# GENDER, NEIGHBORHOOD DANGER, AND RISK-AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES AMONG URBAN AFRICAN-AMERICAN YOUTHS*

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*Research consistently reveals that fear of crime and perceived risk are demographically and ecologically patterned. Women and individuals in disadvantaged community settings report increased fear and perceptions of risk. For women, these fears and perceptions are tied to concerns about sexual violence specifically, whereas for individuals in distressed neighborhoods, crime rates, "incivilities," and poor police–community relations are often identified as important correlates. Here, we build from the insights of previous research by examining the gendered nature of perceived risk and risk-management strategies among urban African-American adolescents. Our findings suggest that both risk and risk-avoidance strategies are strikingly different for young women and young men and are shaped by the gendered organizational features of neighborhood life. We propose that future research will benefit by continuing to investigate how social vulnerabilities function in tandem to structure risks across ecological settings.*

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Nearly three decades of research on fear of crime and perceived risk have offered much insight into the demographic and ecological patterns of these phenomena. Gender is consistently found to be the strongest predictor of fear (LaGrange and Ferraro, 1989; Madriz, 1997; Weinrath and Gartrell, 1996) and has also been found as a strong indicator of perceived risk (Ferraro, 1995). The strength of these relationships has been tied to women's concerns about sexual victimization (Ferraro, 1995, 1996; Gordon and Riger, 1989; Stanko, 1990; Warr, 1985). In addition, both fear and perceived risk are ecologically patterned. Living in neighborhoods high in "incivilities" is the strongest predictor of perceived risk for victimization, which, in turn, predicts fear of crime (Box, Hale, and Andrews, 1988; Ferraro, 1996; LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic, 1992; Ortega and Myles, 1987; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981; Will and McGrath, 1995; but see Carvalho and Lewis, 2003).

However, important gaps remain in our understanding of the nature of perceived risk and its consequences. First, we know that both fear and constrained behavior are common responses to perceived risk (Ferraro, 1995, 1996; Liska, Sanchirico, and Reed, 1988). Much research has examined the constraints on women's behavior and participation in public life that result from both fear and perceived risk, with many scholars arguing that the threat of sexual violence functions as a powerful mechanism of social control in women's lives (Day, 2000; Gordon and Riger, 1989; Madriz, 1997; Pain, 1991; Stanko, 1990). Fewer studies, however, have paid specific attention to men's perceived risk or risk-avoidance strategies, and fewer still have examined the gendered nature of these phenomena. Some scholars suggest that this lack of research results from cultural ideologies that equate masculinity with fearlessness and risk-taking. This view affects not just men's reporting behaviors but also scholars' approach to this area of research (Chan and Rigakos, 2002; Day, 2001; Gilchrist et al., 1998; Goodey, 1997; Hollander, 2001; Newburn and Stanko, 1995; Smith and Torstensson, 1997; Walklate, 1997).

Second, research on fear, risk, and risk management has focused almost exclusively on adults (but see Brown and Gourdine, 2001; Fishkin, Rohrbach, and Johnson, 1997) despite the fact that adolescents and young adults have the highest risks for most types of victimization, including violence. This focus stems in part from the methodological and thus conceptual constraints that result from a primary reliance on quantitative research into these issues. This work highlights who is more fearful of crime and in what contexts fear is heightened, but it does not allow for contextual examinations of the nature of fear, perceived risk, and risk management, particularly among those groups—like young men—whose reported fear is comparatively low.

Such examinations are particularly warranted in high-risk ecological settings (see Carvalho and Lewis, 2003, Madriz, 1997), where youths in particular face increased risks for victimization (Lauritsen, 2003; Lauritsen and White, 2001). Thus, our goal is to provide a contextual comparison of how at-risk and delinquent African-American young women and men understand and negotiate neighborhood dangers in distressed urban communities. We use in-depth interviews with 72 youths to assess inductively the nature of their perceived risks, their accounts of the strategies they use to insulate themselves from neighborhood dangers, and the gendered schemas they draw from in this process. Our examination of these issues provides insights into how gender is organized and experienced in disadvantaged communities and, thus, contributes to debates about the salience of gender in high-crime neighborhoods (see Baskin and Sommers, 1997; Miller, 2001), and it provides insights about recent investigations into the contributions of rational choice perspectives for understanding delinquent youths' decision making (see Matsueda, Kreager, and Huizinga, 2006; Sharkey, 2006).

## GENDER, FEAR OF CRIME, AND RISK AVOIDANCE

Gender is consistently found to be the strongest predictor of fear of crime and is also strongly correlated with perceived risk. Warr (1984) suggests that this finding is because sexual assault is a "perceptually contemporaneous offense" for women, such that concern about any given personal crime is heightened by women's recognition that it could lead to rape. Thus, sexual assault "'shadows' other types of victimization among women" (Ferraro, 1996: 670; see also Gordon and Riger, 1989; Stanko, 1990). In fact, Ferraro (1996) found that controlling for women's fear of rape eliminated the gender effect on fear for most personal offenses and reversed the direction for murder and assault. In other words, men's fear of these offenses was higher than women's.

Explanations of the gender effect, including women's concerns about sexual assault, are often couched in terms of physical vulnerability. For instance, research using a victimization model often differentiates between physical and social vulnerabilities, with the former used as an explanation for heightened fear among women and older adults and the latter used in reference to ecological vulnerabilities. Thus, common explanations for women's fear point to physical weaknesses that limit their ability to defend themselves and to their socialization into more dependent roles (see Bennett and Flavin, 1994; Katz, Webb, and Armstrong, 2003; Smith and Hill, 1991).

In contrast, feminist scholars emphasize the social vulnerabilities women face because of structural and symbolic facets of gender inequality.

They argue that women's heightened fear and perceived risk result from routinized victimization experiences such as public harassment, treatment of female victims (who are often held accountable for their victimization), and messages women receive about their responsibilities for risk avoidance (Gilchrist et al., 1998). In fact, MacMillan, Nierobisz, and Welsh (2000) recently found that the extensive problem of public sexual harassment is a primary factor in explaining women's increased concerns about sexual violence (see also Gardner, 1995). Their research reveals the "importance of environmental and experiential factors" in explaining women's fear and perceived risk (MacMillan, Nierobisz, and Welsh, 2000: 319). This topic is an important avenue for continued research.

Because of concerns about sexual violence, women have been found to adopt a range of precautionary strategies in their daily lives. These strategies include heightened vigilance in public spaces, temporal and geographic avoidance patterns, and retreat to the domestic realm. Such strategies constrain women's full participation in public life and reify the gendered public/private split (Day, 2000; Gordon and Riger, 1989; Madriz, 1997; Pain, 1991; Stanko, 1990). In addition, researchers highlight the paradoxical nature of such strategies, given gendered patterns of victimization risk: Women are more likely to be victimized by people they know, including intimates in private settings, whereas men are more likely to be victimized by strangers in public spaces (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006; Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski, 1987; Stanko, 1990).

Less attention has been given to risk management among men. Some researchers suggest the reasons for this lack of research are tied to gendered understandings of risk. For example, men (and young men in particular) are expected to engage in risk-*seeking* behavior to demonstrate masculinity. These "deeply held social expectations" are believed to affect men's behavioral patterns by shaping how they think about fear and risk (Walkate, 1997: 42). Thus, Hollander (2001: 84) argues that "widely shared conceptions of gender associate femininity with vulnerability and masculinity with dangerousness." Some research supports this interpretation, finding that young men adopt personas of fearlessness and toughness in opposition to their characterization of women as fearful (Day, 2001; Smith and Torstensson, 1997; but see Gilchrist et al., 1998).

However, our limited understanding of men's perceived risk is likely more deeply rooted and is tied to how researchers themselves conceptualize the issue and formulate research questions (see Chan and Rigakos, 2002; Newburn and Stanko, 1995). Feminist scholars document that androcentric bias in criminology often results in the failure to conceptualize gender as a social structure (Risman, 2004). Instead, gender tends to be treated 1) as only affecting women, 2) as an individual attribute, and/or 3)

as cultural ideologies or normative beliefs tied to masculinity and femininity (see Miller, 2002; Miller and Mullins, 2006a). This treatment limits our understanding of how perceived risks and behavioral strategies emerge as responses to gendered organizational features of the lived environment.

Given that exaggerated performances of masculinity are particularly salient for younger males and are heightened in disadvantaged community contexts where other avenues for masculinity construction are less available (Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 1996; Goodey, 1997), it is not surprising that the largest gender gaps in fear of crime are among the young (Box, Hale, and Andrews, 1998; Ortega and Myles, 1987). This finding is tied, as well, to the fact that fear of rape is especially high among younger women (Ferraro, 1996), which is a predictable finding because this stage in life is when their risk for sexual assault is at its greatest (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). Nonetheless, given that young men are disproportionately involved in risky behaviors like delinquency, which are strong predictors of victimization risk (Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub, 1991), it is likely that they do adopt precautionary behaviors to protect themselves, although with requirements of masculinity construction in mind (Day, 2001).

Support for this position comes from recent research on the salience of rational choice theory for understanding youths' decision-making processes. For example, McCarthy and Hagan (2005: 1065; see also Matsueda, Kreager, and Huizinga, 2006) find that youths' perceptions of danger "figure largely into [their] decisions to offend" and are distinct from the potential excitement (or risk-seeking benefits) of crime. Similarly, Sharkey (2006: 826) examines how youths' decision making about how and with whom to spend time shapes their sense of street efficacy, for example, their "perceived ability to avoid violent confrontations and be safe" in their neighborhoods. However, none of these recent studies have considered how *gender* organizes perceptions of danger or the imposed and lived environments in which youth are responding.

## URBAN DISADVANTAGE, GENDER, AND NEIGHBORHOOD RISK

Two general facets of urban disadvantage are also significant for understanding risk and risk-avoidance strategies. First, "ecological proximity to violence is an important structural determinant of victimization" (Sampson and Lauritsen, 1990: 132). Violence is a common feature of disadvantaged urban communities, tied to structural inequalities and the ensuing cultural adaptations that result from lack of social, political, and economic resources (Anderson, 1999; Sampson and Wilson, 1995; Wilson, 1996). Thus, such neighborhoods often lack institutional and other resources necessary to generate social ties and protective mechanisms among their

residents. These ties and mechanisms are prerequisites for the effective control of community crime (Bursik and Grasmik, 1993; McNulty and Bellair, 2003; Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls, 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley, 2002).

Thus, not surprisingly, compelling evidence shows that perceived risks in distressed urban communities are influenced by actual exposure to crime, environmental cues such as visible disorder and public drug use, the presence of individuals deemed potential offenders, and cynicism about the efficacy of neighborhood law enforcement (Bennett and Flavin, 1994; Box, Hale, and Andrews, 1988; Katz, Webb, and Armstrong, 2003; Ortega and Myles, 1987; Sampson and Bartusch, 2001; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981; Smith and Uchida, 1988; Warr, 1990). Although limited research has examined how risk management is accomplished in these ecological contexts, it is likely that such strategies are shaped by responses to these realities. Thus, in a study of mostly urban African-American women, Carvalho and Lewis (2003: 791) argue that because "crime and incivilities cease to exist in the abstract and are contextualized," residents develop precautionary strategies grounded in their knowledge of the temporal, spatial, and social organization of neighborhood crime (see also Brown and Gourdine, 2001; Madriz, 1997).

Second, individuals' cultural adaptations to urban inequality also are likely to affect their risk-management strategies. Anderson (1999) documents what he refers to as the "code of the streets": behavioral expectations for young men in disadvantaged communities that emphasize masculine reputation and respect, achieved through presentations of self that emphasize toughness, independence, a willingness to use violence, and heterosexual prowess demonstrated by sexual conquest. Thus, many urban young men may suppress their immediate concerns about victimization to address more pressing matters, such as fending off affronts to their personal reputations (Anderson, 1999; Mullins, 2006; Stewart, Schreck, and Simons, 2006). To the extent that they perceive unchallenged disrespect as marking them as more vulnerable, aggressive responses can be recognized as a form of risk management, although participation in such offending actually heightens their risk for victimization (Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub, 1991).

What is absent from most of this research, however, is consideration of how gender is organized and experienced in disadvantaged communities. For example, we know little about how gender shapes the temporal, spatial, and social organizational features of neighborhood dangers. In addition, although Anderson's (1999) research certainly suggests the gendered nature of cultural adaptations, several researchers suggest that young women also adopt the street code (Jones, 2004; Ness, 2004), and other researchers have argued that gender has lost salience in disadvantaged

neighborhood contexts (see Baskin and Sommers, 1997; Taylor, 1993). However, strong evidence shows that violence against women is heightened in distressed urban communities. This heightening is the result of the reproduction of gender inequality in offending networks (Maher, 1997; Miller, 2001; Mullins, 2006) and the broader structural characteristics that increase cultural support for violence against women and decrease the likelihood of intervention (see Benson et al., 2003; Lauritsen and Schaum, 2004; Wilson, 1996).

In addition, to the extent that young men's masculinity constructions in disadvantaged urban communities reward not just aggression and competition but also the devaluation and mistreatment of women (see Bourgois, 1996; McCall, 1994; Miller, 2008; Oliver, 1994), they create uniquely gendered risks for young women. This finding—coupled with recent evidence that urban African-American young women's victimization risk is nearly equal to that of urban African-American young men (Lauritsen, 2003)—may explain why fear of crime and perceived risk are highest among urban women and women of color (Gordon and Riger, 1989; Madriz, 1997; Smith and Torstensson, 1997; Warr, 1985). It is also in keeping with Smith and Torstensson's (1997: 628) findings that women "see more risk in urban and public housing contexts than do men . . . [and] perceive some places as risky which men do not." These findings counter conventional wisdom that, aside from sexual violence, women's victimization risks are consistently lower than men's and suggest the need for research that examines the intersections of gender, ecological context, and age in shaping both risk and risk management.

Given the heightened dangers urban African-American adolescents face and evidence that such risks are shaped by gender, our goal is to examine how gender influences such youths' perceptions of risk, selection of avoidance strategies, and negotiation of neighborhood dangers. Following Chan and Rigakos (2002), we examine youths' cognitive maps of neighborhood danger and document how cultural understandings of gender and vulnerability shape perceptions of risk and risk management and how such risks are structured by gender inequalities in disadvantaged communities. Our research speaks to debates about the importance of gender as an organizing feature of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods and suggests that the focus on risk seeking as a masculine adaptation strategy is insufficient for understanding youths' responses to urban inner-city life.

## METHODOLOGY

Data for this investigation come from a broader study of gender and violence among urban adolescents and include survey and in-depth interviews with 72 African-American youths in St. Louis, Missouri. The sample

includes 33 young women and 39 young men.[1] They ranged in age from 12 to 19 years, with a mean age of 16 years for both genders. Interviewing began in the spring of 1999 and was completed in the spring of 2000. The interviews were voluntary; respondents were paid $20 for their participation and were promised strict confidentiality.

Youths were recruited to participate in the project with the cooperation of several organizations that work with at-risk and delinquent youth. These organizations included a local community agency and two alternative public high schools. Within each location, approximately equal numbers of boys and girls were interviewed (see appendix A). The community agency was a neighborhood-based drop-in center in north St. Louis where youths from surrounding neighborhoods were free to congregate and socialize. The two alternative schools drew youths from the St. Louis public school catchment area and were designated to serve students expelled from St. Louis public schools for chronic in-school disruptive behavior or violence. The counselor at each school was asked to identify and approach youths for participation in the study when they were known to reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods in St. Louis.

Sampling was purposive in nature. Our goal was to interview youths at risk or involved in delinquent activities because previous research suggests they have higher risks for victimization (Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub, 1991). We narrowed our study to urban African-American youths to examine the unique impact of urban disadvantage on adolescents' victimization risks and protective strategies. The disadvantage found in urban black neighborhoods is ecologically unmatched (Krivo and Peterson, 1996; Sampson and Wilson, 1995). Respondents were drawn from neighborhoods characterized by intense racial segregation, social isolation, limited resources, concentrated poverty, and high rates of violent crime. Finally, interviews with both females and males allowed for gender comparisons, which allowed us to examine variations across gender in youths' understandings of their neighborhood action spaces and associated risks.

Our sampling strategy has several important limitations, most notably that it cannot yield findings generalizable to African-American youths in disadvantaged communities. Most youths in our sample had been expelled from school and were interviewed at the alternative schools considered the last resort before termination of their participation in St. Louis public

1. The broader research project includes 75 youths and investigates violence against women and youths' interactions with the police (see Brunson, 2007; Brunson and Miller, 2006; and Miller, 2008). Three youths (one male and two females) were excluded here because in-depth interviews were not available.

schools. Despite considerable effort, we could not gain access to a comparative group of youths in the same neighborhood contexts who were thriving academically and socially.

However, all youths in our sample currently were attending school. Thus, our sampling did not capture school dropouts or incarcerated youths. In fact, zero-tolerance policies in St. Louis city schools meant that some youths were placed in alternative schools for a single altercation. This occurrence was evidenced by the substantial minority of youths in our sample who reported a limited history of delinquency. In addition, whereas girls interviewed at the community center reported only minor involvement in delinquency, most boys had histories of serious delinquency. Yet, they sought the center out as a place for recreation removed from the streets (see Miller, 2008). Thus, our sample includes youths who were neither wholly successful nor wholly unsuccessful in their navigation of the difficult terrain of adolescent inner-city life. Although our sample is not representative, it provides a meaningful cross section of at-risk and delinquent African-American youths in the city, and the richness of our data allows for a thorough analysis of youths' perceptions of and responses to risks across gender.

Data collection began with the administration of a survey and the collection of supplemental information on the characteristics of youths' neighborhoods. Youths then were asked to participate in an audiotaped in-depth interview that typically was completed on the same day. The primary data for this contextual examination came from the in-depth interviews. Our goal was to collect data that could provide a relatively holistic assessment of youths' perceptions of their neighborhoods, the risks present, and their strategies for protecting themselves from danger.

The in-depth interviews were semistructured, with open-ended questions that allowed for considerable probing. Youths first were asked to describe what their neighborhoods were like and then were asked about whether problems were in their neighborhoods and how persistent they believed these problems to be. Then they were asked whether they felt safe in their neighborhoods and to detail why or why not. To tap into gendered dimensions of neighborhood perceptions, youths were asked whether they believed it was safer for males or females, whether they faced any specific risks, and why. Finally, they were asked about the strategies they employed to stay safe.

Scholars who study fear of crime and perceived risk have debated extensively the use of various survey measures to capture dimensions of fear and risk adequately (Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987; LaGrange and Ferraro, 1989; Thompson, Bankston, and St. Pierre, 1992). Lane and Meeker (2003: 366) point out that "researchers have rarely asked respondents the specifics of their thinking process when they are afraid." Thus, our goal in using

in-depth interview techniques was to provide youths with wide latitude in describing their perceptions of their neighborhoods and neighborhood risks to allow youths' understanding of these issues to emerge inductively.

Specifically, in-depth interviewing provided us with a method for understanding the social world of the inner city from the points of view of the research participants. Rigorous examination of such accounts offers a means of "arriving at meanings or culturally embedded normative explanations [for behavior, because they] represent ways in which people organize views of themselves, of others, and of their social worlds" (Orbuch, 1997: 455). In our analysis, we took care to ensure that the concepts developed and illustrations provided typified the most common patterns in youths' accounts. This determination was achieved using grounded theory methods, including the search for and explication of deviant cases (Strauss, 1987). We made systematic comparisons to search for potential differences between youths across interview sites, between serious delinquent and at-risk youth, and between gang-involved and nongang youth. For the most part, we did not identify distinct patterns in these comparisons, although we make note of any subtle patterns in the analyses that follow. Interrater reliability was achieved by having two of the authors independently code the data; then, all three authors worked together to arrive at mutually agreed on thematic patterns. Although not generalizable, the study raises significant issues that may guide future inquiries into the gendered nature of urban risk.

## STUDY SETTING

St. Louis typifies the highly distressed urban city, with large concentrations of extreme disadvantage that result in social isolation, limited resources, and high levels of chronic violence (see Baybeck and Jones, 2004). Table 1 provides a comparison of demographic and socioeconomic indicators for study participants' neighborhoods, St. Louis City, and St. Louis County.[2] As shown, most study participants lived in neighborhoods that fit the academic designation "highly distressed": neighborhoods characterized by intense racial segregation and disproportionate rates of poverty, unemployment, and female-headed families. In fact, not a single youth in our sample came from a neighborhood that was comparable with the citywide averages.

2. To ensure anonymity, census data for youths' neighborhoods were obtained by asking for the names of two cross streets near where they lived. Although not precise, this measure provides a rough neighborhood match. Separate calculations for girls and boys yielded nearly identical neighborhood indicators. For a more detailed account, see Miller (2008). One additional note: Unlike most U.S. cities, St. Louis City is not part of St. Louis County.

**Table 1. Select Neighborhood Characteristics**

| | Respondents' Neighborhoods | St. Louis City | St. Louis County |
|---|---|---|---|
| Percent African-American | 82.6 | 51.2 | 18.9 |
| Median family income | $24,806 | $32,585 | $61,680 |
| Percent poverty | 33.8 | 24.6 | 6.9 |
| Percent unemployment | 18.0 | 11.3 | 4.6 |
| Percent female-headed families with children | 43.1 | 28.8 | 10.7 |

*NOTES*: The source of these data is U.S. Census, 2000.

Youths provided a stark account of how these statistics translated into lived experience. Asked to describe her neighborhood, Cleshay said:

> [It's] terrible. Every man for theyself. Ghetto, in the sense of raggedy, people uncool to people, just outside, street light never come on, police don't come in after four o'clock. . . . Heavy drug dealing. They loud, they don't care about, you know, the old people in the neighborhood or nuttin'. It's been like, females, it was a ten year old girl who got raped recently and kilt and didn't nobody—our walls in our neighborhood thin, so I know somebody hear her screaming—[but] didn't nobody, you know, even try to help the girl or nuttin' like that.

Likewise, Maurice explained:

> [There's] a lot of gangs, lot of drugs, dirt. Dirty, like the streets are polluted. A lot of abandoned houses, lot of burned up houses. 'Cause of the drugs and the gangs I guess. . . . They get into a lot of fights, bring property value down, you know, people don't take care of they houses. And you know, don't nobody really wanna live there no more so everybody starts to move. That's why a lot of abandoned houses. Then, when it's a lot of abandoned houses that means the block cold, that mean not that many police around. So that's when dope people move in on that block, you know what I'm saying, go open they shop there. And whenever they go do that, then, you know what I'm saying, lots of crackheads start moving in, lot of gangs, you know what I'm saying, lot of shoot-outs.

Many youths said their neighborhoods were physically run down, and most described drug dealing and street gangs as commonplace. Complaints against the police included both widespread harassment and underpolicing (see Brunson, 2007; Brunson and Miller, 2006). In addition, many residents were described as unconcerned with their neighbors' well-being

and unwilling to intervene when someone was in danger. Crime and violence seemed ubiquitous.[3]

These facets of the neighborhood were interconnected. A substantial body of research documents how community processes like those described by Cleshay and Maurice evolve from structural inequalities and translate into high rates of community violence (see McNulty and Bellair, 2003; Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls, 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley, 2002). For example, youths' descriptions were indicative of limited collective efficacy: Neighborhood processes like the willingness to intervene on behalf of neighbors and monitor the behavior of youth did not thrive in their communities. And although research suggests that significant cultural adaptations—such as the "street code" (Anderson, 1999)—result from urban disadvantage, our research suggests that youths also make strategic choices in these contexts that cannot be entirely reduced to cultural response.[4]

Given our goal of comparing how young women and young men define and negotiate neighborhood dangers, some subtle gender differences in youth's neighborhood descriptions are notable. Although not uniformly the case, young men in our sample were more likely to describe their neighborhoods in ways that indicated their active engagement in neighborhood life, including its more dangerous facets. For instance, more young men used the pronouns "*we*" and "*I*" in their descriptions, whereas nearly all the young women described what "*they*" do in the neighborhood. This difference suggests that the young women were less entrenched in neighborhood networks. Young men were also more likely to emphasize territoriality and name their own or other gangs when describing their neighborhoods. This variation occurred despite the fact that both groups were asked the same initial question: "Can you tell me what your neighborhood is like?"

3. A minority of youths described their immediate block as problem-free, which they attributed to the presence of older adults and younger children, rather than adolescents and young adults. In each case, they described gangs, drugs, and violence nearby and characterized adolescent action spaces in their neighborhoods as having these problems. A few youths described having recently relocated to racially integrated neighborhoods, which they described as comparatively quiet. But these youths reported spending much of their free time at relatives' homes or with friends in their old neighborhoods, despite the presence of crime. Thus, these action spaces are the focus of our analysis of youths' neighborhoods (see Miller, 2008, for more details).

4. Anderson (1999) certainly alludes to this suggestion, particularly in his characterization of young men from "decent families" who must adapt their behavior to the street code. However, it is those facets of his work that emphasize cultural adaptation that have garnered the most scholarly attention.

For instance, when asked this question, Tyrell said, "everybody over there real tight. It's like Six Deuces, One Niners, Crips, and the people from Penrose [Housing Project]. But like a couple blocks over, probably 'bout a mile away it's like other gangs or whatever. . . . If we all go over there messing with them, they come over messing with us." Even when young men were critical of what was happening in their neighborhoods, their descriptions nonetheless indicated their embeddedness in or familiarity with neighborhood networks. Lamont explained:

> It's bad. A lot of drugs. They influence the kids. We see them with these fancy cars and all this money, riding around in these cars. And that's what we want, that's what we thinking in our heads: that's what we want. And the only way we can get that either two choices: go to school, get a good job; or sell drugs. . . . Most of the kids in my neighborhood dropped out so only way they can get it is by selling drugs. And most of they momma's on drugs. . . . What you see, what you want, what influence you, what your eyes see, that's what you pick up and keep 'til your grave, so that's what you learn, that's what you remember.

Thus, although young men varied in the extent to which they engaged in delinquency or participated in gangs within their neighborhood peer networks, most of their accounts actively situated them within neighborhood street life. Such framing was rarely present in girls' accounts.[5]

Part of what makes these differences so striking is that our sampling strategy targeted high-risk and delinquent youths across gender. Youths' self-reports indicate that fairly similar numbers of males and females were involved in serious delinquency (see appendix A), which suggests that youths would exhibit comparable levels of neighborhood engagement across gender. In fact, this idea has been proposed by recent scholarship that suggests girls also adopt the "street code" (Jones, 2004; Ness, 2004; but see Miller and Mullins, 2006b). As we shall see, however, most young men in our study seemed more embedded in neighborhood networks than young women. Although youths reported similar prevalence rates of serious delinquency, young women likely were not as frequently involved in such activities, particularly in neighborhood contexts. For instance, girls' accounts of their own violence centered on conflicts between girls, many of which took place in school (see Miller and Mullins, 2006b). In addition, gang fights were almost uniformly described as the purview of young men, which suggests that those few young women involved with gangs were more engaged in social facets than in gang and territorial defense (see

5. In fact, only one girl made similar comments. Instead, girls spoke in the first person when specifically describing fights with other girls, and these accounts did not emerge when asked for general neighborhood descriptions.

Peterson, Miller, and Esbensen, 2001). The relevance of these differences will become more apparent as we examine youths' perceptions of neighborhood dangers and strategies for remaining safe.

## FINDINGS

Like much of the research on youths' experiences in distressed urban neighborhoods, the youths we interviewed were exposed to a great deal of community violence (Farrell and Bruce, 1996; Richters and Martinez, 1993). Nearly all youths had seen people being hit or physically assaulted, and two thirds indicated that they had witnessed such events in their neighborhoods. In fact, the more serious the violence witnessed, the larger the proportion of youths who reported that it had occurred in neighborhoods. Fully 70 percent of boys and 60 percent of girls had witnessed someone being shot, whereas 48 percent and 34 percent, respectively, had seen someone killed. Nearly all these incidents occurred in neighborhood contexts.

Youths also faced increased exposure to violence as victims. For example, 68 percent of boys and 57 percent of girls described having been jumped or beaten up. Six boys and one girl described having been shot, whereas four boys and five girls described having been stabbed. All of these incidents took place in community settings. In addition, 65 percent of young men had been robbed (compared with 14 percent of girls). And young women reported increased rates of sexual victimization. More than half (54 percent) described experiences with sexual assault or coercion, with 31 percent describing multiple incidents of sexual aggression. Thus, we see both more general and gender-specific risks present in youths' neighborhood action spaces.

Given their increased exposure to neighborhood violence, our goal here is to examine how the gendered social contexts of distressed urban neighborhoods shaped youths' understandings of victimization risks and the strategies they employed to protect themselves from neighborhood dangers. We begin by comparing young men's and young women's accounts of the nature of neighborhood risks, including their discussions of how these risks are shaped by gender. We then compare and assess the strategies they employed to manage risk and maintain their safety and security. In doing so, we emphasize how conceptualizations of gender shaped perceptions of vulnerability and danger and how gendered patterns of adolescent public life in urban neighborhoods structured risks and risk management.

### GENDER AND PERCEPTIONS OF NEIGHBORHOOD RISK

We asked youths a series of questions to tap into their understandings of the gendered dimensions of neighborhood risk. One question that drew a

varied response was whether they felt the neighborhood was safer for males or for females. A fairly even distribution of responses to this question was found, but regardless of whether youths believed males or females were safer or, conversely, faced greater neighborhood dangers, most of their responses drew from gender-specific meanings about the nature of neighborhood risks.

### Perceptions of Neighborhood Risks for Young Men

Asked about the nature of neighborhood dangers for young men, youths in our study identified risks associated with conflicts that result from the maintenance of respect, the participation in or the presence of neighborhood offending networks, the much greater likelihood for male violence to involve firearms, and the threats posed by the police. Anishika explained: "I mean, the male population, a lot of these young black teenagers today and stuff, like they trying to be something that they ain't for real. They just into so much." And Destiny said, "females for real don't own a gun. All they gonna do is fight, you know what I'm sayin' or try to pull out a knife. So really it's not safe for men, 'cause a knife could hurt you . . . but the men gonna try to pull out they gun. They ain't gonna try to fight or nuttin', just guns."

For young men, status and respect were often given primacy over immediate concerns about personal safety. The willingness to stand up for oneself and use violence in the face of perceived affronts was a valued facet of street identity (see Anderson, 1999: 72–6). Raymond said, "dudes just like picking stuff with other men . . . starting stuff with 'em. Like you walking down the street, right, and dude looking at you, you looking back at him, the other dude say something, you like, 'what you say?' Such and such, such and such. That's how stuff get started." Asked why young men engaged in such confrontations, he explained, "so he don't think you soft or something." He noted that "every time you walk up that street," the possibility of being labeled a punk and taken advantage of was present. Thus, a tough persona, backed up by a willingness to act on it, was deemed necessary by some young men to insulate them from future risks that emanate from reputations as "soft" or easily victimized.

As a consequence, however, Anishika said that young men "always have to . . . watch they back." She explained, "like say for instance they got into it with somebody else . . . they know the people gon' come back, but they don't know when. It could be that Thursday or a month later." And Lisa suggested that conspicuous displays of material goods, which are also tied to street identity, likewise posed dangers: "Boys, they got these cars now with twenty inch rims and beats [stereo systems] in it and all this. They gon' get they car stolen, they gon' get robbed. So you don't just get shot up because you got on the wrong colors."

In addition, many youths emphasized the significance of gangs and territoriality as risks for young men. Tyrell, for example, believed young women were safer than young men, " 'cause females ain't be the ones who try and be in gangs and whatever. They see a girl wearing red or whatever, they'll call [her] a slob [a derogatory term for a Blood] or whatever, she keep walking. But they see a dude wearing all red, they gonna wanna beat him up or whatever." In particular, youths emphasized the dangers faced by young men when rival groups or other "enemies" rode through the neighborhoods looking for trouble. As Eugene noted, "some people come [through the neighborhood] and start stuff. . . . 'Cause you go out the neighborhood and it's a gang, you start stuff, and they follow you back in the neighborhood."

Even when young men were not involved in gangs or drug sales, because these activities were ubiquitous in their neighborhoods, the young men remained at risk in public spaces. Terence noted the risk for boys of being "on the wrong corner at the wrong time, they might think you trying to sell something." Jermaine said that because "it be a lot of gang fights" in his neighborhood, "when I'm out front chillin' with my friends, they probably think that we some gang bangers. They'll probably drive by and shoot [at] us or something." Ricky surmised, "you have to be extra careful being a guy in my neighborhood. It's just the image that the neighborhood put out."

Consequently, it was not just young men's neighborhood activities or status and reputational concerns that placed them at risk. Their mere presence as young black men in disadvantaged neighborhoods was often read by others as an indication of criminal involvement (see also Quillian and Pager, 2001). As we have seen, this assumption led to challenges and dangers from other young men. In addition, it led to aggressive interventions by the police, which many young men saw as a primary neighborhood danger. Wayne explained, "I would say males are in more danger [than females] 'cause you gotta deal with police. All police ain't good police. You ain't even gotta be doing nothing." Travis agreed: "They dirty to where like 'aw, you gonna smart mouth me?' and they hit you in the stomach or something like that." And Ricky lamented:

> The police will ride up on a group of guys, they'll get out. They'll make you lay on the ground, they'll pull your clothes all off you. Or they make you take your shoes and socks off. I mean, just unnecessary stuff. Then they'll talk bad, call you all types of punks and sissies. . . . They treat you . . . like you not even human.

Thus, youths' accounts of neighborhood dangers for young men focused both on how their neighborhood activities structured risks against them

and on how simply being young black men in public spaces in urban neighborhoods placed them at risk for violence and other dangers. Young women were believed to be largely insulated from such dangers because they were less involved in street action and because street conflicts over gangs, drugs, and respect were viewed as the primary purview of young men. In addition, as Destiny remarked, the police were seen as less of a threat to young women because "it's little stuff they be sayin' to us [girls], but like with the dudes, they'll try to lock them up and try to take them to jail." Thus, far from simply engaging in risk-seeking behaviors, the young men in our study—including those who were active offenders—were cognizant of and concerned about their neighborhood risks and described these risks as emanating from gendered features of urban communities.

### Perceptions of Neighborhood Risks for Young Women

Youths in our sample who emphasized the dangers posed to girls in their neighborhoods also focused on gender-specific issues. In particular, risks for girls were seen as the result of predatory male behavior, as well as perceptions of young women's lesser ability to protect themselves, and of vulnerabilities for women tied to perceptions of them as "weak." Dwayne explained, "if they look good, somebody might try to touch 'em or something. And they might not want them to touch them and they might say something to 'em. And the dudes in my neighborhood, they might try to beat them up 'cause the girl wouldn't let them touch 'em." Jamellah explained:

> A girl could walk down the street and she hafta fear about somebody stoppin' and rapin' her and makin' her get in the car. And a boy could walk down the street and wouldn't hafta worry about that. . . . And then a man is more likely to try to do something to a female anyway, 'cause we not as strong as a male.

Britney said males were less likely to be "messed with" because they were more likely to be "carry[ing] a gun." In contrast, she said "dudes" perceive females to be "weak, won't do nuttin', won't say nuttin'." Kenisha complained that "dudes get more respect than females. . . . It's just the way it is over there." Many young men concurred. James explained, "dudes, I mean, they can pretty much handle theyself and they ain't gotta worry about nuttin', they're safe. Females, somebody [can] overpower them . . . there ain't too much they can do for theyself." Thus, a common belief among many youths was that women's vulnerabilities in dangerous neighborhoods were tied to their lesser ability to defend themselves and to the greater likelihood that they would be unarmed. Because young women were perceived as "easy" targets, they were believed to be at greater risk.

In contrast—as an individual attribute—young men's gender was perceived as providing them with greater survival skills, although their gendered behaviors, peer networks, and/or stereotypes about young black men placed them at risk.

Another common theme, as Jamellah noted, was the threat of sexual violence. Antwoin said that it's safer for males, "'cause like the females, all the dudes be wanting to try to freak, you know, have sex with 'em, all that kinda stuff." In fact, young women often spoke specifically about the dangers of sexual violence posed by nighttime. LaSondra explained:

> Over there, you have to watch. Especially when you walking or something, 'cause you never know who might be behind you. When I walk, I look around and sometimes when I walking I forget to look around. Next minute somebody's behind me. Like, where'd this person come from? I just start walking faster. That's scary. Especially if it's nighttime too.

Felicia's description was tied to the layout of her neighborhood, which included a public housing complex and another high-crime area in close proximity. She said "in the daytime don't too many people try too much because there be too many people outside." However:

> When I'm coming home from work at night or be coming out from my friends' at night [I don't feel safe]. . . . You gotta enter through the back, which is a alley. And it's like, there's one parking lot and then there's another parking lot. . . . You know, by me being a girl I try not to be, you know what I'm saying, [there for too long]. I come in, try to keep the gate closed, and move up the steps as soon as I can 'cause there's no telling what's gonna happen coming through there.

Felicia tied her concerns to her knowledge of neighborhood crime and the physical infrastructure she had to navigate to get home. Her focus was not a generalized fear of the dark (a common reaction among women generally) but a reasonable perception of the risks young women faced because criminally involved men congregated in public neighborhood spaces.

In fact, young women described being most concerned about their safety because of the presence of male offender networks in their neighborhoods. Britney felt unsafe passing a parking lot near her public housing complex because men congregated "drinking and smoking weed, selling drugs and everything. . . . When you walk past trying to go to the [gas] station, you don't know what they can do, what could happen. They can grab you in the car and rape you and whatever." Likewise, Andrew surmised that "older guys" often targeted teenage girls because "I guess they feel like with a younger girl, they can take advantage of them." He explained:

> Like an older person come through and they'll see a young girl walking through. She can have a pretty shape, pretty face or whatever, and they'll see her and they'll try to dog [her]. They try to talk to her or whatever, and the female will tell them no, or that they're too young or they too old for them, or they not interested. They get mad and get to calling them bitches and ho's, disrespecting them. [Then the girls] get mad, they get to cussing them back out. Sometimes the dudes get mad and threaten 'em, saying, "I'll do this to you," or "I'll do that."

Such experiences with harassment greatly influenced young women's perception of safety in public neighborhood spaces. A considerable body of research documents how women often locate their fear of sexual violence in public spaces at the hands of strangers (Pain, 1991; MacMillan, Nierobisz, and Welsh, 2000). Such concerns were all the more salient for girls in disadvantaged neighborhoods. For multiple reasons—open drug trade, presence of gangs, high rates of unemployment, residents' reliance on public transportation, and lack of recreational venues—public spaces in their neighborhoods were peopled with congregations of men with whom young women came into unavoidable contact. In fact, as we will see, one of young men's primary strategies for protecting themselves in their neighborhoods—socializing and traveling in groups—was precisely a source of young women's perceived risk. Again, this situation was all the more the case because these social spaces were clearly demarcated as male-dominated terrain.

Thus, not surprisingly, young women also focused on risks for women associated with the presence of active drug markets in their communities. Dawanna said that young women had to "watch out for some of the males that be around the neighborhood, 'cause it's a couple of them that force females to, you know, do . . . certain things." She continued:

> It's many of them that sell drugs around here, do drugs, and do certain things to other people. Be renting cars out from people that they sell the drugs to, and sometimes they bring 'em around my house and they . . . have 'em doing sexual active stuff right there . . . on the street where everybody can see.

And several young women described the dangers of being mistaken for drug-addicted women themselves. LaSondra was approached by a "crackhead" while walking home from a friend's house. After he approached her about where he could buy crack, he "pulled up and said, 'you need a ride girl?' I said no, but I made sure he like left [before I] went in my house."

In sum, youths in our study who believed their neighborhoods were less safe for females than for males emphasized the sexual dangers facing women and the perception that women were weaker and thus easy targets.

In addition, youths' accounts explicitly tied young women's risks to cultural and organizational features of their neighborhoods that result from disadvantage, including the congregation of male offenders in public spaces and the sexualization of women that results from the drug trade. The one similarity across gender in youths' accounts of neighborhood risks was that perceived dangers came primarily at the hands of men. Clearly, these accounts challenge recent research that suggests gender has lost salience in high-crime urban communities. In contrast with young men, young women did not tie their concerns about danger to behavioral expectations associated with the "street code." Instead, both groups believed that gender inequalities and girls' perceived weakness limited their ability to protect themselves.

## GENDER AND NEIGHBORHOOD RISK-AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES

Across gender, youths brought a shared understanding of the distinctive risks believed to be faced by males versus females. Dangers for young men were tied to masculine status concerns, participation in street networks, and broader perceptions of young black men in urban communities. Young women, however, were saddled with perceptions of them as weak and ineffectual and with dangers that result from predatory behavior exacerbated by the presence of male neighborhood offender networks in which girls were viewed through a sexualized lens. Given these perceptions of gendered risk, how did young men and women work to insulate themselves from neighborhood dangers? It is to this question that we now turn.

### YOUNG MEN'S RISK-AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES

Situated in their perceptions of neighborhood danger, young men in our sample described adopting several strategies to safeguard their safety. Specifically, they emphasized staying within the boundaries of their own neighborhoods, avoiding activities that might lead to retaliatory violence, and traveling in groups or with weapons. For the most part, young men perceived their *own* neighborhoods as safe.[6] This perception was held because the young men were known by others in the neighborhood and had networks of peers for protection. As Gary surmised, "it's my neighborhood and I know people." As a consequence, young men's risk-avoidance strategies often involved confining themselves to their own

6. Just three young men (Frank, Kevin, and Jermaine) reported not feeling safe in their own neighborhoods. Two were active gang members, and each had involvement in serious delinquency. Kevin's concerns stemmed from specific individuals who were after him, whereas for Frank and Jermaine, it was high rates of neighborhood violence that concerned them.

neighborhoods. Wayne explained, "gangs is out there, so I don't really too much leave out of my neighborhood unless I'm with somebody. But I don't really too much roam the streets."

Most young men described avoiding neighborhoods that they perceived as dangerous either because young men in these neighborhoods would target any unknown males or because they believed they could be specific targets. Dwayne, who was not involved in offending or gangs, said, "if you be going to other neighborhoods, you might get jumped or something, or get shot." In contrast, Kevin was a gang member who participated in serious delinquency. He described avoiding a neighborhood where he previously spent time because other young men were out to get him: "It's [this] person that used to be my friend [who] went around telling a bunch of people stuff. And now they out looking for me, trying to shoot me and stuff. . . . So I don't even go over there." Although young men's rationales differed depending on whether they participated in offending, the strategy of avoiding travel through other neighborhoods was shared.

Not surprisingly, young men rarely mentioned relying on the police to protect them. This lack stemmed both from their distrust of the police and from their belief that the police were nonresponsive to calls for service. Ricky explained:

> You'll have to lie to get the police to come as fast as you would want 'em to come. You'd have to say something like "it's a gang fight and we fear somebody have a gun" or something like, "four or five guys just ran up into somebody house and jumped on somebody, we need the police *right now*!"

Because many inner-city residents perceive the police as representing mainstream white society, they learn to take responsibility for maintaining their own safety (see also Anderson, 1999: 34). This lack of faith left young men to consider alternative strategies to protect themselves.

Although young men described often staying within their neighborhood boundaries, they did sometimes travel into other neighborhoods. When they did, efforts were made to avert the potential for violence. Some young men described adopting body language that decreased the likelihood of being read as disrespectful. Leon explained, "if you the type of person who walk around and think you big and bad, and you staring at people like, 'I'll beat you up' and all that, well some people ain't gon' like that. They gon' be tryin' to fight you." Walter likewise emphasized the importance of keeping a low profile when traveling across neighborhoods: "[If] you come over to that neighborhood and be all hard and you like talk all that stuff, then they'll attack you. [But] you can walk down the street as

long as you don't say nothing to them, they probably won't have a problem with you." Although such strategies sometimes worked in more unfamiliar neighborhoods, as Raymond described earlier, failure to earn the right amount of respect in one's own neighborhood could place young men at increased risk for peer harassment or victimization (see also Anderson, 1999: 73). Thus, young men had to manage their identity and behavior depending on the situational context and faced a catch-22 in balancing what they perceived as immediate versus long-term risks.

Another strategy young men employed was to travel in groups. Wayne explained:

> Gangs is out there so I don't really too much leave out of my neighborhood unless I'm with somebody. But if I'm walking with my clique, you know what I'm saying, that's what I do. I don't walk in cliques one deep, I walk in like eight . . . fifteen, twenty deep, you know what I'm saying. I don't never walk by myself.

Ironically, young men's reliance on peer networks for protection, in both their own and other neighborhoods, contributed to young women's perceived risks because it meant the congregation of males in public spaces. Thus, young men's strategies for managing risk simultaneously triggered young women's sense of heightened danger. Being or traveling in a group could lead to problems for young men as well. Walter explained:

> Say it's like you by yourself and then you talking and acting hard and then they'll jump you. And then they, if it's you with a couple of dudes and they got more [dudes] and you talking stuff, then they'll probably pull out some weapons. If it's a whole bunch of people they'll pull out weapons and guns.

Given the presence of firearms in their communities, some young men also discussed the importance of carrying a weapon. The weapon provided an added sense of security, particularly when they were alone. Maurice said, "if I walk in [another neighborhood] by myself, I'm gonna be carrying a weapon." And Shaun explained, "you always gotta have something [or] somebody gonna sneak up on you and crack you upside the head or something. Everybody I know got a gun or a knife or chain." Although young men primarily framed the need for weapons as a means of protecting themselves, flashing or using weapons could have counterproductive results because it increased young men's risk for retaliatory violence (see also Anderson, 1999: 76).

These accounts are suggestive in two important ways. Young men clearly strategized about their safety and took precautions to manage risk, including when they were involved in offending. This finding challenges the characterization of delinquent boys as simply impulsive risk seekers and gives credence to recent analyses of the importance of rational choice

models for understanding youths' behaviors in urban settings (Matsueda, Kreager, and Huizinga, 2006). In addition, these findings give credence to feminist scholars' critiques of the tendency to reify gender difference as an individual attribute by contrasting men's risk-seeking behaviors with women's risk-avoidance strategies (Chan and Rigakos, 2002; Walklate, 1997). Although we found significant gender differences in youths' accounts, these differences were embedded in their negotiation of the gender-stratified terrain of urban neighborhoods. Specifically, young men adopted risk-avoidance strategies that were tailored to their understandings of gendered neighborhood dangers.

### Young Women's Risk-Avoidance Strategies

As we have seen, young men focused primary attention on staying within the boundaries of their own neighborhoods, not engaging in activities that might lead to retaliatory violence, and traveling in groups or with weapons. In contrast, two themes ran through young women's accounts: avoiding public neighborhood spaces, altogether and especially at night, and relying on the company of others (especially males) for protection, including drawing security from the belief that having neighborhood networks of family and friends would ensure their safety. In addition, although many young men believed the police were a danger to them, some girls drew a sense of security from their presence in their communities.

To begin with, many young women described that they simply avoided being outside in their neighborhoods. Alicia said she felt safe in her neighborhood because "I don't be outside over there, I sit on the porch. I don't go nowhere." Likewise, Jackie explained, "I stay in the house. . . . I don't go outside at all when I'm at home. When I'm around my grandma's house I go outside sometimes. I know mostly everybody over there. But when I'm at home, I don't go outside unless I'm going to the store, but I don't talk to nobody." Likewise, Anishika said, "I don't be on the block. I don't be outside like that." Unlike young men, who reported staying within the boundaries of their neighborhoods, many young women reported choosing to remain in the confines of their own homes because that is where they felt safest.[7]

Strikingly, this strategy was employed routinely by both at-risk girls and those who reported involvement in serious delinquency. Tisha, a former gang member whose friends remained gang-involved, explained, "I don't be outside for real. So yeah, [I feel safe] 'cause I'm inside my house. 'Cause I don't wanna be involved in nothin' that goes on around there."

7. Among the boys, only Kevin reported this strategy, and it was because he knew rival gang members were looking for him.

Cherise, despite reporting participation in serious delinquency and gang ties, believed she was insulated from neighborhood dangers through her lack of participation in criminal neighborhood activities: "I don't get affected by all these problems. Crack dealers get affected a lot . . . the boys that sell drugs get affected. People get killed over gangs do, they get affected." The consistency of these findings provides strong evidence of the salience of gender, even among delinquent girls in urban communities. Most of these girls described their homes as a safe haven from community dangers and thus constrained their movement in public spaces.

Although the most prevalent theme in girls' descriptions of risk avoidance was to limit the time they spent on the streets, girls did spend some time in public spaces in their neighborhoods. At these times, they described either explicitly relying on others for protection or believing that their personal connections would protect them. LaSondra said, "I just don't walk at night by myself. If I'm gonna walk somewhere at night, I'm gonna call one of my friends on the phone or get my next door neighbor that's there so he'll walk with me." Likewise, April said, "if you walk somewhere at nighttime, you just gon' be with some dudes or walk and have something [a knife or mace] on you. . . . I do both—walk with dudes and have something."

Gail noted multiple themes, including the belief that (male) family and community ties would help insulate her:

> I'm not really outside all the time. I might stay in the house and watch TV or whatever. . . . I don't really go nowhere by myself. I mean, I live down the street from a donut shop where it be a lot of grown men just sitting around and stuff. But I don't think they'll harm me, 'cause they like know my uncles and my daddy, and like, they know everybody we live around.

Although she expressed apprehension about men in her neighborhood, Gail hoped she was an unlikely target because her family was known. Similarly, Shauntell said, "I got a lot of family [in the neighborhood] and I know they ain't gon' let nothin' happen to me."

Like Gail, Jamellah was not entirely confident. She explained, "I usually do feel safe in my [immediate] neighborhood. Because I been there, my mother grew up there, that's my grandfather's house, she grew up there. And we been staying there for like 6 years, so I know basically everybody." However, she was concerned in the broader neighborhood where she traveled daily because "that's where all heroin users be at, and you know how they be over that drug—going crazy. . . . I hope they don't do nothin' to me. I know 'em though, 'cause I grew up over there. But still, when a person on heroin, they mind go crazy, they don't care." Thus, having extensive ties in the neighborhood provided young women with some

sense of security, particularly when these ties emerged from residential stability.

Finally, unlike young men in the sample, some girls reported a relative sense of safety because of the presence of police in their neighborhoods. Lisa said she felt safe "'cause the police are always there, ridin' up and down the street. You could always see a police officer over there somewhere." Sheron concurred and said, "police drive in the [housing] complex like every hour." However, young women also described being dissatisfied with how the police treated community members and complained that they were either slow to respond or failed to show up for calls to service (see also Brunson and Miller, 2006). Thus, rather than viewing the police as providing protection to neighborhood residents, girls primarily focused on their presence as a deterrent from potential attacks. Paradoxically, here again we find opposing fear/risk-management dynamics across gender: Although the police were viewed as a primary source of danger for young men, they had the potential to provide young women with an increased sense of personal safety.

In sum, to the extent that girls limited their participation in public neighborhood life and felt themselves to have strong and longstanding ties in their neighborhoods, they believed they were protected against community dangers. They believed that having male relatives in the neighborhood could help place them "out of bounds" for victimization, and they relied on male peers and neighbors to walk with them in traversing the neighborhood, particularly at nighttime. These circumstances gave young women confidence in their relative safety, as did the presence of police.

However, just as limitations to young men's protective strategies were found, limitations to young women's protective strategies remained as well. For example, reliance on community ties was hindered by the great deal of residential instability reported by youths in our sample.[8] These patterns are strongly tied to the kinds of economic deprivations youths and their families faced, but nonetheless they placed limits on young women's ability to rely on collective community ties for protection. Second, young women's faith in the adult men and adolescent boys they knew was sometimes misplaced. Young women reported extensive sexual victimization, most of which came at the hands of young men they knew and trusted (Miller, 2008), a pattern consistently found in the research literature (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006; Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski, 1987). Finally, young women's primary strategy for staying safe in their neighborhoods—staying indoors and at home—although insulating them from

8. Two thirds of the study participants reported having moved in the last 3 years, and fully half reported multiple moves.

neighborhood risks, came at a considerable cost because it limited their ability to fully participate in public life (see also Day, 2000; Stanko, 1990).

## DISCUSSION

Previous research on fear of crime and perceived risk consistently has emphasized the demographic and spatial patterns of these phenomena. Women and individuals who live in disadvantaged community contexts report higher perceived risk and fear than other social groups (Ferraro, 1995, 1996; Madriz, 1997; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981; Stanko, 1990; Warr, 1985). In addition, both fear and perceived risk have been associated with constrained behavioral responses, including the adoption of risk-avoidance strategies that limit participation in public life. Most research on the latter issue has focused on the unique constraints for women that result from fear of sexual assault (Day, 2000; Gordon and Riger, 1989). And although several studies have examined patterns of risk management in distressed urban communities (Carvalho and Lewis, 2003; Madriz, 1997), research on youths' risk-management strategies has been limited, and few studies consider how the gendered social organization of life in the inner city shapes both perceived risks and responses to these risks (Box, Hale, and Andrews, 1988; Ortega and Myles, 1987).

The current study extends previous research through our comparative qualitative analysis of the perceptions and experiences of urban African-American adolescent girls and boys. Our study findings highlight the significance of gender—both as a schema through which youths understood risks and as an organizing feature of public life in disadvantaged neighborhoods that youths necessarily responded to in managing danger. Moreover, our research confirms the utility of examining youths' agency (see also Sharkey, 2006). It suggests that examining young men's perceptions of risk and risk management—beyond the characterization of their behaviors as structured by masculine cultural adaptations that emphasize risk seeking—is an important avenue for better understanding their decision making in disadvantaged communities (see also Matsueda, Kreager, and Huizinga, 2006; McCarthy and Hagan, 2005) and for overcoming androcentric tendencies in research (Chan and Rigakos, 2002; Miller and Mullins, 2006a).

Our study findings highlight that disadvantaged community contexts pose unique challenges for young people across gender. Young men's risks were shaped by their greater participation in neighborhood life, which for some young men included involvement in high-risk delinquent behaviors such as gang participation, drug selling, and gun carrying. Some young men seemed to embrace a "street code" (Anderson, 1999: 92), which was

characterized as a persona that could insulate young men from risks, particularly of an ongoing nature. However, consistent with other research, many youths also recognized that young men's adoption of such behavioral strategies could also seriously compromise their personal security (see Stewart, Schreck, and Simons, 2006).

Broader public perceptions of urban young black men also exposed male study participants to certain dangers. For example, their mere presence in public was often viewed as evidence of involvement in offending (see also Quillian and Pager, 2001). As a consequence, young men routinely found themselves the recipients of unwelcome attention from other young men in the surrounding community, who took them as rival gang members. They faced aggressive police attention also, which eroded their trust in the police and faith in the criminal justice system (see Brunson, 2007; Brunson and Miller, 2006; Sampson and Bartusch, 1998).

The ecological context of disadvantaged neighborhoods also created particular risks for young women in our study. Public space in their communities was male-dominated and characterized by the presence of groups of young men and male offenders who sexualized their interactions with young women and perceived them as physically and psychologically weak. Our findings are consistent with previous research that documents that women's sense of security is negatively affected by the behaviors and actions of strange men in public spaces (Gardner, 1995; MacMillan, Nierobisz, and Welsh, 2000), but they also suggest that the ecological context of disadvantaged communities makes such encounters all the more likely.

For example, high rates of unemployment, the presence of gangs, and the drug trade each increased the presence of adult men and adolescent boys in public spaces. In fact, a primary risk-management strategy for young men—hanging out and traveling in groups—was precisely the type of behavior that heightened young women's sense of neighborhood danger. In addition, the physical layout of neighborhoods affected young women's perceptions of risk. Compared with boys, girls were more likely to identify vacant lots, alleys, and public housing areas as sites that placed them in danger. This finding is consistent with Smith and Torstensson's (1997: 629) findings that "women's 'ecological vulnerability' leads them to perceive more risk in their neighborhoods and to report fear more often, which itself is reinforced by experiences of harassment."

Thus, although perhaps in some contexts young women in disadvantaged communities adopt a version of the "street code" (Jones, 2004; Ness, 2004), our research suggests that girls' perceptions and responses to neighborhood dangers—which they uniformly identify as coming at the hands of men—do not support this as a general claim. Perhaps girls adopt such behavioral strategies in their conflicts with other young women, but even here, we suspect that these interactions are shaped by gender (see Miller

and Mullins, 2006b). Our evidence points to the salience of gender as an organizing feature of daily life in disadvantaged urban communities that shapes youths' perceived risks and guides their responses to neighborhood dangers.

Thus, we found that youths' gendered perceptions of neighborhood risks shaped their risk-management strategies. Young men described avoiding dangerous situations by staying within the informal boundaries of their neighborhoods, traveling or hanging out in groups, and, in some cases, carrying weapons. In addition, they stressed the importance of avoiding actions that might be interpreted by rivals as blatant signs of disrespect. Male study participants were acutely aware of the difficulties inherent in striking a balance between not seeming too deferential or "soft" (which could lead to ongoing victimization) and not projecting an aggressive image that could instigate conflicts (and thus also lead to risks for victimization) (see also Anderson, 1999: 92). Thus, although the precautionary behaviors they adopted were bound by the constraints of masculine cultural adaptation (see also Day, 2001), they were also grounded in their knowledge of the spatial and organizational features of community dangers for young men.

Nonetheless, young men made less dramatic adjustments to their routines than young women and enjoyed greater mobility in their daily lives. The most common strategy described by female respondents was essentially to withdraw from public life and stay in or nearby their homes. As feminist scholars have long noted, young women's concerns about victimization acted as a powerful social control that often relegated them to the private sphere (Gordon and Riger, 1989; Stanko, 1990). And here again, we found an inverted dynamic between girls' and boys' perceived risk and safety. Although young men saw the police as a primary source of neighborhood danger, some young women took solace in the potential deterrent effects of police presence in their communities. Finally, young women hoped that their family and neighborhood ties would insulate them from predatory behavior and sometimes secured the company of males when they ventured outside, particularly at night.

These strategies were limited by problems of residential mobility, limited community collective efficacy, and the fact that it was primarily young men they knew and trusted who victimized them (see Miller, 2008). Thus, girls' risks and responses to these risks were not simply a reflection of their greater physical vulnerability to crime, but instead a reflection of social vulnerabilities that resulted from gendered structural features of disadvantaged communities and cultural adaptations in these settings that included harmful gender ideologies.

Our research highlights the insights to be gained by examining how the ecological context of urban neighborhoods is organized and experienced

as gendered. It is perhaps unsurprising that residents in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods report greater perceived risk than their counterparts in communities with greater resources, lower rates of crime, better relations with the police, more opportunities for the development of collective efficacy, and a wider array of opportunities for men to construct identities that are less bound by narrow concerns about respect and heterosexual prowess. However, our findings provide strong evidence that victimization risks and risk-management strategies in such communities are heightened in gender-specific ways because of prominent gendered features of these ecological contexts.

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# Appendix A. Study Participants ($N$ = 72)

| Name[a] | Gender | Age | Source | Delinquency[b] | Exposure to Gangs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alicia | Female | 18 | School | Serious—ever | Claims a gang; boyfriend a gang member |
| Anishika | Female | 16 | School | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| April | Female | 16 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Former gang member |
| Bridget | Female | 15 | School | Serious—last 6 months | None |
| Britney | Female | 14 | School | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| Cherise | Female | 17 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Boyfriend a gang member |
| Christal | Female | 14 | School | Serious—ever | Friends are a gang; boyfriend a gang member |
| Cleshay | Female | 17 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Friends are gang members |
| Dawanna | Female | 15 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Former gang member; friends are gang members |
| Destiny | Female | 16 | School | Serious—ever | Friends are gang members; boyfriend a gang member |
| Felicia | Female | 17 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Former gang member |
| Gail | Female | 14 | Community center | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| Jackie | Female | 15 | Community center | Nonserious only | None |
| Jamellah | Female | 18 | School | Serious—ever | Present in neighborhood |
| Janelle | Female | 17 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Friends are a gang |
| Katie | Female | 16 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Friends are a gang |
| Kenisha | Female | 16 | School | Serious—ever | Friends are a gang; boyfriend a gang member |
| Kristy | Female | 16 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Current gang member |
| LaSondra | Female | 17 | School | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| Lisa | Female | 17 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Present in neighborhood |
| Michelle | Female | 16 | School | Serious—ever | None |
| Nicole | Female | 14 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Former gang member; friends are gang members; boyfriend a gang member |
| Nykeshia | Female | 15 | School | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| Ramara | Female | 14 | School | Serious—ever | Present in neighborhood |
| Rennesha | Female | 14 | School | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| Sharmi | Female | 16 | School | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| Shauntell | Female | 12 | School | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| Sheron | Female | 15 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Boyfriend a gang member |
| Tami | Female | 15 | Community center | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| Tawanna | Female | 16 | School | Serious—ever | Former gang member; friends are gang members |
| Tisha | Female | 17 | School | Serious—ever | Former gang member; friends are gang members |
| Vanessa | Female | 16 | Community center | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| Yvonne | Female | 17 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Present in neighborhood |
| Andrew | Male | 17 | School | Nonserious only | Former gang member |
| Antwoin | Male | 13 | Community center | Serious—ever | None |
| Arthur | Male | 16 | School | Serious—ever | Friends are gang members |
| Bobby | Male | 17 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Current gang member |
| Carlos | Male | 13 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Current gang member |
| Cooper | Male | 18 | Community center | Serious—ever | Former gang member; friends are gang members |
| Curtis | Male | 14 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Former gang member |
| Darnell | Male | 17 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Former gang member |
| Darryl | Male | 15 | School | Serious—last 6 months | None |
| Doug | Male | 17 | School | Serious—ever | None |
| Dwayne | Male | 17 | School | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| Eric | Male | 17 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Current gang member |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Eugene | Male | 19 | School | Nonserious only | Friends are a gang |
| Frank | Male | 13 | School | Serious—ever | Current gang member |
| Gary | Male | 18 | School | Serious—ever | Present in neighborhood |
| Jamal | Male | 19 | School | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| James | Male | 17 | School | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| Jermaine | Male | 15 | School | Serious—ever | Present in neighborhood |
| Kenny | Male | 14 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Friends are a gang |
| Kevin | Male | 16 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Current gang member |
| Lamont | Male | 13 | School | Serious—ever | Friends are gang members |
| Larry | Male | 18 | Community center | Serious—ever | Former gang member |
| Leon | Male | 18 | Community center | Serious—last 6 months | Friends are gang members |
| Marcus | Male | 16 | School | Nonserious only | Friends are gang members |
| Marvin | Male | 17 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Present in neighborhood |
| Maurice | Male | 14 | School | Serious—ever | Friends are gang members |
| Raymond | Male | 17 | School | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| Ricky | Male | 17 | Community center | Serious—ever | Former gang member; friends are gang members |
| Robert | Male | 16 | School | Serious—ever | Former gang member |
| Ronald | Male | 15 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Present in neighborhood |
| Shaun | Male | 16 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Current gang member |
| Terence | Male | 18 | School | Serious—ever | Present in neighborhood |
| Tommie | Male | 15 | Community center | Nonserious only | Present in neighborhood |
| Tony | Male | 15 | Community center | Nonserious only | None |
| Travis | Male | 16 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Current gang member |
| Tyrell | Male | 17 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Current gang member |
| Walter | Male | 15 | School | Nonserious only | Former gang member; friends are a gang |
| Wayne | Male | 16 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Current gang member |
| William | Male | 15 | School | Serious—last 6 months | Former gang member |

[a] Pseudonyms.
[b] Youths' delinquency is classified as serious if they responded affirmatively to any of the following survey items: stole between $50 and $100; stole over $100; stole a motor vehicle; attacked someone with a weapon or with the intent of seriously injuring them; committed a robbery; and sold marijuana, crack cocaine, or other drugs. We do not include carrying a hidden weapon, as this confounds behaviors adopted for protection with those indicative of broader participation in delinquency.