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# “It’s Not Where You Live, It’s How You Live”: How Young Women Negotiate Conflict and Violence in the Inner City

By  
NIKKI JONES

To navigate inner-city neighborhoods, young women, though reluctant at times, are often encouraged to become known as able fighters for their own protection. Among peers, one’s reputation, once established, is an important social resource. The following narratives illustrate how two young women negotiate the context of violence they confront in their everyday lives.

*Keywords:* violence; youth; urban ethnography; violence in women; female offenders

Several years ago, I was invited to work as an ethnographer for a city-hospital-based violence-intervention project—the Violence Reduction Program (VRP). The project serves youth aged twelve to twenty-four who present in the hospital’s emergency room as a result of an intentionally violent incident, excluding domestic violence and child abuse. All of the young women and men in the project are purposely drawn from neighborhoods in the south, west, and southwest sections of a large northeastern city. Many of these neighborhoods are, as a consequence of patterns of racial segregation within the city, predominantly African American, and in turn, almost the entire population of young women and men in the violence-intervention project are African American youth.

Known drug markets operate within many of the neighborhoods, and residents can often quickly recall stories of violence associated with the salience of the neighborhood drug economy. While there is often a visible police presence in the neighborhood, many residents are reluctant to believe that the police are there to protect them.<sup>1</sup> Large orange “condemned” signs announcing that houses are being reclaimed by the city serve as visible markers of distress on individual blocks. On many of these blocks, trash accumulates in empty lots where aban-

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doned homes once stood. Seasonal signs of poverty and distress are less obvious: some homes are warmed by small box heaters on the coldest winter days and cooled with simple box fans during the hottest summer months. Additional signs of distress include what parents and students often refer to as “out of control” neighborhood schools. School counselors, who will often insist that there are “good kids” in the school, will also occasionally use war analogies to describe their day-to-day attempts to counsel youth. It is inside these schools and within these neighborhoods that young women and men are most likely to experience the violent incidents that lead to emergency-room visits—and their subsequent entrance into the violence-intervention project.<sup>2</sup>

Once they enroll in the violence-intervention project, a random sample of youth is assigned to receive intervention from a team of transitional counselors who, over the course of several months, visit the young people in their homes, offer referrals, and provide mentoring in an attempt to reduce the risk of subsequent violence. My primary role as a researcher was to qualitatively document this intervention process. My curiosity quickly extended beyond the process of intervention and into the lived experience of the young people who came through the hospital doors. I became especially interested in the experiences of young women and girls in the project.

In service of my curiosity, I began to ask the team of transitional counselors about girls and young women very early in the research process. On one of my very first days, I sat down and had a conversation with Tracey. She is an African American woman who was, at that time, twenty years old and a recent graduate of the same public city high school that some of the youth she now counseled attended. Tracey still lives in one of the inner-city neighborhoods included in the VRP’s target area; she could even walk to some home visits. During this conversation, which took place in one of the hospital’s conference rooms, I asked Tracey whether there were girls in the project. She said that there were. In fact, at that time, her entire caseload was made up of girls. Most of the girls, she told me, entered the emergency room with cuts or bruises from fights at school. The following is an excerpt from that conversation:

“What are they fighting about?” I asked.

“About being disrespected—that’s about it,” she replied.

“Being disrespected?”

“Yeah.”

“So how’s that look? What does that mean?” I asked.

“I don’t know . . . they’re always saying, like, ‘nobody talks to me like that’ and all. And I’m like, ‘yeah, but would you rather die over something somebody said?’”

“Do they see death as a real risk?” I asked her.

“No, no. They just see getting beat up and getting laughed at, that’s all. And I try to tell them that life is too short to just do stupid stuff. You can’t argue over dumb stuff. I don’t expect you to go to school and not fight anymore because that would just be too unreal. I was like, ‘but time will tell.’ I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know. Just crazy. I’m like okay, ya’ll were fighting because she said your sneakers were ugly—okay . . . and [laughs] where does the argument start at?”

“Do they answer you? Do they tell you where the argument starts?”  
“Yeah, they were, like, she said my sneakers were ugly, and I said this, and then she said this, and next thing you know this girl said this and we just all started fighting.”

This early conversation with Tracey (and similar conversations during the course of the project) struck me for several reasons. First, descriptions of fights like the ones Tracey described are most commonly associated with fights between boys in inner-city high schools and neighborhoods. The social impetus for such violence has been described in detail in Elijah Anderson’s ethnography of “the moral code of inner-city life.” Specifically, in *Code of the Street*, Anderson (1999) defines “the code” as a set of “informal rules of behavior organized around a desperate search for respect that governs public social relations, especially violence among so many residents [of the inner-city], particularly young men and women” (p. 10). Anderson highlights especially the relationship between masculinity, respect, and the use of violence, writing that “many inner-city young men in particular crave respect to such a degree that they will risk their lives to attain and maintain it” (p. 75). While Anderson’s work emphasizes the relationship between masculinity and the code, Tracey’s claim that young women are fighting “about being disrespected—that’s about it” suggests that the code (i.e., the relationship between respect and violence in the inner city) is not necessarily gender specific. Furthermore, Tracey’s admission, “I don’t expect you to go to school and not fight anymore because that would just be too unreal,” suggested to me that “girl fights” in this setting are not an anomaly but rather a real daily possibility. Girls and young women can and do fight.<sup>3</sup> As I continued to develop this project, I began to consider the following questions: What is the context of violence in the lives of young women in the inner city? How do young women negotiate conflict and violence? What are the consequences of these processes of negotiation?

To respond to this guiding set of research questions, I relied on my work with the VRP, which introduced me to scores of young women and men who were injured and who, in some cases, had injured others during violent incidents. I spent my first year and a half in the field riding along on home visits with intervention counselors.<sup>4</sup> After I spent a year and a half observing home visits, informally interviewing both young women and men injured in violent incidents and transitional counselors, I began to conduct one-on-one, in-depth interviews with young women and men in the project. Some of these young people I was meeting for the first time, while others I had met during the course of the previous year. In addition to these interviews and visits, all of which took place in the neighborhoods and homes of the young people in the project, I engaged in extended conversations with grandmothers, mothers, sisters, brothers, cousins, and friends of the young people. I also systematically observed interactions in the spaces and places that were significant (as revealed during this initial period of fieldwork) in the lives of these young people. These spaces included trolley cars and buses, a neighborhood high school nicknamed “the Prison on the Hill,” the city’s family and criminal court, and various correctional facilities in the area.<sup>5</sup>

## Girls Fight

Through this multilayered fieldwork experience, I have come to find, first, that girls do fight. Girls are not isolated from many forms of violence that men also experience in the inner-city setting. Furthermore, within the inner-city setting, girls, like their male counterparts, realize through observation and experience that violence is a potential tool to mediate the physical vulnerability they may experience in their everyday lives. Some young women, equipped with a history of fighting and winning, are invested in developing and maintaining a reputation as a

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“fighter.” This reputation is an important social resource because it can provide young women with a sense of security and confidence with which they can navigate their neighborhoods and school environments. Other young women, who are less invested in an identity as a fighter, will find ways to negotiate their way out of potential conflicts, with varying degrees of success. The following narratives, the first belonging to Terrie, a self-identified “violent person,” and the second to Danielle, a young woman who has fought but is not a fighter, highlight the context in which young women negotiate potential conflicts and violence. In addition, these narratives demonstrate the various strategies young women consider and select to negotiate the neighborhood and school setting. Ultimately, these narratives illustrate young women’s instrumental use of violence in the inner-city setting.

### “Ain’t I a Violent Person?”: Terrie’s Story

Terrie is seventeen years old and was just completing her junior year at a local public high school when we first met. She stands about 5 feet 8 inches and weighs about 165 pounds. She lives in an older row home with members of her immediate

and extended family including her mother, her mother's fiancée, her Uncle Slim, and a collection of real and adopted sisters. Terrie has not seen her biological father, who is currently serving time in one of the state's prisons, in years. However, the man she terms her "real" father (her mother's ex-boyfriend), who Terrie believes "chose" to be her father (a lineage that she defines as far more significant), remains a stable presence in her life. During the day, Terrie is charged with taking care of her little sisters. Terrie's mother, who Terrie says is like her best friend, works two jobs and is home just two nights of the week. In addition to the role of caretaker that Terrie occupies within the home, she is often seen as a counselor for most of the younger kids in the neighborhood, who often come to her with questions and concerns.

Terrie's neighborhood is only blocks from the invisible yet well-known "cut-off point" that extends around the university area where I began most of my days in the field. A somewhat integrated neighborhood populated with working-class African American families and university students is bounded by a walking bridge that crosses over a set of regional railroad tracks. Quite literally on the other side of the tracks is Terrie's neighborhood, populated by a mix of residents whose income levels range from little to none to steady; often, the homes these residents inhabit share a wall with abandoned or condemned houses. Drug dealers, teenagers, and grandmothers share the space within the neighborhood boundary. At the end of the block is a house that is a center for a variety of illegal hustles, including drug selling and arbitrary violence. On the opposite end of Terrie's block is a corner that is a center of open-air drug trafficking and thus the locus of much of the violent activity that occurs in the neighborhood. Terrie can quickly recall several young men who have been shot on the corner in recent years, including her own cousin. She explains to me that whenever she walks by the corner all the guys say "Hi" to her. "See," she explains, "they all know me."

## A Violent Person?

Everybody knows Terrie because, after living in the neighborhood for fifteen years, she has built a reputation as what she defines as a "violent person." As Terrie explains to me over a series of conversations, the fights she gets into serve in some way to protect this reputation and the authority and respect that enable her to navigate the neighborhood and school setting. The stage for her fights is often the public high school. Terrie explains to me in detail the fight that landed her in the emergency room.

She tells me that it was early one morning when she was approached by her cousin who informed her that another young woman was "stepping to her"—instigating a potential physical conflict. Terrie's cousin believed that she would likely end up in a physical battle with this young woman unless someone intervened, and this is why she came to Terrie.

Terrie tracked down the young woman who was "stepping" to her cousin, talked to her, and they agreed, Terrie says, to "squash it." Terrie explained very simply that

if the young woman stepped to Terrie's cousin, she would have to step to Terrie. At this moment, the argument ended, according to Terrie, on the strength of her intervention. Later in the day, however, Terrie's cousin came back to her and told her that this young woman had stepped to her again. Terrie recognized this as a direct violation of the agreement she had reached with this young woman earlier in the day. It was, Terrie explains, "supposed to be squashed." According to Terrie, such a flagrant violation of their agreement had become a public sign of disrespect toward her. Terrie was essentially being "called out" and would now have to choose a response. She chose to publicly challenge the young woman.

Terrie catches up with the young woman in the hallway; they are surrounded by other young people who tend to gather at the scene of any potential fight. As Terrie turns to say something to a friend of hers, Terrie's cousin spots the young woman doing what young women do when they are preparing for a fight: she has taken off her wig and wrapped a scarf around her head to prevent the hair pulling that sometimes happens during the course of a fair one gone wild. "She's about to hit you!" someone calls out from the crowd. Recognizing that she will soon be at a disadvantage if she does not strike first, Terrie turns around and punches the young woman in the face. As additional punches are thrown the young woman bites down on Terrie's hand. Terrie grabs the young woman's head with her other hand and uses her body weight to bang the other woman's head into a vending machine until the blood from the woman's face is spilling into the open wound on Terrie's hand. School security guards finally reach the center of the fight and break it up. Terrie is quickly suspended and goes home more concerned about how she is going to deal with her mother's response to her suspension than her obviously injured hand. Terrie continues to ignore the gash on her hand until it has doubled in size as the result of an infection. Terrie finally visits the emergency room and has her infected wound cleaned and stitched back together.

## Trading on Violence

Terrie gets something other than an infected wound from this fight. First, she has taken on a challenger and won in front of an audience. Her reputation as a fighter, as someone not to be bothered, is left intact. She is still a violent person. And she can now go on doing the things she does, walking the halls in school or the streets in her neighborhood, as someone whom "everybody knows" and respects. She can also continue to do the other things she does at her high school, including attending her advanced-placement classes. Terrie attended a course for gifted students at a local university over the summer, and she is now making plans to attend college. She plans to be the first in her family to graduate from high school and go to college.<sup>6</sup>

Terrie's use of violence to facilitate her mobility through both her neighborhood and her school is just one of the ways that Terrie can trade on her prowess and the reputation that is associated with it. Terrie can also trade on her reputation as a fighter in other ways; for example, she can come to the aid of people she sees as vul-

nerable. A year after the fight described in the previous section, Terrie stumbles upon the following scene: two young women are stopped in the hallway facing another young woman, most likely a very frightened freshman. It is clear to Terrie that the two girls are about to “roll on” (attack without much prior notice) this young woman, which, according to Terrie, “just wasn’t fair.” So Terrie steps in and asks what is going on. The young woman says, “Well, I think she has a big mouth.” Terrie responds that maybe *she* has a big mouth. Then she makes clear to the young women that this freshman is her “cousin,” and she “doesn’t want anyone to mess with her.”<sup>7</sup> The two young women walk off in a huff, the freshman is relieved, and Terrie feels good about herself. Since this showdown, Terrie’s newly minted cousin, acutely aware of the protection she received from her association with

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*[By intervening in a potential conflict], Terrie has tested and validated her reputation once again without having to actually fight.*

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Terrie, has repeatedly thanked Terrie for coming to her aid. She also continues to trade on this association as she makes her own way through the school. Terrie explains that whenever she sees her “cousin” in the crowded halls of the high school she yells out, “Hey Terrie!” loud enough for everyone to hear. Terrie laughs as she tells me this story. Terrie always says “Hi” back but, she confides, “still has no idea what that little girl’s name is.”

Ultimately, the girl’s name does not matter. The purpose of Terrie’s intervention is really twofold. First, Terrie clearly derives a sense of power and self-confidence from intervening in an unfair situation and making it right simply on the strength of her own reputation. Perhaps most important, however, Terrie has tested and validated her reputation once again without having to actually fight and thus has avoided the threat of suspension or expulsion, which allows her to continue her other activities in the school, including continuing to pursue her goal of graduating and going to college.<sup>8</sup>

### “It’s Not Where You Live”

The strategies used by young women to negotiate conflict and violence are illuminated by examining not only the stories of those with well-established reputations as fighters, such as Terrie, but also of those who have not established such reputations. One example of such a person is Danielle, who would rather do anything



but fight. She is a slim, brown-skinned young woman who recently graduated from one of the city's public high schools. While in high school, she was on the track team and performed well enough in her classes to enroll in a small, predominantly white university hours outside of the city, one that by her own account, is worlds away from her inner-city home. While she enjoyed her experience with college life, Danielle left school in the middle of her freshman year, after discovering that she was several weeks pregnant. Her baby's father, Jimmy, attended the same university on a partial athletic scholarship, but he too dropped out and returned to the inner-city neighborhood across town from Danielle's. Jimmy calls and visits Danielle often, and while Danielle is excited about "making a family," as Jimmy often promises, she has also had to confront her regret about being "back here" in the project apartment where she grew up. "When I left," she tells me, "I didn't plan on coming back except for holidays and stuff like that."

Danielle now spends most of her days in the eleventh-floor apartment she shares with her mother and two brothers, one nine and the other an eleven-month-old. Danielle's grandmother and grandfather live several floors below, and Danielle visits often. This family unit, along with her Christian faith, provides Danielle with a relatively stable support system that she often uses to insulate herself from various forms of conflict. While much of Danielle's time is spent imagining what life will be like when her baby arrives, our series of conversations about life in the projects and her direct and indirect experiences with violence highlighted for me the complicated backdrop of violence that informs the everyday lives of young women who grow up in distressed inner-city neighborhoods.

## Violence as the Backdrop of Everyday Life

During our first visit, I ask Danielle how she likes living in the projects.

"It could be better," she responded, "without the drugs and all, the violence that go on, like cops and stuff and the fire alarms be going off in the middle of the night, like 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, because some kid pulled the alarm. . . . And, you know, crackheads that be in the building and stuff like that knock on your door asking for stuff. . . . It could be better."

The projects where Danielle lives, like many housing projects around the country, are now in transition. These changes, which redistribute complex residents to different areas in the city, have tangibly affected the environment in Danielle's home, as residents from the northside projects, the eastside projects, and Danielle's complex are required to share space after years of conflict. As a result, Danielle tells me, there have been a lot more fights in the complex this past summer.

Danielle's most personal and still most memorable experience with violence occurred during her early teen years when she was dating Jamal, a young man who she inadvertently learned was also a local drug dealer after greeting him with a hug and finding a gun tucked in his waistband. Danielle became quite upset when she

found the gun and began to yell at Jamal, who asked her to just let him explain. Jamal went on to explain his strained relationship with his mother, how Danielle was the first woman to ever express love for him, and how she was the first woman that he ever cared about.

Against her better judgment, Danielle continued to date Jamal and, while doing so, encouraged him to make some changes. For example, she got him to constrain his selling to less hard drugs—"weed," for example—instead of crack. Still, dating a drug dealer, Danielle confides, was difficult and included restraints on their mobility within the neighborhood. She explains what this was like: "it was hard, like, we couldn't go anywhere, to the movies or anything because he was selling and you never knew when someone who was looking for him would find him." While visiting her boyfriend on the block one day, Danielle quickly learned that dating a drug dealer was not just potentially dangerous but actually dangerous. The following is an excerpt from my conversation with Danielle:

Well, one day I wanted to go see him on the block. I wanted to see him because I hadn't seen him in a few days and my cousin was with me and she wanted to see her boyfriend, too. But Jamal told me never to come to the corner when he was working. But my cousin and I went to see them and we walked up to him and my cousin's boyfriend. The next thing I remember is this black car with tinted windows pulling up to the corner. As I'm talking to my boyfriend and she is talking to her boyfriend the next thing I see is a gun pointed at my cousin's head. I'm like frozen. The guy with the gun is asking my cousin's boyfriend where his \$700 is. He keeps saying, "Where my money!" After, like, forever, my boyfriend reaches into his pocket and pulls out a thick wad, *thick*, he pulls out \$900 and gives it to the guy. He's like, "Here it is and here's an extra \$200. Just take it."

Danielle tells me that the guy with the gun took the money, got back into the black car, and pulled away. After the young men left the corner, Danielle's cousin collapsed and Danielle attempted to revive her and regain her own composure. While some young women are undoubtedly attracted by the lifestyle that some drug dealers can afford, for women like Danielle, the risk of danger associated with dating a drug dealer is not worth the energy or the effort. For Danielle, the experience described above was enough for her to refuse to date Jamal or any other drug dealer in the future. Her constraint on this particular type of social relationship is just one of the ways she chooses to negotiate a potentially violent setting.

### "It's How You Live"

While Danielle agrees that much of project life is characterized, fairly or unfairly, by the types of experiences I have described, she is also able to reflect positively on how she has lived out her own life within this context; "I'm blessed," she tells me, "I really am." She continues, "Some people will use living in the projects as an excuse but not me. It's not where you live, it's how you live." It is to a certain degree how Danielle lived that helped her to make it through almost her entire

nineteen years without a fight. Danielle was particularly adept at mediating potential fights in school before they reached the point of a fistfight or worse.

Danielle is able to identify at least three strategies that she used to negotiate potential conflicts in the school setting. First, Danielle was careful in the way she presented herself. For example, she did not exhibit a demeanor that indicated “she had a point to prove,” as some young women do, and in fact, Danielle did not feel like she did have a point to prove or a reputation as a fighter that she needed to protect. Second, because Danielle had no point to prove, she did not feel compelled to meet every challenge with a challenge—that is, every bump with a bump. When a potential conflict did arise, Danielle was quick to activate her networks of authority. Danielle sums up these two strategies when I ask her how she avoided getting into a fight:

Not saying nothing. If people, like, call me names or push me or something I just brush it off. Something like that. Or go to someone, like, I talk to a teacher. I was always talking to a teacher [*laughs*]. I’m scared, I’m a punk [*laughs*]. Little punk.

Danielle also tried to talk out potential conflicts before they escalated into a public battle. For example, she once approached a young woman who had been “talking about her” after school, away from the eyes of an audience. Cutting through the tough front this young woman presented, Danielle simply explained to her “you don’t even know me.” The two talked briefly, and the next day, the young woman told her friends that Danielle was “okay.” And that was it.

Despite the energy Danielle exerted to avoid potential conflicts each day, she did end up in a fight once. One of the common ways that young women who are not fighters get involved in fights is through their “loyalty links.” The strength of these loyalty links is often designated by the given status of a young woman’s relationship to other young women. At least two status positions exist: “friend” indicates a strong link and “associate” indicates a weaker link. It is commonly assumed that young women should fight for a friend but are not necessarily required to fight for an associate. So one of the ways that young women insulate themselves from potential conflicts is by limiting the strength of their social relationships with other young women.

## Loyalty Links

Danielle explains to me how her loyalty link to her best friend resulted in her being in her first and only fight in nineteen years. She tells me that a group of girls had been threatening her best friend who, at the time, lived with Danielle and her family in their project apartment. This group of girls repeatedly threatened to “get” her best friend after school. Danielle was very concerned about this because, as she explains, “It’s my best friend and I don’t want nobody to hurt her.” As Danielle and her friend began to walk home from the high school to the projects, the group of

young women followed, making it clear that they wanted to fight. During the walk, the young women continued to test Danielle and her friend. Danielle explains,

And we were walking and they were following her, calling her names, telling her that you better watch your back “B” or fight me now, just sayin’ stuff. So we got in front of [the local hospital] and I said, “Katrina, drop your bags,” ‘cause they’re behind me and they’re coming closer, and I dropped my bags. Just to make sure that nobody not tryin’ to jump her.

Even though Danielle had never been in a fight before, she was aware of how to handle such a situation. She explains that you cannot keep walking with your back turned or you might get “jumped.” Danielle had also done what many young

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women do when a fight is imminent; she called ahead to her mother who then met them halfway home. When Danielle’s mom arrived on the scene, she was prepared to do her part to make sure that the fight did not get out of hand, despite the fact that she was several months pregnant. Danielle continues,

So my mom was there and everything like that. And Katrina got into the street—and this was something—they was about to swing and fight each other. And I, my mom was there and I was there, so we can make sure that nobody don’t interfere with their fight. You know, make sure it’s not a blood bath or nothing like that, you know, make sure . . . ‘cause sometimes you got to fight, not fight, but get into that type battle to let them know that I’m not scared of you and you can’t keep harassing me thinking that it’s okay.

Once Katrina and the young woman she squared off with began to fight, Danielle was quickly moved from being a bystander to a participant when another young woman punched her in the face. Danielle explains,

I was there, like, just watching everything and then before I knew it I got snuck. . . . I got, somebody came and pulled my hair and hit me in the eye. So I’m, [I] can’t see. I’m like, “what’s going on?” I’m tripping over the curb, fallin’ on the ground, hit my back on the curb and everything like that and I’m on the ground and I’m getting like this girl beat-

ing on me and stuff and I'm, like, "who is this?" I couldn't really see 'cause my eye got hit and I'm trying to see who this is and me and her fighting and everything.

Danielle eventually regained her composure and moved from receiving punches to landing some punches herself:

So I flip her over and I finally get my sight back and we fighting because she hittin' me, I'm hittin' her and everything. Then she get up and I run after her 'cause I'm real angry. I want to like hurt this girl because she hit me for no reason. So I go up to her [and] me and her fightin' and then they ran . . . and we was, like, "Come back and finish! Don't run now because you getting your butt kicked!" So they left and we got in the car and came home. My eye was black. I was seeing stars [*laughs*].

While this fight did not convert Danielle into a fighter, she does confide in me that she felt good when she went to school the next day. She felt confident that she could handle herself. She was not, after all, "a punk." Since this fight, Danielle's best friend has moved down South with her family. Danielle did not have any additional problems with the young women she fought. She has continued to engage in strategies to negotiate conflict before it can escalate. For example, when she ran into the girls, she would make an attempt to avoid walking by them or speaking directly to them.

If not for her loyalty link to her best friend, Danielle may have made it through her entire high school career, as some young women undoubtedly do, without ever getting into a fight. If that would have happened, however, it would be a result not of luck or even because Danielle is "blessed" but, as is demonstrated above, of her investment in negotiating potential threats of interpersonal conflict before they reach the point of a violent battle. In her neighborhood, Danielle restricted her social network to a few friends and a tight-knit family who had a strong relationship with the church. At home, Danielle chose to spend most of her time in her apartment, to avoid being involved in her neighbor's "petty" arguments that could quickly escalate into fights. In school, Danielle sought to address perceived conflicts by talking with other young women or, when that was not a sufficient remedy, by seeking the help of other authority figures whom she could trust. Danielle's only direct involvement in a fight stemmed from her strong allegiance to Katrina, her best friend. Not willing to let someone "just hurt her," Danielle realized that the two of them would have to meet the challenge presented by the group of young women who were following them home. She realized this herself, she prepared for it, and when she had to, she fought.

## Conclusion

In distressed inner-city neighborhoods young women like Danielle and Terrie come of age against a backdrop of real and potential violence. This remains true despite the decline of the types of violence that characterized the nation's inner cities during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Often, young women in distressed inner-

city neighborhoods are encouraged to both be and become known as able fighters for their own protection. The utility of such a reputation is demonstrated in Terrie's narrative. A self-identified violent person, Terrie is known and respected by both the drug dealers and the grandmothers on her block. Being known in this way allows Terrie a certain degree of security and mobility in her neighborhood and school setting. To maintain this reputation and its benefits, Terrie must at times fight, and she does so when necessary. Young women without a known reputation as an able fighter must still account for the violence that exists beneath the surface of everyday life. As demonstrated in Danielle's narrative, while she is not a fighter, she still exerts quite a bit of energy negotiating potential conflicts with a remarkable degree of success. The narratives of Terrie and Danielle, and other young women like them, encourage us to reconsider current conversations about "violent girls" that tend to pathologize young (predominantly African American) women who use violence while ignoring the structural and cultural context within which young women negotiate conflict and violence and the variety of strategies they use to do so. For young women in distressed inner-city neighborhoods, being able to fight and being known as a fighter are at times the most reliable social resources available to them in their everyday lives.

## Notes

1. In my own fieldwork, I have found much support for this theme, which Elijah Anderson explores in detail in *Code of the Street* (1999). Regarding the relationship between the police and many inner-city residents, Anderson writes, "The police, for instance, are most often viewed as representing the dominant white society and not caring to protect inner-city residents." See also "Going Straight: The Story of a Young Inner-city Ex-convict" (Anderson 2001, 136).

2. See Massey and Denton's *American Apartheid* (1994) for a discussion of the consequences of concentrated poverty. For a discussion of how the interaction of "structure" and "culture" influence crime and victimization in distressed inner-city neighborhoods, see Lauritsen and Sampson's "Minorities, Crime, and Criminal Justice" (1998, 65-70) and Sampson and Wilson's "Toward a Theory of Race, Crime, and Urban Inequality" (1995).

3. My own fieldwork suggests that despite the decline in the violence that characterized the inner city in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many young men and women still rely on the "code of the street" as a useful framework in which to consider potential threats of violence and its consequences. This research complements the work of Anderson by examining how *young women* experience the threat of violence and, in turn, work "the code" to mediate those threats.

4. During this time, I developed a close relationship with two women who grew up in the same inner-city neighborhoods where they now worked for the Violence Reduction Program: Stephanie, who was the intervention team coordinator, and Tracey, the intervention counselor I described earlier who evolved into a "key informant" in the field.

5. Anderson defines a staging area as "hangouts where a wide mix of people gather for various reasons. It is here that campaigns for respect are most often waged" (Anderson 1999, 77). During visits to the homes of young women and men in the project, fostered initially by Tracey, and then in my own observations of public transportation scenes during key times of the day, I discovered the trolley as an additional staging area for youth of high school age.

6. It is important to note that while the use of violence can ensure a degree of respect, freedom, and protection, for some young women like Terrie and those she deems worthy, this same reputation is essentially meaningless in the face of other threats young women face, particularly the threat of sexual assault. For example, during a visit to her boyfriend's neighborhood, Terrie took a walk to the corner store. After she entered

the store, the owner proceeded to lock the front door, trapping Terrie inside. But he was then interrupted by a customer knocking on the locked glass door. When he returned to the front door and unlocked it, Terrie slipped out. She was clearly shaken by the experience but eventually calmed herself down enough to talk with her boyfriend about what she considered a potential sexual assault. She told me that her boyfriend wanted to go to the store to “see” this man, but Terrie forbade him to do so. “If I wanted someone to shoot him,” she explained to me, “I’d get my brothers.” This brief example demonstrates that despite Terrie’s physical strength and her strong reputation as a fighter, she is less capable of challenging certain forms of violence. I pursue this theme in greater detail in my dissertation *Girls Fight: Understanding the Context of Violence in the Lives of African American Inner City Girls*.

7. The adoption of fictive kin has been discussed in classic ethnographic studies including Elijah Anderson’s *A Place on the Corner* (1976).

8. One would be incorrect to conclude that Terrie is essentially a violent person. Erving Goffman’s discussion of the presentation of self in everyday life is helpful in considering the role of the self to the “performance” in which Terrie is so deeply invested (Goffman 1959). Goffman writes, “A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited” (Goffman 1959, 253; emphasis added). Goffman’s explanation encourages us to consider the present analysis not as a study of violent girls per se but rather as a study of how young women and girls use violence to mediate potential threats of violence in their everyday lives.

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