space to provide structured and unstructured opportunities for young people. A central reason teens came to the teen clubs was to "hang out." Implicit in this motive was that young people wanted a safe place where they could get together and relax. Although the researchers readily identify that the teen clubs are located are racially segregated areas, one predominantly black neighborhood and the other in a predominantly white, Henderson and King (1999) do not engage the significance of this context in their analysis, reducing the scope of the study to the confines of the teen clubs' inner world.

Participants in multiple studies viewed recreation centers as important means to prevent youth from getting involved in illegal activity. Youth in Oakland felt so strongly about the value of recreational activities for teenagers, they surveyed nearly 300 youth and confronted their City Council leaders with drafted legislation based on the survey results to redirect municipal funds towards recreational facilities and programs for teenagers, an area youth in the city felt had been ignored for too long (Ashley, Samaniego, and Cheun 1996; Ries et al. 2011).

As noted above, much of the social science literature on recreation centers is the result of

non-sociological research. Victor Rios' work stands out as one of the few, if only, recent sociological studies in which urban youths' relationship with a community-based facility, in this case a community center, is explored. In *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*, Victor Rios extends Foucault's notion of panopticism – the practices and architecture of constant surveillance – to the urban context of Oakland, California, to demonstrate the ubiquitous process of criminalization endured by Black and Latino boys. Based on three years of ethnographic study, interviewing and observing Black and Latino youth in Oakland, Victor Rios contends that criminalization "the process by which styles and behaviors are rendered deviant" (p xiv), extends beyond the traditional vehicles of the criminal justice institution into their lives across multiple social institutions "including school, the neighborhood, the community center, the media, and the family" (Rios 2011, p xiv). Rios refers to this inter-related web of institutions as the *youth control complex*. In each of these institutional settings, youth in his study were subjected to messages and punitive interactions that reinforced their marginalization to the point in which several of his participants developed political identities rooted in resistance to criminalization.

Of particular relevance to the current study is Rios' examination of the community center as a site of punitive social control for urban youth. Rios found that community centers increasingly received funding from criminal justice institutions as financial support from non-criminal justice agencies dried up. Rather than spaces that foster youth development and provide recreational opportunities for youth, the boys in Rios' (2011) study were mandated to attend the community center to fulfill their probationary mandates (p. 91). He noted how some youth workers relied on the threat of calling the police to address young people's behavior in the youth program, an act that reinforced the punitive function of the institution. Many of the boys reported having this experience of the community center call their probation or police officer to for non-

criminal activity (p. 92). In this study, the community centers became part of the network of institutions participating in the widespread criminalization rather than a space that fostered youth development or provided recreational opportunities for youth of color.

Rios' work provides a useful departure point for the current study in two ways. First, he brings the community center into the current sociological discourse of institutions in urban communities particularly as they relate to youth of color. Secondly, Rios' ethnographic approach exemplifies the ways in which intentional engagement with youths' perspectives and lived experiences can challenge existing notions of the functions and meanings of institutions like the community center can have in the lives of young people. While Rios brings the community center into the contemporary sociological discourse of urban youths' lives, it is given limited space in his analysis. There is still much to understand about this institution within the realm of sociology as it pertains to the lives of urban youth. As Henderson and King (1999) noted, social scientists must develop a more substantial understanding of why and how these spaces are important.

Conclusion

Foucault's theoretical insights are instructive and relevant here as this study benefits from the methodological consideration to explore the institutional practices at the micro-level to understand how power informs the ways youth experience and think about this institution as part of their lives. The current study aims to understand the recreation center's role in the lives urban youth with the recognition that, as an institution, it has the potential to embody the multiplicity of possible roles and functions – a site for the development of social capital, a place of leisure, a place for physical activity, and perhaps even a place that engages the disciplinary practices outlined in Foucault's work and later extended by Rios' work. The theoretical inquiry guiding

this study seeks to understand the role the recreation center, an understudied social institution within sociology, plays in the lives of youth in Atlanta, Georgia.

In the next chapter, I move forward having adopted Small and McDermott's (2006) notion that the specific context of urban environments have a strong hand in the types of institutions available to residents in poor communities. It is imperative to recognize and delineate the local and specific historical context of Atlanta's Black communities to provide the proper context in which to understand the recreation centers' contemporary significance both in the city and it the lives of Black youth in Atlanta's low-income communities.

Chapter III

CARING FOR OUR OWN: A BRIEF HISTORY OF YOUTH-SERVING

INSTITUTIONS IN ATLANTA'S AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

At the height of the Civil Rights movement, noted psychologist Kenneth B. Clark

released *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (1965), an extensive qualitative analysis of the

ghetto as internal colonies in the United States. In a brief yet insightful aside, Clark makes an

astute observation of Southern cities in comparison to the ghettos increasingly filled with Black

residents at the time. Observing the social dynamics of white businesses owners in

predominantly Black communities, he notes:

> Negroes have left business in the ghettos to whites not from a dislike of business but for a
> complex of other reasons. In those Southern cities like Birmingham, Atlanta, and
> Memphis, where the pattern of segregation is so complete that the dark ghettos must be
> almost self-sufficient… (29).

The self-sufficiency Clark identified in Southern cities is critical to understanding the specific

historical context of Atlanta as a site of study pertaining to Black youth. The contemporary

condition of youth residing in Atlanta's low-income communities rest on a tenuous relationship

with a municipal government that has neglected this portion of the population to varying degrees

throughout the city's history. This chapter examines the provision of youth recreation

opportunities in Atlanta before and after the historic *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision to

understand how urban youths' access to these opportunities were shaped by the legacy of

municipal neglect and the commitment Black cultural institutions. of youth services relationship

between the municipal government and Atlanta's Black community. The current chapter aims to provide a selective historical framework to demonstrate how urban youths', in this case Black youth in Atlanta, access to public recreation facilities has been shaped by racial and class inequality for much of Atlanta's recent history.

Early Growth of Black Atlanta

The rapid industrialization of cities in the period following the Civil War brought people from the rural environments to settle in the city. Atlanta's population growth mirrored this trend as the city's population grew from 21,789 citizens to 89, 872 citizens between 1870 and 1900 (Gibson 1998). African Americans constituted a substantial portion of the city's new migrants during this period. After the war, many formerly enslaved men and women in rural communities in Georgia traveled to the city in search of steady wages and freedom from sharecropping and freedom from the vestiges of plantation life. The Black population in Atlanta more than doubled from 1890 to 1900 as over 63,000 lived in Atlanta (Dittmer 1977). Hertzberg notes that Atlanta's Black neighborhoods expanded as rural residents migrated to the city.

The growth of Atlanta's Black population in the latter half of the nineteenth century directly contributed to the development of businesses, institutions, and community organizations that served the needs and interests of Black Atlanta. As the population of Atlanta grew in the latter decades of the 19th century, the city's Black businesses prospered as they had a base of clientele to support them. Alongside the Black businesses were the core institutions of Atlanta's Black community emerged during this period. Several churches including Friendship Baptist Church (1862), Big Bethel AME (1865), First Congregational Church (1867), Wheat Street Baptist Church (1870), and Ebenezer Baptist (1886) the home church of Atlanta's most prominent public figure, Martin Luther King, Jr. Five Black educational institutions were

founded in the city – Atlanta University (1865) the oldest graduate institution serving a predominant African American student body; Clark College (1869) founded in the Summerhill neighborhood[5] directly South of downtown Atlanta by the Freedman's Aid Society and a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church to educate Black youth; Morehouse College[6] (1879), Spelman College[7] (1883), Gammon Theological Seminary (1883), and Morris Brown College (1885). In the face of entrenched segregation, many of these institutions operated as the anchors of Atlanta's Black community. It is these institutions, in part, that informed Clark's (Clark 1965) conclusion that the dark ghettos in Southern cities are self-sufficient.

In the wake of the Civil War (1861-65), the custom of segregation, already a common practice in Northern states, became custom practice in Georgia and other states across the South (Grant 1993). State legislators passed laws in 1872 to segregate schools by race. Even the smaller, seemingly mundane acts of life were subject to the dictum of racial segregation. In many places, public restrooms were separated by gender for whites, one for "Ladies" and one for "Gentlemen" while Blacks utilized a unisex facility for "Colored" (Grant 1993:217). Even in death, blacks and whites were buried separately after Reconstruction. Some cities in Georgia extended this segregation to cemeteries. An 1877 ordinance required black bodies buried in white cemeteries "be dug up and reburied in segregated sites" (Grant 1993: 221).

---

[5] The Summerhill neighborhood was established after the Civil War in 1865. It was initially inhabited by formerly enslaved African Americans and Jewish immigrants

[6] Originally named the Atlanta Baptist Seminary, its name changed to the Atlanta Baptist College in 1897 and finally to its current name in 1913.

[7] originally named the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary, the educational institution began in the basement of Friendship Baptist in April of 1881 with the mission of providing quality education to black women and girls. With the assistance of philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, the overflowing school relocated from the basement of the church to a former encampment used by Union troops during the Civil War. The school demonstrated its appreciation by changing its name to Spelman Seminary in honor of Rockefeller's wife's parents. On June 1, 1924, Spelman Seminary became Spelman College (Spencer 2016).

Atlanta established Jim Crow segregation laws as early as 1890 that separated the city into distinctive Black and white areas. Jim Crow laws prohibited Black Atlantans from accessing the city's public facilities and services including schools, restaurants, residential neighborhoods, religious institutions, and the parks, all of which were fully available to Atlanta's white citizens (Bayor 1996). The constitutionality of state segregation laws, such as the ones enacted in Atlanta, was challenged in *Plessy v. Ferguson* case that originated in New Orleans and subsequently upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896. This ruling established the legality of the "separate but equal" doctrine in which segregation was legal when equitable public accommodations were provided for White and Black citizens alike. However, in Atlanta and other areas of the South, the requirement for equitable accommodations was regularly undermined by municipal governments that are responsible for providing a basic standard of services for municipal residents.

The development of municipal recreation facilities began taking shape in cities around the country in the late 19th century. Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr's Hull House in Chicago established a model for ameliorating the effects of urbanization on youth in the city Jane Addams (1912), co-founder of the Hull House in Chicago, argued that the provision of recreation is a public function. As Bayor (1996) noted, this national trend took a different form in Atlanta. Black citizens of Atlanta were excluded from accessing parks in the city to prevent interracial contact.

As Atlanta began acquiring land and capital for parks and playgrounds, these facilities were allocated along race and class lines starting with White elite communities, then to poor white communities and lastly to Black communities should any resources remain. Prior to the establishment of Washington Park on the west side of Atlanta in 1919, there were no public

parks available to Atlanta's Black residents. In the same year, the Ashby Street School near Washington Park was also transformed from a school for whites to a school for blacks. The two acts had the effect of solidifying this area of town as a Black neighborhood. The lack of public recreational facilities in Atlanta's Black neighborhoods was an ongoing political issue regularly brought to the attention of the municipal government who demonstrated little interest in addressing these concerns (Lerner 1974).

Jim Crow discrimination shaped the spatial dynamics of Atlanta's Black neighborhoods. W.E.B. Du Bois, who came to Atlanta in 1897 to serve as a faculty member at Atlanta University[8], observed that Atlanta's Black population "stretched like a great dumbbell across the city, with one great center in the east and a smaller one in the west, connected by a narrow belt" (Du Bois "The Negro South and North," 505 as cited in Dittmer 1977:12). These areas were the least desirable areas in the city. The eastern core was "Sweet" Auburn Avenue, home to many of the city's Black businesses and Black middle class. Rouse (1989) notes that this group constituted a small minority of the city's Black population, never growing larger than four percent. The custom of segregation informed the development of Black communities in Atlanta. These community boundaries were orchestrated through zoning practices that placed African American communities in less desirable areas of the city while providing less land for residential and business purposes use than land allotted to whites for similar uses (Bayor 1988). According to Steven Hertzberg (Hertzberg 1999), most Black residents of Atlanta were concentrated in four areas of the city in 1896: Mechanicsville southwest of downtown; in the neighborhoods surrounding Atlanta University and Spelman Seminary farther west and south; Summer Hill

---

[8] See Earl Wright II's (2002a, 2002b; 2006) for an extensive treatment of Du Bois' Atlanta Sociological Laboratory established at Atlanta University. Wright's thorough examination of this period demonstrates that this School of Sociology predates the Chicago School of the 1930s as the first school of sociology in the United States. See Aldon Morris' *The Scholar Denied* for additional discussion of Du Bois' marginalization within the Sociological canon.

southeast of downtown and Shermantown in the northeast sector of downtown. Additionally, small clusters of Black residents lived in white neighborhoods throughout the city. These areas were given racially-charged names like "Niggertown," "Hell's Half Acre," and "Darktown."

The city of Atlanta failed to provide many basic services and amenities in Atlanta's Black communities. The West Side of Atlanta was a mixed settlement of Atlanta's Black community. The streets/areas in the immediate vicinity of the Atlanta University were home to members of Atlanta's Black Middle class, yet the areas beyond this were some of worst slums in the city (Dittmer 1977). The areas beyond Atlanta University were considered 'slums' Shivery and Smythe (1942) noted that the West Side of Atlanta – the areas surrounding Morehouse College, Spelman College, and Atlanta University – were a "neglected section of the city" (151). The infrastructure was in poor condition. Streets were filled with holes and debris and housing conditions were poor. Additionally, the city burned waste in this area prompting residents to appeal to City Council to stop the burning of waste. Some areas surrounding what would later be referred to as the Atlanta University Center were unsafe for children. Fights, brawls, gambling, and murders were regular occurrences in areas named 'Beaver's Slide,' White's Alley, Peters Street, and Roach Street made it unsafe for children to play in and around some areas of their communities (Shivery and Smythe 1942:151). Houses of "ill repute" were permitted in an area of the city called "Lightning," a former neighborhood north of Vine City (where the current World Congress Center now stands).

The conditions on the West Side were found in other Black communities in Atlanta. Shivers and Smythe (1942) described the Summerhill neighborhood as "a Negro settlement in which many Negroes owned small pieces of unimproved property and where the same neglect as to lights water, sewerage, pavements, and housing prevailed" (151). The Mechanicsville and

Vine City neighborhoods, located Southwest and West of downtown, respectively, were subject to similar conditions. Many of the black neighborhoods suffered from lack of basic infrastructural and social goods taken for granted in the city's White communities. yet the municipal government expressed little interest in ameliorating the poor conditions facing Black residents in these communities.

Self-Help in Black Atlanta

Within the context of Jim Crow segregation, Atlanta's Black community used a strategy of self-help to address some of the issues facing residents in their neighborhoods. Black Atlantans turned to the constellation of organizations within their community – churches, businesses, women's clubs, colleges, fraternal lodges, literary groups – to address the social, economic, medical, educational, recreational, and civic needs (Rouse 1989: 66). Institutions and organizations within Atlanta's Black communities played a significant role in providing social and recreation opportunities for black youth during the Jim Crow era. As noted above, many of these institutions existed well before the city began its systemic racial segregation in the 1890s (Porter 1974); however, when the city neglected its responsibility to its Black citizens, these organizations played a significant role in addressing the needs of the community when the city neglected this community. Many of these community organizations and institutions addressed the needs of Black youth as members of the community organized to pressure local officials to provide equitable facilities for youth and adults in segregated Atlanta.

Black Churches and Youth Programs

The Black Church operated as the epicenter of Black communities in the South; Atlanta was no different. Jackson and Patterson's (1989) historical research on Atlanta churches notes that the First Congregational Church of Atlanta, founded in 1867, opened a gymnasium, library,

49

and kindergarten for local youth. For instance, Dr. Henry. Hugh Proctor, pastor of First Congregational Church in Atlanta (founded in 1867), organized his church to provide several services to the broader community. Additionally, Proctor's church served as an educational center when there were few primary or secondary educational facilities in the city. Church rooms at First Congregational doubled as classrooms for children and adult learners to develop fundamental skills. Proctor's church also provided including day care for small children, a gymnasium, a school of music, an employment bureau, and Bible school (Jackson and Patterson 1989; Rouse 1989; Woodson 1921). Other churches in Atlanta engaged in outreach endeavors through cooperative efforts with the Black YWCA and YMCA as well as the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts organizations (Mays and Nicholson 1969 [1933]). Wheat Street Baptist hosted a troop of Boy Scouts as one of its non-religious youth activities (Rucker 1942) .

Interestingly, Woodson (1921) noted that Black churches were slow to develop social engagement activities that resembled the recreation found in secular spaces. Through the lens of the conservative values guiding the church, recreation and play were viewed as activities that gave in to vice and immorality. However, the church modified their programs in an attempt to attract youth and divert them from the dancehalls and theaters, places viewed by the churches as serving immoral desires and vice (Du Bois 1971; Woodson 1921). Some of the Social Work studies acknowledged that local churches were beginning to recognize the importance of recreation in the lives of people and had begun incorporating recreation expenses into their budgets (Rucker 1942; Sloan 1945). While churches often had limited space, they offered space for supervised activities. Rucker (1942) noted that, at the time of her study, the current pastor of Wheat Street Baptist Church, Rev. William Holmes Borders, started "a small recreation program for boys and girls in the community" consisting of "games, stories, song fests and parties" (4).

However, many of their offerings for youth were shaped by the religious values and practices. Sunday School was a common program offering for children and older youth.

While this shift may have been taking place, Rucker (1942) noted that the ten churches in the vicinity of Wheat Street Baptist Church did not offer any activities for recreation (Rucker 1942: 12). One observer noted "[t]he demand for more recreational facilities for Negro youth in Atlanta was so great that the youth in their search for new adventure had begun to frequent, in large numbers, the night spots reserved for adults" (Lockett 1946:27). Lockett's observation illustrates the extent to which young people were willing to go to fulfill their desire for leisure activity.

The Neighborhood Union

The lack of suitable recreation facilities for her eldest son and the unnoticed death of a neighborhood woman led Mrs. Lugenia Burns Hope, wife of Morehouse College president Dr. John Hope, to organize a group of women and establish the Neighborhood Union (NU) in 1908 (Rouse 1989). Before moving to Atlanta in 1897 as a newlywed, Mrs. Hope resided in Chicago where she was active in the Hull House settlement homes co-founded by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr. Social work appealed to Lugenia as a way of making a positive contribution in the lives of others. According to Rouse's (1989) historical account, Mrs. Hope a resident of the West Side neighborhood in the immediate vicinity of Atlanta University, called together the women of the neighborhood to discuss the utility of a settlement in their community. The women, some of whom were also wives of college faculty, agreed to organize the group, establishing the Neighborhood Union with the stated purpose of "rais[ing] the standard of living in the community" and to provide "wholesome recreation and cultural education" for children in the community (Rouse 1989:66, 69).

The group began their work immediately. Between the first and second meeting, the women visited with families on the streets assigned to them within their section to collect the names of parents and children. During these outings, the participants noted problems raised by the families they spoke with and brought this information back to the group's second meeting (Rouse 1989). The reports "showed that there were major needs in the area that no one, including the city, was working to alleviate" (Rouse 1989:66). At that time, there were no playgrounds available to Black children and many families needed childcare so the parents could work.

The Neighborhood Union sought the assistance of the Black colleges to address these needs. Assisted by Morehouse College students, the women conducted additional door-to-door interviews with residents to inform the community of its presence and plans to provide assistance They convinced Morehouse College to allot space on the campus to build playgrounds for the local neighborhood kids using money from fundraisers (Lerner 1974; Shivery and Smythe 1942). The women raised money for the equipment by contacting local businesses and secured donations and laborers to install the playground (Lerner 1974). The organization also established a community center on the Spelman College campus in 1914 that operated until 1926 (Lerner 1974; Shivery and Smythe 1942). The center hosted programs for children that combined recreation, education, and day care for working mothers (Lerner 1974).

According to Lerner (1974), the success of securing the resources to provide playground space at Morehouse College strengthened the women's resolve to address issues in their community. The Neighborhood Union purchased a building in 1922 on Sunset Avenue near Morris Brown College which became the center for the organizations varied activities. Much like the Hull House homes in Chicago, the Neighborhood Union's community center provided a range of services the address the needs of Atlanta's Black community. In the education realm,

the Neighborhood Union petitioned the Atlanta Board of Education in 1913 to build two new

schools for Black children in Atlanta leading to the development of Booker T. Washington High

School, the city's first high school for Black students. In 1923, The Neighborhood Union

participated in organizing voters to secure the bonds necessary to increase the number of schools

serving Black children and improve existing educational facilities (Shivery and Smythe 1942).

Among their most notable achievements in the realm of recreation was the successful

negotiation with the city's department of recreation to acquire the grounds for Washington Park

in 1919 which became the first public park in the City of Atlanta accessible to the city's Black

population. The Neighborhood Union was the first social work organization in the city of Atlanta

to address the specific needs of Atlanta's underserved Black communities. The women of the

Neighborhood Union set their focus on preventative measures to improve the community in

ways that enriched the welfare of the children whom they viewed as future citizens until a more

permanent government agency took over the work. Although the Neighborhood Union continued

to provide services well through the 1970s, the work of the organization was taken up by other

social agencies that addressed issues within the community, particularly of youth recreation.

The Butler Street YMCA

Although a private organization, Atlanta's YMCA was segregated for much of its history.

The Atlanta YMCA (later became the Metro YMCA) opened in 1858 primarily serving young

men and older boys who moved from rural locales to the city (Blau, Heying, and Feinberg 1996).

The Atlanta YMCA, like others elsewhere, engaged in social reform activities like volunteer

work in prisons and hospitals, provided lectures and Bible studies for its patrons (178). However,

the charitable mission of the Metro YMCA was supplanted by other organizations. As such, they

moved towards membership-oriented programs "that served White, middle class suburban

Atlantans" leaving the needs of inner city African Americans to be addressed by a segregated YMCA on Butler Street.

The Negro YMCA was founded in 1894 in the basement of Wheat Street Baptist Church. By 1910, nearly 40 YMCAs serving Black communities existed but none had their own building. The national organization helped develop local associations but did not provide financial support. Atlanta's Black YMCA continued providing its services and programs in Black churches until residents raised the funds to build the facility on Butler Street in 1920 (Blau et al. 1996; Mjagkij 1992). The Butler Street YMCA emphasized social services over recreation and physical fitness, the latter of which was the focus in White-serving YMCAs in the Atlanta area. Butler Street YMCA's main clients were " the inner city poor…who are dealing with problems of drugs, alcohol, unemployment, and deteriorating schools" (Blau et al. 1996:186).

In the 1940s, the Butler Street YMCA operated youth canteens in three of Atlanta's Black neighborhoods – the East Side, the West Side, and in the Pittsburgh community to the south (Lockett 1946). The canteens were vibrant recreational and social spaces for Black youth in Atlanta during the mid-1940s. The canteens were popular among teenagers and young adults attending college near the West Side Canteen. The Coca-Cola Company helped furnish the canteens with coke bars and games but the Butler Street YMCA supplied ping pong tables, chairs, tables, a record player, and a public-address system for youth attending the facilities (Lockett 1946: 29). With the aid of adult advisors recruited from each community and staff members from the Butler Street YMCA, youth created and participated a range of programs at the canteens:

> The programs of the canteens also included skits, dramatic plays, forums, radio broadcasts, a circus, and various other types of novel programs. When outstanding artists were in town the canteen leaders sometimes were able to secure them for programs. Some dancing was included in the program. (Lockett 1946:33).

Programming at the canteens reflected youths' recreational and educational interests. The skits and plays were used to discuss the expected standards of decorum, behavior and dress for youth who come to the canteens. During the summer months, attendance thinned as youth went away for vacation or began work. Although these canteens operated with limited resources in comparison to the youth programs at the Metro YMCA, they filled a need for Atlanta's Black youth in the context of a segregated society in which their access to recreational spaces was limited by white supremacy's hold on space and resources.

Youth Groups in Public Housing

Atlanta was the first city in the United States to build public housing units in the 1930s. Youth in Atlanta's housing projects also had their own social clubs, programs and activities (Sloan 1945). For example, in the Grady Homes Housing Projects, the Youth Councils sponsored a night club for teenagers; dance groups studied folk dance and social dances; young girls participated in the Girl Scout troop; youth in the Athletics Club participated in a variety of sports; and a small contingent of Girl Reserves work under the guidance of the YWCA to carry out their activities. In housing projects with Youth Centers, these facilities often provided the space for youth to host dances (Sloan 1945).

In a survey of available recreational facilities in Atlanta's Black communities, Sloan (1945) She tallied "1 swimming pool, 2 Community Centers, 10 playgrounds, and 2 park areas, one of which is in the county" available to Black folks (Sloan 1945:10). The community centers were attached to public schools while other amenities were embedded in the housing projects. Sloan concluded that Black citizens in Atlanta lacked facilities in proportion to its 104,533-person portion of the city's population.

The first half of the twentieth century, Black communities, particularly the city' poorer slum areas, were neglected by the municipal government's commitment to racial segregation. Residents of all ages were impacted by the squalor of these areas. The absence of public services failed to adhere to the mandate of separate but equal. The dearth of public facilities in these communities reflected the indifference of white supremacy. However, community institutions, organizations, and residents in Atlanta's Black neighborhoods responded to the challenges of municipal neglect by creating resources and opportunities to address the social, political, educational, and cultural needs of the community.

Of vital importance to these efforts was the well-being of young people in these communities. Churches welcomed youth into their doors to avert the vices of the streets, while educational institutions parlayed their resources into recreational activities for young people and support for families. The YMCA, YWCA, and public housing youth councils provided opportunities for youth to engage in supervised social and recreational activities among their peers. Although the Neighborhood Union found success leveraging the capital of its Black middle-class membership to secure resources from the city of Atlanta, the embeddedness of Jim Crow racism in the municipal government prevented the municipal government from acting in the interests of Atlanta's Black youth.

Desegregating Public Spaces

In the time between the end of World War II and the *Brown* decision, the NAACP's legal victories successfully expanded construction of state parks and available to Black citizens in the South (O'Brien 2012). However, decades of municipal neglect of Black communities resulted in the uneven distribution of public services and institutions in Atlanta's racially segregated neighborhoods. The Atlanta Urban League took inventory of the existing disparities in access to

recreation facilities. Table 3.1 is based on data collected and presented in a report released in

January 1954 Atlanta Urban League report (Atlanta Urban League 1954) highlighting the racial

disparity in public recreation facilities available to citizens of Atlanta.

**Table 3.1 Recreational Facilities Available
to Atlanta Citizens by Race in 1954**

Facility type	Number available to White citizens	Number available to Black citizens
Parks	128	4
Tennis courts	96	8
Community Centers	7	1
Playgrounds	18	3
Total facilities	**249**	**25**

Table 3.1 based on data from "A Report on Parks and Recreational Facilities for Negroes in
Atlanta, Georgia, January 1954," (Atlanta Urban League 1954).

Table 3.1 shows a significant disparity between the number of public facilities available to

citizens in Atlanta by race. White Atlantans had access to nearly ten times the number of public

facilities as compared to Black Atlantans in 1954. Of the eight community centers available in

1954, African Americans were only permitted to access one facility in the entire city. It is clear

from this data that Atlanta authorities obliged the demand for separate but largely ignored the

call for equal facilities.

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court's decision *in Brown v. Board of Education*

overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine that defined the first half of the century. The process

of desegregation of Atlanta's public facilities was relatively peaceful in comparison to other

cities in the South. The public golf courses were desegregated first by rule of the Supreme Court

in 1955 followed by a legal campaign to desegregate the city parks. By 1962, all municipally

owned parks in the city of Atlanta were desegregated but the pools remained white-only facilities

until the following summer, at which time many white citizens abandoned the public spaces for

private facilities (Bayor 1996; Kruse 2005). Mayor William Hartsfield coordinated the transition in private meetings with facility management to preserve the city's image of "The City Too Busy to Hate" (Kruse 2005).

The desegregation of public spaces was an important factor for the transition in Atlanta's racial composition. According to Kruse, Atlanta's white working class viewed the desegregation of public facilities as a loss as they were more likely to utilize public facilities than their affluent counterparts who continued to enjoy the exclusion of private recreation clubs. The desegregation of the public amenities combined with the encroachment of Black homeowners in historically White neighborhoods in the city, and school desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s served as a catalyst for the outmigration of Atlanta's White population to the suburbs.

However, the racial disparity in access to recreation facilities continued after the Supreme Court called for the desegregation of public institutions. Between 1954 and 1960, the City of Atlanta increased the number of recreation centers in the city from 8 to 19. However, only two additional facilities were created in African Americans communities while the other 9 facilities were developed in White communities. In 1960, African Americans constituted over one-third of the city's total population (186,464 of 487,455), yet the disparity in public recreational facilities persisted. In the six years after the Atlanta Urban League report, according to one observer, the facilities were considered "sub-standard" and were "so over-crowded that they tended to become 'potential trouble spots'" according to commentary of the time (Hein 1972:217; also see McPheeters 1964).

In the decades following desegregation, recreation facilities continued to be one of many issues facing residents in Atlanta's poorer Black communities. pressed for when they had an opportunity. Following a protest from the SNCC Atlanta Project, an organized group of

moderate citizens surveyed residents of Summerhill and Peoplestown, and Mechanicsville communities to identify the most pressing issues. As Grady-Willis noted, residents "requested that the city build recreation centers, improve vital services, and reduce overcrowding in schools" and called for an end to the "police discourtesy" in their communities (Grady-Willis 2006:126).

Community residents in Vine City employed peaceful yet disruptive demonstrations to bring attention to the absence of a much-desired recreation facility in their community (which was still being referred to as a 'slum' in the 1960s). The Satellite Center, the first organized attempt to provide a space for recreation in Vine City, was a small three-room facility in a two-story antique building[9], too small to adequately accommodate larger groups of youth (Harmon 1968). The nearest recreation facility to Vine City was Washington Park, over a mile away, making it difficult and potentially dangerous for children to access on their own. Members of the Vine City Council requested a park from the city in 1965 but nothing materialized from the request.

In response to the city's inaction, the early summer months of 1966, Vine City residents took to the streets in the early summer months of 1966. Teenagers and adults blockaded Magnolia Street, a main thoroughfare in the Vine City neighborhood, with playground equipment for a week, staging a "play in" demonstration afterschool. Captain Morris Redding of the police Crime Prevention Bureau offered to locate recreation space for the neighborhood youth, volunteering officers from his unit to supervise the recreation time in an attempt to

---

[9] The recreational director of the Satellite Center and subsequently the Vine City Recreation Center, Eddie Murphy, noted the size of the facility ("…3 rooms about 7 x 7 or 8x8 ft.") during the Vine City-Lightning Areas meeting with the Community Relations Commission on April 6, 1967.

negotiate with the Vine City Council organization. His offer was rebutted because the measure lacked the permanence a recreation facility ensured (Anon 1966b).

Co-chair of the Vine City Council Willie Williams criticized the city's priorities in a comment reported in the *Atlanta Constitution:* "I don't understand it…The city spent $18 million to build a stadium and $500,000 to get the Braves and they won't give us a park" (Anon 1966b). William's comments reflect the perceived discord between city officials and the needs of residents in Atlanta's poorer communities. The significant amount of money to transfer the Braves from Milwaukee to Atlanta gave the impression that the city was in a position economically to address the request for recreation facilities within the Vine City community but it did not appear to be a priority of the city.

In July, held a dance party in the middle of Magnolia Street as a demonstration to get a recreation center in their neighborhood. According to the *Atlanta Constitution* (Anon 1966a)*,* the group numbers swelled to as many as 100 participants as a compact record played in the street. At either end of the street, the demonstrators built blockades and placed them at either end of the street where children passed out handbills that read:

> "Come dance for a recreation center. The Vine City teenagers want a recreation center. We went down and talked to the mayor [Allen] and he told us we can't have one. So we decided we're just going to get out and demonstrate for it today at 10:30."

Many of the bystanders watched the demonstration and claimed no responsibility for the participants when Police Captain Morris G. Redding attempted to disperse the group of dancers. The demonstration lasted nearly four hours until local activist Helen Howard convinced the group to return to their homes so no one would be hurt (Anon 1966a).

A year after the dance demonstration, a "new" Vine City Recreation Center opened on Magnolia Street. However, the facility was not provided by the municipal government; it was

acquired through the efforts of the Royal Knights Social Club, a group comprised of men who worked together on the Ford assembly line. The men, led by John Brown, coordinated a summer program for children in the Vine City neighborhood as a pilot program to secure federal grants for a larger initiative to combat poverty, according to Winn's (1967) news report. Through their efforts, they successfully acquired the basement room of the old Elks Lodge in the neighborhood and worked to transform it into a recreation facility for children in the community.

Although the recreation center was open, Mr. Brown, kids from the neighborhood, and community members worked to finish the center's interior. The Vine City Recreation Center received donations from a mixture of sources. Carsons Furniture, Brown's place of employment, donated furniture and cash and Economic Opportunity Atlanta provided a $4,000 grant to the recreation center. Winn reported that the City of Atlanta was trying to lease the building's basement in order to legally contribute money to the facility. Additionally, the city planned to provide the city with a full-time staff member to run the day-to-day operations. The city's involvement in the Vine City Recreation Center were driven by the efforts of Black citizens to address these needs in the face of municipal neglect. Community members engaged in peaceful civil disruption and organized resources in their community and social networks to provide a recreation facility for youth in Vine City.

Municipal Investment in Recreation for Black Youth

As White residents continued to leave Atlanta, African Americans became the majority of the city's population for the first time in 1970. In 1973, Atlanta elected its first Black Mayor, Maynard Jackson, over incumbent Sam Massell (1970 – 1974). Jackson's interest in the challenges facing the city's poor and working-class communities were evident in his anti-police brutality rhetoric and concern with the lackluster conditions in public housing. However, these

concerns were short-lived. As Atlanta faced declining revenue streams due to white flight and

changes in federal and state funding practices, Jackson replaced his pro-labor position with

policies emphasizing private investment and tourism (Levy 2015). Maynard Jackson responded

to the declining employment numbers for manufacturing jobs and the impending national

economic recession by shifting to a pro-business policy stance that required increased

consultation with business leaders to generate job creation. The economic and employment

conditions overshadowed ongoing concerns from the city's poor Black neighborhoods regarding

equitable access to recreational facilities.

Between 1979 and 1981, nearly 30 children, teenagers, and young adults were abducted

and found murdered throughout the city. Sociologist Bernard Headley (1999) aptly describes the

youth targeted over the course of this spree in the following passage:

> It was the children of this displaced, "wageless" class of Atlantans who were constantly
> being subjected to violent crime…children from dreary, neglected homes worth escaping,
> even at odd hours of the night; children from neighborhoods without parks and
> recreation; children who had to take a bus for long distances, past countless liquor stores
> and juke joints, to catch a movie, use a swimming pool, or buy a loaf of bread or carton
> of milk (27).

Headley's passage presents a portrait of the conditions in Atlanta's poorest communities and the

vulnerability these conditions created for young people. These conditions increased the

vulnerability of youth from poor communities. Some of the younger children went missing while

running errands for their neighbors to earn some cash (Renfro 2015). Others were last seen

coming to or from recreation facilities located outside their immediate communities. Residents in

some low-income neighborhoods organized patrol groups to safeguard their children from

potential predators.

Recreation centers emerge as a central institution in response to the ongoing cases of

missing and murdered children from Atlanta's poorer neighborhoods. Citing the absence of

supervised activities and lack of employment opportunities as conditions rendering youth vulnerable to abductions, Jackson, then in his second term, introduced the "Safe Summer '81" initiative. Under the "Safe Summer '81" initiative, city officials and local business leaders collaborated to provide safe recreational spaces and find employment opportunities for older youth to address the conditions that potentially contributed to the killings. Over 100 recreational sites were secured as literal safe spaces to protect youth, providing parents a place where their children could be watched for up to twelve hours per day (Diggs 1981; Headley 1999; Renfro 2015). Budget cuts during the Reagan era reduced the federal funding available to cities leaving state and municipal level governments to determine which services to continue through the local budget, those that could be privatized, and those that could be eliminated (Renfro 2015). Amidst federal budget cuts and a strained municipal budget, Mayor Jackson urged community members at a Neighborhood Planning Unit to "adopt" their local recreation program, providing whatever fiscal support they could muster to ensure youth had a safe place to go while the investigation continued (Williams 1981). Despite the Reagan Administration's concurrent withdrawal of federal funding and valorization of the private sector organizations to address issues of child safety (Renfro 2015), the federal government was able to contribute a large sum of financial support to aid with the cost of staffing facilities during the Safe Summer '81.

Safe Summer organizers noted "geographical disparities" in the location of Atlanta's recreation centers (Renfro 2015). Historically Black neighborhoods throughout the city still lacked recreational resources leading organizers to call for additional recreational facilities in "unserved or underserved" neighborhoods (159). Although the Safe Summer Initiative established the Camp Best Friends summer program which has continued for almost 40 years, the existing literature is scant in detailing the city's response to addressing the "geographical

disparities" identified by the initiatives organizers. As an issue that predominantly affected residents in the city's predominantly Black and poor communities, it is difficult to determine the extent to which constructing recreation facilities to address the inequity was viewed as a priority by the municipal government.

Over the next two decades, the City of Atlanta responded in spurts to the call for building more recreation centers in underserved communities throughout the city (AJC 1993; Hill 1991). The provision of youth recreation programs was repeatedly beyond the economic capacity of Mayor Andrew Young's administration (1982 – 1990). Grants from the federal government used for the "Safe Summer '81" were not guaranteed in subsequent years leading the city government to call on the private sector to provide these opportunities. In 1982, Mayor Young and city officials asked local corporations to "adopt a site" to provide summer recreational opportunities for youth in the city's poor communities while the city was navigating a "budget crunch" (Wells 1982). Georgia Power, the Coca-Cola Corporation, Southern Bell and Georgia Tech were among the agencies responding to the call. Banks also donated money to the 1982 summer program entitled "Summer Fun and Fitness" (Anon 1982). In the spring of 1984, Mayor Andrew Young called on the residents and business leaders in the Poole Creek area, an economically distressed community in southeast Atlanta, to contribute money for summer recreation programs for youth. At the time, city officials told concerned residents that the city could not afford to finance a summer program in addition to the thousands of dollars they were spending to plant grass and trees in the local park to encourage more use.

Incremental gains Bill Campbell's mayoral tenure (1994 – 2002) saw gradual investment in the expansion of recreation facilities. For instance, Rosel Fann, a long-term resident and activist in Southeast Atlanta, used the city's Neighborhood Planning Unit (NPU) system as a

vehicle to voice her complaints. "After thirty years of "crying out loud for a recreation center," Fann led the charge to secure a gym and natatorium in her Southeast Atlanta (Puckett 2014). Additionally, Campbell secured funds to build Adamsville Recreation Center in Southwest Atlanta (Hairston 2000). Further, upgrades in computer equipment at municipal recreation centers aimed to address the "digital divide" through Summer Cyber Camps and training sessions for children, adults and seniors (Suggs 2000).

If these accounts are an indication of the city's response to the demands for recreational amenities in the city's poor Black neighborhoods, then the local government's ability or willingness to invest in the development of permanent recreation amenities seemed to be driven by the financial conditions of the municipal government. However, a number of researchers assert that the succession of Atlanta's Black mayors governed the city within a coalition driven by a partnership between the city's white business elite and Black elites who shared similar interests in the future grown of the city (Levy 2015; Reed Jr. 1999; Stone 1989). Any interest Jackson and his successors had in advancing an agenda that benefitted the city's poor Black population were filtered through the elite coalition's vision for the city. The pro-growth agenda rarely created room to prioritize the needs of the city's poor. Adolph Reed, Jr. suggested that the issues facing poor Black communities in black-led cities – unemployment and underemployment, decrepit public housing, crime and youth recreation – received negligible support from the city's governmental leadership.

Atlanta Recreation in the 21st Century

The fate of Atlanta's recreation centers has been closely tied to the vision and political climate of the municipal administration. By 2008, the City of Atlanta was facing a projected budget gap of $70 million. Multiple issues contributed to the fiscal gap – a slowing economy,

faulty estimates, and growing insurance and pension costs for government employees, were further exacerbated by poor accounting practices that masked the city's actual financial conditions (Dewan 2009). In an act of austerity management, the mayor initiated a round of layoffs and cuts across the city and proposed a tax increase to City Council that aimed at stabilizing the city's budget. Despite the city's financial outlook, the council declined Mayor Franklin's recommendation deciding instead to cut taxes, a move that further threatened the city's fiscal condition. Mayor Franklin continued layoffs among city employees, furloughed police officers and firefighters, and reduced City Hall's operational hours from five to four days per week to minimize the damage of the growing budgetary crisis (Dewan 2009). 22 of the 33 recreation centers operating under the Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs were closed to reduce municipal spending.

Amidst citizens' complaints over the police furloughs, City Council quickly came around to Mayor Franklin's perspective of the impending crisis. In June 2009, council members passed legislation that increased taxes more than six times higher than the proposal Mayor Franklin recommended the year before, an unpopular move with elections later that year. The measures taken by the mayor and City Council proved effective. In August 2009, the mayor reported that the city was back in the black. Although the city administration managed to right the economic ship, at least for the time being, the recreation centers remained shuttered in many low-income communities across Atlanta.

Franklin's successor, Kasim Reed, a former state senator and manager for both of Franklin's mayoral campaigns[10], made the recreation centers a central focus of his own mayoral

---

[10] Reed served as a state senator from 1998 to 2009. Prior to launching his own mayoral campaign, Reed served as Franklin's campaign manager in 2001 and 2005 (see Owens and Brown 2014). Franklin won the second election with 90.4 percent of the vote (Shaw et al. 2013:208).

campaign. Given the budgetary challenges of the Franklin administration, the municipal budget

could not support the recreation center operations at full capacity. Reed recognized that

budgetary troubles under previous municipal leadership lead to the disproportionate closure of

several recreation centers in low-income neighborhoods throughout the city. Reed promised

voters that he would secure the funds necessary to reopen all of the shuttered facilities. Atlanta's

recreation centers primarily serve youth from the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) system in which

76 percent of the student population is eligible for free or reduced lunch (Ogunsola 2010; Reed

2013). Following a narrow victory in the run-off election[11] with Mary Norwood in December

2009 run-off, Reed was installed as the Mayor of Atlanta. In January 2010, Reed delivered his

inauguration address and took the opportunity to remind the City of Atlanta of his campaign

promise to reopen all of the recreation centers closed:

> We must take responsibility for giving hope to those who feel hopeless to give
> opportunity to those who feel they have none. This is why as Mayor I have
> pledged and I will keep my pledge, to open every single recreation center in this
> City and to find, raise and retain the funds necessary to keep them open. But more
> than opening them, we will turn them into what they must be - Centers of Hope,
> and from this day forward that is how we will refer to them and that is what they
> must be for the sake of our children (Reed 2010).

By the end of his first year in office in December 2010, Reed fulfilled his promise of

raising the capital to reopen and begin revitalizing all 33 recreation centers throughout the city.

City council approved $3.7 million which provided the seed money for the Centers of Hope

initiative (Kapp 2011; Spooner 2011). Mayor Reed combined the allotted public funds with

material and financial donations from some of Atlanta's largest names in the corporate

community including Coca-Cola, Turner Broadcasting Corporation, and Wells Fargo (City of

Atlanta 2013; Reed 2013; Suggs 2013), as well as contributions from smaller business partners

---

[11] Reed's margin of victory over Norwood was secured by 620 votes.

to reopen and revitalize the city's closed facilities. Furnished with additional resources, new technology, and structural improvements to facilities' appearance, revitalized recreation centers represent the city's vision of safe spaces for young people to grow and develop.

As of 2017, the city has transformed nearly one-third of the 33 recreation centers operating under the Department of Parks and Recreation into Centers of Hope. The locations of Centers of Hope are in areas with high-density populations of youth and with negative social indicators including high levels of child vulnerability risk in underserved sections of the city (Spooner 2011). The Centers of Hope are at once the revitalized facilities themselves and Mayor Reed's aspirational vision for what these facilities can do for the city's youth. "Now as mayor, I know that robust and well-funded parks and recreation centers benefit our youth and their positive development greatly" as they act as "havens of learning, culture, and character development for our young people" (Kapp 2011:68).

Conclusion

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an extensive history of all the organizations and institutions, community groups, and social agencies that contributed to the social welfare of Black youth during the twentieth century. Yet, from this survey of institutions we are better able to understand the historical context of youth development and recreation within Black communities, particularly in Atlanta. While segregation in law and custom prevented Black citizens from accessing equitable resources for the benefit of their youth, these community-based resources acted as agents in their own self-interest, organizing their resources to provide spaces and opportunities for the social, educational and recreational activities/programs for the young people in their community. In some instances, like the canteens and the youth councils in the public housing projects, youth themselves were at the helm of

organizing programs and activities for themselves and other young people. The spirit of self-determination was present in the era of segregation. As Atlanta continues to rely on the collaboration between public and private institutions and organizations to provide programs for the city's youth, how do young people navigate these facilities? What impact do young people think these institutions will have on their lives? The following chapter delineates the study's research approach to answering these overarching questions.

Chapter IV

METHODOLOGY: STUDYING YOUTH IN THE RECREATION CENTER

The existing literature on youth programs and urban communities have identified that

social institutions serve a variety of functions for young people. However, racial and ethnic

minority youth in lower-income communities are comparatively less access to recreational

facilities. Existing literature has identified that municipal governments are becoming

increasingly important players in the provision of programs for urban youth. The historical

overview demonstrated that indigenous, community based initiatives within Atlanta's Black

communities were primarily, if not solely, responsible for providing recreational opportunities

for Black youth during the Jim Crow era. These community efforts continued after desegregation

as the City of Atlanta's black political leaders utilized public-private partnerships to support

municipal recreation program offerings and slowly erected permanent facilities in underserved

communities. However, what is lacking from the existing scholarship is an in-depth

understanding of the perspectives of young people who are regular participants in activities and

programs within a public municipal center. Young people's perspectives of their experiences

within the programs offered within the recreation center can offer insight into the particular role

this institution plays in the lives of youth in low income communities.

A qualitative ethnographic approach is the most appropriate way to explore young

peoples' perceptions of the recreation center because it will allow for a contextualized

understanding of the ways they experience the recreation center and its possible implications for their lives outside the facility. As outlined in the introduction, the study is guided by a central research question and a set of sub-questions. They are as follows:

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of urban youth in a municipal recreation center in Atlanta, Georgia, to understand how municipal governments utilize social institutions to address the needs of marginalized groups in urban communities. Observations and interviews are guided by two central questions:

1. Why do youth in low-income communities participate in the recreation center?

2. How do youth perceive and describe their experiences as participants in the recreation center?

The sub-questions guided the analysis of data collected through an ethnographic approach (discussed later in this chapter). This study examines data from collected from 12 months of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 18 youth in order to understand how urban youth utilize the public recreational center to navigate their social environment/the role a public recreation center plays in their lives. The current chapter summarizes the research design and data collection methods used to explore youths' perceptions of the Hope Park Recreation Center (HPRC) in Atlanta, Georgia.

Ethnographic Studies in Urban Communities

As a qualitative approach to research, ethnography is concerned with how people see their world (Agee 2009; Grills 1998). In particular, ethnography is acutely concerned with the social context in which information about people's perspective of the world is gathered. In this study, ethnography refers to the process of becoming part of a research setting, forming

relationships, acquiring expertise from knowledgeable participants within the research setting, and developing a way of seeing the environment that is informed by the perspectives of those living within it daily (Berg 2008; Marvasti 2004). Given this embeddedness, ethnography, above all other approaches, is best suited to allow researchers to understand the beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of their subjects (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Tedlock 2000). The goal of ethnographic research is not representativeness; rather, ethnographic research aims to develop a deep knowledge of a particular setting, rooted in the identification of patterns and variations in relationships and an understanding of the ways that people respond to their context (Delamont 2007; Lareau and Rao 2016).

Sociologists have utilized the ethnographic approach throughout the history of the discipline to investigate and understand the everyday life of urban communities from the perspectives its inhabitants. Between August and December of 1896, W.E.B. Du Bois embedded himself in Philadelphia's 7th Ward, a segregated African American community, combining ethnography, surveys, interviews, and statistical analysis, to produce the first empirical study of Black life in the United States (Du Bois 1899/1996). The Chicago School is often associated with popularizing the ethnographic approach within sociology. According to Deegan (2001), the 'core Chicago ethnographies' were produced by doctoral students under the guidance of Park and Burgess. These ethnographic studies illuminated everyday interactions within Chicago's local communities and were central to establishing ethnography as a tradition of the University of Chicago and within the field of sociology.

For this study, I employ two complementary forms of qualitative data collection: participant observations and in-depth interviews with youth to inform my understanding of the recreation center setting. These methods are described in further depth in the following sections.

Taking a qualitative approach allowed me to explore the perspectives and experiences of youth participants with the aim of seeing "the world from their perspective and in doing so make discoveries that will contribute to the development of empirical knowledge" (Corbin and Strauss 2008:31). Moreover, qualitative research situates the experiences of participants within the larger context they inhabit (Corbin and Strauss 2008). In this study, situating youth's experiences in and perceptions of the recreation center are explored as social meanings and actions within their community context.

Gaining Entrée

Gaining access to hope Park Recreation Center was a protracted process. In the process of identifying a research site, I made two trips to Atlanta to meet with city officials to discuss my interest in studying the municipal recreation centers. I first sought access through the local government officials because I wanted to assure that my project would not be affected by failing to secure access through approved channels. During my first visit in March 2015, I met with the Executive Director of the Office of Recreation at the time and Amy Phuong, the Commissioner of the City of Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation. I returned to Atlanta the following month to meet with Mayor Kasim Reed in his office at City Hall and discuss my plans for the project. He was supportive and encouraged me to consider contacting the facility in the Hope Park community. I found these meetings with the city officials insightful but they did not facilitate entry into the recreation center as I initially hoped. I moved back to Atlanta in the summer of 2015 to continue the process of securing a site for the project.

My entrée to the Hope Park Recreation Center, and, to a limited sense, the surrounding community, was facilitated by a visit to the facility on a Saturday in the middle of November 2015. Although I grew up in the Metro-Atlanta area, I had never spent any significant time in or

near the Hope Park community where the recreation center is located. I had a sense of where it was but wanted to get a concrete understanding of where the facility was located. I followed the GPS to the recreation center on a Saturday in the late morning, expecting it to be closed but still wanting to know where it was located. When I pulled into the drive, I was surprised to see find kids on the playground in the front and small children walking out of the facility with parents and grandparents.

I parked my car in a relatively empty lot and walked into one of the building's open doors. Inside, two men sat behind the main desk in front of the doors. They wore matching short-sleeved polo shirts with the City of Atlanta's insignia stitched on the left breast of the shirt. I approached the desk to introduce myself to Coach Daryl and Coach Phil[12]. We talked about the recreation center and some of the activities taking place that day. Over the course of our hour-long conversation, I disclosed my research intentions and described the kind of project I was interest in carrying out. They gave me the business card for Coach Dennis and instructed me to contact him. During our phone calls about the project, Coach Dennis recommended that I come back to the recreation center and meet with Coach James – "he the one working with the kind of kids you looking for."

I returned to Hope Park the Monday after Thanksgiving to meet Coach James. I arrived at 5pm and waited almost an hour to meet with Coach James. Coach Daryl introduced me to Coach James as "the young man I told you about with all the good ideas!" We talked for an hour or so at the top of the stairs about what the mission and vision of his mentoring program and my interest in the young people. At the end of the conversation he agreed to let me work with MTMT. "Just hang with me and let the guys get to know you," he told me. They had to feel me

---

[12] Pseudonyms are used for all people attached to the Hope Park Recreation Center to protect their identities and privacy.

out as well. I came back the following week and started volunteering with the tutoring and mentoring program.

As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) note, ethnography requires the researcher to take on a role in the field. In December 2015, I became a volunteer with Coach James' youth program Making Tomorrow's Men Today (MTMT). For the next year, I went to Hope Park Recreation Center on Monday and Wednesday evenings to working alongside Coach James' small group of dedicated Coaches[13] who provided drop-in academic tutoring, mentoring, and recreational activities for young boys and teenagers in the Hope Park community.

Data Collection

During this twelve month period, I collected data for the study through a combination of participant observation and interviews with youth at the recreation center. Participant observation and interviews were used as complementary methods of data collection for this study. Rather than conceptualizing them as competing notions of reality, "what one sees" vs "what one says," these methods are used together within the ethnographic enterprise to capture a sense of context (participant observation) in which youths' perceptions and experiences are created and subsequently recounted (interviews) in this study.

Participant Observation

Participant observation was a central tool of this ethnographic study. This method of data collection dovetails with ethnography's mandate that the researcher immerse himself into the social world of interest to develop a first-hand account of the context (Hammersley and Atkinson

---

[13] The core group of Coach James' team of "Coaches" included three other men in their late 40s and early 50s who worked out in the recreation center's weight room. These men were the only ones remaining from the initial group of 15 men Coach James recruited in 2012 to start the program. During the course of the study, the number of Coaches increased with the addition of two undergraduate students from Morehouse College and another man recruited from the weight room.

2007; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006; Lincoln and Guba 1985). As a participant observer, I made extensive visits to the recreation center observing and participating in the activities that took place in this setting. Over the course of the data collection phase, I spent 12 months in the field and completed over 300 hours of participant observation at Hope Park Recreation Center.

In addition to providing a context for understanding young people's perspectives of the recreation, participant observation was an integral aspect of developing my own perspective of the recreation center. As a newcomer to the institution, I needed to understand the way the facility operated as much as possible to understand how youth I was interested in talking with 'fit' into this space. However, I came to understand that youth do not always fit into this space, a cruel irony for a public institution.

I used my time as a volunteer to develop a sense of the institution's day to day activities. I often arrived at the facility before the tutoring sessions began to walk around the facility to chat with staff members from various programs operating in the recreation center. Other times, I sat on one of the indoor benches and observed the activity. Additionally, the volunteer role allowed me to develop relationships in the recreation center organically. Recreation center staff employed by the City of Atlanta and BGCMA staff members came to know me as a volunteer with "the mentoring program" who worked with some of the same young people they worked with in the afterschool program. During this period, I took note of a number of things including who came to the recreation center, what young people did while they were at the facility, and young people's interactions with their peers and adults on-site. I recorded these observations in my field notes.

While at the recreation center, I rarely removed myself from the activities to record observations. My role as a Coach often meant I was engaged in the program's activities which precluded me from leaving the site to record field notes. In order to address this issue, I used a

note-taking application on my cellphone, Evernote, to record keywords, phrases, and short thoughts as they arose (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). I found that using the Evernote app was an inconspicuous tool for recording "jottings" linked to observations in the field without drawing attention to my research activity. Given the ubiquity of cell phones in American culture and particularly among young people (Ling and Haddon 2008; Marshall and Rossman 2011), using my cell phone to record field notes drew far less attention from others than if I used a notepad to record field notes in the moment. I generally attempted to expand these jottings into written or typed field notes within 24 to 48 hours to maintain an accurate account of the experience. In total, over 300 hours of participant observation yielded over 150 pages of handwritten field notes were produced, typed field notes for 30 site visits, and 4 audio field note files.

As a participant observer, I was directly involved in a variety of activities in the recreation center. When I began the study, I was unsure of the level of involvement I would have in MTMT's activities. However, it became very clear early on as I dove into the tutoring activities with our "young boys" on my second visit to the Hope Park in December 2015. As someone who has experience as an educator and worked with youth in the past in similar afterschool settings, I felt extremely comfortable joining the other Coaches in the tutoring activities. At some point in January 2016, Coach James introduced me to a parent as "Coach Cameron" and it was clear that I had become part of MTMT. As a Coach with MTMT, I participated in the program's activities listed below:

- "chop up sessions" (informal conversations between Coaches and MTMT participants that took place before the open-court basketball sessions);
- Informal MTMT Coaches meetings – led by Coach James, we discussed changes to the programs, upcoming events, and any issues or challenges with MTMT youth we needed to be aware of as a team
- Men's Monthly Fellowship group – Saturday ministry sessions for men in the recreation center

- End of Summer Celebration – I volunteered to grill 270 hot dogs and transported them to the recreation center to help feed the guys in the program

Building Rapport on the Court

Undoubtedly, the most important activity I participated in during this time was playing basketball with MTMT youth, whom the Coaches often referred to interchangeably as "the boys" or "the guys," during the open-court sessions. Coach James and the Hope Park Recreation Center staff have an ongoing arrangement that allows MTMT access to the basketball court during youth basketball league's offseason. When the youth basketball season ended in April 2016, Coach James had full access to the gymnasium to expand MTMT's range of activities to include open-court basketball sessions in which youth affiliated with the program can play basketball in the gym. Word that the basketball courts reopened spread quickly in the neighborhoods. After the public school system's spring break in early April 2016, the handful of preteens we met with in the classroom each week during the tutoring sessions ballooned to over 40 youth in a standing-room only. A mixture of middle school- and high school-age males from surrounding neighborhoods came to the small classroom space to play ball in Hope Park Recreation Center to meet with Coach James and play on the recently refinished basketball court. Several of these youths became participants in the study.

Although I had been an active presence in the recreation center for nearly five months, I had no prior relationships with any of the guys who came for MTMT's open-court sessions. Despite the centrality of interviews to the data collection process, attempting to engage in interviews prior to establishing meaningful relationships (i.e. built on mutual trust and familiarity) would be less likely to yield rich data. Further, I feared that pursuing interviews immediately without establishing a relationship and mutual respect would give the impression I was only interested in what they could offer me and less interested in them as people. I strongly

believed moving too quickly to get the teenagers involved in the project would reinforce my

status as an outsider, perhaps one who is not trustworthy. The arrival of the teenagers for the

mentoring arm of MTMT required an additional period of immersion among the newly arrived

youth to cultivate the trust and rapport necessary to successfully recruit them to participate in the

study as interviewees. As such, I continued as a participant observer for the next four months of

the data collection period (April 2016 to August 2016).

When the older teenagers arrived in April, I made a conscious decision to shift my time at

the recreation center from tutoring in the classroom to spending more time in the gym during the

open-court sessions to be among the teenagers I wanted to interview for the study. Initially, I

watched the courts from the sidelines with the other Coaches. I quickly realized that this

sustained the distance between the guys and myself as youth and adults. In order to close this

distance and cultivate relationships with the guys, I had to "get in the game" literally and

figuratively, a decision that was critical in establishing a foundation of familiarity and trust

necessary to conduct meaningful interviews with the group of youth included in this study (Berg

2008; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Lincoln and Guba 1985).

I started coming to the rec center dressed to play ball - a pair of basketball shoes, some

shorts, and a tee. For me, entering that space, the basketball court, meant entering a space where

youth self-governed and leaving much of the authority and power of my adult status and role as a

Coach to become another ball player. Playing basketball did not make me 'one of the guys'; it

did not erase my status as an adult or remove the fact that I was a 'Coach' in the program.

However, participating alongside them as a teammate or opponent made me vulnerable in ways

that allowed them to interact with me differently than if I continued to watch them play from the

sidelines. Waiting with the guys to 'get next,'[14] talking trash, and getting heckled by guys who were sometimes half my age ("You too old to be out here, Coach![15]") during friendly but competitive games facilitated the development of trust and familiarity that could not be developed from the sideline.

Demonstrating an active interest in them by immersing myself the activities they were interested in changed the dynamics of the relationships I had with many of the guys who came to the mentoring program. As the weeks progressed through the summer, there were more handshakes, "'Sup Coach,"-es, and more meaningful interactions between the guys and myself. These interactions created opportunities to have conversations with the guys about a range of topics - sports, school, girls, and sometimes issues they were dealing with. These "in-between conversations" helped establish foundational relationships with many of the guys in the program. When the conversation was going well (i.e. they actively engaged in the exchange with full answers), I asked them about their relationship with the recreation center: "So how long have you been coming to the rec center?" or "When did you start coming to Hope Park [recreation center]?" Sometimes, these casual conversations developed into informal interviews and often took place while the guys were waiting - waiting for the discussion portion of the mentoring session to begin; waiting court-side to get in the next game; waiting in front of the building for their ride home after the session ends. These conversations provided brief windows into their lives beyond the recreation center and became an important part of my ethnographic practice.

---

[14] In pick-up basketball terminology, having 'next,' often stated as a claim "I got next!" or a question "Who got next?" is a collectively understood declaration or question of who has priority to be on the court in the following game, typically associated with the individual(s) who have been waiting the longest to play.
[15] Marvin, an 18-year-old and one of the original teens participating in MTMT, delivered this commentary with a smile the first time we faced off on the court.

Further, these conversations and interactions helped me to begin identifying potential participants for the interviews.

The Sample

Participants for the interviews were selected using a purposeful sampling strategy. Purposeful sampling emphasizes identifying information-rich cases for in-depth study that could illuminate the perceptions youth hold about the recreation center (Abrams 2010; Patton 2014; Robinson 2014). Further, this approach ensured representation of different perspectives among interviewees (Singleton and Straits 2005). Interview participants were selected based on three criteria. First, the participant was between the ages of 13 and 19 at the time of their interview. I presumed youth in this age range (teenagers) would have more autonomy in determining where and how they choose to spend time in their leisure hours (Crosnoe and Johnson 2011; Lareau 2011). Secondly, I chose youth who attended the facility on a regular basis, meaning they rarely missed two consecutive MTMT sessions. Finally, I chose youth whose participation at the recreation center was voluntary. I reasoned that choosing to spend one's time in the recreation center demonstrates that a young person ascribes some value to the institution.

The mentoring program was my primary pool for recruiting interview participants for the study. During the summer months, attendance regularly exceeded fifty young males from age 7 to 23. Despite the large numbers of teenagers who came to the recreation center during the summer for MTMT's open-court, individual attendance patterns varied; some youth came nearly every Monday and Wednesday while others attended more sporadically. Of this crowd, I identified and attempted to recruit 31 male participants for this study. However, only 17 completed the informed consent process to participate in the study. Additionally, I sought out female participants from other programs in the recreation center as there were no female

participants in the MTMT program. I identified four teenage girls affiliated with the Boys &
Girls Club's "Teen Club" program who fit the criteria for the study. Two were sisters and were
the siblings of a young male who participated in the MTMT program. A third young woman was
approached about participating in the study but was unsuccessfully recruited. However, of the
three who expressed interest, only one successfully completed and returned the signed consent
form. She provided the sole female perspective of this study.

The question of sample size in qualitative research is referred to by scholars as "data
saturation" — the number of interviews in which no new information or themes emerge
(Creswell 2003; Glaser and Strauss 1967). The recommended standards for qualitative sample
sizes fluctuates with scholars recommending as few as 5 participants to over 100 participants; the
size being determined by the specific goals of the study. However, there is no set number. Using
data from a study involving 60 in-depth interviews, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that
saturation occurred within the first 12 interviews. Additionally, a similar study conducted by
Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi (2016) examined 25 in-depth interviews and found that a
minimum of 16 interviews were needed to achieve the same goal. The current study's sample
size of 18 participants falls within these parameters.

Table 4.1
Interview Sample Characteristics

Category	Number of Interviewees N = 18 (100%)
Race	
Black/African-American	18 (100%)
Gender	
Male youth respondents	17 (94%)
Female youth respondents	1 (6%)
Education status	
Middle School Students	2 (11%)
High School Students	13 (72%)
High School Graduate, no college	1 (6%)
High School Graduate, some college	2 (11%)
Age (Range 13 – 19 years old)	
13 – 15 years old	7 (39%)
16 – 18 years old	9 (50%)
Over 18 years old	2 (11%)
Program Affiliation	
Making Tomorrow's Men Today (MTMT) Only	13 (72%)
Boys & Girls Club Teen Club Only	4 (22%)
Both programs	1 (6%)

Eighteen of the youth who expressed interest in participating in the study returned signed consent forms. The sample population consists of youth who identified as either Black or African American, reflecting the predominant racial group within the Hope Park community.[16] The sample disproportionately skews male, as there is only one female participant in the study. The

---

[16] Over 90% of residents in the Hope Park community are Black or African American, while the remaining 7% of the population is comprised of Whites, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders and other racial groups. Fiver percent of the Hope Park community's members are members of Hispanic or Latino ethnic groups. (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

sample ranged in age from 13 to 19 with an average age of 16.17 years old. All of the participants in the study were either enrolled in school or had completed the previous level of education. At the time of the study, three of the oldest males in the study were high school graduates, two of whom had begun their freshmen year in college at the time of their interviews; fourteen (14) were enrolled in one of the two high schools closest to the recreation center; and the youngest participant, age 13, was an 8th grader in middle school. None of the youth respondents had dropped out of school at the time of their participation in the study. All of the male youth participated in an afterschool program at Hope Park Recreation Center, either Coach James' tutoring and mentoring program or they participated the Teen Club for the Boys & Girls Club, open to males and females. Four of the males in the sample participated in both the Teen Club run by the Boys & Girls Club and Coach James' SNFC mentoring program.

The sole female in this sample was a regular participant in the BGCMA Teen Club at Hope Park Rec Center. All of the participants self-identified as Black, a reflection of the majority-minority demographics of both the recreation center and surrounding community it served.

Figure 4.1
Education Level of Respondents
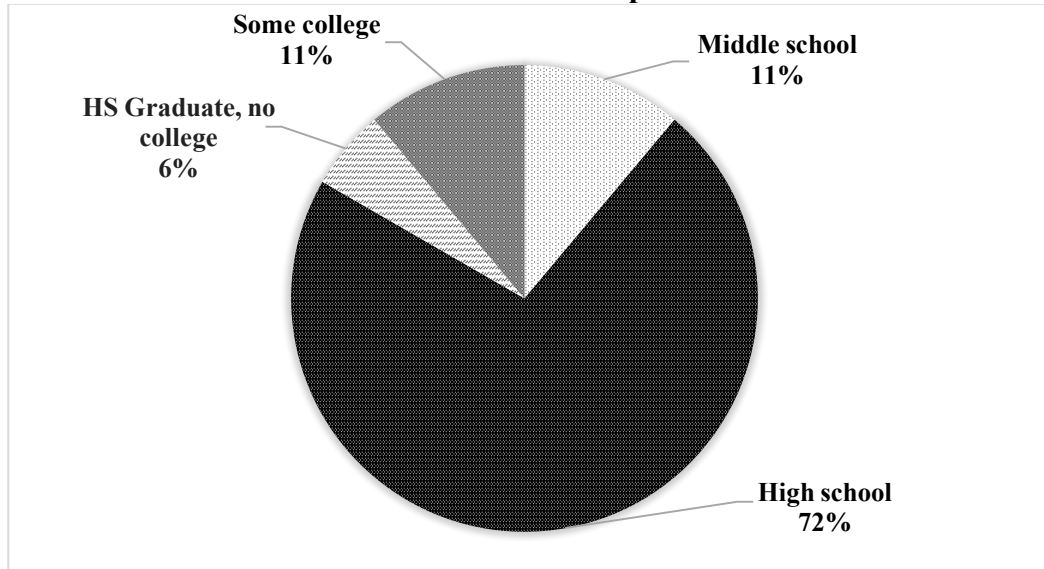
Figure 4.1 illustrates the educational level of all respondents at the time of their

interviews. All of the youth were either enrolled in school at some level or had been previously

involved in school; none of the respondents had dropped out of school. The majority of

respondents (n= 13, 72%) were enrolled in high school. Three respondents were high school

graduates, two of which had begun college while the third was employed in a part time job.[17]

The two remaining respondents were enrolled in middle school. With the exception of Trey,[18] all

youth attended schools in the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) system within the Hope Park

Community.

Perspectives not Included in the Study

At the outset of this study, I intended to include youth from the community who were not

active participants in the recreation center in this study. I was interested to understand if their

non-participation was by choice, the presence of objective or perceived barriers, a combination

---

[17] Raheem was the only respondent who was not currently enrolled in school at the time of the study, having
recently graduated from Rosa Parks High School, one of the three high schools attended by youth in this sample.
[18] Trey, 19, was enrolled in an accredited online program to finish his remaining credits for high school.

of the two, or reasons that have not emerged in previous research. Previous research has attempted to ascertain the reasons young people are not involved or do not participate in youth programs however they have relied on youth who were active in said programs to speak on behalf of their non-participant peers (Perkins et al. 2007; Serido et al. 2014). The voices of non-participant youth are not adequately represented in these studies alongside their peers for comparison.

Despite my intentions and curiosity, I was unable to incorporate the perspectives of non-participants in the current study. I presumed, perhaps naïvely, that my relationships with youth at Hope Park Recreation Center would provide a 'bridge' to their peers in the neighborhoods who were not active participants. My access to them, my relationships with the youth who participated in this study and those who were part of the program, was cultivated inside the recreation center facility where I had a role and a sense of place. In other words, my presence in the recreation center was legitimate. Further, the recreation center is a facility open to the public which made it easier to enter and ask questions.

Over the course of the year the study took place, I was unable to establish a connection with youth in the surrounding neighborhoods the recreation center. Although I frequented some of the convenience stores around Hope Park and drove youth to and from Hope Park Recreation Center, I did not have an immersive experience within the neighborhoods that would allow me to develop a role and the rapport necessary to extend my research beyond the recreation facility. Unlike my experience in the recreation center, I did not have a gatekeeper to facilitate my access to youth in the neighborhood. I did not feel comfortable asking young people to take on the responsibility of facilitating my access to their neighborhoods.

Additionally, my personal safety in the neighborhoods was a concern. News reports and

stories from youth in some of the neighborhoods made it clear that their neighborhoods could be unsafe, particularly to outsiders. On several occasions during the interviews, the guys expressed that while they often felt safe in their neighborhoods, outsiders may be at an increased risk as they may be viewed as potential targets of crime or violence (see CH5 page XX). I took heed to this message and determined that the time and resources required to establish myself as a known person within Hope Park were beyond my capabilities at the time. Had I lived in the Hope Park community during the course of this study, I may have been able to establish a consistent presence in a Hope Park neighborhood and developed relationships that facilitated access to non-participant youth. This may be accomplished in future research by a longer study period and finding a gatekeeper who is a respected member of the community to help establish presence within the neighborhoods to facilitate access to youth who are not involved in the recreation center programs.

Additionally, it is important to note that I did not conduct formal interviews with adults at the Hope Park Recreation Center for this study. The perspectives of recreation center staff, BGCMA staff and volunteers were beyond the scope of this study. However, I did document conversations I had with staff members in my field notes as part of my ethnographic practice. They offered insights about the facility's larger operations, local history, and aspects of young people's lives inside and outside of the recreation center.

Youth Interviews

Youth interviews followed an extended period of participant observation at Hope Park Recreation Center. Interviews were used to explore young people's perspectives of the recreation centers in their lives. While afterschool programs located in similar facilities are a topic of interest for researchers, as Eder and Fingerson (2002) note, young people do not always discuss

the issues researchers are interested in in their daily interactions with peers and adults in their lives. Furthermore, their perspectives of the facility and how it relates to their lives is not easily discernible through observation. Interviewing youth allows researchers, myself included, to understand the salience of issues, events, and topics from non-adult perspectives that are often minimized or missing from research.

For the study, I conducted and recorded face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 18 youth between the ages 13 and 19. The interviews were conducted between August 2016 and December 2016. This period coincided with the second half of the mentoring program's access to the basketball court open-court sessions. Additionally, Atlanta Public Schools began the 2016-2017 academic year at the beginning of August and many of the young people in the program returned to school during this period. As the youth basketball league resumed after the Thanksgiving holiday, the majority of the youth who came throughout the summer and into the first half of the academic school year stopped coming to the facility. As the number of youth who met the sample criteria declined, December became the natural end of data collection.

All interviews took place at the Hope Park Recreation Center prior to or during MTMT's open court basketball sessions on days and times agreed upon by youth respondents and me. Except for the interview with Joy, [19] all interviews were held on Mondays and Wednesdays when MTMT was holding a session. Meeting on these days for interviews was ideal because they were planning to be at the recreation center for MTMT and thus, did not require youth to make a significant change to their schedule. On interview days, youth were encouraged to show up a half-hour to an hour early if possible to minimize the extent to which the interview would cut into the open-court session.

---

[19] Joy's interview was conducted on a day between MTMT sessions because she was not a participant in the MTMT program.

At the time of the interviews, I collected participants' signed consent forms. I checked the forms to ensure they signed their names in the appropriate space. After collecting the forms, I thanked each respondent for agreeing to meet with me and reminded them that their participation was completely voluntary. As such, they were reminded that we could skip any question they did not want to, or feel comfortable answering and they could stop the interview at any time and would not be penalized in any way for their choice. Although the consent form included a check box to identify if they were comfortable with the interview being recorded, I asked each participant prior to the interview for verbal assent. All participants provided assent and the interviews were recorded.

Interviews followed a semi-structured approach wherein I entered the interview process with a set of questions around topics of interest yet allowed room to generate new questions related to the respondents' specific answers and experiences (Rubin and Rubin 2012). The interview schedule was divided into four sections: background and demographics; participation and perception of the recreation center; perspectives of their social context; and wrap up questions. Table 4.2 provides a sample of the interview questions from each section (see Appendix A for full interview schedule).

The in-depth nature of the interviews helped uncover the ways youth perceived their worlds and interpreted their experiences at the recreation center. Probing questions allowed me to generate additional insight into the ways young people viewed their experiences in the recreation center in relationship to their lives beyond the facility.

Table 4.2
Sample Interview Questions

Section of Interview Schedule	Sample question(s)
Youth background	*Have you thought about what you want to do after high school?[20]*
The Recreation Center – participation and perception	*Can you tell me about when you started coming to the recreation center?* *What are the adults like here at the recreation center?* *How would you describe the recreation center to a friend who has never been here before?* *Why do you come to the recreation center?*
Perceptions of their social environment	*How would you describe your neighborhood to someone who has never been there?* *What's it like going to your school?* *What is it like for youth growing up in Hope Park?*
Wrapping up	*Are there any questions you'd like to ask me?*

Interviews ranged from 28 minutes to 71 minutes, on average lasting approximately 43 minutes each. Thirteen youth were interviewed in one-on-one with the researcher; six youth were interviewed in pairs on three separate occasions. All of the tandem interviews were with the guys were familiar with one another prior to the interview: Xavier (age 16) and Dwayne (age 16) knew each other from the program; Brian and Darnell (both age 16) were friends and lived in the same neighborhood; and Torrence, or "Big T" (age 16) and Anthony (age 15) were brothers. The tandem interviews were conducted as such as a matter of convenience for the participants (they were available on the same day and were comfortable participating with their counterpart).[21] During the tandem interviews, I attempted to ensure that each participant provided an answer to each question. I found that the multi-respondent format allowed youth to

---

[20] This item was incorporated into the interview schedule because it was a recurring topic in MTMT's chop-up sessions. It provided an opportunity to understand the possible trajectories youth in the study envisioned for themselves.

[21] All of the youth were familiar with one another from the program. Two were really good friends from the neighborhood and the other tandem were brothers.

speak openly with their peers about their experiences as they responded to my questions. In this way, paired interviews mirror one of the strengths of the focus group method in that discourse among respondents often reveals information about their experiences that the interviewer may not have considered ahead of time (Berg 2008; Boateng 2012; Morgan 2002). All audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

There were two primary sources of data for the study: interview transcripts and field notes from participant observations. As noted above, the field notes were collected in multiple formats: handwritten observations collected in two field notes journals, 2) electronic field notes composed using Microsoft Word, and 3) audio notes. I uploaded the electronic field notes to NVivo for Mac, a qualitative analysis software program. Four audio field notes were uploaded to the NVivo program as well as the program can be used to organized and analyze textual, audio, and multimedia files. Audio recordings of in-depth interviews were professionally transcribed in their entirety. I reviewed each interview transcription while listening to the audio recording to address and correct any inconsistencies between the audio file and the transcript. Once the interview transcripts were cleaned of errors, electronic versions of each transcript were imported into NVivo for analysis.

Analytical Procedure

In this study, there were two forms of data produced in this study: interview transcriptions and field notes from participant observations. I analyzed the interview transcripts and field notes using constant comparison and analytic induction (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Thomas 2003, 2006), employing a two-cycle approach to coding (Saldaña 2016). I began the analysis with the interview transcripts. During the first coding cycle, I utilized a list of deductive

codes developed from the interview questions outlined in the interview schedule to initiate the

coding process. I elaborated on the initial set of codes through open-coding to take stock of

additional ideas that were presented in the interview data corpus. Many of these additional codes

were captured using two primary coding techniques: *descriptive coding* (a word or term that aims

to succinctly summarize the topic of a passage) and *in vivo coding* (codes based on terms or

phrases used by participants) (Saldaña 2016). In vivo coding was a particularly useful in this

project because it seeks to prioritize the voice of the participant over the researcher's perspective.

Saldaña (2016) notes that "coding with [youths'] actual words enhance and deepens an adult's

understanding of their cultures and worldviews" (106). Prioritizing their voices, even at this

stage of the research process, was an intentional effort to preserve young people's perspectives in

the scholarship. In addition, *concept coding* (a word or short phrase that represents a meaning

that transcends a single item or action) (Saldaña 2016) was also incorporated in the first cycle to

a lesser extent. Table 4.3 provides examples of the types of codes generated from interview data.

Table 4.3
Examples of First Cycle Codes

Code type	Code	Example
descriptive code	[respect]	*"I know if I want respect from somebody, I got to give 'em respect. So, I come up here, listen to what everybody got to say and then just play basketball. – Steven, 13*
in vivo code	[TROUBLEMAKERS][22]	*"We wouldn't take no shit from nobody. They took it as a sign of being <u>troublemakers</u>; we took it as a sign of protecting ourselves." – Marvin, 18*
concept code	[supportive adult]	*"...and then Coaches, Coach Emerson – that's the only Coach I'm really cool with. He the only one to every give me a chance…" – Trey, 19*

Analyzing Field Notes

As noted above, I constructed field notes in three ways: 1) handwritten field notes in two note books, 2) electronic field notes typed in Microsoft Word, and 3) audio recordings of notes. Audio notes were often recorded in the car using the voice memo application on my cell phone immediately after the session ended. The audio notes were transcribed into electronic field notes. Electronic field notes were uploaded to and analyzed using the NVivo software program while the handwritten notes were coded manually.

Although there were multiple forms of field notes capturing my observations at Hope Park Recreation Center, the analytical process was consistent across all forms of field notes. Following the guidelines established by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011), I analyzed the field

---

[22] In this study, in vivo codes are written in all caps to mark them as codes based on actual language used by the interviewee.

notes utilizing a grounded theory approach to analysis carried out in a two-cycle process. The first cycle proceeded with a close reading of the field notes and an open-coding process, applying codes to segments of data. Subsequent field notes were compared to existing codes to determine if they supported an existing code category or constituted a new code (constant comparison method).

An important aspect of the first cycle coding unique to the field note analytical procedure was detangling the descriptive accounts of my observations from my commentary on the observation. In what some might consider an ideal set of field notes, the notes are comprised of purely descriptive accounts of the researcher's observations. However, in practice, the descriptive accounts of observations in the recreation center were interspersed with commentary or reflections on these observations. These 'observer comments' were in-time reflections of the events described in the field notes and operate as an early form of an embedded analytical memo. I distinguished between field notes and observer comments during the first cycle coding process. Observer comments were coded as *OC* followed by a colon and a corresponding code to identify. For example [OC: youth waiting outside] is a code denoting a segment of writing that captures my reflection on the observation of the young people in the program waiting outside while others walked in and out of the building.

The second stage of the analysis was aimed at identifying connections and relationships between the codes developed in the first cycle to generate a framework (Saldaña 2016). During the second stage, I integrated the codes generated by the field notes and interview data to develop overarching categories in which to re-organize the data corpus. Categories reflected connections between codes and were further synthesized into themes presented in the successive chapters. Ultimately, data excerpts from the field notes and interview transcriptions included in

the following chapter were selected as representative illustrations of perspectives and events in the data. Conversely, I include segments of data in the analysis to illustrate points of divergence from these narratives thereby demonstrating the diversity of perspectives within young people's experiences and perspectives within the Hope Park Recreation Center and their broader community context.

The themes presented in the following chapters were developed through multiple cycles of constant comparative analysis. The themes are presented in relation to the study's empirical questions. Through this analysis of interview and observational data, I found that youths' decisions to go to the recreation center in the Hope Park community were informed by the perceived dearth of opportunities and desirable institutions in their neighborhoods and the widely held perception that the recreation center provided an intervention for youth in the community. Yet, their access to the amenities and resources in the recreation center is mitigated by relationship with adults responsible for providing programs and others who maintain the facility.

Validating the Data

The validity of the study's findings is supported by the use of methodological triangulation (Guion et al. 2011). Data from observations and interviews were compared during the analytical process to identify convergent and divergent perspectives of the experiences and ideas presented in the final analysis. Unfortunately, member checks were not part of the validation process for the current study. Time constraints were an issue as they spent very little time at the recreation center and the turnaround of the project did not permit an opportunity to coordinate a member-check following the data collection process. Further, the end of the data collection ended shortly after the end of the basketball sessions. As Corey predicted in his interview, nearly all of the teenagers who came to the rec centers for MTMT stopped coming

when the basketball court was no longer available adding an additional barrier to coordinating a member check as part of the analysis.

Power Relations in Interviewing Youth

The societal power imbalance between youth and adults is an unavoidable component of researcher's engagement with youth (Eder and Fingerson 2002). I addressed this power imbalance in a number of ways leading up to and during the interview phase of the research. My participation at the recreation center helped me establish a constant presence in which trusting relationships developed on mutual respect could develop. As discussed above, my time on the basketball court was an invaluable experience that I strongly believe helped develop my relationship with the guys and disrupt some the power dynamics between youth and adults. Briefly, the basketball court was a space governed by youth with little adult input. The guys shared a collective understanding of the rules and norms of pick-up basketball that required little oversight from adults. Entering that space required that I suspended a reasonable amount of authority associated with my role as an adult or Coach to compete on equal standing with them. The basketball court was a leveling ground in which the power dynamics related to the age hierarchy are minimized and supplanted by athletic skill and competitive acumen. From my perspective, the time spent on the court helped the guys in the program become more comfortable with me which was extremely helpful when some of them sat for the interviews.

I was constantly aware of the power dynamics throughout the interview process. I was mindful of how youth might perceive me as an authority figure and that this perception might curtail their responses to the interview questions. I attempted to address these in-interview dynamics using a few strategies. First, I framed the interview as a 'conversation' between us in which there were no right or wrong answers. I explained that I was interested in their opinions.

As an extension of the first strategy, I encouraged youth to ask me any questions that came to mind during the interview and to feel free to ask for further clarification for interview questions that were unclear to them. Some youth responded to this more than others asking questions and moving the interview to unexpected, yet fruitful, topics.

Further, at the end of each interview, I offered them an additional opportunity to ask me "anything else you might want to know about me or the project." A number of the participants took this opportunity to ask questions: Xavier (age 16) asked me "What you gonna do with this when you done?" and Trey (age 19), turned a central question on me, "Why you come here?" I took these opportunities to explain more about my motivations for the research and how much I learned from listening to and being around them. I believe these changes to the interview dynamic helped create a more comfortable and natural context for the youth in this study to share their perspectives.

The final strategy, tandem interviews, were an unplanned but useful tool in addressing power relations during the interview process. The power that comes with age and authority (in this case, being an adult a Coach in MTMT) can be reduced by group settings where young people outnumber the adults (Eder and Fingerson 2002). As noted above, two of the three sets of tandem interview participants had relationships that were rooted in areas of their lives beyond the recreation center (i.e. siblings, close friends from the same neighborhood). When I interviewed Craig (15), his younger cousin was visiting the recreation center with him. As his guest, Craig was responsible for escorting his cousin through the facility and he sat with us during the interview. These relationships between the interview tandems occurred with someone the participants had an existing relationship with or a sense of familiarity. The added person reduced

the power dynamic by outnumbering me but also provided the comfort of a peer to the interview set up that proved beneficial to the interview experience and the quality of the data.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the research design and methodological orientation employed to explore how youth in low-income communities perceive the role of a municipal recreation center in their lives. Utilizing an ethnographic approach, I collected qualitative data through 12 months of participant observation and interviews with 18 youth at Hope Park Recreation Center in Atlanta, Georgia. I utilized the qualitative software program NVivo to analyze the data. By using the inductive analytical techniques of coding, organizing, and categorizing the data, I developed themes grounded in the young peoples' experiences at Hope Park Recreation Center and reflected themes in existing scholarly literature. In the following chapter, the themes developed through the analysis of interview and observational data are presented to illustrate urban youths' experiences and perceptions within the recreation center and the ways in which participants relate this institution to their lives beyond the facility.

Chapter V

"AIN'T NOWHERE ELSE TO GO!"

EXPLORING YOUTHS' DECISIONS

TO UTILIZE HOPE PARK RECREATION CENTER

The analysis of the findings is driven by two empirically driven sub-questions that serve to operationalize the dissertation's central question: What role do social institutions play in the lives of urban youth in low-income communities?

Two sub-questions were created in order to explore this question within the specific context of a recreation center in Atlanta, Georgia. These questions were:

1. Why do youths in low-income communities go to the recreation center?

2. What are youths' perceptions of their experiences in the recreation center?

The current chapter presents an analysis in response to the first of the study's sub-questions.

Where are the Teenagers?

Nearly 27% of the Hope Park's 35,000 residents are under the age of 18. However, teenagers were virtually absent from the Hope Park Recreation Center during the first five months of my time at the facility. A field note excerpt from late February 2016 captures an observation of teenagers' relative absence from the facility:

> *I arrived at 5:25p, earlier than normal. I wanted to get there early to just sit in the rec center and see what happened in the rest of the facility, as much as I could see by sitting on the bench outside the swimming pool. Most of my time at the recreation center at this*

point has been in the downstairs classroom with Coach James and the kids who come for tutoring.

What did I see? A lot of young elementary-aged kids all over the place…literally everywhere. There were kids in the 'play space' where the billiards table and foosball tables are located. Two young girls circling the billiards table, sticks in their hands, smiles on their faces as they chat with each other and eye the table…The kids are everywhere - sitting on the floor talking, doing push-ups, laughing in small groups. Two were playing a game of tabletop foosball. I remember seeing the foosball table a few weeks back but the one they were playing was on top of a table rather than the self-contained game I saw before. Is the full-size foosball table broken?

One thing I do notice is the relative rarity of teenage-looking youth in the facility when I'm there. When I see them, they stand out like giants among the smaller youth. I saw two yesterday interacting with each other. The young male was wearing a grey hoodie and what appeared to be matching pants. When I first noticed him, he was standing by the rail that overlooks the bottom floor. I noticed one of the CoA [City of Atlanta] *employees motion to him to remove the hood from his head from across the lobby.*

The ubiquitous presence of small children in the facility was the direct result of the afterschool program, a central focus in the Centers of Hope initiative. According to iPARCS Atlanta, the Department of Parks and Recreation's (DPR) online services portal some community members use to sign up for programs, the afterschool program offered at recreation centers throughout the city "provides quality Educational, Recreation [*sic*], and Cultural Programs" for youth from ages 5 – 12 to keep them "active and healthy by creating a safe supportive and structured environment" (Atlanta Department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs 2017). The afterschool program operates from 2:30 - 7:00pm from Monday to Friday during the school year.

On Mondays and Wednesdays, some of the children from the afterschool program trickled into one of the multipurpose classrooms to spend the next hour to two hours with Making Today's Men Tomorrow (MTMT) working on their reading and math skills. MTMT was a non-profit organization created by Cedric James in 2011 to promote health and overall wellness for youth in Atlanta. MTMT took root at Hope Park Recreation Center in 2012 when James

recruited men who frequented HPRC's weight room to begin a mentoring program for youth in the Hope Park community.

Conversely, there were very few programs for teenagers at Hope Park Recreation Center during this same window of time. From time to time, guys who participated in the MTMT mentoring program in previous years stopped by to check in with Coach James. Some stayed long enough to plan their next move and a few used the computers when we took the boys in the tutoring program to the computer lab.

In mid-April, MTMT acquired control of the basketball court, attracting youth from the surround neighborhoods to the recreation center. Word of mouth and text messages spread the word when MTMT got the courts back after basketball season and the guys showed up. Many of the guys in the program, including some of the guys interviewed in this study, walked from their neighborhoods while others were dropped off by their parents or an older sibling. Others came from Courtland Ridge, the apartment community next door to the Hope Park Recreation Center separated by a wrought iron gate surrounding the government property. Guys traveled in small groups of three or four, climb down into a small dugout of the earth to maneuver themselves through a well-worn opening under the wrought iron gate separating their apartment complex from the Hope Park Recreation Center and walk towards the front doors of the facility.

Interviews with youth in the recreation center were key to understanding why young people walked, rode bikes, and got their parents to drop them off at Hope Park Recreation Center each week. These interviews revealed that youths' decisions to come to the recreation center were related to their perceptions of their social environments. Specifically, the perceived lack of places to go and activities in their neighborhoods combined with a strong desire to avoid the

streets (a cultural institution) were primary overarching themes related to respondents' decision to go to the recreation center in Hope Park community.

Perceptions of Neighborhoods

Youth traveled from neighborhoods near and far to come to Hope Park Recreation Center (HPRC). I briefly saw some of them up close as I drove guys home from the recreation center after playing basketball for a couple of hours. Some lived in houses tucked away in well-established communities filled with homes that have been there for decades while others directed me to drop them off in apartment communities with flickering lights, cracked pavement, and weathered speed bumps that did little to slow drivers insistent on ignoring the recommended speed limit signs. These brief glimpses added a small sense of the places these young people were coming from when they arrived at the recreation center each Monday and Wednesday. However, these passing encounters were not enough to understand what it was like to live in these communities. To understand these neighborhoods, I asked the respondents to describe their neighborhood as though they were describing it to someone who had never been there, which was true for me in most cases.

Youths' descriptions of their neighborhoods and their experiences in them revolved around notions of safety and the perceived options available to them in these places. Youths' sense of personal safety is a common lens in which young people understand their everyday environments particularly in urban communities (Fine et al. 2003; Popkin, Leventhal, and Weismann 2010). Youth in the study discussed safety in terms of what elements, people, or activities were present or absent from their neighborhood environment. Over half the respondents described their neighborhoods as safe places to live.

Nearly a third of the youth in the sample were part of the mass relocation that involved thousands of families who were dispersed throughout metro-Atlanta as the city demolished its public housing stock by 2011 (Oakley, Ruel, & Reid, 2013a, 2013b). Trey and Kareem both moved from the public housing community Cherry Hill Homes to Hope Park. They shared similar perspectives on the relative safety they felt living in Hope Park:

> Cameron: What's it like, is the neighborhood you livin' in now similar to Cherry Homes?
> Trey: Nothing like Cherry Homes. It's so comfortable! Like, you can leave your door open. I stay, I stay in like, I stay like down by West Pond but before West Pond. And it's two big ol' houses, I stay in a real big house. It's like, neighbors cool, everythang like, everythang just chill…it's better than like Cherry Homes. Yeen got to worry bout nobody, yeen got to worry bout coming out the door and almost getting shot. Yeen got to worry bout none of that. Like it ain't sweet, but it's comfortable.
>
> Kareem: I live in a quiet neighborhood. Nothing but old people. That's what I like. I don't wanna hear no shootin'. But if I do hear shootin' it's either from the Ridge or going up towards that way. At first, I used to stay across the street from these apartments that shoot outs every day. They shot our windows out. Thangs like that. Anybody could have got hit. Once we move in the quiet neighborhood, I been chillin' ever since. I got my goal outside. I can shoot whenever I want to. I can play pool. I can ride dirt bikes in my neighborhood. So, things like that.

According to them, the threat of violence and victimization was much higher in Cherry Homes Changing neighborhoods often helped young people and their families move to safer environments than the ones they left. For Trey and Kareem, relocating to Hope Park has allowed them to feel safer and less susceptible to danger than in their old environment. Other respondents used similar descriptors to indicate their perception of a safe neighborhood. Some described their neighborhoods as "quiet" places "where old folks" live. Craig noted that his neighborhood oscillated between noisy and quiet but that they "really don't got no problems." Dwayne and Gerald identified the low number of kids in their neighborhood as an indicator of a quiet neighborhood ("Either they like, real, real small or they grown already"). According to Jimmy, everyone in his neighborhood knows each other. These social ties help keep "break-ins" to a

minimum. These descriptors were all indicators used to suggest that their perceived neighborhood were safe places to live.

Incidents of violence replaced "old folks" as a common descriptor in other Hope Park neighborhoods. While a few respondents mentioned fights between youth in the neighborhood, it was not commonly described as a regular occurrence in the neighborhood. Shooting, however, was discussed as an imminent danger in some neighborhoods in the Hope Park community. Steven, a 13-year-old who recently returned to his home in Hope Park from a year in New York, expressed concern about his brother's safety in the neighborhood should he move back home: "At the same time, I really don't want him to stay down here. My brother took boxing classes and he know how to fight... and people down here like shooting people." Steven's concern revealed the ease in which conflicts could escalate to gun violence in his neighborhood.

Perceptions of "The Ridge"

The peace and quiet youth associated with the "old folks" neighborhoods contrasted with other areas in Hope Park where many of the youth I encountered reside. Several of the study's participants and many more of the young people who come to MTMT live in Courtland Ridge. "The Ridge," as it is known among the youth, is a low-income housing apartment complex in the Hope Park community that has a reputation for being a rough neighborhood. People "grow up rough" in The Ridge (Trey, Interview, August 2016). Like Trey and Kareem, longtime friends Darnell (age 16) and Brian (age 16) moved from Bowen Homes to Hope Park. However, they have lived in The Ridge for almost half their lives. In the excerpt from their interview together, they point to the one of the key challenges growing up in their neighborhood:

> Darnell: ...Out there in our apartment, we, us as in like teenagers, we really grown. Like grown men out there.
> Cameron: What you mean?

Darnell: Ain't too much, ain't nobody too much looking out for you. You gotta start making your own decisions at a certain age.
Brian: Yeah. You gotta do what you gotta do to try to make it.

To an extent, Brian and Darnell's comments corroborate the assertion that young people grow up rough in their neighborhood. The autonomy they describe, of having to make decisions on their own as teenagers, is a condition that seems, from their view, imposed on young people by the environment rather than something that is desired. The notion that they are growing up fast, that teenagers are "grown men," infers that young people in their neighborhood are taking on more responsibility for themselves within this context because they feel like they are on their own ("ain't nobody...looking out for you"). This perception of "growing up fast" coincides with Jarrett's (1997) assertion that adolescence can be a be an elusive phase of the life course for youth in urban, disadvantaged neighborhoods like the Hope Park community.

Marvin (15) and his older brother Marcus (18), have lived in The Ridge for their entire lives. When asked what living in The Ridge was like, Marvin said the neighborhood is "too bad" and added that he "wouldn't want [new people] to come out there." He explained that visitors would notice trash everywhere, a condition of the neighborhood I confirmed driving through the neighborhood to drop youth off at their homes after MTMT was over. As Marvin explained, the complex's maintenance crew were either fired or stopped working. "Like, if you stay over here one night, you gonna hear a whole bunch of shooting." (Marvin, 15, Interview, August 2016).

The majority of respondents agreed that the night time meant that youth need to be in the house to avoid the shooting Marvin described. The night time was associated with danger and criminal activity even in neighborhoods youth described as relatively safe:

Xavier: But at night time it be dangerous because people wanna come over the neighborhood – we up the street from Simpson so say if somebody steal a car they'll probably bring it to our neighborhood and park it or something. And then there'll be like police around and stuff.

Although many of the young people in this study acknowledged potential dangers in their neighborhood, the presence of danger did not always translate to feeling unsafe living in their neighborhoods. Insiders decidedly had a different take on their communities. Growing up in the Hope Park community appeared to create a different perspective of safety among community insiders, those who live in the community. As longtime residents of the neighborhood, their perspectives of the neighborhood differ from what an outsider may view. Brian and Darnell, who live in Courtland Ridge, perceived their long history in the neighborhood, being familiar, was a form of protection from potential victimization:

> Darnell: "Like, ain't nobody gonna come at us aggressive cause you know, we grew up there, *they know us, so we straight*...
> Brian: We familiar faces. We basically like family.
> Darnell: …Yeah exactly. Everybody, if you grew up there, you family.
> (Brian and Darnell, August 2016).

The insider perspective on safety is interesting. Despite the issues identified in these neighborhoods, youth who lived in them identified a sense of community among the residents. Brian and Darnell agreed that people who grew up in their neighborhood are like "family." This familial social tie assumed by neighborhood residents is a form of (social) trust that decreases their susceptibility to victimization within the community relative to outsiders.

Conversely, according to Brian, outsiders were at a higher risk of victimization entering these communities. This notion of the outsider's precarious position in the neighborhood is discussed below in Brian's story of the new guy who came to the neighborhood and was robbed for running his mouth:

> Brian: Like, if a new person come out there, like, think of it like . . . a couple weeks ago a new boy came out there like talkin' like he run everybody stuff like that, got robbed the same day. Cause nobody didn't know him but he was saying he over everybody and all that. Robbed him. Didn't nobody know him. He say he was out there like year before but I was out there and I didn't even recognize him. So I know the other folks didn't

recognize him…like, later on that day, a couple of my homeboys came in, said they seen him getting robbed on they way out of the apartment.

According to this story, outsiders are at a much greater risk of victimization than people who are members of the community. Even though some of the guys acknowledge the presence of crime, shooting, and other conditions that may often be interpreted as or associated with an unsafe or dangerous neighborhoods in previous research (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998), they expressed a sense of safety that was rooted in being a 'known persona' in the neighborhood. "...they know us so we straight.[23] Gerald (18) recently moved back to Hope Park from New Orleans. He argued that outsiders, people who did not live in the area, were the ones labeling the community as a "bad area." "I say you only say it's a bad area because you an outsider looking in. If you an insider looking out you notice that it's really not all that bad."

Raheem shared a similar observation about the value of being known in the neighborhoods to being safe. He lives in a neighborhood near The Ridge but passes between it and another neighborhood regularly when he leaves his home. "You gotta know somebody around here in order to be safe. Lucky for me, I know plenty of people. So, I don't have to worry about getting jumped." In both cases, young people articulated the protective value of insider status. As insiders, youth are somewhat insulated from the threat of victimization within a specific area of the community. However, 'being known' does not make them invulnerable to victimization. Regardless of the ways respondents discussed the safety of their respective neighborhoods, it was widely perceived that Hope Park community lacked viable opportunities for teenage youth.

Since Thrasher's seminal study on gangs, social scientists have viewed gangs as a prominent social group in the urban context. More recent studies have discussed youths'

---

[23] in this context 'straight' is used a term to indicate they are safe from potential victimization

participation in these social groups as a facet of street life for adolescent males and females (Chesney-Lind & Hagedorn, 1999; Miller, 2001; Taylor, 1993; Taylor et al., 2003). Vanessa,[24] a 10-year-old girl living in The Ridge, was the first person to mention the presence of gangs in the Hope Park community (to me); "It's Bloods in my neighborhood!" she blurted out one day over the summer while waiting for me to pull bags of chips out of my bag for her and her younger brother Deion (field note, June 2016). The statement was unprompted but it made me consider whether or not the presence of these groups was a normal facet of her life and living in the Ridge.

Only a few respondents mentioned gangs in the Hope Park neighborhoods during our interviews corroborating Vanessa's declaration. Further, respondents' perspectives on gangs revealed a variety of perspectives on these social groups.

Joy asserted that many of her peers are 'false claiming' to impress people. "They just be false claiming all these types of gangs. But then when somebody real come in your face they shut down. They be, 'oh no, I wasn't saying that!' It's to the point where you just getting shot over wearing blue, over wearing red." Raheem agreed with Joy's sentiment about perpetrators but noted that there were others who "follow through on what they be sayin'." Both respondents expressed difficulty understanding why people choose to affiliate with a gang. When I asked why he was not involved with a gang, Raheem responded:

> Why should I? It's not even worth my time or effort just to try to join something that really little do people know that it's not good to join… Some people say they need friends. Sometimes they say they need protection. Some of them say just because they trying to get a family. Those reasons don't make no type of sense to me. What kind of family do that? They jump you for no apparent reason. They rob people for no apparent

---

[24] Although she wasn't part of any programs at Hope Park Recreation Center, Vanessa (or Nessa for short), was a regular face at the recreation center's playground in the evenings with her younger brother Deion (age 8) who played in the youth football league. Nessa often tagged along with Deion when he came to MTMT. She preferred to play games or watch YouTube videos in the computer lab when MTMT Coaches accompanied some of the guys who were less interested in playing basketball.

reason. You might as well call yourself a criminal than somebody in a gang. I just don't see no reason for it. It's not right.

The reasons he says some of his peers may be motivated to join a gang, a sense of belonging, seeking out protection, are consistent with the reasons found in previous (Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn 1999; Miller 2008; Taylor 1989) Yet, to Raheem, these needs were invalidated by what he believed to be these groups' propensity to victimize others in the process of becoming a member.

Other participants, however, viewed gangs differently. Marcus and Torrence shared perspectives on gangs' presence and role in the community that portrayed them in a less threatening light. Marcus, an 18-year-old residing in The Ridge (the same neighborhood as Vanessa) described gang members as "regular people" who "post up" in front of neighborhood apartment buildings "but they don't do nothing." Further, Torrence offered an example of gang members helping children in the neighborhood. "Say you doing sports and you need some cleats or something. They gonna help you get what you need so you can be successful. But they don't want you to be gang members like them." Building on Torrence's perspective, Big Greg, an original MTMT participant, told the Coaches and youth during a chop-up session that some of the gang members from the neighborhood sent him money to help him out during his first semester in college[25] (field notes, December 2016).

Respondents' perceptions of gangs in their neighborhoods problematizes the conventional notion of gangs as dangerous members of the community. On one hand, these groups are associated with the potential for danger and victimization in Hope Park neighborhoods. Yet, other accounts illustrated ways in which gang members were also served as

---

[25] Big Greg visited MTMT while he was home from college on winter break in December 2016.Big Greg was a standout athlete in high school sports and a somewhat of a neighborhood hero to his peers and younger children.

109

potential sources of support for youth, redirecting them away from getting involved in what they

do (the streets), particularly youth who are striving for success. Still, none of the respondents

who discussed gangs were affiliated with these groups, which may reflect a general notion that

membership in these groups were not viable options for young people.

"Ain't nowhere else to go!"

Although previous studies have linked urban youths' participation in youth programs and

recreation facilities to a desire for safe environment (McLaughlin et al. 1994; Ries et al. 2008),

many of the respondents' decisions to come to the recreation center were related to the

perception that there were few desirable places, opportunities, or amenities available in the Hope

Park community.

When I asked about places they spent their free time, very few mentioned spending their

time in other institutions in their community. Somewhat surprising, only some of the respondents

mentioned spending any time at the church. Gerald and Marcus, both age 18, attended church for

religious services, although Marcus stopped for a time when his grandmother passed away. He

credited his "play-brother," whose family presides over a small church outside of Hope Park, for

helping him get back to the church. Otis presented a different perspective on the church, noting

that some people did not feel comfortable in church.

> That's for people that - everybody not interested in church. Some people like being in
> their homes. Some people, 'cause you know how it is at church, your first day in church.
> They callin' you up, come on buddy. Cause if you play like you don't know, they know
> everybody "YOU, I NEVER SEEN YOU BEFORE!" You know how it, come on
> everybody don't like that…they want you to feel comfortable at the House you know?
> So, that's why they do it. – Otis, 19

Although he did not say it directly, he may have been articulating a perspective he held. It was

clear he was familiar with the customs of Black church traditions of welcoming visitors and

newcomers but he did not indicate if the church figured prominently or at all in his life. Jimmy

(age 14) spent his Saturdays at a church participating in an intervention program to curb some of behavior issues he was having at home, "to stop disrespecting [my mama] and stuff." It is unclear if the limited discussion of the church among the respondents is a reflection of the institution's declining relevance to younger African Americans as suggested in recent commentary (Glaude 2010) or if it may have been discussed more through a different line of questioning. Perhaps others did not consider it a place where youth spend their time in the same ways one might at the recreation center.

The public library presented divergent opinions among a few youths. Craig (age 15), was adamant that the library is the last place to find teenagers: "like we don't want to go to no library. Like, what's to do at the library? Read books or get on the computer? Like, nothing to do unless you get a job." Others, however, felt differently. Kareem used the library regularly to do his homework; and Raheem, an ardent gamer, used the public library when he could not use the computer lab in the recreation center: "Anywhere there is a computer I do the exact same stuff." Outside of the few who went to the library, most youth agreed that there were few places to hang out in their neighborhood when they were not at the recreation center.

> Cameron H: Is there anywhere else to go other than the recreation center?
> Marvin: Around here?
> CH: Yeah.
> M: No. Back to school and do community service hours.[26] Besides that, ain't nowhere else to go.
> CH: There ain't no other like gyms or churches or anything like that where people go hang out? Roll-and-Glide?[27]
> M: People go there on Saturday. That's when the kid's day is.
> CH: Oh, okay.
> M: And that's it. Ain't nowhere else. Hmm, nowhere else.

---

[26] Students attending Atlanta Public Schools are required to complete 75 hours of community service in order to receive their diploma. Marvin had already started collecting hours by volunteering at the middle school he attended.
[27] A popular skating rink in the area; pseudonym.

With few desirable places to go, many of the guys spent their free time in their neighborhoods playing sports and hanging out with their friends. While some youth can play basketball comfortably in their driveways (Kareem and Trey[28]), many of the guys talked about the poor state of recreational amenities in their neighborhoods. Some respondents said the basketball courts in in their neighborhoods were often missing, had been pulled down, or were at risk of being torn up. Marvin mentioned that The Ridge used to have a community center facility but it had been closed. He did not know why it was closed or if there were any plans to reopen the facility. According to Brian and Darnell, new basketball goals were erected in one part of The Ridge but they have spent a long time without them because, as Darnell noted, "they took the 10-foot [goal] and then come back and took the 8-foot [goal]." Marvin had a portable basketball goal he refused to put up in his neighborhood to prevent it from being torn up like the first three ("the fourth one still up under my bed!").

The poor condition of existing recreation facilities or complete lack of them lack of in their neighborhoods led others to seek out alternatives. Corey (age 15) noted that he and his friends walked to outdoor parks and basketball courts that were much further away when the recreation center courts were unavailable. The basketball goals in Steven's neighborhood are in disrepair. He could play on the basketball goal there but he preferred coming to the recreation center to play basketball instead of the "messed-up hoop" in his neighborhood. One father brought his son to the MTMT open court sessions on Mondays and Wednesdays during the summer to teach his son how to play basketball on an actual court. "He watches it on TV and when he plays 2K[29] and kind of learns the moves through there but he doesn't really get outside

---

[28] I picked up Trey, Otis and Gogo to and from the recreation center a number of times. They were often playing basketball on a goal standing up out of the cement driveway where their families parked their cars.

[29] NBA 2K is a popular video game title on multiple video game consoles

and play you know? There's not really a court near our house [to play on]" (Field note, April

2016).

Many respondents also defaulted to spending time inside their homes or at a friend's

home, playing video games or just "chillin'."

> Cameron H: So like, if they don't let y'all in, where else, like where else do y'all go, like,
> to hang out or whatever to do something?
> Brian: Back to our apartment.
> Darnell: Yeah. Go to your home boy's house, chill. Chill with him.

The proliferation of computers and video games has resulted in young people spending more

time indoors (Lenhart et al. 2008). However, the absence of public spaces amenable to the

presence of teenagers in urban communities is a concern raised by previous researchers (McCray

and Mora 2011) that appears to be at play here. Rather than choosing to go inside respondents in

this study defaulting to this option because there are very few desirable options to go elsewhere

in their community.

Other youth in the study expressed the need to be away from home for various reasons.

For some, coming to the recreation center was simply an opportunity to get out of the house.

Corey and Xavier both lived in homes that were predominantly occupied by girls and their

mothers. Jimmy, a 14-year-old who started coming to the recreation center with his cousin at the

end of the summer, was looking to get away from home because he found his home life boring:

> Jimmy: …I just don't like staying in the house. The house be getting boring.
> Cameron: What's the issue with staying in the house?
> Jimmy: There's no game system, cable. We ain't even got Wi-Fi at the house.
> [inaudible]. It's boring.

Similarly, Joy (age 16) had very little to do at home which prompted her mother to send her and

her younger brother and sister to the recreation center three years ago: "We didn't have nothing

to clean up with and I didn't have no homework so I'd go home and go to sleep…She was like,

'you not coming home and go to sleep no more.'" Raheem described the recreation center as a place where he could retreat from the demands of his home life, particularly the demands of his grandmother:

> The difference here is it's quiet. I actually have time to myself just to relax. At home, I'm constantly on the move. Not even enough time to relax. I gotta do this, gotta do that. I gotta do what my grandma tell me to do. It just gets irritating after a while. I don't like to be irritated too much 'cause it messes with me. This constantly thinking. I just don't like that. I don't like to be on edge. Constantly thinking about stuff.

Raheem, a recent graduate of Rosa Parks High School, was trying to figure out his next step – where he wanted to work, where he wanted to live. In other words, he was making the transition towards adulthood. However, living at home with his grandmother made it difficult for him to develop a sense of independence associated with adulthood. Later in his interview, he described the independence he experienced at the recreation center in contrast to his home environment:

> Raheem: The best thing I like about the recreation center is not something I like, it's just something I come to. I just come in here and sit down somewhere without being told what to do. Now, if you gotta little prick like some of these coaches are that think they gonna tell you what to do. But mostly, for me, I just come in here and sit down, me and my tablet, just do whatever until I feel like the need to come back home.

> CH: Okay, so you come here cause folks don't tell you what to do. Is that something that happens outside of here, like at home or at school or something?

> Raheem: No. At home, I got a warden at home. I got one of those parents they like to be in control of everything. So I got that type of person at home so I ain't trying to be going home too much. I'm trying to find ways to leave. Each time I'm trying to find a way to leave, I always gotta tell 'em where I'm going. I know it's important but don't hit me with that you gotta have money to leave here. Not everywhere I go I gotta have money. If it was like that I would not even come at all.

For these youth, the recreation center served as a site of refuge from their home lives, whether the home felt crowded, was perceived as boring, or stressful. The recreation center was where they came to get out of the house and get some time to themselves.

"It's easy to get in trouble if you ain't got nothing to do…"

The perceived dearth of activities and places for young people to go in the Hope Park community was magnified by the street activity interwoven in their social environment. The interviews revealed that the streets were firmly entrenched in their community, as they have been in Black urban communities historically (Anderson, 1999; Clark, 1965; Liebow, 1967; Taylor, Smith, & Herman, 2015; Wilson, 1996). Yet, respondents in this study discussed the streets as activities and behaviors enacted by their peers and sometimes themselves rather than a distinct geographical space.

Youth associated the streets with a range of activities, often illegal, from using drugs and selling them to getting involved in gangs, "hot-boxing" (stealing cars), and "running out the store" (shoplifting). Respondents often mentioned peers or family members who had previously been and were actively involved in street-related activities. Trey, described growing up in one of Atlanta's former public housing communities[30] around drug dealers and his uncles who were involved in the streets. In the following excerpt from the interview, I asked Trey whether or not he ever felt the pull of the street life because of family members:

> Me: Did y— you don't gotta answer this – I'm thinking about… like there's times when you coming up, right, and there's guys deciding they doing that stuff, you know, they got the street stuff, and it's people that you care about stuff like that. So, the way I see it, you can go one of two ways: you can roll up behind them or you can kinda go the way that you going or whatever. Has it ever been a time when you been on that track and how did they respond to it?
>
> Trey: Oh, yeah. I have but umm, they never really respond to it, like, negatively because they knew where I came from they were like you do however you feel. Like, they, it was, well I was, I say [pauses] like they didn't say too much because they know how they is. And like, they was like, 'you wanna be whatever you can be, so like if you wanna be a street nigga, you can be a street nigga; if you wanna play basketball, you can play basketball.' And they were just behind me whatever I wanted to do and I chose basketball. So that's what I've been doing ever since.

---

[30] In 2011, Atlanta became the first city in the United States to demolish all of its public housing communities.

Trey was left to decide on his own and he chose to pursue basketball over the streets. Rather than feeling obligated opting to pursue basketball instead of which he also received their support.

Other respondents explained that money was the motive for getting involved in the streets. Xavier (age 16) explained that some of his peers "claim they trying to get some money, _they_ selling drugs and stuff" (my emphasis added). Jimmy, a tall, slender 14-year-old who started coming to Hope Park RC with his cousin in the late summer, got involved in some of these activities at a young age. In the exchange below, he explained why some young people choose to participate in the streets:

> Cameron: So, how do ya'll get into that stuff?
> Jimmy: How we do it?
> Cameron: No, no, no, no, no. Like how does that even become something y'all interested in doing? That somebody your age, like --
> Jimmy: People our age like money. Money, clothes, shoes, watches, phones. And like to smoke weed or pop Zans or pop Molly. They just like to do stupid stuff. They like to dress nice. But they don't want to wait for it. They don't like waitin' for it. So they just wanna go get it. Just like coach what's his name said. What's his name? Coach what's his name?
> Cameron: Coach James.
> Jimmy: Coach James! They be like a microwave. They like a microwave. Want it right now. We want it. But, they don't want to wait for it. So if you don't want to wait for it you gonna end up in jail or get away with it. Some people rich that's saying get away with it.

In this exchange, Jimmy corroborated Xavier's claim that young people are willing to participate in street-related activities in pursuit of money as well as other material symbols of wealth. While Jimmy does not specifically identify selling drugs, young people with the "microwave" mindset want to get to the "money, clothes, shoes, watches, phones" through any means ("they just wanna go get it") which may include selling drugs among other illegal activities. For youth with this mindset, the streets operate as an alternative to participating in the mainstream economy. However, the employment opportunities for young people in urban communities are often limited to low-wage positions that yield "little money" as Jimmy called it.

116

A few respondents noted "peer pressure," the desire to "impress other people" and trying to "fit in" among the reasons their peers chose to get involved with street-related activity. For instance, Kareem mentioned that his brother and cousin were early influences in his life. His brother was in and out of juvenile and his cousin 'jumped off the porch' (got involved in the streets) early. He recalled trying to fit in with these two:

> …Cause like when I was younger, I was trying to fit in. I'd sit outside late at night with my brother in the neighborhood. I know I ain't supposed to be out 'cause I know they shootin' every night, stuff like that. But when I seen, the day my cousin died, I was like "that could have been me" 'cause I was just with him. That could have been me. He got killed in a drive-by shooting and I could have been standing next to him. We both could have got died.

For Kareem, the consequences of being involved in the streets were crystallized by the loss of his cousin. It also signified a turning point for him, the need to "get [his] act together" by staying in school and out of trouble.

Despite the widespread acknowledgement of the streets' presence in the Hope Park community, many of the respondents never seemed interested in pursuing aspects of street life. Youth in this study recognize the consequences associated with participating in street life. The possibilities of death, victimization, incarceration and the limitations it could place on their future possibilities were often cited as deterrents. For some respondents in this study, getting involved in the streets was not a viable option; that was what their peers did.

Hanging with "The Right Crowd"

Youth made a lot of comments that revealed how they distinguish themselves from other youth. Dwayne categorized his peers at R.D. Abernathy High in two categories: "people who "ain't tryin' to do nothing with they lives" and "folks that's trying to be somebody." The people in the latter category were young people who were involved in the streets or breaking the rules at

117

school – getting into fights or skipping class or "just being bad" as Joy described. Corey made a similar distinction when talking about the difference between himself and "folk [his] age":

> Corey: …They be smoking and stuff. I don't do that. I can't do that. When they smoke they be doing [pauses] it makes me feel good me not doing it. I feel good about myself.
> Cameron H: What makes you feel good about it?
> Corey: I know I don't have to do that. Smoking weed? I can't do that! And then I'm trying to play basketball and stuff.

Corey's decision to avoid smoking weed was a rejection of behavior he did not want to be associated with and found detrimental to his goal of playing basketball for his high school next year. Additionally, the non-specific use of "they" to identify the group of peers who were smoking illustrates the ways Corey and others demarcate their peer groups using particular behaviors. This distinction between 'us and them' operate as proxies for how they saw themselves as people who were trying to do something with their lives.

Although some youth perceive that getting involved in the streets is fairly easy for young people, particularly when there are not a lot of options, it is not a forgone conclusion that youth will choose this path. As noted in previous research, many youths in inner-city communities avoid getting involved in the streets, opting instead to pursue other options that align with mainstream norms and values (Anderson 1999; MacLeod 2009). For the youth in this study, this meant staying in school and finding jobs, short term aspirations that were aligned with mainstream notions of success.

Education

All of the youth were either enrolled in school at some level or had been previously involved in school; none of the respondents had dropped out of school. The Atlanta Public Schools (APS) System has been in the spotlight in recent years. A state investigation initiated in 2011 found that 178 principals and teachers in the school district were involved in altering

118

students' answers on standardized tests to raise the schools' performance scores. In April 2015, eleven of the twelve teachers and administrators involved[31] were convicted on racketeering charges in the largest educational cheating scandal in the history of the United States (Ellis and Lopez 2015; WXIA-TV 2015). The Atlanta Board of Education has proposed plans to close or consolidate schools to address declining populations and budget constraints. These plans have heightened concerns among residents in Atlanta's inner-city neighborhoods as students and teachers would be displaced by the restructured school arrangement (Downey 2017).

Although these larger scale changes had potential implications for youths' educational experiences, these topics rarely emerged in conversations at the recreation center or in the interviews. Frankie,[32] one of the teens who stopped by MTMT during the tutoring sessions, mentioned the potential consolidation of Du Bois Preparatory Academy with another school[33] but felt like it was out of his hands.

In my interviews with respondents still in school, we talked more about their daily experiences at the school. These conversations revolved heavily on their relationships with teachers. The pervasive perception of teachers was that there were many teachers in their schools who did not care about students or teaching well. "Man, they don't even teach," Corey told me. "They just give us the work really."

In describing the difference between teachers who care and those who don't, Joy noted that the former "have that excitement to teach" and that they "give you a chance...'cause they see that potential in you." She described those who don't care as being very transparent in their disinterest:

---

[31] 35 Atlanta educators were initially indicted in 2013; over 20 took plea deals (Ellis and Lopez 2015).
[32] A non-participant in the study, field note
[33] This occurred at the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year.

Joy: …Other teachers just like "I don't care. I got two degrees or I get paid. You don't." It's like, you shouldn't have that mentality as a teacher.

Cameron: How come?

Joy: I mean the getting paid part, yeah. That you don't care about your students, that kinda affects how your students see you and how they gonna learn from you. Cause if you keep that I don't care mentality they not gonna care. They not gonna do their work. They gonna be like, "if the teacher don't care then why should we care to try to do our work?" But if the teacher motivates you to do your work and he or she cares about you and helps you, the kids are gonna actually sit there and learn and when you actually sit there and learn, the class goes by fast and you don't want it to end. But when you just sitting there stuck with ya teacher, class just gonna go by slow.

While many respondents seemed bothered by the apparent apathy of some teachers, Craig

reported that some teachers made it difficult to show his potential in class:

Craig: Dealing with my teachers. They have attitudes. I don't like attitudes. Like, say if I had a teacher that had an attitude. I don't' like attitudes. I'm, say if you say something but ask me not to say it, I'm say it back. I'ma speak my mind.
Cameron: What kinda, has that happened before?
Craig: Yeah, today.
Cameron: What happened?
Craig: Teacher said something that I didn't like, so I had said, like. He was like "Dude, you got homework. Do it if you can." So I was like, what you mean if I can. You gonna make me out to be [inaudible]. It's like I feel like he was calling me retarded. Cause he was talking about if I can do it.

Although respondents' overwhelming perception of teachers at school reflected a notion of

indifference towards teaching and their students, a few respondents pointed towards teachers or

coaches who supported them and kept them motivated.

Nearly half of the respondents reported having had some form of employment during our

interviews. Kareem had a part-time job working with his father on construction projects and

cleaning buildings; Gerald was recently promoted to a night management position at a large fast

food chain when we conducted our interview. Marcus worked multiple jobs while going to

school. Brian, a high school soccer player, has been a coach for youth teams at Hope Park

Recreation Center. And after graduation, Raheem secured a job at a local theme park.

Others held part-time jobs over the summer. Joy worked on the Camp Best Friend (CBF) teen staff monitoring younger children's behavior and movement through the facility: "Making sure kids not on the front stairwell, making sure kids not sliding down the rail, cause little kids like to do stuff." Xavier secured a job through the Atlanta Works Development Association working with a landscaping company. After my interview with Trey in August, I helped him edit his resume to apply a job at a local grocery store, which he did receive. At 14-years old, Jimmy was not old enough to work without a permit so he took his mother's advice and started doing yardwork in the neighborhood for money.

The respondents who were not employed were still interested in finding work. For instance, Dwayne, who moved from Maryland* to Hope Park at the beginning of the summer to live with his father,[34] (15) expressed his interest in working for Chik Fil-A because "they pay good and they don't work on Sundays." However, he had to obtain a work permit[2] firs because he was only 15 years old. The young people in this study were interested in making money for themselves. And many of them viewed finding a job as the logical step even though other options were available to them. As discussed above, the streets provided an economic alternative for people in low-income communities to earn money either in addition to or in place of their participation in the mainstream economy. However, based on their discussion of the streets and their peers who participate in that institution, this did not appear to be the avenue respondents in this study were interested in pursuing.

"Off the streets" and "Out of trouble"

As youth who were "trying to do something" with their lives, the young peoples' participation at the recreation center symbolized a commitment to avoiding the trappings of their

---

[34] Dwayne moved from Maryland* to Hope Park at the beginning of the summer to live with his father

neighborhood. All respondents in this study viewed the recreation center as an institution capable of keeping youth off the streets. All youth in this study agreed that the recreation center to the recreation center provided an alternative to the streets. Marcus summed up the connection between the recreation center and the streets in the following excerpt:

> When you see an opening to not being involved in the streets. Cause like when you stay in the hood and you know what's going on and you don't want to be involved in it and you see something that can keep you out of the hood, keep you out of being out there where everything is going on at, you take it. Especially when it got something to do with a gym. It's free time to come play basketball. Free time to go on the football field. Free time to go in the weight room. It's free time to be in the gym where they normally shut off.

Marcus' explanation for why youth come to the recreation center encapsulates the relationship between the recreation center and the environment of many of the youth in this study. The neighborhood is "where everything is going on" and is viewed as something to be evaded. For Marcus and others, the recreation facility not only offers a place to get away from the elements of the hood but it offers access to several amenities that may be of interest to young people. In this sense, the recreation center fulfills the role of an intervening institution for young people who may either become victimized in the streets or succumb to participating in them for lack of viable alternatives in their community.

Although all respondents agreed that the recreation center could effectively keep youth off of the streets and out of trouble, most youth described this institutional function in reference to a nebulous, general "you," "kids" or "us" that stood in for young people collectively. Most respondents did not speak about themselves in these terms. This gave me the impression they made conscientious efforts to avoid getting involved in street-related activities or they were selectively repressing any previous or ongoing involvement in these activities.

Yet, two of the respondents – Jimmy and Craig, age 14 and 15 respectively – did discuss their presence at Hope Park Recreation Center as a conscientious decision to keep themselves from getting in more trouble. Jimmy was an easygoing and straightforward person but he's had some issues at home with his mother and at school with his teachers. His older cousin brought him the recreation center over the summer a few times and he started coming more regularly afterschool begun. In the eighth grade at the time of our interview, Jimmy had already begun thinking about high school and that he wanted to leave the area to go to another district. He had heard about the students at R.D. Abernathy High: "People get in fights at Abernathy and stuff. They crazy at Abernathy. I'm crazy too, but I ain't that crazy!" Jimmy, like others makes the distinction himself and his peers based on behavior. Our conversation continues in the excerpt below:

> Cameron H: How you figure you crazy?
> Jimmy: I'm bad, but I ain't that bad.
> CH: What's the difference?
> J: They bad is they slap teachers and stuff. They do some crazy stuff at Abernathy.
> CH: What's your level of bad compared to their level of bad?
> J: Alright, so listen: low bad, middle bad, and high bad. I'm in the middle of the low middle to high bad.
> CH: So what's that mean?
> J: I don't be doin that stuff. I probably disrespect my momma here and there, but I don't be doin that stuff. I ain't tryin to be in these streets. I ain't tryin to be in these streets.
> CH: What you mean you ain't tryin to be in these streets? What's out there?
> J: A lot of stuff. Crime, crimes, hot boxing, breakin' into people's houses, smoking and stuff like that. It's a lot of stuff out there. But I don't feel like doin' all that.
> CH: You too young for that stuff though.
> J: Yeah I know, but I did it. I did it though. I don't do it no mo'. It got lame to me. It's boring. That's why I come to the rec center. To get out of these streets.
> (Interview, December 2016)

In this exchange, Jimmy revealed that he had previously been involved in a number of street-related activities. I was genuinely surprised he had been involved with those types of activities at a relatively young age. Despite being involved in these activities, he did not consider himself to

be willing to strike a teacher, the rumored behavior of students at Abernathy High. Jimmy

incorporated the recreation center as part of his plan to break with the streets.

Similarly, Craig said his involvement in the BGC was an agreed upon decision between

he and his mother to keep him "out of trouble:"

> Craig: I come here at, like I'm going here for afterschool so I stay out of trouble. Yeah, my brother them got practice so instead of staying there, I always have something to do to keep me busy.
> Cameron H: Is that your decision or you mom's decision or what?
> Craig: Both.
> CH: Yeah
> Craig: I feel I was getting into too much trouble and she felt the same thang.
> (Interview, September 2016).

Unlike Jimmy, the kind of trouble Craig described was less criminal in nature. Craig was a

fighter. He fought another guy in his neighborhood for hitting on kids smaller than him,

including girls. "I didn't like it," he told me. He also talked about fights with other teenagers who

picked on his younger siblings. As he recalled one of these neighborhood altercations led to

police involvement:

> …we was outside playing football, I had to come up here like a few weeks ago to talk to the police because we was playing football and I bammed (tackled) somebody. I guess they daddy didn't like that. He so-called said he was hurt. He lied to the police saying I was punching him in his face and stuff… but he also, the reason I tackled him was 'cause he kicked my little brother in the mouth.

These fights were happening with some sense of regularity. His mother moved them to a

different apartment complex and he began coming to the recreation center at the beginning of the

school year. He hangs out at Hope Park Recreation Center in the afternoons while his little

brothers go to football practice with the youth recreation teams. At the time of our interview,

Craig reported that he had not been in any trouble "cause I'm like, away from all the trouble. In

here, I'm away from all the trouble." For youth like Craig and Jimmy who are attempting to

prevent themselves from becoming more involved in delinquent behavior, the recreation center becomes part of the strategy for occupying that time in a safe environment.

Conclusion

The finding presented in this chapter demonstrate that understanding why youth come to the recreation center is tied to their perceptions of their neighborhoods. Irrespective of neighborhood safety, respondents described them as lacking the amenities available in the recreation center. As such, the recreation center gives them a place to go and activities to do in an environment many youths perceived as having few viable options beyond the streets. For the youth in this study, the recreation center represents an alternative to the perceived dearth of desirable opportunities and amenities in their environment and a way to avoid the trajectory of the streets.

Youth utilize a number of strategies to keep themselves away from or out of trouble – carefully avoiding peers who have shown an interest in the street related activities (even if they had done them before), staying inside at dark to protect themselves from shootings and criminal activity at night. Coming to the Recreation Center figures prominently in this strategy of staying away from the streets. And for some, the recreation center symbolizes an aspirational trajectory that deviates from their peers who are involved in the streets. In the following chapter, respondents' experiences within the recreation center are examined to further understand the role the recreation center plays in their lives.

Chapter VI

"HOME AWAY FROM HOME?" THE PRECARIOUS CONDITION OF

YOUTH IN HOPE PARK RECREATION CENTER

Hakeem was the first teenager I saw at Hope Park Recreation Center (HPRC). It was my

first week at the recreation center volunteering with making Tomorrow's Men Today, Inc.

(MTMT). Coach James, the founder of MTMT and his small team of Coaches – Bruce, Vince,

and Robert – were in one of the multi-purpose classrooms working with some of the elementary-

age boys who came over from the Afterschool program on their math skills. Coach James told

me it would be a while before the older guys came back for the mentoring sessions so I was

surprised to see Hakeem and his friend, Tayshaun come through the door. Yet, it was difficult to

determine if he was supposed to be in the facility. The following excerpt recounts the

observation and my initial reflection on the incident:

> [Coach James speaking]"Alright, let me see you get up here and handle that"…"I need
> y'all to be on point today! I need y'all to be sharp! I know one of y'all gonna be dull
> because you haven't been here." At first, there were five boys. They did the work on the
> board: multiplication first, then addition and subtraction work. They were playful while
> they worked, oscillating between light teasing and supporting one another. Both of the
> assistant Coaches helped the boys make corrections when the numbers didn't 'add up,'
> sending them back to the board to fix their errors.
>
> Elijah[35]…was in this group of kids. He appeared to be the least engaged putting his head
> down on the table and his hoodie over his head. He missed some of the math problems
> but it didn't seem to bother him as much as it did the others. All of the kids were under

---

[35] Mentioned earlier in the full field note. I overheard him talking to another boy in the hallway about skipping
basketball practice because he didn't enjoy playing anymore but his "Mama already paid $70 and she can't get her
money back." He came to the tutoring program before practice during basketball season.

the age of ten – that's what I'm assuming based on the math and the [physical] size of the kids. Two more kids came into the room while the tutoring session was going. They entered the room and Coach James put them right to work at the board.

Not all of the youth who came into the room were young. About twenty minutes into the session, Coach Dennis, the current director of the facility, brought two young teenage boys to the door. His voice was a bit tight as he checked, better yet verified, with Coach James that the boys were in the facility to see him. James verified their story and they say down in the rear of the room. Coach Dennis' voice, his tone, seemed like he mistrusted the two teenage boys. He was ready to put them out of the building if their story didn't check out with James. They sat in the back chatting. The one in the red hoodie kept saying that he wanted to see his girlfriend who arrived for swim practice. After some time, there were four teenagers at the table behind the other Coach and me. They laughed as they talked about Snapchat and Instagram and tried to get the attention of the people they could see through the door's window. Phones out the whole time they talked among themselves.

Eventually, they opted to venture out into the rest of the facility. The Coach next to me accompanied them back into the facility. These boys caught my attention. They struck me as being cool and something in Dennis' voice told me they might also not be regular attendees at the recreation facility. I kept an ear out to their conversation, trying to get a sense of how they tied together (i.e. their social relationships) and what topics they entertained when talking among themselves. These are the youth I want to talk with. Later, I found out that these guys are some of the young people Coach James recruited from the surrounding neighborhoods. They didn't have any affiliation with the afterschool programs run through the Boys and Girls Club -- they are here because of Coach James (field note, December 2015).

At that time, I realized what I witnessed was disconnected from my assumption that the recreation center as a public space for citizens in the neighborhood including its young people. The exchange between and Coach James and Coach Dennis, the facility's director and head of recreation center staff, began to chip away at that assumption. The line of questioning, the process of verifying Hakeem and Tyshaun's story, were subtle indicators that there were conditions on young people's presence that I would come to understand best by talking with youth in the recreation center.

This chapter presents an analysis of data related to youths' interpretations of their experiences as participants in the recreation center. Themes are presented and illustrated using

excerpts from interviews and field notes to provide insight into the ways young people engaged in the social world of this institution.

Gaining Access

Availability is a major impediment to urban youths' use of recreation facilities and participation in youth programs (Quinn 1999). The City of Atlanta addressed a major structural barrier to youths' access highlighted in previous research by constructing the Hope Park Recreation Center in this community. Public recreation facilities are more likely to be used by youth and families who do not have the economic resources to pay for private facilities (Galaskiewicz et al. 2013; Ries et al. 2008). Although this structural barrier was eliminated by political will and the Centers of Hope initiative reinvigorated recreation center's relevance to the city's underserved youth, I was curious to determine if cost was a concern or a barrier for participation among youth in this study.

Membership

I spoke with adults and youth about the requirements to use the facility. As one might expect, different informants and respondents provided different and sometimes conflicting information about the requirements to gain access to the facility. Coach Dave, a recreation center staff member who also provided personal training for high school and college athletes, reported that teenagers could purchase an annual membership for $110 that provided members with access the swimming pools and weight rooms at all City of Atlanta facilities. However, Coach Dave's information conflicts with the information provided on the Department of Parks and Recreation website, iPARCs. On this site, $110 is the cost for an adult membership; a youth membership (age not specified) costs $65 and provides the same level of access as the adult memberships at half the cost. Lastly, Coach Dave noted that youth can pay drop-in fee to play

basketball or come to open court during the week to play for free adding that "if they come through y'all program [MTMT], they can play basketball" for free (field note, August 2016).

Respondents' Perceptions of Paying for Access

None of the respondents had annual memberships to the recreation center. When I discussed the requirements to come to the recreation center, most youth were not aware of any fees associated with coming into the facility. However, when presented with the possibility of paying to use to recreation center, none of the respondents were interested. Raheem, a long-time participant in MTMT who spent much of his time in the recreation center's computer lab, expressed this sentiment during our interview:

> Cameron: You gotta pay to come in here?
> Raheem: I hope not. If I gotta pay to come in here then something's wrong.
> Cameron: Okay. I was thinking you said you gotta pay to come in here.
> Raheem: Nah. If I had to pay to get here then that would just be savage.

Otis, known to his friends as "OT," preferred coming to the open court sessions provided by MTMT over the option of purchasing a membership for the recreation center. For the 19-year-old who began coming to MTMT over the summer with Torrence, the membership did not provide the kind of access he desired: "…I just know if I can't be in the gym 24/7 then I can't get no membership here. It's not for me…I want to able to come when I want. Not after it's closed, but while it's open I want to be in here."

Like many of the youth who participated in the MTMT program, OT did not come to the recreation center outside of MTMT's open court sessions during the week (discussed below). For OT and many others, coming to MTMT's open court sessions made more sense because it cost them nothing. Youth only had to show up on Mondays and Wednesdays in time for the chop-up session and sign-in to participate. Undoubtedly, the fact there was no participation fee was a factor in drawing so many participants when it had the basketball court. This may be related to

129

the fact that I spoke with a lot of young people who were affiliated with the MTMT program which had no participation fees.

In my search to understand the ways youth gained access to the facility, I found that the requirements to participate in each program varied. While the MTMT program was free for boys of all ages, the subset of respondents who participated in the Teen Club program provided by the Boys & Girls Club reported that there was a nominal for a Teen Club membership. During their interview, Xavier explained the process of signing up for the BGC Basketball team to his co-interviewee, Dwayne, who was interested in playing:

> Xavier: ... the afterschool program got a basketball team too.
> Cameron: Ok. So you come up here for the basketball?
> X: **Nods head**
> I: Just the basketball team?
> X: **nods head again**
> Cameron: So is it Hope Park's basketball team?
> X: Nah. It's the Boys and Girls Club.
> Cameron: Ohhh, ok. (To Dwayne) Is that the thing you was looking for?
> D: Yeah that's what I was talking 'bout.
> Cameron: So he's looking for the guy. Who's the Coach for that?
> X: You gotta sign up for afterschool.
> D: How much is it?
> X: Like $5.

In describing the process of signing up for basketball, Xavier revealed the nominal fee of $5 to join the BGC Teen Club. Additionally, access to the specific basketball team for teenagers Dwayne was searching for was only accessible through membership. Torrence and Anthony clarified that the $5 was a one-time fee. While this may not seem like a significant economic cost, Torrence and Anthony's older sister and three younger brothers were also participants in the Teen Club and the afterschool program, respectively. At $5 per child for the Teen Club and up to

$35 per week[36] for the afterschool program, the cost by household can add up quickly for families with limited economic resources.

In addition to the membership fees, Joy noted that teens had to submit an application form to be filled out and returned to the BGC. "Your medical information, your personal information, stuff like that, you just got to fill it out for them." For Joy, the $5 fee was waived because she was older. According to her, the special fee waiver for older youth who were in their junior or senior years in high school, a fact I confirmed with the on-site BGC Director Mr. Clark. However, when I asked Joy about participating in other activities in the recreation center, the price made a difference. "Their program you gotta pay for. Their stuff is like $35 a month. Who pays for that?!" The price Joy referred to is the price for the afterschool program her younger siblings participate in. As noted above, the cost was $35 per week for residents within Atlanta's city limits and $110 for non-residents according to the DPR website.

Previous research has clearly noted the value of youth programs to facilitating youth development (Carruthers and Busser 2000). Yet in this study, youth programs for teenagers were vehicles that allowed youth affordable access to the recreation center and its amenities. All youth in this study came to the recreation center during their afterschool hours and many continued throughout the summer when school was out. These programs cost very little compared to the annual memberships provided by the City of Atlanta. As a result, youth programs allowed young people from families who may not have the financial resources to acquire an annual membership, or multiple memberships for families with more than one child, to bypass/get around the desired costs to use the facility.

---

[36] The City of Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation offered needs based financial assistance for Afterschool, Camp Best Friends, and Youth Athletics for households who qualified.

Program Experiences

Hope Park Recreation Center hosts several activities for community residents. In addition to the Afterschool program for kids age 5-12, the recreation center has youth athletics (e.g. Basketball, football, swimming, girls' volleyball), dance classes, swimming classes and a swim team, martial arts, cheerleading, and other cultural enrichment programs. Many of the respondents played sports in Hope Park Recreation Center's youth athletics program when they were younger. However, there are fewer activities offered at HPRC through the Department of Parks and Recreation for youth as they get older. Camp Best Friends summer camp allows youth to age 17 to participate and the ATL Teen Leaders is a program that provides youth interested in civic engagement with leadership training throughout the school year. None of the respondents were involved in these programs during the period this study took place.[37]

Respondents in this study participated in programs provided by two organizations: Making Tomorrow's Men Today, Inc. (MTMT) and the Boys & Girls Club (BGC) Teen Club. Founded in 2012 by Cedric James – or Coach James as he is known in the recreation center – MTMT aims to address complete wellness in young people so they may live healthy and productive lives. In its daily capacity, MTMT operated out of Hope Park Recreation Center providing tutoring and mentoring to young males who live in the Hope Park community.

Some of the older youth who were still around during my time at the recreation center were among the original group recruited directly by Coach James. Youth who had been with MTMT the longest – people like Marcus and his brother Marvin, Big Greg, brothers Raheem and Hakeem – were recruited directly by Coach James when MTMT first began. As Marcus explained, many of the youth were already spending time at the recreation center:

---

[37] Torrence and Anthony mentioned that they participated in Camp Best Friend at a different recreation center when they were younger.

So when the program came about a couple years ago I was already here. I knew the coaches. I knew the staff. It was just Coach James. When Coach James came along he was talking about [the program] We said okay, yeah. It was me and a whole bunch of other boys. It was a lot of us but you don't see a lot of them now, but it was a lot of us that stick around and stayed around. We was here already anyway so we might as well come. We came and you see how many of us still come around.

Many of the newer guys who came to the MTMT sessions often found out about the program by word of mouth. Coach James regularly encouraged the guys in the program to spread the word in their schools and neighborhoods "Y'all tell your friends and partnas that y'all can come out here on Mondays and Wednesdays with us to chop-it-up (MTMT's group discussion) and shoot around on the court, get off the streets." (Field notes, April 2016). All of the male respondents in this study, including the four males who participated in BGC Teen Club, were participants in Making Tomorrow's Men Today, Inc. (MTMT). Figure 6.1 provides shows the program affiliation for each respondent in the study's sample.

Figure 6.1
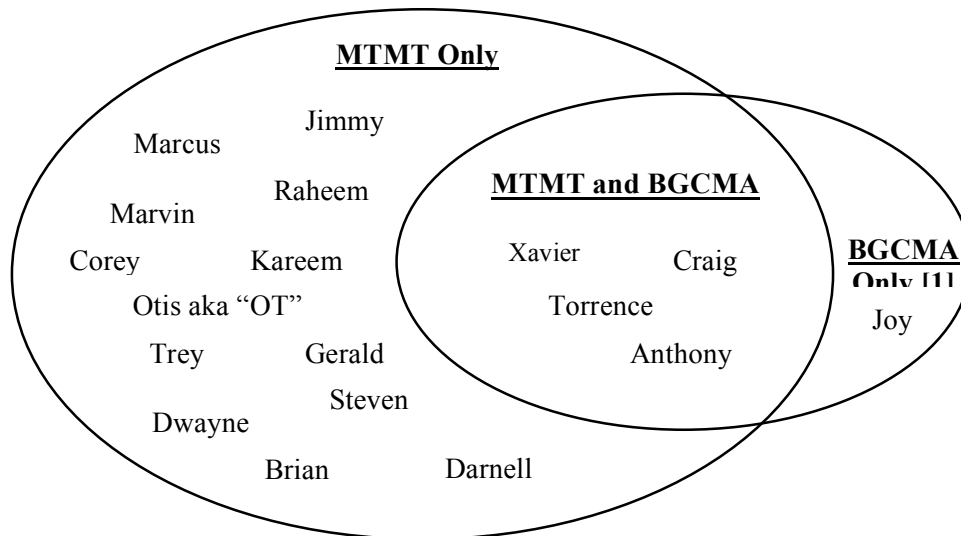**Respondents' Program Affiliation at Hope Park Recreation Center**

Figure 6.1 is a Venn diagram illustrating the interview participants' program affiliation within the Hope Park Recreation Center. The name and age of each participant is also included besides their names.

133

As noted in Figure 6.1, five of the respondents in this study were members of the Teen Club: Joy (17), Xavier (16), brothers Torrence (15) and Anthony (14), and Craig (15). The BGC Teen Club was an afterschool program tailored towards teens age 13 – 17. As a Boys & Girls Club initiative, the Teen Club operated in the same window of time as the afterschool program for the 5-12 age group. Teen Club participants came to the recreation center afterschool to participate in a different set of activities than the younger kids in the afterschool program. In addition to the basketball program mentioned above, youth in the Teen Club organized and participated in fundraisers, participated in chess tournaments, and a college readiness initiative.

Before MTMT started the open-court sessions in April 2016, I observed very few teenagers in the facility. I would later recognize them as members of the BGC Teen Club. When the youth basketball league reached the end of its season, MTMT reclaimed the basketball gym for its open-court sessions. This transfer of a key amenity in the facility marked the beginning of the program's mentoring arm for the "older ones" each year. As noted in the previous chapter, respondents noted that came to the recreation center to access the amenities that were either in poor condition or unavailable to them in their neighborhood. It was normal for the sign-in sheets to hold over forty names by the end of the night, particularly during the summers when youth were out of school.

MTMT Chop-up Sessions

While many of the guys came to play basketball, Coach James was adamant that the mentoring was the priority, reminding the guys on multiple occasions, when he noticed guys were "getting it mixed up" that "this is a mentoring program, not a basketball program." (field note, June 2016). The mentoring activities were informal and often took the form of group discussions called "chop-up" sessions. "We gon' chop-it-up with the boys, see what they thinkin'

134

'bout, what's on they minds." Prior to the open-court sessions, the Coaches and MTMT guys would engage in discussions about a number of inter-related topics including plans for their futures, the importance of finishing school, the perils of the streets, and taking care of their physical and mental well-being.

Many of the respondents think the chop up sessions are valuable parts of the experience. Some of the respondents appreciated Coach James' honesty during the chop-up sessions. Corey noted that he listens to Coach's messages because he recognizes it as "some real talk" that "make you just wanna do better in life."

Others thought the sessions were important because they helped young people start thinking about their lives differently:

> OT: Yeah.
> CH: Well what, what's up with the conversation? What do you think about it so far?
> OT: I mean, he be telling the truth. It's good information...
> CH: What you mean the people who understand? What you gotta like . . .
> OT: Because, I mean, some people don't know about, you know, jail or, you know, life period. Like knowin that, like, what he's talkin about you can't wait until the last minute be talkin' bout 'am I gonna go to college or not?' You gotta be ready. So, some people don't be, you know, they just be lookin at life as a game…
>
> CH: What y'all think about the chop up sessions? You think they helpful?
> D. Yeah I think they helpful for getting young people's mind right cuz it's so much negative out here…It's good for them to have something else.

In his interview, Kareem pointed to Coach James' "motivational speeches" are part of what kept him coming back to the recreation center:

> Kareem: Yeah. That motivates me to keep playing, keep trying, never give up. Sometimes I be drivin' to the hole and I just oh flapping, but I know I gotta get back on defense. So when Coach James be motivatin' me, I be like, I need to do this. Let me come back to the gym so I can hear this again.
> Cameron: What's motivating about the speeches and stuff?
> Kareem: Like, how he just be telling us from the past, like what he seen, 'cause I know he's a older head, and like he seen more stuff than me. He probably seen lots of stuff. I just take that as a good way to keep me moving, keep my blood pumpin'. That's what it basically is… Keep me into basketball, all that, never give up thing.

135

Again, it's clear from Kareem's perspective that the guys value Coach James perspective on life. As an 'old head' – what Anderson (1999) considers 'an adult role model' – someone who's seen quite a bit of life, he tries to pass on that information to the next generation of young people as a way to keep them from succumbing to the streets. Although Torrence recognized the benefit of the chop-up sessions, he thought they went on too long sometimes. "He be giving us some good advice though, but they be too long talking. Cause Coach be having to break it down word for word. I just don't like lectures" (Interview October 2016).

After the chop-up session, some MTMT youth like Raheem chose to spend the open-court time in the computer lab, alternating between looking for employment opportunities to supplant his part time position at the amusement theme park and playing online games. However, most of the guys headed to the gym to play basketball. For the next seven months, boys of all ages came to HPRC on Mondays and Wednesdays with their friends to play basketball. One of the most fascinating aspects of observing them play and eventually playing alongside them is the ease in which they organized themselves on the courts. The field note excerpt below depicts an early observation of how they managed themselves on the court:

> *There are four goals up when we hit the courts - 2 at 10ft at either end of the gym and 2 at 8ft side by side… The boys break up into groups or cluster around the goals, the younger and often smaller youth congregating around the smaller/lower (portable) goals while the older teens take the 10ft goals. Everyone is shooting from the 3pt arch, a lot of shots bouncing off the rim and backboard. When a shot goes in, the shooter often boasts loudly to let everyone know who made it: "That boy wet!!" or "Curry!!" in reference to NBA superstar Stephen Curry who has made a spectacle of the 3pt shot, shooting and routinely making 3 pointers from beyond the designated 3pt line, sometime approaching midcourt and even still from beyond it.*
>
> *As folks are shooting their shot, a tall kid in a blue shirt, purple shirt and blue Pumas is going between the 10ft goals trying to organize a 5 on 5 game to run full court. His name is Xavier but he shortens it to X when I introduce myself. I attempted to intervene when I saw the full court game being organized because the current setup of the goals would prevent the majority of the boys from playing. I mentioned they might have to hold up on*

the full court game. He didn't seem to take that idea well and continued to organize. "Y'all got y'all's five?" he yelled down the court.

Coach James came [back] into the gym and asked if we needed more goals. "Yes!" – Me. We (the Coaches) set up the other portable goals across from the 8ft goals. Coach Rome pulled out some tool to raise the 8ft goal to 10ft goals. Now it was time for the full court game (field note, April 2016).

The basketball court was a self-governing and autonomous space for youth in the MTMT program. Youth gravitated towards the goals based on their respective age groups and skill levels. The older guys took to the main court to play full court using their age. young people are taking the initiative to organize themselves on the court during the games, before the games and otherwise. While this may seem a bit mundane, it stands out as an expression of autonomy from young people. Coaches were not involved in the process of organizing the basketball games because youth had a set of established norms and procedures for governing the play (i.e. ways to choose teams, settling disagreements with the 'do-or-die' shot, and determining who plays in the next game). These norms are not unique to this group; they resembled many of the rules and practices in the ways I learned to play pick-up basketball in parks, schools, and in my neighborhoods growing up. The shared understanding is what allowed me to eventually join in the activity. But the autonomy is one of the factors I think might be important to understanding why they might enjoy this time at the recreation center. They are free from adult oversight for an hour and a half, maybe two hours, spending time with friends doing something they enjoy.

The Boys & Girls Club Activities

According to the respondents who participated in the Teen Club, youth in the Teen Club spent a lot of their time in the Teen Room, a single-door room with large windows facing the interior lobby of the building dedicated for teenagers. The room looked less like the classrooms found in other parts of the building where tables and chalkboards resemble an extended school

day. Instead, the tables and chairs are arranged around the tables in ways that were better suited for group discussions and casual conversations among peers. The sofas in the room encouraged youth to relax. One wall had a handmade tournament bracket for an ongoing chess tournament for the youth learning to play chess.

The teen room was also referred to as the Game Room because it housed a pair of the most popular items for youth in the afterschool programs — television carts equipped with video game systems: an Xbox One on one tv cart and a Playstation 4 on the other. According to Xavier, these were relatively new additions for the program.

> Xavier: But in 2015, I mean not 15, in 2014… They ain't have no games or nothing but now when we there, every year they be asking us, and I think it was Mr. Dickerson who was here but then Mr. Clark came I think last year and took over. Now we got Xbox One. We playing 2K16 and stuff. So now it's something really to do here.

Outside of the Teen Room, the teenagers spent a portion of their time in the gymnasium. The moments I've been able to directly observe them in the gym (which takes place about an hour before the MTMT session begins at 6pm), youth were engaged in several different activities. Torrence and Xavier often faced off in one-on-one games of basketball or played with a few others in the gym. The gym was also a place where the teenagers socialized. Typically, when I arrived at HPRC in the afternoons, members of the Teen Club were on rotation either eating in the cafeteria or hanging out in the gym:

> *While they're shooting, there is a small group of teenagers sitting on the wall next to the fan near the back door. The boys and girls were sitting in between each other talking and loosely keeping track of the guys shooting. Among this small group was Kevin's[38] oldest brother. he had one his shoes off, apparently relieving an ankle injury (he plays football at his high school). This is one of the few times I have seen males and females socializing in the rec center with one another. They weren't doing anything resembling formal activity as far as I could tell* (field note, June 2016).

---

[38] Kevin was one of the middle school boys who came to MTMT's tutoring program

The few girls I observed in the recreation center did not appear to be interested in the video games or the basketball-related activities taking place in the gym. These activities appeared to be of most interest to the boys in the program. where Torrence, Xavier, and Anthony spent a good deal of their time playing 1-on-1 or pick-up games with a few of the other teens in the program.

It was unclear from observations what activities the few teenage girls I saw at the facility were engaged in. According to Joy, she and a few other girls that she spends her time with at the recreation center have been going to the facility for nearly three years. They go to school together as well. At her request, I interviewed Joy during the Teen Club's scheduled gym time in the late afternoon. Joy generally skips the gym session as she is disinterested in basketball, an activity that tends to be dominated by the boys in the Teen Club program. In the excerpt below, Joy describes how they spend their down time at the recreation center:

> Joy: …the boys, they play in the gym, and the girls, we just sit around or play.
> Cameron H: What y'all do? You say y'all play. What y'all do?
> J: I don't know how to explain it. We just be messing with each other. That type of thing.
> CH: Like y'all were doing yesterday?
> J: Yeah.
> CH: Did you ever give that girl her money back?
> J: [Laughing]Yeah, I gave her money back.
> CH: Okay.
> J: She was upset just a little bit.

Her comment provides a glimpse into the gender dynamics along the lines of activity in the Teen Club. For Joy and her friends, their time at the recreation center seemed to involve more socializing with one another; the 'play' she describes is a form of lighthearted teasing to pass the time. While this may also be happening with boys in the Teen Club, the time in the gym is for the boys in the program as far as she is concerned. Although I had limited exposure to the girls in the Teen Club, they seemed to be the only consistent teenage female presence in the facility during my time at Hope Park Recreation Center. Vanessa, who was not a member of the

Afterschool program, found herself inside the facility while her brother attended MTMT sessions. The all-male focus of the MTMT meant that she stood out among the boys on the basketball court. From my perspective, Nessa appeared comfortable around the boys in the program. Yet, when she asked me "Why y'all don't have nothin' for the girls?" it articulated the necessity of program options comparable to MTMT to offer her and girls her age in HPRC.

The Limitations of the Multipurpose Facility

As noted by Ream and Witt (2004), youth are one of many groups the recreation center is designed to serve. The multipurpose nature of the recreation center affected youths' use of the facility. All of the room in the Hope Park Recreation Center are multi-purpose rooms. A room holding GED course in the morning became the site for the MTMT Chop-Up session in the evening. The room where Mr. Garrett leads the all-boys discussion group hosted a church group's praise, worship and fellowship Wednesday evening at 7:00pm. The two spaces that were most utilized by older youth in the recreation center, the basketball gym and the Teen Room, were often subject to the facility's multi-purpose use and the youth who relied on these spaces were forced to accommodate the changes.

When the City of Atlanta uses the space for a program or an event, activity spaces are shuffled around in ways that were inconvenient to the program as well as the young people in the program. Both programs were constrained by the multipurpose nature of the recreation center. Sometimes the events were beneficial to young people such as the time a public official treated youth in the program to a spaghetti dinner after their meeting concluded. Other times, the city's use of the facility prevented MTMT from operating as normal. For instance, an event held to celebrate senior citizens was held on the basketball court during the day and the staff failed to reset the court forcing Coach James to cancel MTMT's open court session. Some youth stayed

and worked out with a couple of the Coaches in the weight room while others hung out in the classroom to play board games and talk. However, most of the guys left the facility because there was no basketball for the day (field note May 2016).

The Teen Room was transformed into a voting precinct during the 2016 Presidential Election. The week before the voting began, I saw Mr. Clark (Director of BGCMA afterschool club) in the Teen Room pulling posters off the wall and packing up the room to make space for the voting precinct. In the following weeks, voting lines stretched from the Teen Room into the lobby as hundreds of citizens cast their ballots. Meanwhile, the teens were temporarily displaced; a makeshift Teen Room was erected in the auditorium where snacks and meals were served for the afterschool program. These changes in the facility irritated Joy:

> Joy: Whenever anybody come in here, anybody like the citizens that come over here… and they want to use something— like the older people, like the elderly people, — they go inside the Process Room and they use that or they go inside the cafeteria that we in and they use that. We really don't have a say in which room we get to use. If it's vacant then we can use it. If it's something like voting or they do church, or the seniors do they little dance, we gotta let them use it.

From Joy's perspective, the citizens received priority over the youth in the facility. Further, these changes were taking place with little to no input from the youth affected by these changes. To be clear, BGC staff were subject to the same authority of the city. When I talked with Mr. Clark about the move, he seemed to take the change in stride. The perceived limitations of the multipurpose nature of the recreation center was further highlighted when Joy compared the Boys & Girls Club experience at Hope Park Recreation Center to a traditional, stand-alone facility:

> Cameron: What you think about this, kinda moving y'all around?
> Joy: Irritating. Cause at a traditional Boys and Girls Club, cause see this is a recreation center. At a traditional Boys and Girls Club the whole building is to yourself. The building is yours, every room in the building it's like your room. You get to make it into whatever room you want to make it into. We went to another Boys and Girls Club last

week and they had their own art room. So pretty! They had a teen center but inside their teen center they had they own studio. I was just like, we could have all that stuff up here if we just had our own Boys and Girls Club.

The displacement comes from groups inside the facility as well. Anthony and Torrence were also bothered by the sense that space designated for the teenagers was often used by the "little kids" in the Afterschool program. According to Anthony, "the teen room is not really a teen room" because "all the little kids be in there. Like they be messing up the furniture and stuff, then we have to clean it up. They just need to make a whole new, they need to make this the teen room," he said in reference to the large nondescript room we were sitting in during our interview, another multipurpose room regularly used by the Afterschool program for cultural experience classes, like dance and stepping.

Between the "little kids," "the elderly folks" and "the city," the spaces and amenities valued by the teens in the recreation center were not always available to them. The Teen Room, the only dedicated space for teenagers in the facility, was compromised by outside forces. This clear use of dedicated space mirrors the desire for a grown independence and autonomy characteristic of adolescence. Youth are no longer children but they are not yet adults. Children's use of the space designated for teenagers and the city's use of the space undermine the presence of teenagers in the recreation center. There is space for small children and space for adults, however, teenagers are often placed in a precarious semi-permanent position within the recreation center in which the resources and amenities they use were not always available to them.

Youth-Adult Interactions

The presence of a caring and supportive adult is a necessary component of a young person's healthy matriculation to adulthood. Youths' relationships with these non-familial adults

are important to young people's development of social capital (Jarrett et al. 2005). Additionally, these relationships help connect youth to institutions and opportunities beyond their family and neighborhood (Wilson 1987). However, all adults do not engage in the caring and nurturing relationships championed in previous studies (McLaughlin et al. 1994). Respondents' discussion of the adults at Hope Park Recreation Center ranged suggests that they interacted with supportive adults who showed sincere interest in them and criticized those who, as one youth framed it, worked at the recreation center "to get a check."

Youth primarily interacted with adults who ran the programs in which they participated. MTMT Coaches were well regarded among the older youth who came to the recreation center during the mentoring sessions for creating space for youth to come to the recreation center to hear a good word of encouragement and play basketball. As a newcomer to the recreation center, Gerald felt welcomed by the MTMT Coaches: "It's always nice to know that you feel welcomed in a place that you don't really know, that you not really used to. Because if you don't feel welcomed you're not going to keep coming." Kareem commended the Coaches for the support they have showed the boys in the program "All of y'all doing good, showin' that y'all love us. If nobody got y'all, we got y'all. That's how I feel on all the coaches." These feelings of care and concern for their well-being are welcoming to the young men who come in the recreation center.

Similar support was found in the BGCMA. As mentioned above, five of the youth in this study participated in the Boys & Girls Club Teen Club program. The dominant perspective those youth had of the adults involved with this program was positive. Torrence and Anthony considered the BGCMA staff they interacted with on a regular basis "fun people." Key to their favorability with the respondents was their ability to relate to them. For example, Torrence was upset that Ms. T. is no longer with the program because "Ms. T., wanted to do what we wanted to

do. Mr. B only want to do what he want to do when we go to the gym." Further, Anthony

enjoyed the fact that she "talk to us like we talk." For these two brothers, the staff's ability to

relate to them went a long way in determining which staff members they considered cool.

Finding ways to relate to young people can be challenging for some adults but it seems BGCMA

staff excelled in this regard.

Joy developed strong relationships with in some of the BGC staff. These adults acted as

confidants for Joy when she needed to talk about something going on in her life:

> Joy: …I talk to a lot of people, but the one person I can really talk to, it's two of them.
> It's Ms. Ivy. and Mr. Howard, the basketball man that be in the gym. Those the main two
> I talk to.
> Cameron: And why them?
> Joy: It's like a feeling you get where you can just be open enough to anybody, no
> judgment. You know they can help you with your problem or what's going on in your
> life. People be like why can't you talk to your momma. Your momma's your momma.
> She's supposed to help you. She's supposed to know what's wrong with you. I can talk
> to my momma, but it's like . . . I don't hide nothing from her. It's just like certain things
> I don't feel comfortable talking to my momma about. I tell her what's going on or how
> I'm feeling, but I don't really just be open. And she gets mad cause she think I talk to my
> friends about it. I don't tell my friends anything. The only thing my friends probably
> know about me is my middle name, my birthday. But anything other than that that's
> personal that has anything to do with my home, going on at home, they don't know that.
> It's not their place to know unless I want them to know.

Joy's relationship with Ms. Ivy and Mr. Howard resemble the caring and nurturing relationships

found in optimal youth programs. They provide a safe and trusting outlet for her to talk about

issues she wants to keep private from her friends and sometimes her mother.

Not all adults in the recreation center were perceived by youth as supportive adults. Some

of the respondents perceived that adults in the recreation center were quick to "catch an attitude"

with them. The phrases "catching an attitude" or "having an attitude" were used to indicate the

perception of someone engaging with another person in a disrespectful manner. For people in

low-income communities where respect is highly valued; any perceived threats to one's respect

144

presented youth with few options - avoid conflict or by responding with 'attitude' in turn as a mode of self-defense.

Access Restricted?

Despite the range of amenities available at the recreation center, many respondents discussed issues with having limited access to amenities in the facility. Although many of the youth grew up in Hope Park neighborhoods, few had ever been in the facility's swimming pool. had never been in the facility's swimming pool while others were dismayed with the restrictions to the basketball courts, the latter of which was the most important and significant attractions to many of the guys in the program.

As Coach Dave noted, youth had the option of coming to the recreation center to play basketball during the free play sessions on the weekends. Interestingly, the basketball court was closed and quiet on the Saturdays I came to the recreation center to meet with Coach James to participate in the men's fellowship group. I initially thought I was just missing them or the free play sessions were happening on select Saturdays. However, the guys made it clear that free play was no longer an option for their weekends. "They stopped them from coming down here on the weekend," Corey told me during our interview.

> Corey: They stopped them from coming down here on the weekend, like on Saturday.
> Me: What used to happen on Saturday?
> Corey: Everybody used to come down here and play basketball.
> Me: For real?
> Corey: Mm-hmm. It was like at 10 o'clock to about to like two or one or something like that.
> Me: So you didn't have to have like no membership or nothing like that?
> Corey: No. Just come down here. Didn't have to have nothing.
> Me: You don't do that no more?
> Corey: Nah they don't do that no more.

Xavier, who had been coming to the recreation center for three years, shed some light on the loss of free play:

X: Because, like, when I first started…we used to have free play on Saturday and Sunday, people started doing dangerous stuff opening the back door when you know you gotta come through the front to sign in first. They'll be opening up the back door letting people come in, fightin', putting knives in the walls and stuff —I don't know for what— just to play basketball. And then be gambling, playing basketball. I think Dennis caught 'em finally. That's why I ain't never play with 'em. They'll be old folks and they'll be arguing, well not old folks but they'll be like twenty-something, they'll be up here every Saturday and Sunday gambling but Coach Dennis didn't know so that's why I played on the side goals with the other kids. I ain't never play with them because they was gambling—

D: That's why they be tripping because people be walking around—

X: —now, they banned it! They banned free play on Saturday and Sunday. I know one boy who came to me, Dante came to me, he was like "why they ain't got free play on Saturday and Sunday?" I was like, "people, the old people, them twenty-year olds that be coming up here on Saturday and Sunday messed it up."

Dwayne and I gained some clarity regarding the recreation center staff's actions from Xavier's explanation. The surveillance and constant monitoring I observed up to that point had been given some historical context. These actions compromised the security of the recreation center. These actions also served as the differentiating factor between Xavier and the older guys coming in the gym. Although they were all present to play basketball, a common interest, Xavier's choice to maintain some distance from the older group because of their behavior on and around the basketball court reflected a common strategy among youth to keep themselves out of trouble.

The attempt to prevent undesirable behavior in the recreation center was also at the core of Marcus' explanation for the loss of free play. Marcus, age 18, believed the recreation center's decision to reduce the free play sessions from the weekends to two sessions during the week was prompted by the staff's perception of young people as troublemakers.

Marcus: I don't know man. When we was young we had a lot of stuff going on. People fighting, everything. We had a lot of stuff going on when were younger.
Cameron: Who talking about when you say we?
Marcus: Us as a whole. We had a lot of stuff going on up here when we were younger. Might come up here just be on the playground chillin. Some people might come up, start an argument, start throwing wood chips and stuff, get into a fight in front of the gym.

You might be on the football field [in the back of the facility] playing football with another neighborhood, the other neighborhood they start tripping, start throwing the football at you — you know how people get when they get mad about football when they miss a pass, you get to trash talkin', they get mad start throwing stuff at you, you get to fightin' about that.
Cameron: Umm hmm.
Marcus: We wouldn't take no shit from nobody when we was younger. And it's still to that point. If all of us link up together and play football against another neighborhood and the stuff was to happen again it would probably be the same situation like it was when we were younger. We wouldn't take no shit from nobody. They took it as a sign of being troublemakers. We took it as a sign of protecting ourselves. Protecting our names, like period. Like, you come in somebody else neighborhood and you pop off at the mouth being all extra and stuff, you expect them not to say nothing? You expect for them not to protect they hood? Not to speak up for they self? Nah, that wasn't us when we was younger. That wasn't us. Now I don't care. You can talk as much trash as you want to, we can get to fightin' about football, everything. I won't care.

Free play, an additional way young people in the surrounding neighborhoods accessed the recreation center at no cost, was withdrawn as an activity because of delinquent behavior taking place in the facility, thereby reducing the points of entry to the facility for youth in Hope Park Recreation Center.

While free play on the weekends was no longer available, there were sessions during the week on Tuesdays and Thursdays.[39] Notwithstanding the fact that they should probably be in school, these mid-week free play sessions were not always accessible to teenagers according to Marcus:

Marcus: We only had free play on weekends. And sometimes it might be on Tuesday or Thursday mornings. That's only if they feel like letting you in.
Me: So it was like, if you come on Tuesday or Thursday mornings, it depends on who's at the front desk?
Marcus: I wouldn't even say that. It depends on who's on the floor. They'll let the grown people come in, but as far as the teenagers, the kids, they won't let you in. It depends on how many grown people they got on the floor. It they wanna let you in, they wanna let you in. If they don't want to let you in, they not gonna let you in. Then they got to the point where you might come in, they might ask you for ID knowing you ain't got no ID. So now you got to turn around. Or you either going to give them your phone, or give them something to keep while you down there on the floor since you ain't got no

---

[39] They don't run during the summer because Hope Park Recreation Center hosts Camp Best Friend during the summers

147

ID. Teenagers not fixin' given up their phones. So they made it to the point where they know it's something you not going to do. So they made it a rule.

According to Marcus, access to the facility during free play was at the discretion of the front desk staff. The creation of new rules to access the basketball court during times when he felt they should have access served to constrain teenagers' access to the gym. The loss of free play meant one less opportunity to utilize the recreation center and one less place for youth to turn to in their free time. In this instance, the institutional power over youth is exercised in ways that restrict young people's access to the institution, curtailing one of the one of the few options for youth to access the recreation center at no cost.

Crime in the Rec Center

The increase in the facility's security protocol was aimed ostensibly at reducing crime and increasing safety in and around HPRC. Although there were a few minor incidents regarding security during my time at the facility, BGC staff and MTMT Coaches shared stories about issues with criminal activity in the recreation center's recent past. According to Mr. Garrett, a BGC staff member, youth have been suspended from the Afterschool program in the past for fighting at the recreation center. Mr. Garrett noted that this was more likely to happen towards the end of the school as conflicts that started on school grounds carried over to the recreation center. Officer Summers, the on-site police presence, told me he has put elementary-aged children in handcuffs for breaking into cars and vandalism at the recreation center (field note, November 2016).

Shortly after MTMT started the open-court sessions, I asked Coach Bruce about one of the guys shooting around on the far end of the court who was new (to me). "Man, him and his brother got caught on video — you know the office if you come in by the pool, it's right there?

These knuckleheads got caught on camera breaking in there. They act like they not up here all the time. People know who they are!" (Field note, May 2016).

Later in the summer, Coach Vince and Coach Bruce shared more stories about the guys in the MTMT program's past. There were guys they used to have in the program who would be with them in the evenings and burglarize the facility at night and on the weekends. "They'd go through your bag (in the gym)" he stated while pointing at my gym bag strapped across my body "grab your car keys go outside and start clicking (to sound the car unlock feature) and drive off with your car! The same guys that were up in our program!" (Field note, July 2016). From what these adults shared with me, I was not aware that the crime incidence occurred as regularly as it appeared to them. According to a 2017 report on crime at municipal recreation facilities[40] in Atlanta, Hope Park Recreation Center is among the top ten locations with the highest incidents of crime between 2009 and 2016 (Dixon Davis LLC 2017). HPRC ranked particularly high in aggravated assaults and auto thefts. The aggregate data substantiates the information the adults have witnessed in their time at the recreation center.

Increasing Security

Unlike the BGCMA and MTMT adults, the recreation center staff members (RC staff) did not preside over any programs. They were City of Atlanta employees and, based on my observations while in the recreation center, they were responsible for addressing any issues that arise in the building, maintaining the facility's upkeep, and providing customer service to patrons of the recreation center.

The rec center staff made changes that communicated a concern with preventing additional crime that may contribute to the sense of an unsafe environment. In August (2016), a

---

[40] The report presented data on all 357 park spaces managed by Atlanta's Department of Parks and Recreation. Crimes recorded were considered on-site if they took place at or within 250 feet of the park or facility.

30-inch computer monitor replaced one of the smaller computer monitors at the front desk. It was tilted in such a way that it was visible to patrons who were checking in at the front desk. The screen was sectioned off in small squares displaying the view from security cameras placed throughout the recreation center property – parking lots, the basketball courts, classrooms, stairwells and other areas in and on facility grounds.

All guests, adults and youth, must pass by the front desk to scan their membership cards, or sign-in if they do not have membership cards, to access the rest of the facility. Adults routinely passed by the front desk, scanning their membership cards and chatting with the staff before heading to a fitness class, Bible study, or any other events taking place in the recreation center. Adults who were not members and needed to enter the recreation center also signed in on the visitors list.

Some of the youth in the MTMT program experienced the front desk routine differently from the adults. None of them had recreation center memberships and were required to sign in each visit to the facility. They would pass through the front doors, basketballs held at their hips and book bags carrying their shoes, cell phones and other personal items affixed to their backs, and head towards the desk where they lined themselves up in a queue to sign their names on the visitors' log, establishing a record of their presence in the facility. On most occasions, the process went smoothly. If Coach Dennis were at the front desk, youth might exchange greetings with him as many of the youth had established longer relationships with him than other staff members. Otherwise, they would sign their names and proceeded to the classroom for MTMT's chop-up session.

At other times, entering the building was not so simple for some of the guys. Dwayne was the first person to draw my attention to the issue. On the day of his interview, Dwayne

signed in at the front desk and walked into the building with me. This allowed him to come by

the front desk uninhibited. However, there was an exchange behind us between one of the

recreation center staff and another guy coming for the MTMT program. I did not hear precisely

what took place as I was scouting out the location for the interview but Dwayne reacted to it. I

asked him about it in our interview:

> Cameron: So, what was he like, you said that was wack, but what was he trying to do? What was going on?
> Dwayne: He was tellin' him about walking around or whatever. He was telling him that they was too early for the program. That kids came too early.

There were times when I walked in the building with young people who were held at the front

while I was allowed to pass through uninhibited although we were both early for the same event.

For instance, I picked up Trey, OT and Gogo and brought them with me to the recreation center.

As we walked through the doors and towards the front desk together close to 15 minutes before

the 6pm start time for MTMT, the enforcement occurred then as well; they were told to wait,

"that it was too early" for them to sign in as I was allowed to walk by the front desk and towards

the room.

Most of the guys were aware of this unwritten rule and made a small but important

adjustment avoid any issues with the recreation center staff at the front desk. During the school

year, I often saw guys who came to the MTMT program standing outside the building when I

arrived. They stood there bouncing basketballs, cell phones in hand, and talking about any

number of things. At first, I took interpreted this as youth hanging out at a meetup spot before

MTMT open court sessions. Perhaps they were waiting on their friends to arrive, I thought.

However, this temporary waiting period may have been an adaptation to reduce the likelihood

they would violate the unwritten rule of entering too early.

I asked respondents about their interactions with recreation center staff and most of the respondents reported no issues with this group of adults. Gerald, who started coming to HPRC during the summer, said he had not experienced or heard of any his peers have problems with staff at the recreation center. For him, problems with others were easily avoid by respecting everyone: "Treat everybody how you want to be treated. Respect all adults and people your age."

However, many of the comments about negative interactions or perceptions of the adults in the recreation center involved the recreation center staff members. A subset of the youth described incidents in which they were confronted by recreation center staff members. Darnell and Brian spoke about the vigilant policing they attribute to the recreation center staff members.

> Cameron: Oh, okay. Okay. So like, is it easy for folks to just kinda walk in here or whatever? Like, somebody your age or whatever, like to just come in and use the facility?
> Brian: Nope. They not playing that.

> Darnell: Yeah. They kinda, kinda annoying. Like you come to the front gate, they, before you even get a hello out or anything like that, they be like "Where you going? You can't be in here," and all that type of stuff.

> Brian: Yeah, and we just turn around and just, just leave.

> Darnell: You don't even feel like goin' in.

In this passage, Brian and Darnell illustrate the challenges some youth face trying to gain access to the recreation center. As they describe the experience, they identify the ways adults in the recreation center confront young people as they enter the facility. Their perception of the interaction suggests that they feel the way adults are engaging young people is unwarranted. Rather than fighting or pushing back, the youth yield to the adults' authority and simply leave the facility.

Respondents shared additional instances in which they had similar kinds of interactions with the recreation center staff. However, a subset of the respondents recounted interactions in

which they felt they were treated poorly or unfairly by recreation center staff members. Many of these incidents were connected to the surveillance activities conducted by the recreation center staff. Some commented specifically on the ways they were treated when entering/attempting to enter the facility. For instance, Craig, a 15-year-old who participated in MTMT and began participating in the Teen Club at the beginning of the school year, reported an instance when Coach Rome cussed him out for walking past the front desk towards the computer lab to get his little brothers.

Others discussed instances in which they were removed from the facility altogether. Raheem had been coming to Hope Park Recreation Center as a participant in the MTMT program. He believed this helped establish a bit of credibility in the facility but, as he shared, this did not insulate him from new staff members. "All of the Coaches know me. Except the new Coaches. Some of the new Coaches don't know me." He was surprised when one of the new coaches kicked him out of the computer lab. Unaware of whether or not he did anything wrong, Raheem concluded that he was put out because "sometimes they don't want nobody in here."

There were a range of responses among youth who experienced these interactions with members of the recreation center staff. Respondents criticized the adults' actions saying that they were "trippin'" or over-reacting to the circumstances. These interactions left youth "irritated," "annoyed," and "mad." In the excerpt below, Brian and Darnell's responses volley back and forth to explain how they deal with the irritation they feel when they are subject to the surveillance in the recreation center.

> Cameron: So when they do that type of stuff, when they send y'all out, or try to like "Hey, hey what y'all doin?" or they watchin', like what does that make y'all feel like?
> Darnell: Irritating! I leave. I don't wanna —
> Brian: I really get mad cause —
> Darnell: —you can't say nothing else, cause if you say something else, it's gonna be something else.

Brian: —It might end up being something worse, or something like that.
Darnell: You don't wanna try to start a fight. Cause you come there relaxed, they do all that, like you really just tryin to do something wrong, you just want a cup of water or to participate, and they come at you all "Hey, stop!" "What you want?" "You can't be in here! Go on somewhere!" all of that. So, you just, you leave before you just do something reckless.

Having faced previous suspensions and temporary bans from the facility, Brian and Darnell advocated leaving to prevent escalating the encounter to a conflict or doing "something reckless" which may warrant a more severe penalty.

Both Darnell and Brian described responding to these moments by removing themselves from the facility to avoid escalating the conflict by doing "something reckless." Darnell believes the recreation center staff presume that youth who come to the recreation center are interested in doing "something wrong" and treat them as potential problems rather than young people who want to use to the facility. These moments in which youth experienced surveillance were often considered unfair by the youth who experienced them. Often, they were unclear why they were being treated in this manner.

"They Don't Want Us Here!!!"

These interactions were accepted as par for the course. They made Corey angry but his only recourse was to minimize his interactions with the staff:

It be making me mad. Don't work here then! They don't be wantin' to talk to you and junk. That's why I don't talk to them folks. I just come straight down here. That's why I don't be asking them stuff like -- they don't want to hear that junk. I think we done tried before. And they just be tripping.

I was not sure how often these kinds of interactions happened. Yet, observational data supported the respondents' reports of contentious interactions with the recreation center staff. On two separate occasions, I witnessed Coach Rome confront MTMT youth as they attempted to enter the facility shortly ahead of MTMT's scheduled six o'clock start time. The first occurred in

154

October while I waited in the lobby for one of the guys who was scheduled for an interview. I sat

on a bench inside the facility facing both the front desk and the doors to the facility when I

witnessed the first of the two moments take place. As was the norm, guys who were standing

outside the building dribbling a basketball and holding book bags when I arrived, came through

the doors and walked towards the front desk to sign in. However, Coach Rome stopped them

somewhere between the front door and the front desk, raising his voice to remind the small group

"y'all don't come in here til 6 o'clock!" The guys appeared surprised but did not put up any

resistance or protest; they simply turned and went back through the doors to wait outside (Field

note, October 2016). This instance left me a bit curious. Why were they being put out of the

facility this close to MTMT's start time?

A few weeks after this observation, I caught up with Coach Rome in the lobby near the

front desk. He and Coach Dennis were responding to a situation involving a school bus filled

with afterschool participants in the parking lot. As Coach Rome reported, a patron of the facility

called the police to report that one of the children on the school bus threw a rock at their car.

Police officers responded to the call which involved holding the kids on the bus for nearly an

hour while some of their parents waited for them to be released. As things settled down, Coach

Rome and I stood in the lobby and shot the breeze. I took the opportunity to follow up with him

to understand why MTMT youth were stopped at the front desk and sometimes told to go back

outside:

> "Y'all's boys can't be getting up here at 5:30 and walking around mingling with the
> afterschool kids," Rome says to me. I asked him why they had to stay separated. He
> explained that "y'all kids - well they all our kids - aren't part of the afterschool program
> and if something happens to them, they might come up here and get to fighting with the
> Boys and Girls Club [kids]," something they're trying to prevent. (field note, November
> 2016).

Two aspects of Coach Rome's explanation struck me as odd. The first was his use, and subsequent correction, of "y'all's boys" in describing the guys in the MTMT program. It felt like a tell in a game of poker, as if Coach Rome tipped his hand and was trying to cover it up. Which statement reflected his perspective honestly? Secondly, the distinction rests upon the perception that the MTMT youth pose a potential threat to youth in the Afterschool program although While there is virtually no overlap between the groups' members (none of the MTMT youth were in the afterschool program, the BGC notwithstanding), I understood his desire to maintain a safe environment for youth in the facility but I was dismayed at the way youth in the MTMT program were cast in this rationale. How did Rome come to this conclusion about the two groups of youth? How was one group of youth cast as the aggressors?

Coach Rome reinforced this line of reasoning later that same evening. Before the chop-up session ended, Coach James ceded the floor to Coach Rome who stood just inside the door to the room to deliver his message about the expected check-in procedure:

Coach Rome talks with the guys at the end of the chop-up session:

"Tell 'em about being orderly… When you come in this building, I'm most likely the first person you see so let the people know at the front desk you here for Coach James' Makin' Men so you won't have no problems. Let 'em know you here for the Making Men program and come on down to the classroom. Don't go walking around 'cause we still got afterschool going on. I be telling y'all that for y'all's safety because y'all get here at 5:30, between 5:30 and 6:00 and something happen — one of y'all see a little girl y'all wanna talk to and go to 'poppin' flavor' with her and then she go, "oh, he felt on my ass!" and this and that — it's a problem. Then we gonna have to call the police on you. Aight? So be where you supposed to be in this building and let everybody know that you here to go down to Coach James for the MTMT. Be orderly, man. Act like you got some sense up there, alright? So let 'em know, sign in, don't be putting' uh –

Coach James: Boo Man!
Coach Rome: Lucifer –
Coach James: Right, right.
Coach Rome: –and Kojak on there.
Coach James: Lil Wayne[41]

---

[41] The name of a popular hip hop artist from New Orleans, Louisiana.

156

Coach Rome: 'Cause let me tell ya something - you know why it's good to put your name on there? Because when your other lil partnas who don't come here - listen to what I'm telling ya - your other friends who don't come here go rob the CVS down here and say y'all was with 'em, we can go to the paperwork and see your name on there at such and such time, then we know they lying, see what I'm saying?
Coach James: Just cleared you.
Coach Rome: Just cleared you because your name is up there on that paper.
Coach James: And I told y'all I've had that happen.
Coach Rome: Ok? Ain't that what the police gonna do? They gon' come right through the rec center and look at that paper. Now you done put on there –
Coach James: Kojak.
Coach Rome: or Shawty Lo⁴² or somebody. So, you better put your name on there!
(Field Note, November 2016)

In this exchange, Coach Rome laid out the expectations for youth entering the building and the importance of following the expected procedures for signing in. The requirement to sign-in is straightforward; it is part of the process of maintaining an awareness of who is in the building at all times. I got the impression that this tracking was an administrative task that recreation center staff is required to perform. Coach Rome and Coach James' mixture of names from popular culture was used to comical effect and emphasized the expectation that youth use their given names rather than nicknames or street names. This was often an issue in MTMT prompting Coach James to remind the guys to write "the names yo' mama gave you, not the ones Pookie and 'em call you" legibly on the MTMT sign in sheets.

Yet, there are aspects of Coach Rome's message and the observed interactions with youth that indicate he may hold an unacknowledged bias about/against/towards the guys who come to the program. First, the policing of MTMT youths' access to the building, the 'no-early entry' rule, was done with a heavy hand and very little apparent care for the young people. It appeared, to me, to be an insensitive manner of enforcing an unwritten rule of the facility. Secondly, the use of "y'all's kids" in his explanation for this practice reveals a distinction he made between the

---

⁴² [3] The name of a popular Atlanta-based hip hop artist from the West-side of Atlanta who died in 2016.

youth in the afterschool program and the MTMT youth, one used to justify keeping MTMT youth out of the facility. Lastly, under the guise of ensuring their safety and the safety of others, Coach Rome presents three scenarios in which the guys were engaged in delinquent if not criminal behavior — fighting youth in the afterschool program, touching a young girl inappropriately, or being associated with other youth committing an act of crime. Further, the logical end of these acts bypasses any internal moderator and directly involving law enforcement, as though to remind young people that their transgressions could lead to the involvement of the criminal justice system. Taken on the presumption that Coach Rome's talk was delivered with the best intentions for the youth, it is still difficult to reconcile the expectation of care from adults with the default perception of youth as troublemakers.

Hope Park Recreation Center provides youth with access to supportive caring adults in their programs who demonstrate a genuine interest in their well-being. Conversely, a subset of youths experienced negative encounters with adults that conveyed the message that they do not belong in the recreation center. This happened with a small group of the young people I spoke with in this study. Although this was not a widespread experience, it raises the question of how often youth experience these kinds of interactions, who the youth are in the context of the recreation center that they might treated this way, and how many youths may have left and never returned after this kind of interaction. The fact that youth continue to come back to the recreation center after these incidents speaks volumes to the value they find in coming to the recreation center and likely to the dearth of options available to them in their neighborhoods.

Chapter VII

CONCLUSION: FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The availability of economic capital in Atlanta due to the city's growth provided the city

with an economic base to subsidize these youth programs in the recreation centers. Since the

election of Maynard Jackson, Jr. in 1973, the City of Atlanta's Department of Recreation has

steadily utilized partnerships with the private sector entities to overcome limitations within the

municipal budget to provide recreational programs for the city's most vulnerable youth in its

poorest communities beset by systemic inequality. Sjoquist (2000) contends that Atlanta's

paradox is one in which steady economic growth has failed to trickle down to improve the lived

and material conditions of the city's Black poor. Yet, the Centers of Hope in Atlanta and in other

cities engaging in similar initiatives represent a small but important effort to redirect economic

capital through social institutions to directly benefit the city's youth. Mayor Reed's vision for the

recreation centers expanded the institution's programmatic offerings beyond recreation to

incorporate educational, nutrition, and cultural enrichment for youth participants.

Given the recent reinvestment in Atlanta's recreation centers using private and public

capital, and the roundly held assertion among scholars and policymakers that youth programs

hosted in youth-serving sites like YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs, and recreation centers are "safe

spaces" for youth, I became curious about the ways young people viewed their experiences as

participants of programs within these social institutions. The current qualitative study explored

youths' experiences and perceptions of urban youth in a municipal recreation center in Atlanta, Georgia to understand how municipal governments utilize social institutions to address the need of marginalized groups in urban communities.

In order to center the voices and experiences of youth in this institution, I employed an ethnographic approach to explore the social life of a recreation center in Atlanta, Georgia. From December 2015 to December 2016, I conducted over 300 hours of participant observation at Hope Park Recreation Center. During this time, I become a volunteer and eventually considered a "Coach" in making Tomorrow's Men Today (MTMT), building relationships and respect with youth through regular engagement in the activities they pursue inside the recreation center, and making myself available to youths and adults in the recreation center as needed. These activities helped me develop a deeper, informed sense of the recreation center's context.

Observational data from my time at Hope Park Recreation Center were complemented by semi-structured interviews I conducted with 18 youth who were regular participants in two youth programs at the recreation center: Making Tomorrow's Men Today, Inc. (MTMT), a non-profit organization that operates a tutoring and mentoring program for young males in the Hope Park community and the Boys & Girls Club's Teen Club, a program partner through the Centers of Hope initiative. Qualitative interviews with youth in the recreation center and observational data of youth activity (e.g. program activities, interaction amongst young people, adult-youth interactions and relationships) were analyzed using inductive analytical methods of data analysis (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Saldaña 2016).

Discussion

Capital Acquisition

The implied premise of Wilson's (1987) theoretical discussion of institutions in urban communities suggested that youths' access to basic institutions negates the compounding effects of social isolation. Further, access to institutions such as recreation centers facilitate youths' access to the social capital necessary to transcend the conditions of their disadvantaged environment to participate in mainstream society. To varying degrees, such was the case in youths' experiences at Hope Park Recreation Center.

None of the youth possessed official memberships administered by the Department of Parks and Recreation. Some youth were unaware of any costs associated with utilizing the recreation center; others were disinterested paying for access to this institution. One might be led to conclude that the notions about paying for access many be a function of living in a low-income community context and the possible limitations of the economic capital. Yet there is not enough evidence to settle on that conclusion. Otis noted the limited access that a membership would grant him. Taking his perspective as an example, the value of the membership to young people may actually be a more important factor at play in youths' interest or decision to get a membership.

However, youths' perceptions about the official memberships may be informed by the comparatively low cost of participating in the youth programs operating in the facility. For many youth, access to the facility was a function their affiliation with youth programs, whereas group affiliation is a form of social capital. While a few respondents either held a job with the recreation center or were looking to secure a future opportunity, there were not many opportunities for youth to generate the conditions in which to cultivate economic capital.

As noted in previous research (Jarrett et al. 2005), youths' relationships with adults the relationships with adults were key to developing capital. Both programs created opportunities for youths to engage in mutually respectful and healthy relationships with supportive adults. The community-based program created an opportunity for youth to use the facility who may not otherwise have been granted access to the facility. Youths participation in the MTMT programs and BGC Teen Club, were opportunities to develop capital often aimed to serve them in the future. Both programs created opportunities for youth to acquire information from adults about different aspects of life. The chop-up sessions in MTMT delivered several messages about being successful, career possibilities, and making decisions about life.

Similarly, youth in the BGC Teen Club had participated in different aspects of the College Bound initiative. In comparison to MTMT's chop-up sessions, College Bound was a more structured activity designed to expose increase young people's access and eventual enrollment in college. As part of a national organization, BGC members had access to financial and material resources that would enhance their knowledge regarding the requirements to prepare for college, a challenging transition for youth from underrepresented backgrounds.

In both programs, the social capital derived from group affiliation created the conditions in which they could receive information from adults in their programs. This information, a form of *embodied cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1986), becomes knowledge young people can put to use later in life.

Despite the stated intentions to create space for youth in the facility through recreational programs and programs that cultivate the transfer of capital through youth programs, youth were subjected to aspects of the surveillance state within Hope Park Recreation Center.

Adults in positions of authority either contribute to or take away from young people's sense of belonging in the institution, of affirming or negating one's status. In the interest of maintaining a safe environment for guests and patrons, Rec Center staff are charged with regularly making judgements about who does and does not belong in the recreation center at any given moment. In the context of trying to maintain a safe and secure institution for the broader community, what happened to the teenagers? They were subject to the disciplinary technologies embedded in the recreation facility.

Philosopher Michel Foucault (1977) theorized that practices of constant surveillance, a notion he referred to as "panopticonism," cause individuals to internalize their punishment and become self-disciplined docile bodies. Based on observational and interview data presented in previous chapters, respondents in this study have been subject to the punitive gaze of surveillance within Hope Park Recreation Center. Surveillance processes manifested in multiple ways in Hope Park Recreation Center. The securitization of the recreation center - enforcing the sign-in procedure, the visibility of surveillance technology (new 30-inch monitor with closed circuit television security), and the no early entry - can be interpreted as tools of the panopticonism. They represent a conscientious effort by the recreation center staff to control the flow of patrons in the facility, to curb criminal activity, and maintain a safe environment.

Youth were cognizant of the unwritten rule that barred early entry among youth in the MTMT program. Although some protested this rule in privacy of the interview, in order to maintain their access to the facility, they acquiesced with the guidelines and rarely fought back in confrontations with the recreation center staff. Youth who expressed disdain for the ways they were treated by rec center staff – prevented from entering the building, followed through the

building, or kicked out of the building – may have experienced this treatment as adults view them through the lens of potential troublemakers despite their claims to the contrary. Anderson (1999) observed a similar practice among teachers in Philadelphia schools:

> Often students perceive (more or less accurately) that the institution and its staff are utterly unreceptive to their street presentations. Mixed with their inability to distinguish the decent child from the street child, the teachers' efforts to combat the street may cause them to lump the good students with the bad, generally viewing all who display street emblems as adversaries" (Anderson 1999:96).

Teachers' inability to detangling the fashion and style associated with street culture from the orientation of particular students caused them to characterize all youths with street-presenting appearances as the bad ones, as "adversaries." A similar treatment happened with youth and police in Fine et. al. 's (2003) study. It is not uncommon for adults in positions of authority to rely on stereotypes when interacting with youth of color.

The collective actions of their peers and the reputations of certain neighborhoods may be informing some recreation center staff members interactions with youth they suspect may be from these neighborhoods. It may also reflect a shared cultural stereotype about Black youth from poor neighborhoods as potential deviants, an idea deeply rooted in the cultural ethos of the United States (cite) and encapsulated in terms such as "thug," and politically charged "superpredator" (Drum 2016; Welch 2007). Black males have been considered violently dangerous, criminally minded, and sexually aggressive. All three these notions showed up in Coach Rome's characterization of the guys when he warned them about the perils of failing to sign in at the front desk and in his explanation to me about limiting their access to the facility to keep them from 'mingling' with the BGC youth.

Labeling Black youth utilizing these terms that connote deviance may lead them to begin engaging in deviant behavior and incorporate the label into their identity. This is known in

sociology as labeling theory (Becker 1973). While there are elements of the labeling process taking place in this study, most explicitly in Coach Rome's comments about the guys, more evidence is needed to determine the scope and influence of these labels on youth.

Based on the data available through this study, it is difficult discern whether or not the recreation center staff were acting on their own motives or if their actions were aligned with a mandate from the Department of Parks and Recreation or the City of Atlanta. To determine this will require additional research involving the adults in the facility. Irrespective of the impetus, there is evidence that suggests recreation center staff view young people in the surrounding neighborhoods as potential threats to the safety of other young people in the facility. In its current iteration, Hope Park Recreation Center is a reflection of the city's ongoing paradox – it appears to be a well-funded program whose benefits are limited to those in the best position to take advantage of it.

The efforts of municipal leaders to address the needs of its most vulnerable population are commendable. Yet these efforts may not always be ideal experiences for young people whose lives they intend to reach. While this study draws on empirical data from a single case in Atlanta, Georgia, the implications of its findings are relevant in cities across the nation as municipal leaders are considering how to create or support opportunities in the public realm for youth, particularly young people who live in communities where few current options exist (Ouellette et al. 2005; Spooner 2011).

Policy Recommendations

Policy makers in cities across the United States are accounting for their local assets to determine how they can be put to use in ways that serve multiple populations without adding strain to the budget (Ouellette et al. 2005; Spooner 2011). However, as they consider using these

multipurpose institutions as vessels to provide opportunities for youth, they must have an awareness of how youth experience these institutions as they currently exist and summarily construct perceptions of the recreation centers.

One of the major points of contention among youth in this study was the restricted access encountered by young people who were not members of any sanctioned program at the recreation center. The loss of open play opportunities limits young people's access to the recreation center, particularly those who do not have memberships. Recreation centers can create additional drop-in opportunities for young people who are not affiliated with 'sanctioned' youth programs (those supported by the City of Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation) to access some of the amenities inside the recreation center. Further, drop-in programs can reduce the financial threshold for youth to enter the facility, making it more equitable for youth whose families may not be in a position, economic or otherwise, for them to participate in 'official' programs where parental registration and activity fees may be requirements of participation. Improving access opportunities may contribute to reducing crimes that stem from boredom and a lack of access to leisure activities while exposing youth to the programs and services available at the recreation center.

The recreation center has the potential to provide services that improve the quality of life for young people as an institution firmly embedded in their immediate environment. However, in its current iteration, the recreation center is focused on providing programming opportunities to young citizens and their families including youth developmental programs, cultural arts and awareness, and athletic programs. While these are important, there are other areas in which young people need assistance.

In my interviews and conversation with young people at the recreation center, I was struck by the ways violence was discussed with such regularity. On a number of occasions, when young people opened up about these experiences and how they were dealing with the feelings related to losing loved ones or friends, or being the victim of violence themselves, many said they did not feel comfortable talking with anyone. Some resorted to their peers but a common refrain was that they spoke to no one.

As a public resource, the recreation center could be utilized as a site for young people to receive some type of support for coping with these traumatic experiences in healthy ways. Social workers and community psychologists could be instrumental in helping young people navigate the complex emotions they often experience as part of growing up with these kinds of experiences so closely embedded in their regular day to day experiences. While adults in the recreation center may be viewed as parents, big brothers and sisters who are willing to listen to young people, this research suggests that not all adults are welcoming to young people or better yet, not all young people feel comfortable with the adults who staff these facilities to be attuned to their needs. Further, even those who are interested in helping may not be equipped to help young people navigate the emotional terrain.

Limitations of the Study

As with all research inquiries, the present study has limitations that are worth acknowledging, not to undermine the quality of the study but to consider how this project or one similar to it might benefit from reflecting on areas in which the study could be improved. My analysis of youths' experiences and perceptions of this social institution was limited to a single research site approved in the IRB application submitted to the university. While this decision

was made in part for practical reasons, investigating a single site limits the generalizability of the study's findings.

Although the sample size met the requirement of data saturation established in prior studies (Guest and Johnson 2006), the study would benefit from the perspectives of adolescent girls and adult youth workers who were underrepresented in the sample's composition and youth non-participating youth who were absent from the study altogether. I encountered far fewer adolescent girls than I did adolescent males at Hope Park Recreation Center. This may be an indication of the limited availability of programs or activities of interest for teenage girls at the recreation center. It may also be a reflection of the fact that my role and point of entry in the recreation center was a tutoring and mentoring program focusing on young males. I spent the majority of my time with this group which facilitated my access to young males for the study. In either circumstance, a serious inquiry regarding the experiences of adolescent girls and young women would improve our understanding of the ways municipal institutions address the particular needs and interests of girls in low-income urban environments.

As noted in Chapter 4, the absence of 'non-participants,' youth who lived in the same communities as youth in this study but were not active participants in the recreation center. While a few studies provide some insights into why this may be the case (Perkins et al. 2007; Serido et al. 2014), the presence of negative interactions between youth and adults that push young people out of the facility has not been examined by previous literature. There may be youth in Hope Park who were once participants whose non-participation status is related to these interactions.

Future Studies

This dissertation served as a pilot study to explore the social world of the recreation center from the perspective of youth to understand the role of this voluntary social institution in their lives. Although the study's findings are constrained by the conditions surrounding the time spent in the field collecting data and the amount of data gathered within the time span in which youth were available, the findings establish a platform upon which a longitudinal exploration that incorporates additional youth from inside the recreation center and in the surrounding neighborhoods and schools can expand the range of perspectives involved in the analysis.

The current study incorporated perspectives of adults via informal interviews and conversations in the facility recorded in the field notes. However, this study did not focus on their perspectives with the same weight as perspectives shared by youth. Youths perceptions of adults in the facility were central to this study but only part of how the institution can be understood. Adults, particularly the staff of the recreation center, can provide a foundation for understanding the operational challenges of operating the facility and providing services to the citizens and examining the implications of the city's vision for the policies and procedures enacted within the facility.

Future studies should also aim to incorporate alternative methods beyond the typical social scientists' tool box to provide multiple opportunities to share their perspectives. Schaefer-McDaniel's (2007) incorporation of the neighborhood walk positively received by the young people in her study who acted as tour guides. As she notes, young people were not as talkative during interviews at the school building were "more open and talkative" (432) when they left the school for the neighborhood walk. It allowed youth to talk about their neighborhood in real time, drawing on environmental cues that reinforced ideas that came up during interviews and

allowing new topics to emerge from the context in real time. Putting youth in charge of what they tell researchers can alter the power dynamic between youth informants and adult researchers in ways that enrich what we can learn about the social world from youths' perspectives.

APPENDIX

Central Research Questions
1. Why do you participate in the recreation center? Or 'What structural and/or individual factors contribute to urban youths' decision to participate in the recreation center?'
    a. What barriers exist that may prevent youth from participating?
2. How does the recreation center fit into urban youths' ecological environment?

The overall study seeks to understand what meanings and valuation urban youth ascribe to the recreation center, a revitalized institution under the current mayor's Centers of Hope initiative?

Background: Who are you?

Let's start by talking about bit about you: who you are? what are you interested in? [demographics]

Age [Demographics]:
Family dynamics [Demographics]:

Have you thought about what you want to do after high school? [Aspirations]

Why are you here at the recreation center? [Participation]

The Recreation Center: Participation and Perceptions

When did you start coming to the recreation center? [Participation]
- How did you find out about it?
- Have you attended any other recreation centers?

Do you have a Teen Pass or any other kind of membership with the recreation center? [Participation]

How long have you been coming to Coach King's mentoring program? [Participation]

How do you get to the recreation center? [Participation]

What do you do when you come to the recreation center? [Participation]

What are the adults (staff and Coaches) like here at the rec center? [Perceptions of the recreation center, adult interactions]
- Do they remind you of adults in other areas of your life (home, school, neighborhood, work, church, other)? [adult interactions (PYD asset), rec center x community comparison]

Are there any rules at the recreation center that you think are unnecessary? [perception of recreation center, perceived barriers]

Do you think the recreation center has something to offer for people your age, something they couldn't get anywhere else? [perceived value of recreation center to youth]
- Better question: is there anything you get from the recreation center that you can't get at home, in school, or any other place?

How would you describe the recreation center to a friend who's never been here before? [youth perception of recreation center]

Urban ecology (as understood from a youth perspective)

What do you do in your free time when you're not at the recreation center? [leisure time activities]

Do you think there are a lot of/enough of things (i.e. programs, events, opportunities) for you to get involved in when you're not in school? [perceptions of urban ecology, access to developmental opportunities/assets]

Home environment/setting
What's the name of the neighborhood/community you currently live in? (aka: where do you live?) [demographics]

 If you had to describe your neighborhood to someone who had never been there before, what would you say about it? [perception of urban ecology]

What's it like living there? [perception of urban ecology]

School setting
Where do you go to school? [perception of urban ecology]

What grade are you in? [demographics]

What's it like at your school? [perceptions of urban ecological setting, school]
- How are the teachers and other adults?

What kinds of challenges do people your age have to think about or deal with as you grow up? [adolescence]

Do you think you have the resources in your community to help you get to where you want to go? [neighborhood resource

Wrapping it up

Do you think there are any benefits of coming to the recreation center? [participation in the recreation center, perceived benefits]
- Do you think coming to the recreation center can help/has helped you achieve your goals? [ecological assets x aspirations]

There are people in your neighborhood or at your school who don't come to the recreation center. Do you think there are reasons why they don't come to the recreation center? [non-participation in recreation centers, perceived barriers]
- What do you think it would take to get them to come? [non-participation in recreation centers, behavioral change]

If you could change something (or a couple of things) about the recreation center, what would you change? [perceptions of the recreation center]

What do you like least about the recreation center? [perceptions of the recreation center]

What do you like most about the recreation center? [perceptions of the recreation center]

What [about the recreation center] keeps you coming back? In other words, why do you keep coming to the recreation center? [participation, perceptions of the recreation center]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abrams, Laura S. 2010. "Sampling 'Hard to Reach' Populations in Qualitative Research: The Case of Incarcerate Youth." *Qualitative Social Work* 9(4):546–50.

Addams, Jane. 1909. *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets*. New York: The MacMillan Company.

Addams, Jane. 1912. "Recreation as a Public Function in Urban Communities." *The American Journal of Sociology* 17(5):615–19.

Afterschool Alliance. 2016. *Afterschool in Communities of Concentrated Poverty*. Washington, D.C.

Agee, Jane. 2009. "Developing Qualitative Research Questions: A Reflective Process." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 22(4):431–47.

AJC. 1993. "More Mentors Needed." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 22, D4.

Anderson-Butcher, Dawn, Scottye J. Cash, Susan Saltzburg, Theresa Midle, and Debra Pace. 2004. "Institutions of Youth Development." *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 9(1–2):83–99.

Anderson, Elijah. 1990. *Street Wise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Anderson, Elijah. 1999. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Anon. 1966a. "Negroes Dance For Slum Center." *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 17, 40.

Anon. 1966b. "Vine City Street Blocked 7th Day in Play Protests." *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 7.

Anon. 1982. "$ 130,000 Given To Summer Programs." *Atlanta Daily World*, June 13, 1.

Ashley, Jermaine, Dawn Samaniego, and Lian Cheun. 1996. "How Oakland Turns Its Back on Teens: A Youth Perspective." *Social Justice* 24(3):170–76.

Atlanta Urban League. 1954. *A Report on Parks and Recreational Facilities for Negroes in Atlanta, Georgia, January 1954*. Hamilton Papers.

Bayor, Ronald H. 1996. *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Bayor, Ronald H.(Georgia Institute of Technology). 1988. "Roads to Racial Segregation; Atlanta in the Twentieth Century." *Journal of Urban History*.

Becker, Howard. 1973. *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: The Free Press.

Berg, Bruce L. 2008. *Qualitative Research for the Social Sciences*. Allyn & Bacon.

Bevir, Mark. 1999. "Foucault , Power , and Institutions." *Political Studies* XLVII:345–59.

Billingsley, Andrew. 2003. *Might Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform*. Oxford University Press.

Blau, Judith R., Charles Heying, and Joseph R. Feinberg. 1996. "Second-Order Cultural Effects of Civil Rights on Southern Nonprofit Organizations: The Atlanta YMCAs." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 25(2):174–89.

Boateng, William. 2012. "Evaluating the Efficacy of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Qualitative Social Research." *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 3(7):54–57.

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1899. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc.

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1971. "The Function of the Negro Church." Pp. 77–81 in *The Black Church in America*, edited by H. M. Nelsen, R. L. Yokley, and A. K. Nelsen. New York: Basic Books.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." Pp. 241–58 in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. Richardson. Westport, CT.

Carruthers, Cynthia P. and James A. Busser. 2000. "A Qualitative Outcome Study of Boys and Girls Club Program Leaders, Club Members, and Parents." *Journal of Park & Recreation Administration* 18(1):50–67.

Charles, Camille Zubrinsky. 2003. "The Dynamics of Racial Residential Segregation." *Annual Review of Sociology* 29(1):167–207.

Chesney-Lind, Meda and John M. Hagedorn. 1999. *Female Gangs in America: Essays on Girls, Gangs and Gender*. Chicago, IL: Lake View Press.

City of Atlanta. 2010. "Mayor Kaşım Reed, City Leaders and Community Activities Celebrate the Grand Re-Opening of Atlanta Recreation Centers." Retrieved December 12, 2017 (https://www.atlantaga.gov/Home/Components/News/News/283/).

City of Atlanta. 2013. "Centers of Hope Booklet" edited by Department of Parks and Recreation.

Clark, Kenneth B. 1965. *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power*. New York: Harper and Row.

Cone, James. 2010. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Corbin, Juliet M. and Anselm L. Strauss. 2008. *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Creswell, John W. 2003. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Crosnoe, Robert and Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson. 2011. "Research on Adolescence in the Twenty-First Century." *Annual Review of Sociology* (37):439–60.

Deegan, Mary Jo. 2001. "The Chicago School of Ethnography." Pp. 11–25 in *Handbook of Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Delamont, Sara. 2007. "Ethnography and Participant Observation." Pp. 205–17 in *Qualitative Research Practice*. Sage.

Diggs, Morse. 1981. "Few Parents Enroll Kids in ' Safe Summer '." *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 31.

Dittmer, John. 1977. *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920*. Urbana, IL: University of Ilinois Press.

Dixon Davis LLC. 2017. "Analysis: Crime at Atlanta Parks." Retrieved November 19, 2017 (https://www.dixonfirm.com/atlanta-park-crime/).

Downey, By Maureen. 2017. "Get Schooled (Http://getschooled.bl Og.myajc.com/)."

Drum, Kevin. 2016. "A Very Brief History of Super-Predators." *Mother Jones*. Retrieved November 15, 2017 (http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2016/03/very-brief-history-super-predators/).

Eder, Donna and Laura Fingerson. 2002. "Interviewing Children and Adolescents." Pp. 181–203 in *Handbook of interview research: Context & method*, edited by J. F. Gubrium and J. A. Holstein. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Ellis, By Ralph and Elwyn Lopez. 2015. "Judge Reduces Sentences for 3 Educators in Atlanta Sign in Privacy Policy." *CNN.com*. Retrieved July 31, 2017 (http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/30/us/atlanta-schools-cheating-scandal/).

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Fagan, Jeffrey and Deanna L. Wilkinson. 1998. "Guns, Youth Violence, and Social Identity in Inner Cities." *Crime and Justice* 24(JANUARY 1998):105.

Fine, Michelle et al. 2003. "'Anything Can Happen With Police Around': Urban Youth Evaluate Strategies of Surveillance in Public Spaces." *Journal of Social Issues* 59(1):141–58.

Fulk, Joseph Richard. 1972. *Municipalization of Play and Recreation*. Washington, D.C.: McGrath Publishing Company.

Galaskiewicz, Joseph, Olga V. Mayorova, and Beth M. Duckles. 2013. "Studying the Roles of Nonprofits, Government, and Business in Providing Activities and Services to Youth in the Phoenix Metropolitan Area." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 647(1):50–82.

Gambone, Michelle Alberti and James P. Connell. 2004. "The Community Action Framework for Youth Development." *The Prevention Researcher* 11(2):17–20.

Gibson, Campbell. 1998. *"POPULATION OF THE 100 LARGEST CITIES AND OTHER URBAN PLACES IN THE UNITED STATES: 1790 TO 1990."* Washington, D.C.

Giroux, Henry A. 2003. "Spectacle of Race and Pedagogies of Denial: Anti-Black Racist Pedagogy Under the Reign of Neoliberalism." *Communication Education* 52(3/4):191–211.

Glaser, Barney G. and Anselm L. Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine Publishing Co.

Glasgow, Douglas. 1981. *The Black Underclass: Poverty, Unemployment and Entrapment of Ghetto Youth*. Vintage Books.

Glaude, Eddie. 2010. "The Black Church Is Dead." Retrieved July 27, 2017 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddie-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.html).

Grady-Willis, Winston A. 2006. *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Grant, Donald L. 1993. *The Way It Was in the South: The Black Experience in Georgia*. New York: Carol Publishing Group.

Grills, Scott. 1998. *Doing Ethnographic Research: Fieldwork Settings*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Grossberg, Lawrence. 2001. "Why Does Neo-Liberalism Hate Kids? The War on Youth and the Culture of Politics." *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies* 23(2):111–36.

Guest, Greg and Laura Johnson. 2006. "How Many Interviews Are Enough ? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability." 18(1):59–82.

Guion, Lisa A., David C. Diehl, Debra McDonald, and IFAS Extension. 2011. *Triangulation: Establishing the Validity of Qualitative Studies*. University of Florida.

Hairston, Julie B. 2000. "Mayor Mends Fences Councilman C.T. Martin Has Become Less Hostile, and His District Has Benefited." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 22, A1.

179

Halpern, Robert. 2002. "A Different Kind of Child Development Institution: The History of after School Programs for Low-Income Children." *Teachers College Record* 104(2):178–211.

Hammersley, Martyn and Paul Atkinson. 2007. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge.

Harmon, Perry. 1968. "Recreation Model Built in Vine City." *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 21, 9A.

Harris, Mary G. 1999. *Cholas: Latino Girls and Gangs*. New York, NY: AMS Press Inc.

Headley, Bernard D. 1999. *The Atlanta Youth Murders and the Politics of Race*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Hein, Virginia H. 1972. "The Image of 'A City Too Busy to Hate': Atlanta in the 1960's." *Phylon (1960-)* 33(3):205–21. Retrieved (http://www.jstor.org/stable/273521).

Henderson, Karla A. and Kathryn (Kat) King. 1999. "YOUTH PLACES AND SPACES: CASE STUDIES OF TWO TEEN CLUBS." *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 17(2).

Hennink, M. M., B. N. Kaiser, and V. C. Marconi. 2016. "Code Saturation Versus Meaning Saturation: How Many Interviews Are Enough?" *Qualitative Health Research*.

Hertzberg, Steven. 1999. "Jews and Blacks." Pp. 245–60 in *Strangers & Neighbors: Relations Between Blacks & Jews in the United States*, edited by M. Adams and J. H. Bracey. Amherst: University of Massachussets Press.

Hesse-Biber, Sharlene Nagy and Patricia Leavy. 2006. *The Practice of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Hill, Alma E. 1991. "Officials Court Finds for New Gym." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution1*, November 15.

Hirsch, Barton J. et al. 2000. "Inner-City Youth Development Organizations:: Strengthening Programs for Adolescent Girls." *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 20(2):210–30.

Jackson, Roswell F. and Rosalyn M. Patterson. 1989. "A Brief History of Selected Black Churches in Atlanta, Georgia." *The Journal of Negro History* 74(1/4):31–52.

Jarrett, Robin L., Patrick J. Sullivan, and Natasha D. Watkins. 2005. "Developing Social Capital through Participation in Organized Youth Programs: Qualitative Insights from Three Programs." *Journal of Community Psychology* 33(1):41–55.

Jaynes, Gerald David and M. Williams Jr. Robin. 1989. *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society*. Washington D.C.: National Academy Press.

Johnson, Byron R., Soon Joon Jang, Spencer De Li, and David Larson. 2000. "The 'Invisible Institution' and Black Youth Crime: The Church as an Agency of Local Social Control." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 29(4):479–98.

Kapp, Amy. 2011. "Kasim Reed." *Parks & Recreation* (September):68–70.

Kruse, Kevin M. 2005. *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lareau, Annette. 2011. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Lareau, Annette and Aliya Hamid Rao. 2016. "It's about the Depth of Your Data" edited by S. Ali and P. Cohen. *Contexts: Understanding People in Their Social Worlds* 2016 (May 10). Retrieved (https://contexts.org/blog/its-about-the-depth-of-your-data/).

Lenhart, Amanda et al. 2008. "Teens, Video Games, and Civics: Teens' Gaming Experiences Are Diverse and Include Significant Social Interaction and Civic Engagement." *Pew Internet & American Life Project* 1–64.

Lerner, Gerda. 1974. "Early Community Work of Black Club Women." *The Journal of Negro History* 59(2):158–67.

Levy, Jessica Ann. 2015. "Selling Atlanta: Black Mayoral Politics from Protest to Entrepreneurism, 1973 to 1990." *Journal of Urban History* 41(3):420–43.

Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Egon G. Guba. 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, Publications, Inc.

Little, Priscilla M., Jean Baldwin Grossman, Heather B. Weiss, and Diana Lee. 2010. *Engaging Older Youth: Program and City-Level Strategies to Support Sustained Participation in Out-of-School Time*.

Lockett, Delores Juanita. 1946. "An Analysis of the Youth Canteen Movement in This Country with Particular Application to the Youth Canteens of the Butler Street Y.M. C.A." Atlanta University.

Lustig, Deborah Freedman and Kenzo K. Sung. 2013. "Dissolving Borders: Reframing Risk, Delinquent Peers, and Youth Violence." *Children and Youth Services Review* 35(8):1197–1205.

MacLeod, Jay. 2009. *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*. 3rd ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Marvasti, Amir. 2004. *Qualitative Research in Sociology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Massey, Douglass S. and Nancy A. Denton. 1993. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mayor's Office. 2016. "City Kicks Off 'Hire LA Youth' Program." *Los Angeles*. Retrieved December 9, 2017 (https://www.lacity.org/blog/city-kicks-hire-la-youth-program).

Mays, Benjamin E. and Joseph W. Nicholson. 1969. *The Negro's Church*. New York: Arno Press, Inc.

McCray, Talia M. and Sabina Mora. 2011. "Analyzing the Activity Spaces of Low-Income Teenagers: How Do They Perceive the Spaces Where Activities Are Carried Out?" *Journal of Urban Affairs* 33(5):511–28.

McLaughlin, Milbrey W. 2000. *Community Counts: How Youth Organizations Matter for Youth Development*. Public Education Network.

McLaughlin, Milbrey Wallin, Merita A. Irby, and Juliet Langman. 1994. *Urban Sanctuaries: Neighborhood Organizations in the Lives and Futures of Inner-City Youth*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

McPheeters, Annie L. 1964. *Negro Progress in Atlanta, Georgia, 1950-1960 : A Selective Bibliography on Human Relations from Four Atlanta Newspapers.* Atlanta : West Hunter Branch, Atlanta Public Library, 1964.

Miller, Jody. 2001. *One of the Guys: Girls, Gangs, and Gender*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Miller, Jody. 2008. *Getting Played: African American Girls, Urban Inequality, and Gendered Violence*. New York: New York University Press.

Mjagkij, Nina. 1992. "A Peculiar Alliance: Julius Rosenwald, the YMCA, and African-Americans, 1910-1933." *American Jewish Archives Journal* 44(2):585–605.

Moore, Latetia V., Ana V. Diez Roux, Kelly R. Evenson, Aileen P. McGinn, and Shannon J. Brines. 2008. "Availability of Recreational Resources in Minority and Low Socioeconomic Status Areas." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 34(1):16–22.

Morgan, David. 2002. "Focus Group Interviewing." Pp. 141–60 in *Handbook of interview research: Context & method*, edited by J. F. Gubrium and J. A. Holstein. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Nicholson, Heather Johnston, Christopher Collins, and Heidi Holmer. 2004. "Youth as People: The Protective Aspects of Youth Devleopment in after-School Settings." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 591(1):55–71.

Noam, Gil G., Beth M. Miller, and Susanna Barry. 2002. "Youth Development and Afterschool Time: Policy and Programming in Large Cities." *New Directions for Youth Development* Summer(94):9–18.

O'Brien, William E. 2012. "State Parks and Jim Crow in the Decade before Brown V. Board of Education." *Geographical Review* 102(2):166–79.

Ogunsola, Jennifer. 2010. "Atlanta Mayor Reed Keeps Promise of Hope through Youth Centers." *U.S. Mayor Newspaper*. Retrieved (http://www.usmayors.org/bestpractices/usmayor10/pg20_BP-Atlanta.asp).

Oliver, William. 2006. "'The Streets' An Alternative Black Male Socialization Institution." *Journal of Black Studies* 36(6):918–37.

Ouellette, Mark, Audrey M. Hutchinson, and Nina Frant. 2005. *The Afterschool Hours: A New Focus for America's Cities*. Washington, D.C.

Ouellette, Mark and John E. Kyle. 2002. "The Various Roles of Municipal Leaders." *New Directions for Youth Development* (94):125–32.

Owens, Michael Leo and Jacob Robert Brown. 2014. "Weakening Strong Black Political Empowerment: Implications from Atlanta's 2009 Mayoral Election." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 36(4):663–81.

Owens, P. E. 2002. "No Teens Allowed: The Exclusion of Adolescents from Public Spaces." *Landscape Journal* 21:156–63.

Patton, Michael Quinn. 2014. *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Perkins, Daniel F. et al. 2007. "Participation in Structured Youth Programs: Why Ethnic Minority Urban Youth Choose to Participate—or Not to Participate." *Youth & Society* 38(4):420–42.

Peterson, Ruth D., Lauren J. Krivo, and Mark A. Harris. 2000. "Disadvantage and Neighborhood Violent Crime: Do Local Institutions Matter?" *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 37(1):31–63.

Pond, Allison, Gregory Smith, and Scott Clement. 2010. *Religion Among the Millennials*. Washington, D.C. Retrieved (http://www.pewforum.org/topics/generations-and-age/pages/2/).

Popkin, Susan J., Tama Leventhal, and Gretchen Weismann. 2010. "Girls in the 'Hood: How Safety Affects the Life Chances of Low-Income Girls."

Porter, Michael Leroy. 1974. "Black Atlanta: An Interdisciplinary Study of Blacks on the East Side of Atlanta, 1890-1930." Emory University.

Pryor, Brandy N.Kelly and Corliss W. Outley. 2014. "Just Spaces: Urban Recreation Centers as Sites for Social Justice Youth Development." *Journal of Leisure Research* 46(3):272–90.

Puckett, Mechelle. 2014. "Mobility in the Neoliberal City: Atlanta's Left Behind Neighborhoods."

Quinn, Christopher M., Sandy J. Slater, Dianne C. Barker, and Frank J. Chaloupka. 2015. *Availability of Local Public Recreational Facilities and Programs for Physical Activity*. Chicago, IL.

Quinn, Jane. 1999. "Where Need Meets Opportunity: Youth Development Programs for Early Teens." *The Future of Children* 9(2):96–116. Retrieved (http://www.jstor.org/stable/1602709).

Ream, Geoffrey L. and Peter A. Witt. 2004. "Organizations Serving All Ages." Pp. 51–76 in *The youth development handbook: Coming of age in American communities*, edited by S. F. Hamilton and M. A. Hamilton. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Reed, Kasim. 2010. "Atlanta: A City on a Hill." Retrieved (http://www.atlantaga.gov/index.aspx?page=127).

Reed, Kasim. 2013. "Foreword." *Havard Law & Policy Review* 7(2):219–30.

Reed Jr., Adolph. 1999. "The Black Urban Regime: Structural Origins and Constraints." Pp. 79–116 in *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Renfro, Paul Mokrzycki. 2015. "Keeping Children Safe Is Good Business: The Enterprise of Child Safety in the Age of Reagan." *Enterprise & Society* 17(1):151–87.

Rhodes, Alison M. and Rachel Schechter. 2014. "Fostering Resilience Among Youth in Inner City Community Arts Centers." *Education and Urban Society* 46(7):826–48.

Ries, Amy V. et al. 2008. "The Environment and Urban Adolescents' Use of Recreational Facilities for Physical Activity: A Qualitative Study." *American Journal of Health Promotion* 23(1):43–50.

Ries, Amy V., Alice F. Yan, and Carolyn C. Voorhees. 2011. "The Neighborhood Recreational Environment and Physical Activity among Urban Youth: An Examination of Public and Private Recreational Facilities." *Journal of Community Health* 36(4):640–49.

Rios, Victor. 2011. *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*. New York: New York University Press.

Robinson, Oliver C. 2014. "Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 11(1):25–41.

Roth, Jodie L. and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. 2003. "What Exactly Is a Youth Development Program? Answers from Research and Practice." *Applied Developmental Science* 7(2):94–111.

Rouse, Jacqueline Anne. 1989. *Lugenia Burns Hope, Black Southern Reformer*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.

Rubin, Herbert J. and Irene S. Rubin. 2012. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Rubin, Roger H., Andrew Billingsley, and Cleopatra Howard Caldwell. 1994. "The Role of the Black Church in Working with Black Adolescents." *Adolescence* 29(114):251–66.

Rucker, Lillian Ethel. 1942. "A Study of the Interests and Abilities of the Membership of Wheat Street Baptist Church to Support a Recreation Program." Atlanta University.

Rutherford, Lindsay Taggart. 2004. "Truly Disadvantaged ? An Exploratory Analysis of Nonprofit Organizations in Urban Neighborhoods." *Dynamics of Culture* 4.

Saldaña, Johnny. 2016. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Serido, Joyce, Lynne M. Borden, and Christine B. Wiggs. 2014. "Breaking Down Potential Barriers to Continued Program Participation." *Youth & Society* 46(1):51–69.

Shaw, Todd C., Kasim Ortiz, James McCoy, and Athena King. 2013. "The Last Black Mayor of Atlanta? Kasim Reed and the Increasing Complexities of Black Politics." Pp. 201–30 in *21st Century Urban Race Politics: Representing Minorities as Universal Interests*, vol. 18, *Research in Race and Ethnic Relations*. Bingley, U.K.: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Shedd, Carla. 2015. *Unequal City: Race, Schools, and Perceptions of Injustice*.

Shivers, Jay S. and Joseph W. Halper. 1981. *The Crisis in Urban Recreational Services*. East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc.

Shivery, Louie Davis and Hugh H. Smythe. 1942. "The Neighborhood Union: A Survey of the Beginnings of Social Welfare Movements among Negroes in Atlanta." 3(2):149–62.

Singleton, Royce A. and Bruce C. Straits. 2005. *Approaches to Social Research*. Fourth Edi. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Sjoquist, David L. 2000. *The Atlanta Paradox*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Sloan, Vivian Louise. 1945. "A Compilation and Interpretation of the Social and Recreational Needs of the Negro Women and Girls of Atlanta, Georgia, with an Analysis of These Needs in Relationship to the YWCA Program." (January).

Small, Mario L. and Katherine Newman. 2001. "Urban Poverty after the Truly Disadvantaged: The Rediscovery of the Family, the Neighborhood, and Culture." *Annual Review of Sociology* 27(2001):23–45.

Small, Mario Luis and Monica McDermott. 2006. "The Presence of Organizational Resources in Poor Urban Neighborhoods: An Analysis of Average and Contextual Effects." *Social Forces* 84(3):1697–1724.

Spooner, Bela Shah. 2011. *Municipal Leadership for Afterschool: Citywide Approaches Spreading Across the Country*. Retrieved (http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED537016.pdf).

Stone, Clarence N. 1989. *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946 - 1988*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

Strobel, Karen, Ben E. N. Kirshner, Jennifer O. Donoghue, and Milbrey Wallin Mclaughlin. 2008. "Qualities That Attract Urban Youth to After-School Settings and Promote Continued Participation." *Teachers College Record* 110(8):1677–1705.

Suggs, Ernie. 2000. "Free Computers Tackle Digital Divide: Two Learning Centers Open in Atlanta, Give Public Cyber Training." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution2*, June 24, H3.

Suggs, Ernie. 2010. "City Reopening 'Centers of Hope': Atlanta Mayor Reed Ushers in String of Community Centers." *The Atlanta Journal - Constitution*, August 11.

Suggs, Ernie. 2013. "$1M Grant from Coke Gives City More Hope: Money Will Help Fund Recreation Centers. Corporate Gifts Crucial to Reopening of 22 Centers since 2008." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 9, B1.

Taylor, Carl S. 1989. *Dangerous Society*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.

Taylor, Carl S. 1993. *Girls, Gangs, Women and Drugs*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.

Taylor, Carl S. and Pamela R. Smith. 2007. "Businesswomen in Urban Life." in *Urban girls revisited: Building strengths*, edited by B. J. R. Leadbeater and N. Way. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Taylor, Carl S., Pamela R. Smith, and Cameron Khalfani Herman. 2015. "An Education of Positive Youth Development Challenged by Street Culture." Pp. 153–68 in *Malcolm X's Michigan WorldviewAn Exemplar for Contemporary Black Studies*, edited by R. K. Edozie, C. Stokes, and A. Jackson. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.

Tedlock, Barbara. 2000. "Ethnography and Ethnographic Representation." Pp. 455-486 in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Thomas, David R. 2003. "A General Inductive Approach for Qualitative Data Analysis." *Population English Edition* 27(2):237–46.

Thomas, David R. 2006. "A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data." *American Journal of Evaluation* 27(2):237–46.

Tucker-Worgs, Tamelyn N. 2011. *The Black Megachurch: Theology, Gender, and the Politics of Public Engagement*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press.

Warf, Barney and Morton Winsberg. 2010. "Geographies of Megachurches in the United States." *Journal of Cultural Geography* 27(1):33–51.

Webb, Patrick and William Allan Kritsonis. 2006. "Zero-Tolerance Policies and Youth: Protection or Profiling?" *Doctoral Forum: National Journal for Publishing and Mentoring Doctoral Student Research* 3(1):1–8.

Welch, Kelly. 2007. "Black Criminal Stereotypes and Racial Profiling." *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 23(3):276–88.

Wells, T. L. 1982. "Businesses Asked To Help Fund Safe Summer Program." *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 11, 11D.

Whalen, Samuel P. and Joan R. Wynn. 1995. "Enhancing Primary Services for Youth through an Infrastructure of Social Services." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 10(1):88–110.

Williams, Donna. 1981. "Mayor Urges Community Support of Play Centers." *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 2, E11.

Wilson, William Julius. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Wilson, William Julius. 1995. "The Political Economy and Urban Racial Tensions." *The American Economist* 39(1):3–14.

Wilson, William Julius. 1996. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Winn, Bill. 1967. "Vine City Center Big Hit With Kids." *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 16, 4B.

Woodson, Carter G. 1921. *The History of the Negro Church*. Washington D.C. Retrieved (http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/woodson/woodson.html).

Wright II, Earl. 2002a. "Using the Master's Tools: The Atlanta Sociological Laboratory and American Sociology, 1896-1924." (October 2000):15–39.

Wright II, Earl. 2002b. "Why Black People Tend To Shout! An Earnest Attempt To Explain the Sociological Negation of the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory Despite Its Possible Unpleasantness." *Sociological Spectrum* 22(3):335–61.

Wright II, Earl and Thomas C. Calhoun. 2006. "Jim Crow Sociology: Toward an Understanding of the Origin and Principles of Black Sociology via the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory." *Sociological Focus* 39(1):1–18.

WXIA-TV. 2015. "11 Atlanta Educators Convicted in Cheating Scandal." *USA Today*. Retrieved July 31, 2017 (https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/04/01/atlanta-schools-cheating-scandal-verdict/70780606/).