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“Caught Up”: How Urban Violence and Peer Ties Contribute to High School Noncompletion

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While research shows growing up in urban neighborhoods increases the likelihood of not completing high school, it remains unclear what mechanism facilitates this process and why some youth are more vulnerable than others. This study addresses this gap by drawing on interviews with male, Latino high school graduates and non-completers in Los Angeles. Interviews reveal urban violence is the most salient feature of urban neighborhoods and consequential for school completion. In an effort to avoid victimization male youth exposed to urban violence draw on male peer ties for protection. Inherent in these social ties, as in other forms of social capital, are expectations and obligations. I find that an orientation that privileges these expectations and obligations—and not specifically an anti-school orientation—gets male youth “caught up” in behavior counterproductive to school completion, like being truant with peers and getting expelled for “backing them” in a fight. I find not all urban youth adopt this orientation because youth are differentially exposed to the neighborhood. Family and school institutional factors limit some youth’s time in the neighborhood, buffering them from urban violence. These youth then bypass the opportunity and need to draw on male peer ties for protection. Not having to employ these “strategies of action,” they avoid getting “caught up” and experience higher chances to graduate. This study argues that to understand the cultural orientation that guides behavior that contributes to school noncompletion requires accounting for how the threat of violence punctuates and organizes the daily lives of male urban youth. Keywords: neighborhood effects; urban violence; high school dropout; culture; Latinos.

If I go to community college I am still going to be in the streets. The homies are going be, “what’s up, let’s go kick it [hang out], let’s go smoke” . . . That’s how people don’t make it. Yeah you are going to college but you are still *caught up* . . .

— Sergio, 18, on why he opted to join the U.S. Marines

Studies find that growing up in poor, urban neighborhoods is associated with lower educational attainment, specifically higher odds of high school noncompletion (Clark 1992; Crane 1991; Ensminger, Lamkin, Jacobson 1996; Harding 2003; Wodtke, Harding, and Elwert 2011). While popular perception is that urban youth embrace “anti-school” orientations, studies repeatedly show urban youth vary widely in their cultural orientation towards education (Carter 2005; Flores-Gonzalez 2002; Harding 2010; Warikoo 2011) and most value education as a means to get ahead (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1998; Downey, Ainsworth, and Qian 2009; Harris 2011; Solorzano 1992; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). It remains unclear, then, why urban neighborhoods are so detrimental for school completion. To uncover the neighborhood mechanisms that contribute to school noncompletion, and why

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these social processes absorb some youth but not others, I draw on interviews with Latino young men and examine how the neighborhood context matters for high school graduates and nongraduates from two disadvantaged neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Consistent with growing research, I find exposure to urban violence to be the most salient aspect of the urban neighborhood and consequential in school noncompletion (Harding 2009a, 2010; Sharkey 2010).

I call attention to school noncompletion as a behavioral outcome structured, in part, by a social context that influences and constrains choices and decisions on a day-to-day basis. The dropout *process* involves failing courses, falling behind on course credits, getting retained in school, and experiencing interrupted schooling. Punitive school policies adopted to address academic failure and behavioral problems play a central role in this process. The present study examines the behavior and cultural orientation of youth that elicits zero-tolerance responses, like suspensions, expulsions, and arrests, known to increase the dropout problem (Bowditch 1993; Hirschfield 2008, 2009; Kirk and Sampson 2012). I find that to understand the cultural orientation that guides behavior counterproductive to school completion requires accounting for how the threat of violence *punctuates* and *organizes* the daily lives of male urban youth.

Exposure to urban violence impacts the kinds of peer relationships male youth establish and sustain; their social network, in turn, influences these young men's cultural orientation and behavior in a way that clashes with school policies and lowers their chances to graduate. In line with other studies, I find that in an effort to avoid victimization youth exposed to urban violence draw on male peer ties not only for friendship but also for physical and symbolic protection and respect (Anderson 1999; Harding 2008, 2009b, 2010; Horowitz 1983; Jones 2009; Rios 2011). Yet I elaborate on this finding by calling attention to the dynamics of reciprocity embedded in such peer ties. Drawing on male peer ties to avoid victimization is an urban-specific kind of social capital (Anderson 1999) and inherent in these social networks are "obligations" and "expectations" (Coleman 1988:102). I find that the behavior that contributes to school noncompletion is guided by an orientation to the obligations and expectations youth have towards peers, specifically those they draw on to navigate urban violence. Urban youth who fail to complete school do so often for being repeatedly truant *with*, and, getting expelled *for*, peers. These expectations include "kicking it," partying, and at times engaging in delinquent acts, like "tagging" or "smoking out," in and out of school. Obligations also involve providing "backup" to peers engaged in peer group conflicts. I find that in drawing on male peer ties to navigate the threat of urban violence, male youth, like Sergio, become "caught up" in male peer group dynamics—that of gangs and "crews"¹ in the Los Angeles context. Ultimately, these ties make "excess claims" (Portes 1998:15) as the behaviors that enhance cohesion among these peers and urban-specific social capital jeopardize school completion.

To further understand why some urban youth get "caught up" but not others, I point out urban youths' *differential exposure* to the neighborhood. Research shows youth are differentially exposed to violence *across* neighborhoods, but variation *within* a single neighborhood is less often examined (see Elliot et al. 2006; Furstenberg et al. 1999; Small and Feldman 2012; Wodtke et al. 2011). Some studies emphasize differential responses to the urban context, in terms of resiliency (Wolkow and Ferguson 2001), self-efficacy (Sharkey 2006), and cultural orientations (Harding 2010). Yet this assumes all urban youth experience the neighborhood similarly. In this study, I find family and school institutional factors limit some urban youth's time in the neighborhood and as a result buffer the effects of urban violence. Families, in particular father/father figures, can structure time and peers for male youth in such a way that it limits their exposure to urban violence (see Elliot et al. 2006; Furstenberg et al. 1999). School institutional structures, like the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) magnet program, unintentionally do the same. Other institutional structures, like half-day alternative school programs, inevitably give youth more exposure to the neighborhood and its risks (see Flores-Gonzalez 2005). Ultimately, urban youth

1. Crews in Los Angeles tend to be short lived, loose associations of male adolescents. They form an identity around "partying" or tagging and differ from gangs in that they typically are not neighborhood bound, nor linked to the drug market or prison gangs. They are discussed in more detail later in the article.

buffered from the neighborhood and urban violence bypass the opportunity and need to draw on male peer ties for physical and symbolic protection. Not having to employ these “strategies of action” (Swidler 1986), these youth avoid getting “caught up” in obligations and expectations with peer ties and experience higher chances to graduate.

William J. Wilson (2009) explains cultural orientations emerge out of “individuals who face similar place-based circumstances or have the same social networks” (p. 4). Compared to high school graduates in their neighborhood school noncompleters in this study were exposed to the neighborhood and urban violence to a greater extent from an early age and throughout adolescence. Faced with the threat of violence on a day-to-day basis, these youth gravitate to peers that provide a sense of protection. An orientation to fulfill expectations and obligations to these peer ties—and not specifically an anti-school cultural orientation—drives the behavior that contributes to school noncompletion.

The Latino Dropout/Pushout Problem

This study focuses on high school noncompletion among Latino male urban youth. Latinos, specifically Mexican Americans, have a high school noncompletion rate *twice* the national average, and about a quarter of Latino young men never earn their high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics 2013). Research attributes this problem among foreign born in part to their limited English proficiency (Rumberger 1991; Valencia 2002). Yet numerous factors affect school completion, like socioeconomic background and family structure. Other individual-level factors, like poor academic achievement, being retained in school, absenteeism, and student mobility, contribute to this problem (Rumberger 2004, 2011).

In addition, school factors play a role in high school noncompletion. These factors include the social composition of schools, school resources, school social climate, and school’s practices. For instance, studies show suspensions and expulsions, and attending an alternative school, increase the odds of dropping out (Rumberger 2004). Studies also call attention to the hypersegregation of Latinos in schools (Orfield 2004) and the tendency for Latinos to be tracked in lower academic programs (Valenzuela 1999) as additional reasons for high dropout rates.

Researchers also find that social ties factor prominently into the Latino dropout problem. For example, William Carbonaro (1998) finds that a lack of intergenerational closure, that is, a lack of ties among friends’ parents, increases the odds of school noncompletion (see McNeal 1999). Other studies focus on social capital among peer ties, which can be positively related to educational outcomes (Conchas 2006; Ellenbogen and Chamberland 1997; Farmer et al. 2003; Flores-Gonzalez 2002), as well as sources of “negative social capital” (Crane 1991; Portes 1998; Ream and Rumberger 2008). Still others consider the role teachers and other institutional agents have in creating social capital (Croninger and Lee 2001; Stanton-Salazar 2001). For instance, Richard Stanton-Salazar (2001) finds that Latinos have fewer institutional agents that facilitate school success.

Latinos also increasingly make up a sizeable portion of the U.S. population living in the most concentrated poor and segregated neighborhoods (Kneebone, Nadeau, and Berube 2011). Some immigration scholars suggest that these residential patterns devastate the social mobility prospects of children of immigrants specifically. Proponents of the segmented assimilation framework argue that the high dropout rate among Mexican Americans reflects a “downward assimilation” trajectory into the “underclass” (Haller, Portes, and Lynch 2011; Lopez and Stanton-Salazar 2001; Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008; Portes and Zhou 1993). While these scholars propose a number of factors contribute to downward assimilation, they explain this trajectory is most likely to occur in urban neighborhoods where second generation youth encounter and adopt an oppositional culture orientation that derails them away from school. Yet exactly how the neighborhood contributes to the Latino dropout rate remains mostly speculative. Few studies empirically examine the relevance of the urban neighborhood in the lives of Latino young men as it relates to their educational outcomes (see Harding 2010; Rios 2011). This study addresses this gap in the literature.

Urban Neighborhoods and School Completion

Numerous studies show that neighborhoods impact well-being and life opportunities, over and beyond individual-level factors (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber 1997; Kawachi and Berkman 2003; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002; Sampson and Sharkey 2008; Sharkey 2012; Sharkey and Ellwert 2011; Wilson 1987). Among these studies some find an association between neighborhood disadvantage and high school noncompletion (Clark 1992; Crane 1991; Ensminger et al. 1996; Harding 2003, 2009a; Wodtke et al. 2011). However, exactly why or how neighborhoods matter remains unclear. That is, sociologists have made few strides identifying the specific neighborhood *mechanisms* or *social processes* that contribute to poor educational attainment (Mayer and Jencks 1989). It also remains unclear why the neighborhood context impacts some urban residents more than others.

The literature has theoretically proposed several neighborhood mechanisms that may increase school noncompletion. First, some studies emphasize the lack of institutional resources in urban neighborhoods. Scholars suggest that a lack of high quality schools in these neighborhoods may be the driving force behind the poor educational outcomes of urban youth (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1997; Small and Newman 2001). The most disadvantaged children continue to attend the most underresourced public schools due to persistent high levels of school segregation by race (Orfield 2001; Orfield, Frankenberg, and Lee 2003) and class (Reardon 2011). As discussed earlier, studies find school-level processes differ between urban and nonurban schools and these contribute to differential outcomes. Yet only few empirical studies isolate or disentangle neighborhood from school effects (Ainsworth 2002; Briggs, Popkin, and Goering 2010; Cook 2003; Cook et al. 2002; Goldsmith 2009; Owens 2010; Pong and Hao 2007; Rendón 2013; Sanbonmatsu et al. 2006; Sykes and Musterd 2011), making it challenging to know if and how schools and neighborhoods function independently or together to produce dismal educational outcomes (see Condron 2009).

Second, some studies indicate that the social disorganization of neighborhoods, specifically the lack of social cohesion of neighbors and social capital, may impact youth outcomes (Bowen, Bowen, and Ware 2002; Crowder and South 2003). For instance, researchers find social disorganization or a lack of trust and social cohesion among neighbors contributes to high rates of crime and violence in poor neighborhoods (Sampson et al. 2002; Sampson, Morenoff, and Raudenbush 2005; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). Social disorganization, then, may contribute to school noncompletion indirectly through youth engagement in crime and delinquency, a function of communities struggling to monitor youth and enforce conventional norms (Nash and Bowen 1999). A lack of social cohesion or social capital may also impact educational outcomes by making it challenging for parents to exchange information and serve as resources for one another in promoting school success. In his study, James W. Ainsworth (2002) found that a lack of collective socialization mediated the impact of neighborhood disadvantage on academic achievement (also see Pong and Hao 2007).

The literature identifies other neighborhood mechanisms, including environmental toxins in urban neighborhoods associated with school absenteeism (Gilliland et al. 2001). Yet the argument that an oppositional culture in the inner city contributes to poor educational outcomes has, arguably, received the most attention. In his seminal study, Wilson (1987) suggested that the outmigration of the black middle class from the urban context left the most disadvantaged socially isolated, with a lack of role models and minimal ties to the mainstream. Wilson argued this isolation led to the development of a ghetto-specific culture that further contributes to poor youth outcomes. A strand of education research that argues that a “reactive identity” and an oppositional culture of racial minority youth explain the achievement gap (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 1983; Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi 1986) and facilitates downward assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993) reinforced this idea.

Urban Violence, the Missing Link

While researchers continue to build on theoretical neighborhood mechanisms outlined in the literature, urban ethnography has pointed in an important direction. Prominent studies show that urban residents identify urban violence as one of the most meaningful and impactful characteristics of their neighborhoods (Anderson 1999; Briggs et al. 2010; Harding 2010; Jones 2009). Extensive research has also documented violence as a distinguishing characteristic of urban schools (Anderson 1998; Bowen and Van Dorn 2002; Guerra, Huesmann, and Spindler 2003; Hellman and Beaton 1986). In one important study, Pedro Mateu-Gelabert and Howard Lune (2003) describe a “bidirectional flow” of conflicts between neighborhoods and schools that contribute to violence among urban youth in both contexts. Yet few other studies examine the fluidity in conflicts and violence that exists between neighborhoods and schools. That is, while studies note urban violence is a serious problem that permeates into and challenges urban schools, few studies examine if and how exposure to urban violence impacts youths’ educational outcomes directly.

Only recently have researchers begun to examine the link between urban violence and educational outcomes. These studies find a strong association between exposure to urban violence and poor educational outcomes (Harding 2009a, 2010; Sharkey 2010), but exactly how urban violence impacts educational attainment requires further study. For instance, Patrick Sharkey (2010) finds that exposure to a local homicide impacts children’s cognitive performance and he hypothesizes this occurs via various physiological, emotional, or social responses related to stress, fear, or trauma. In his research, David J. Harding (2009a, 2010) finds that exposure to urban violence encourages youth to establish ties with older youth to stay safe and he argues that these ties prove detrimental for school completion (Harding 2009a; 2010). Harding (2010) contends that drawing on these ties with older young men for protection sways the younger generation away from the traditional or conventional education paths via the transmission of alternative and/or nonmainstream educational outlooks. For Harding (2010), older peer ties matter in shaping poor educational outcomes of inner-city youth because they influence their cultural orientations.

My study builds on this aforementioned body of work (Harding 2010; Sharkey 2010) but offers an alternative explanation for how urban violence contributes to high school noncompletion. Consistent with Harding (2010), I find that urban violence structures peer ties for male youth. That is, the threat of violence leads youth to draw on peer ties for physical and symbolic protection and respect. However, I find high school noncompleters are not necessarily either socialized or influenced by their peers to reject, give up, or pass on high school completion. In this study, I find that high school noncompleters express similar education outlooks as those who graduate; some express discontent with schooling, while others affirm their belief in education and attempt to earn their diploma by re-enrolling in school. This is consistent with research that finds no evidence that African Americans, Latinos, or other groups possess a reactive identity or embrace an oppositional culture against schooling in particular (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Carter 2005; Cook and Ludwig 1998; Downey et al. 2009; Flores-Gonzalez 2002; Harding 2010; Harris 2011; Mateu-Gelabert and Lune 2007; Solorzano 1992; Tyson et al. 2005; Warikoo 2011), and studies that show that racial and ethnic minority youth vary widely in their cultural orientations towards education (Carter 2005; Flores-Gonzales 2002; Harding 2010; Warikoo 2011; Warikoo and Carter 2009).

Instead, I find that high school noncompleters failed to earn their diploma because they engaged in behavior counterproductive to school completion—like skipping school and fighting—which school officials penalized. I argue that an anti-school or “oppositional” orientation does not drive this behavior, but rather youths’ sense of obligation to peer ties that afford them urban-specific social capital does. The present study examines the cultural orientation and behavior of young men that emerge *as a function of* the urban context and explains how these relate to youth education outcomes (also see Anderson 1999; Flores-Gonzales 2002).

In addition, this study explains why urban violence impacts some youth in such a way, while others are less affected. It is important to recognize that neighborhoods do not impact all youth similarly. The extent to which the neighborhood influences youth outcomes depends on several other factors, like family background characteristics, the schools youth attend, or the amount of time spent in the neighborhood. As Geoffrey Wodke, David Harding, and Felix Elwert (2011) show, neighborhood effects are strongest for those exposed to environments for a long period of time. Moreover, interacting factors may moderate, exacerbate, or mediate neighborhood effects (Burton and Jarret 2000; Furstenberg 2000; Small and Feldman 2012). Therefore, this study is one of the few to consider how these different contexts, i.e., family, schools and neighborhoods, simultaneously shape educational outcomes (Ainsworth 2002; Garner and Raudenbush 1991; Goldsmith 2009; Pong and Hao 2007). I find that the extent to which urban violence impacts peer ties and the cultural orientation and behavior that contributes to school noncompletion depends on the level of exposure to the neighborhood in the first place. Not all urban youth get “caught up” because not all urban youth are similarly exposed to the neighborhood and urban violence.

Study Design and Methods

Data came from a yearlong study designed to uncover the neighborhood mechanisms that explain *why* and *how* disadvantaged neighborhoods shape school and work outlooks and decisions of young adult male children of Latino immigrants, the majority Mexican. The original study included semistructured interviews with 42 young men, between 17 to 23 years old, and their immigrant parents living in two high-poverty neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Ethnographic observations of these neighborhoods enhanced interview data.

In this study, I drew primarily on the interviews conducted with young men. Two-thirds of the respondents are U.S. born and one third are foreign born, having arrived in the United States at a very early age (between two and five years old). I purposefully sampled young men on different educational trajectories: one third were high school “dropouts,” one third were on the college track or in a four-year college, and the rest were in-between, usually having attained a high school degree when the study began. This sampling strategy allowed me to account for outlook and behavioral diversity within poor neighborhoods and to better leverage neighborhood mechanisms contributing to education and work-related outcomes in young adulthood.

I selected the two neighborhoods on theoretical grounds. Specifically, I designed the study to test the argument proposed by the segmented assimilation framework, that exposure to U.S. born native minorities (i.e., African Americans or third-generation Mexican Americans)—specifically their presumed embrace of an oppositional culture—contributes to downward assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993). For this reason, half of the young men interviewed were from a poor, predominantly Mexican immigrant neighborhood, *Pueblo Viejo*, and the other half were from a similarly disadvantaged, black and Latino neighborhood, *Central City*, in Los Angeles² (see Appendices A and B).

To gain entry into these two neighborhoods, I relied on help from personal networks who had contacts in these two neighborhoods. These personal ties led me to specific families, teachers, and academic counselors in local schools and community organizations, such as Boys and Girls clubs, churches, and organizations serving “at-risk” youth. These initial informants either linked me directly to youth or to others who then linked me to youth who fit my sampling criteria. While some young men were connected to neighborhood institutions, others were not. Initial informants were particularly instrumental in putting me in contact with the hard-to-reach group, school dropouts not linked to any of these neighborhood institutions. The sample included seven youth

2. The names of these neighborhoods are pseudonyms. Communities were selected at the zip-code level. The purpose for selecting this ecological space, as opposed to a census tract, was to allow greater freedom for respondents to designate their own neighborhood boundaries. I conducted the field research in 2006 and 2007 and the 2000 Census data was the most up-to-date neighborhood-level data at the time.

who experienced incarceration, two of whom became incarcerated during the fieldwork. While a few of these young men knew of each other, I avoided interviewing their friends, siblings, or other relatives. Therefore, I arrived at each case separately.

The majority of young men approached agreed to participate, having been encouraged to do so by someone they knew. As a Latina raised in a similar neighborhood nearby, I approached them as an insider and an outsider. Our commonalities likely elicited a sense of trust, as did the Certificate of Confidentiality I obtained through the National Institute of Health that protected their ability to tell me about acts that might be illegal.³ Yet as a female I did not share their experience of violence in their neighborhoods.

I met with the 42 male young adults three times, on average, over the course of a year. I also interviewed one of their parents once, resulting in 160 interviews. Each interview visit explored different themes, including the interviewee's social relations, identity, and outlooks and decisions regarding school and work, as well as their thoughts on the role(s) their neighborhood played in these. I made minor modifications to the interview guides with each additional case and by the end of the study I reached saturation (Small 2009; Yin 2002). I conducted interviews at community organizations, churches, youths' homes, school campuses, local parks, and eateries. Each interview lasted about two to three hours and these were recorded and transcribed. While participants were awarded ten dollars for each interview visit, roughly half declined the financial compensation.

I spent entire days in these neighborhoods with youth (and/or their parents), sometimes having lunch or dinner with them, helping them run errands, or giving them rides to nearby places. In between interviews, I conducted ethnographic observations of the neighborhood, mostly of public space, but also of local high schools, alternative schools, community organizations, and family life. I recorded these observations as field notes at the end of the day. I also requested respondents provide a "tour" while we drove or walked around their neighborhood. Each described features of his neighborhood, shared stories, and provided a better sense of how and where he spent his time in the neighborhood. Respondents also outlined their neighborhood boundaries and described where they spent most of their time and the places they avoided and why through the use of a map. The ethnographic observations, cognitive maps, and neighborhood tours, as well as the parent interviews, allowed me to triangulate the data, giving me greater confidence in my findings.

I coded and analyzed transcribed interviews, field notes, and cognitive maps using the Atlas-ti software. Interview guides accounted for theoretical mechanisms—social ties, acculturation processes—and some codes were anticipated along these lines. Yet most codes originated when reviewing the data, such as codes revolving around violence, an unanticipated emergent theme in the study. Consistent with Mario Small's (2009) multiple-case approach, I treated interviews with young men as single cases and these were examined in-depth to understand if and how the neighborhood mattered in the lives of these youth. Having identified urban violence as a salient feature of the neighborhood, I then compared high school graduates and nongraduates to examine if urban violence mattered differently across these cases and how it factored into their educational trajectories. This approach allowed me to draw logical inference to explain "under what conditions" urban violence contributes to school noncompletion (Lamont and Small 2008). Notably, this is distinct from sampling logic used in quantitative research, which allows researchers to draw statistical inferences (Small 2009).

Interviews with the young adult men revealed that the neighborhood context remained salient in their lives. In some cases, respondents remained highly exposed to urban violence during the study and embedded in neighborhood peer networks that continued to impact their lives, including their efforts to re-enroll in school. Yet the neighborhood did become less relevant as young men left behind their high school years and traveled outside their neighborhood for work

3. A Certificate of Confidentiality allows the investigator and others who have access to research records to refuse to disclose identifying information on research participants in any civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceeding, whether at the federal, state, or local level (National Institute of Health n.d.)

or higher education. This means that some of data is retrospective, such as a 21-year-old thinking back on what it was like when he was 14. One limitation with this kind of data is respondents' recall, which may leave out significant social processes. Yet it is striking that young men recalled similar neighborhood experiences to be significant—specifically those revolving around victimization and the meaning of peer ties—as consistently as they did. I argue the cohesiveness of this narrative is a strength of the data.

Urban Reality: Drawing on Ties to Navigate Urban Violence

Despite national declines in violence over the past 20 years, the presence of gangs persists in Pueblo Viejo and Central City, both of which are among the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Los Angeles and have a long history of urban gang violence. Young men in particular deal with this reality. Nongang youth—who make up the majority of youth in these neighborhoods—most often experience violence beginning in middle school in two ways, by being “hit up”—asked to what gang they belong—or when “pocket checked”—assaulted, usually with a weapon. When gangs hit up youth, replying, “I’m from nowhere” typically ends the encounter. Nonetheless, the threat of violence looms in these encounters. David, a 20-year-old school noncompleter, described this incident:

Usually they ask me, “Where you from?” I just look at them, like, “No, nowhere” . . . But, that one time . . . I looked back and they started running . . . getting closer . . . one of them pulled out a bat . . . I started running home . . .

Like David, most youth described having several incidents like these over the course of their adolescence.

Young men referred to the walk home from school as “a mission” because assaults by older youth usually came after school. Alfredo, an 18-year-old senior, began experiencing pocket checks in seventh grade. During these assaults, Alfredo and his brothers not only had to give up money, but on one occasion their jackets and sneakers as well. Another youth, Osvaldo, a 20-year-old college student, described two incidents when he was “jacked” (assaulted and robbed) after school.

We were walking home from Central High and some *cholos* [Mexican gangsters] . . . just got in front of us with a knife . . . it was a big *cholo*, fat guy, and he took my money and my pager . . . one day I was walking in the alley and . . . a *cholo* held a gun at me and took two gold chains. He took my wallet and money.

Similarly, Genaro, a 20-year-old school noncompleter, experienced repeated assaults by a gang member at the bus stop on his way to work and had to surrender money every time. When youth became victims of assaults, most felt they had to give up their belongings either because they were threatened with a weapon or because the assault involved several young men. Others, like Rigoberto, a 19-year-old high school graduate, put up fights throughout high school.

Early in adolescence boys in these neighborhoods learn *not* to navigate the urban context alone or risk being “caught slippin’”—caught off guard and unprotected and vulnerable to victimization. Youth in these two neighborhoods talked about “always walking with two or three guys,” a strategy they picked up after their first pocket checks or after getting hit up. Pedro, 22, who earned his GED, explained that finding peers to accompany him home from school was among the first things that came to his mind when the school day ended.

Walking to school wasn’t as bad as walking home. Walking home is when you thought alright, uhm . . . where is what’s his name and what’s his name? Because we wanted to walk, like, in a group. And yeah, we wouldn’t walk home, say, me and my brother. We wouldn’t walk all by ourselves.

In these neighborhoods, peers become an important resource, a source of protection from victimization or getting “punked” physically and symbolically. These ties provide urban male

youth with an urban-specific kind of social capital, while navigating the urban context *solo* can be a liability. Violence, therefore, impacts the way youth establish and maintain male peer ties in these communities, including youth who do not identify as gang members, but who must, nonetheless, learn to navigate the threat of violence in their neighborhoods characterized by gang dynamics. In effort to stay safe and uphold respect, nongang youth gravitated to two kinds of peer ties in Los Angeles: neighborhood gang ties without joining the gang and alternative male peer groups, notably tagging and party crews (see Alslybar 2007; Lopez et al. 2006).

Ties to the "Hood"

Youth who spent time in the neighborhood and had neighborhood ties were likely to have gang ties. These ties often came as the natural sequel to childhood friendships. For example, Mauricio noted that six out of ten peers from his neighborhood had been "locked up" and he knew the gangsters who killed a young woman nearby. Mauricio explained, "They weren't really gangsters. I don't know what got into them . . . a year ago we used to play soccer." Nongang youth like Mauricio were highly critical of gang activities. When asked why they had not joined a gang, most said they felt "dying for a street name is dumb," they "didn't want others telling them what to do," and especially they "didn't want to kill anyone" or be killed. Nongang youth with ties to gang members did not identify with, much less glorify, gangs and gang behavior.

Despite these strong views, several nongang youth repeatedly expressed that they "kept it cool" with gang members. Among youth with gang ties, most reported drawing on them for protection at one point during their adolescence. In a context characterized by gang rivalries and violence, nongang youth had strong incentive to maintain friendly ties to gang members in their immediate neighborhood or block. Joaquin, a senior, explained how he benefited from his ties to the neighborhood gang. One of the younger members of the gang, a stranger to him, assaulted him one day. When the gang found out, they harshly reprimanded and beat the young gangster. Joaquin explained, "Because they [the older gang members] know me for a while, they actually protect me somewhat." Joaquin's gang ties in the neighborhood made him feel he would not be "messed with."

In Central City, black and Latino neighbors generally had amicable ties. Yet Latinos often felt they were targets of black gang members. This perception contributed to minimal cross-racial ties between Latino youth and black gang youth. Without a sense of protection from the local gang, youth like Pedro, who grew up in a predominantly black public housing complex, spent very little time in the projects due to fear. Instead, Latino youth in Central City gravitated to coethnic peers, including Latino gang members. Pedro explained:

I went over there [a predominantly Latino block in Central City] and I see Hispanic kids with their bikes, just riding and having fun, playing out in the street . . . I guess that's why I went there a lot because you don't have to worry . . . The guy that I used to hang with, his cousin . . . he was from a gang . . . The older guys, they would look out for him.

In this case, Pedro relied on his friend's ties to the gang for a sense of safety in Central City.

Crews as an Alternative to the Gang

One male peer group was more popular than the neighborhood gang: the crew. Seventeen youths in this study had been in a crew at one point. Unlike neighborhood gangs who are long-standing, entrenched neighborhood institutions, most crews in Los Angeles tend to be short lived, loose associations of male adolescents. These crews tend to form an identity around partying or tagging.⁴

4. In a party crew, young men "throw" parties on weekends and "ditching" (skip school) parties during the week. Tagging crews write nongang related graffiti on public property and they gain status by spreading their "tags" (graffiti) throughout

Male youth form crews in urban Los Angeles when gangs begin to target them. Efrain, 22, a school noncompleter, formed a crew in middle school after being pocket-checked and “jumped” (beaten up) several times. Efrain explained:

After that [assault] I started . . . pumping up [lifting weights] and started getting confidence on my own . . . I’m not going to let them punk me . . . ‘cause I have brothers behind me that are going to come to the same school. I can’t leave a reputation saying that, “This fool used to be punked, then, we can punk the brothers.” Oh, hell no. I’m going to get everybody that gets punked and start a crew, and that’s the way we did it . . .

Aside from providing physical protection, joining a crew allowed Efrain and his peers to signal to others that they could not be punked.

Crew members felt strongly about the importance of holding respect and believed it key to avoiding victimization. Jaime, 19, a school noncompleter, joined a tagging crew early in high school. While he was arrested a number of times for tagging, Jaime explained why he did not regret joining:

People are like, yeah, I heard about you . . . I got all of that [reputation and respect] cause of them [his crew]. ‘Cause they were telling me, “Don’t ever be a punk because it’s going to make us look bad” . . . See, if they come talking shit and you just let yourself [get victimized], that means . . . you’re a punk; anybody can just come and step over you . . .

Although they were willing to put up a fight and uphold “respect,” crew members like Jaime distinguish themselves from gang youth. They echoed other nongang youth views about gangs, in particular a disdain for the more serious forms of violence they associated with gang members. Ezequiel, a 19-year-old school noncompleter and crew member, described the fine line he walked with his gang peers.

I used to hang out with the South Gang. I hang around with the Krazy Boys and the Broadway Gang . . . [I didn’t join] because I always thought, why give your life for a street name? It’s not worth it . . . I was kicking it with them . . . going to parties with them . . . if they had a party, they’d call me. If I had a party, I’d call them up, drinking together, smoking, but like *bust a mission* [engage in gang shooting] with them—no.

These young men revealed that besides having an interest in the party scene or tagging, youth in urban Los Angeles joined a crew because it offered important benefits in their neighborhoods: an identity with a peer group who could provide physical protection and allow the youth to claim respect without having to join a gang or the gangster lifestyle.

Getting “Caught Up” and High School Noncompletion

I never liked school . . . They made me feel like a dumb ass . . . I learned more with my dad [working on side jobs] than I did at school. I really only graduated to please my mom.

— Noel, 19, high school graduate

Education, it’s going to matter . . . because someone who is mentally challenged is not going to know how to do the same as someone who knows math, science, and social studies . . . I wouldn’t hire anybody that knew nothing compared to someone that knows a lot . . . So I’m thinking I better learn something to get a good job . . . period.

— Jaime, 19, school noncompleter

I found a weak association between youths’ educational outlooks and high school non-completion. While some youth voiced discontent in the schooling process this was not limited to

the city. Unlike Los Angeles gangs, crews typically lack neighborhood confines or links to the drug trade or prison gangs. Yet because of the vandalism, school officials and law enforcement often treat taggers as gang youth.

school noncompleters, as Noel, a graduate, exemplifies. Moreover, youth who expressed strong views in favor of education included school noncompleters like Jaime. Instead, the strongest distinction between high school graduates and noncompleters was the extent to which youth drew on gang and crew peer ties to navigate urban violence. Typically, youth who failed to complete high school had engaged in certain behavior, like truancy and fighting, which set them behind academically and interrupted their schooling. Importantly, youths' sense of commitment to the gang and crew peer ties who gave them, at least initially, a sense of protection and respect in their neighborhoods drove much of this behavior. Rarely did these youth report that they had skipped school alone or engaged in a conflict or a fight that did not involve male peer group dynamics. I found that in the process of drawing on gang and crew ties to navigate urban violence, nongang youth became "caught up" in group expectations and obligations or acts of reciprocity and this orientation towards male group dynamics factored into school noncompletion in a number of ways.

First, gang and crew ties pulled youth away from school for social reasons, such as partying, drinking, and smoking, which strengthened cohesion among these peers. Smiley, an ex-gang member and school noncompleter, explained that right before he stopped attending school he "was taking care of business." He explained, "I was making sure I did my class work, but I was being sneaky . . . I was also getting drunk, smoking weed, and hanging with the boys." While most youth in this study skipped school at some point (and some did so frequently), youth with gang ties or in a crew were more likely to report skipping school to be with their male peer ties. These ties made opportunities to hang out available. Furthermore, there was an incentive to maintain these ties due to the urban-specific social capital they provided.

For most school noncompleters who did not become gang members, truancy, one of the biggest problems in both neighborhoods' schools, was central to not obtaining their high school diploma. Being perpetually truant resulted in an accumulation of "missing credits" and failed courses that put them extensively behind in school. In some cases youth were retained a grade (or more) and in other cases youth were expelled to alternative schools where they could pursue a high school diploma or the GED, but commonly failed to acquire either. Efrain represents a common dropout case in these neighborhoods. While he left his crew behind midway through high school, he had fallen far behind in course credits as a result of skipping classes to be with his crew peers early in high school. By the end of this senior year, Efrain was unable to meet all the course credits required to graduate on time.

Having ties to gangs and crews in adolescence not only fostered truancy in middle and high school, but as these young men explained these peer ties ultimately introduced more conflict in their lives. "Keeping it cool" with gang members on the block proved risky for nongang youth because it sent the message that they were affiliated with the gang in substantive ways. Joaquin, who could draw on gang ties on his block to protect him because "they knew him for a while," went to the hospital for two days with bruises all over his body, a "messed up face," and three broken ribs. Members of a gang with a rivalry with the one in his neighborhood beat Joaquin after school as he walked home; he reported the rival gang members had "got the idea" he was from the local neighborhood gang because he hung out with some of the gangsters there. Similarly, crews found themselves in conflict with other crews, as their members postured themselves to gain respect and were challenged in return.

As a result of this pattern, nongang youth with ties to gang and crew peers were constantly "watching their back." At a minimum these conflicts distracted youth from school. Often ties to gangs and crews absorbed youth into gang and crew behavior in direct and consequential ways that impacted school completion. For instance, youth with ties to gang members often felt they had to reciprocate protection and "back up" their gang peers in their neighborhoods, even when they were *not in* the gang. Sergio is such a case. Despite not being a gang member and holding strong views against the gangster lifestyle, Sergio became involved in many gang fights:

I had homies where I used to live in the apartments and you can say that they were gang related. They didn't try to get me in the gang . . . because they were more the family type. "I'll respect you if you *don't*

do this [join the gang]." They actually told me, "Nah, don't do this . . . I already fucked up so you don't do this" . . . like family just looks out for you. But if something happened, if somebody did something to one of us, then we all got his back because we all kicked it together.

Sergio's strong ties to gang members got him in trouble, specifically fights, because he felt the need to "get their back," i.e., support them, like they supported him when he was in need. These fights eventually led to his school expulsion. During his senior year, Sergio recognized that he was "caught up" in behaviors and peers that were counterproductive to schooling, and thus opted to enroll in the military as a way to physically remove himself from the neighborhood context, and specifically, his neighborhood peers.

Importantly, youth wrestled with their sense of obligation to their gang and crew peer ties. Ezequiel recognized these ties could introduce problems when going out to parties in the neighborhood. One way he tried to minimize problems was insisting his friends ride in his car, where he prohibited them from smoking and drinking. Despite his efforts, Ezequiel frequently found himself in the middle of fights providing back up. While feeling disinclined to help when his friends "started shit," Ezequiel did so anyway. He explained why:

I end up backing them up anyways . . . it's like having a minor. If he's out with you, he's under your responsibility. With my homies . . . if I'm out with them, they're not my responsibility, but I'm with them. So what kind of a friend am I to stand right there and let him get his ass kicked?

High school noncompleters in urban Los Angeles were youth like Ezequiel who prioritized gang and crew ties at one point in their adolescence and became "caught up" in group behavior and dynamics that proved detrimental for school completion. Even though Ezequiel never joined a gang, his commitment to his gang and crew peers got him expelled four times from three different schools when he provided back up. In one case, he punched a school police who was "man-handling" his friend. Ezequiel stopped attending the fourth school after being there only for a week because a gang, TKB, was present at the school and he didn't "get along with them." While he insisted conflict with members of TKB "was personal beef" and that "it had nothing to do with the [his friends'] gang," as a close friend to gang members rival to TKB, he had become entangled in some of their ongoing conflicts. At the time of this study, Ezequiel, 19, was attending his fifth school but his truancy and multiple expulsions had greatly interrupted his schooling and he was extensively behind academically; it would have taken him two years to get his diploma. He began to work full time during the study and concluded he had "too many missing credits" to actually catch up so he opted to leave school again.

Youth who failed to complete high school shared a distinct cultural orientation relative to most urban youth who graduated. Yet this distinction was not a difference in their orientation towards education or an oppositional or street orientation per se. Rather, the cultural distinction lies in how these youth privileged their male peer ties and specifically meeting the expectations and obligations that came with drawing on a social network that provided a type of social capital that they believed, at least initially, helped them better navigate the threat of violence. Importantly, this orientation and ties to crews and gangs weakened over time for most youth as they reached their young adult years. The academic setbacks and greater exposure to conflict and violence taught most of the young men that the *sense* of safety they initially felt through gang and crew peer ties was illusive and came at a high cost. Youth like Rigoberto left the crew behind midway through high school. As he explained, "I got tired of watching my back . . . And they never backed me up like I did them." In some cases, breaking away from these ties occurred early enough in high school that youth were able to make up missing credits or failed classes in order to graduate. Such was the case with Rigoberto who scrambled his senior year to earn course credits and get rid of his demerits due to his history of truancy. Yet while some managed to break away in time to graduate, others did not. Youth like Efrain who didn't meet the credit requirements to graduate had either turned away from these peer ties too late or were too far set behind academically when they did so to warrant graduation. For others, like Ezequiel and Jaime, a sense of obligation to

gang and crew ties remained a feature of everyday life into their early adult years, making school completion elusive.

Why Some Get “Caught Up” and Drop Out and Others Don’t

When I had extra time I would hang out in the street. Just walk up and down, talk to homies, homegirls, just kick it, do nothing. Just like that, when I had free time I would get home from school, have nothing to do, just walk around, ride my bike. Just kick it.

— Ezequiel, 19, school noncompleter

Most youth living in neighborhoods characterized by high rates of violence graduate from high school, which raises the question why urban violence impacts school completion for some youth but not others. I found that while no youth in these two communities could escape the reality of violence, some were exposed to it more than others. Youth like Ezequiel who describe spending a lot of leisurely, unstructured time in the neighborhood were more likely to witness and experience the threat of violence and be victimized more often relative to those who spent less time in the neighborhood. In general, high school graduates had more limited exposure to the neighborhood and experienced the threat of violence to a lesser degree. By having less opportunity and feeling less of a need to draw on male peer ties for protection they bypassed getting “caught up” and engaging in behavior that jeopardized school completion. Therefore, to understand why urban violence contributes to school noncompletion for some youth but not others, it is necessary to account for urban youths’ *differential exposure* to the urban neighborhood and urban violence in the first place.

Unlike Ezequiel who was highly exposed to the neighborhood context from an early age, most youth were buffered from the neighborhood and its violence to some degree. Where youth attend school and where and how youth spend their time after school and on weekends and during school breaks (and school hours) influences their exposure to their neighborhood and to its violence. Two institutions had a pivotal role in moderating youths’ exposure to the neighborhood and urban violence: the family, particularly father/father figures, and school, particularly busing and the LAUSD magnet program. Families and schools structured youths’ time and peer connections, leaving minimal opportunity for the neighborhood context—specifically urban violence—to do so.

Parents’ Role in Structured Time and Peer Connections

Like youth, parents reported urban violence to be the most salient aspect of their neighborhood and the threat of violence directed at them or their children influenced their decisions and behavior as well. Fearing the reputation of the local high school as violent, several parents sought to send their children to school elsewhere, including nearby high schools, charter schools, or schools further afield. These approaches had mixed results, at times shielding their sons from violence, but not always.

Ultimately, parents buffered youth most effectively from urban violence when they structured their son’s time and by default their peer ties. Parents did this in two main ways: by engaging them in extracurricular activities, such as sports, and by taking them to work. Some parents did this intentionally as a way to buffer their sons from violence and gangs, while others had other reasons. Leo’s mother, a full-time working, single parent of five boys, aggressively managed her sons’ time in the neighborhood by enrolling them in various sports beginning in their elementary school years and throughout high school. Leo, 19, graduated from high school, and he recalled his family’s commitment to the program and described how busy it kept them for several years. On Saturdays all five boys were up at 5 or 5:30 a.m. to be at the park at 6 a.m. He explained:

We’d line the field in the morning . . . set up the concession stand, cook, get ready for the game, play the game and then after come back and cook some more and then clean. And we’ll be back to school on

Monday and just do the same routine over because we would practice during the week Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and we were always involved . . .

Other young men's parents engaged their children in extracurricular activities for their intrinsic value. Jose and Leonardo's parents began a soccer league when the twins were three years old. Their mother explained, "Engaging them in an open air activity is good for their mental health. Otherwise it's all television, cartoons, and Nintendo and they don't learn anything there." Sixteen years later, these parents continued to run the league, now with 10 teams and 250 youth. Over time they learned to appreciate how sports could function to keep kids in the neighborhood "out of trouble."

Fathers or father figures played a critical role in encouraging time away from the streets for their sons. Youth who were consistently involved in sports throughout their childhood and adolescence—as opposed to trying a sport one season—often had fathers who strongly encouraged these activities. Alfredo and his two brothers were on the baseball and soccer teams and as children had participated in numerous other activities, like taking piano lessons, karate, and swimming. Their father, Jorge, an underemployed salesman, drove the boys to these different activities. Though financially strained, Alfredo's parents expressed that Jorge's underemployment and flexible schedule allowed him to "dedicate time to [their] sons." They attributed the fact their sons were not involved in gangs, like their cousins, to Jorge's involvement in their lives.

Moreover, several of the immigrant fathers were strong proponents of teaching their sons to work at an early age, some for the sake of instilling a strong work ethic and encouraging self-sufficiency and others as a strategy to keeping their sons out of trouble. Humberto explained:

Since they were little . . . I would tell them to join me on weekend jobs . . . "Look son, this is how you earn a living" . . . Children begin to value work. They develop a different mentality. As long as their mind is occupied, it doesn't have the space to think about doing bad things. But if a child has nothing else to do, he'll go his own way.

Youth like Mauricio and Joaquin who had extensive neighborhood ties, including gang ties, but who still completed high school, were kept busy by their fathers with work on weekends and occasionally during the week. Though neither sports nor work completely protected youth from violence—as stated earlier Joaquin went to the hospital after a beating by gang members—these were alternatives to spending time in the neighborhood. Mauricio worked all day on weekends filming *quinceañeras* and weddings with his father, while Joaquin, who also played for the football team, joined his father in construction jobs on the side, sometimes even during school hours. Spending less time in the neighborhood, they avoided getting caught up in gang and crew peer dynamics and while not stellar students, Mauricio and Joaquin managed to graduate.

Not all parents were able to engage their sons in extracurricular activities or work. Jaime's father, Reynaldo, worked long hours. In an effort to keep an eye on his sons he encouraged them to hang out with friends at home. While Reynaldo got to know his son's friends well, his home became the "hangout" spot for Jaime's crew. This unstructured leisure time ultimately attracted attention from a nearby gang and during the study Jaime's house was "shot up." The lack of structured time and activities made the neighborhood context and its threat of violence persistently relevant in Jaime's life. Shortly thereafter he stopped attending school altogether after getting expelled for a fight.

Schools' Role in Structured Time and Peer Connections

School institutional structures, namely school busing and the magnet program in the LAUSD, had a profound impact on the amount of time youth spent with peers in the neighborhood. Designed to racially desegregate students, the magnet program in LAUSD bus and shuffle students from disadvantaged urban schools to other schools. While some of these host schools are racially mixed and higher income, some are not. Often inner-city students are bused to a magnet program

in a similarly disadvantaged school. Regardless of the school, being bused out ultimately restricted students' exposure to their own neighborhood.⁵

Bused youth had to catch a bus at 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning to arrive at school on time. Because of the distance and Los Angeles traffic, these youth arrived home late in the evening in time for dinner and had very little time to spend in the neighborhood and draw on gang and crew ties. In general, youth whose parents picked them up at the bus stop bypassed getting hit up or pocket checked. These youth tended to perceive and experience less violence in their neighborhoods and therefore felt less need to establish or maintain gang or crew ties for protection and respect.

Youth who were not picked up at the bus stop remained vulnerable to victimization. Federico, 19 and a college student, had been pocket checked five times and beaten up once on his way home from the bus stop in high school. Yet Federico had minimal opportunity to interact, much less form a close friendship, with any youth in his neighborhood because he'd been bused out since middle school. For these youth, drawing on gang and crew ties and getting "caught up" was simply harder to do and completing high school easier to achieve.

The structure of magnet programs buffered youth from the neighborhood and urban violence in other important ways. Even attending the magnet program in the local neighborhood school shielded youth from urban violence to some extent. The program isolates students in separate classes from the larger student population. Forced to take the same courses in a cohort, the structure of magnet programs greatly influences who these youth spend time with and how. Magnet youth reported more close friendships with classmates than nonmagnet youth or neighbors.

Less school and neighborhood peer overlap among youth attending magnet programs had two consequences. First, it meant that the conflicts that flowed between the neighborhood and school rarely entered these classrooms. Second, because classmates lived scattered throughout Los Angeles, students gravitated to the after-school magnet enrichment programs to socialize. This meant that magnet students spent less time with nonmagnet students in and after school or out in the neighborhood. Fernando, 22, a college student, explained:

I was in the magnet program. If I was in the regular track, I would have met all sorts of kids my age that lived around my block . . . and we would have hung out. I would have had friends that lived close by . . . I didn't know anybody around my block. I didn't hang out with the neighborhood kids and till this day, the people that's my age around my block I don't know who they are. I don't know their name[s].

All young men in this study who were on the college track had been in a magnet program, either bused out to another school or attended the magnet program in their neighborhood school with class peers from other neighborhoods. They were the youth most buffered from the neighborhood and urban violence and least likely to draw on gangs and crews to navigate their neighborhood and school.

In contrast, youth like Ezequiel, who had "nothing to do, just walk around," encountered more threats of violence throughout their adolescence and it was these youth who felt a stronger need—and had greater opportunity—to draw on gang and crew ties to navigate their neighborhood and schools safely. Unintentionally, school expulsion and the loose structure of half-day alternative schools provided even greater opportunity for these youth to hang out, reinforcing these dynamics.

5. School busing and the magnet program may raise questions of selection. I found most parents were unaware of these programs and did not have the option to enroll their children. Parents who did hear about the program did so through a teacher who identified their son as a good candidate or through their personal networks, such as kin or a neighbor. While parents stated they bused out their children to receive a better education, parents' assessment of a "high quality" school typically centered on issues of social disruption and violence.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to identify neighborhood mechanisms that contribute to higher rates of high school noncompletion in poor, urban neighborhoods. Interviews revealed urban violence has a profound impact on young men. Violence and the threat of violence encourage male youth to draw on one another for physical and symbolic protection. This, in turn, has consequences. In drawing on this form of social capital, youth get “caught up” having to fulfill a set of expectations (hanging out) and obligations (backing up) with these peers that ultimately prove to be counterproductive to school completion. A significant distinction between high school noncompleters and those who graduate is their greater exposure to the urban neighborhood and its defining feature, urban violence.

Urban male youth who fail to complete high school not only tend to exhibit poor academic performance, but high levels of truancy and fights on campus that lead to suspensions and expulsions, *behavior* often characterized as being “street” and not “school” oriented (Anderson 1999; Flores-Gonzalez 2002). Debate over the identity and education cultural orientation of these youth has dominated current understanding of why such a large number of inner-city youth perform poorly in school, including why so many of them drop out (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Carter 2005; Flores-Gonzalez 2002; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Harding 2010; Harris 2011; Ogbu 1983; Portes and Zhou 1993; Tyson et al. 2005). This research shows that to understand the cultural orientation that contributes to school noncompletion, it is necessary to shift attention away from educational norms presumed to figure prominently in education outcomes and to account for the everyday context that guides urban youths’ choices and behavior. Studies suggest certain features and processes unique to urban neighborhoods help explain the higher rates of high school noncompletion there. This study focuses on neighborhood mechanisms and identifies a cultural orientation that emerges when male youth are victimized in urban neighborhoods. In doing so, the study answers a call for scholars to examine cultural orientations specific to disadvantaged contexts (Noguera 2003; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010).

While urban poverty research has emphasized social disorganization as an underlying factor driving urban violence, the present study shows that in the absence of structured time and peer ties, violence functions to create organization among youth. In Los Angeles, youth draw on gang and/or crew ties to tap into an urban-specific social capital that assists them to get by in these neighborhoods. The downside to being embedded in these social networks is that while seemingly useful for navigating violence, they actually expose youth to more violence over time and ultimately make “excess claims on group members,” bringing about what Alejandro Portes (1998) describes as “negative social capital” (p. 15). This finding is consistent with research that shows social networks are a central feature that facilitates urban violence (Papachristos 2009; Papachristos, Hureau, and Braga 2013). And, this is aligned with research that shows social cohesion in the inner city can help residents navigate urban conditions, while at the same time undermine the well-being of these communities (Pattillo 1998; Venkatesh 1997).

Cultural orientations and behavior counterproductive to school completion, then, do not emerge out of social isolation from the “mainstream” (Wilson 1987, 1996), but rather *social interaction* and a kind of peer *organization* that develops among urban youth exposed to urban violence. The social and moral distancing from gangs—and specifically gang violence—voiced by most youth in this study highlights the dominance of conventional norms in the urban context. Most urban youth are highly critical of gang behavior in part because they face an ever-present threat of violence in their neighborhoods, many having been victimized at some point. Nonetheless, the conditions of these Los Angeles neighborhoods make it so that garnering respect and protection via gang and crew ties remain an invaluable resource. Social isolation matters in shaping these orientations in the extent to which it contributes to urban violence.

This study makes an additional contribution by identifying “for whom” the neighborhood context matters. Researchers aiming to understand neighborhood mechanisms that contribute to

poor life outcomes need to account for *within* neighborhood variation to explicate how factors such as parents or school structures interact with, either moderating or amplifying, neighborhood effects. As Michelle Lamont and Mario Luis Small (2008) explain, the strength of the qualitative research is in accurately depicting social processes or social mechanisms and describing “under what circumstances” two phenomena are associated or “how one leads to another.” By comparing cases of high school graduates and noncompleters this study draws logical inferences to explain “under what circumstances” high noncompletion occurs in urban neighborhoods characterized by high levels of violence. Two next door neighbors can experience the neighborhood quite differently and the impact the neighborhood will have on their life outcomes will differ if one youth spends very little time on the block either because he works, participates in extracurricular activities, or is bused to school outside the neighborhood, and the other youth spends ample unstructured leisure time in the neighborhood. The negative impact of urban violence weighs heavier on youths lacking structured time and peer ties because they are more exposed to the context in the first place.

How urban parents impact their children’s educational outcomes should also be understood within the reality of urban neighborhoods and constrained information and resources. Research shows that the threat of, and engagement in, violence weighs heavily on parenting practices in urban neighborhoods (Elliot et al. 2006; Furstenberg et al. 1999). In this study, this concern underlined parents’ decisions to send their children to different (though often similar quality) schools, encourage indoor activities (i.e., video games), or sons’ friends to visit (and not the other way around). Yet most parents reported having minimal information to guide them in these decisions. For example, most parents were unaware of busing or magnet programs. Further, parents who learned about these programs through a teacher, kin, or neighbor reported they had enrolled their sons in large part to avoid the social disruption and violence in local schools. Ultimately, for most parents engaging their sons in work and/or sports and extracurricular activities proved most effective in buffering their sons from urban violence. Notably, this strategy is distinct from Annette Lareau’s (2003) finding that middle-class parents encourage extracurricular activities to cultivate cultural capital, a means for upward mobility. Often, parents in urban neighborhoods turn to these activities in response to gang activity and violence in their neighborhood and to avoid “downward assimilation” of their children.

Future research should continue to examine how school structures and school processes contribute to school disengagement in conjunction with the neighborhood processes identified here. While studies show that school arrangements, like magnet programs, foster social and cultural capital that encourages academic achievement (Conchas 2006; Flores-Gonzalez 2005; Mehan et al. 1996), it is less appreciated how these programs unintentionally minimize exposure to urban violence and curtail the opportunity and incentive to form “negative” ties. Policy makers and educators interested in lowering the dropout rate should be cognizant of how school institutional arrangements can either buffer or further expose youth to the neighborhood and urban violence. Acknowledging how urban violence impacts male youth is needed to deconstruct the notion of the oppositional urban youth and to discourage school policies that criminalize youth and exacerbate the dropout problem (Hirshfield 2008, 2009; Kirk and Sampson 2012; Rumberger 2011). While this study shows that the cultural orientations and behaviors that contribute to school noncompletion cannot be decontextualized or reduced to only what happens in the classroom, academically disengaged youth in this study—dropouts and graduates alike—also pointed to the schooling process as being problematic. Notably, youth reported they skipped out on specific classes—those where they perceived teachers “didn’t care”—versus skipping out on school entirely, indicating that the extent to which the neighborhood matters also depends on school factors.

The cultural orientation that guides youth behavior counterproductive to school completion can shift, and this is promising. Cases in this study illustrate that youth’s exposure to violence can change over time, weakening or strengthening. In turn, an orientation to the gang and crew peer

ties can also weaken or strengthen over time, as those who broke away from these ties indicate. Underlying the data is a developmental story of young men learning to adapt to their environment and maturing into more constructive strategies to navigate their neighborhood. The data strongly suggest that reducing male youth's unstructured leisure time in urban neighborhoods through work or extracurricular programs will enhance their odds of completing high school, even in communities impacted by violence.

Appendix A • Racial and Ethnic Composition of Neighborhoods, 2000

	Latino (Percent)	Mexican Origin (Percent)	Other Latinos (Percent)	Non-Latino White (Percent)	Black (Percent)	Other (Percent)
Mexican neighborhood: Pueblo Viejo	92.3	76.3	16.0	2.0	1.5	4.2
Black-Latino neighborhood: Central City	52.4	32.4	20.0	1.0	45.4	1.2
Los Angeles County	44.6	32.0	13.0	31.1	9.8	14.5

Appendix B • Social Characteristics of Residents by Neighborhood, 2000

	Female-Headed Household, No Husband (Percent)	Males 16+, Not in Labor Force (Percent)	Males 16+, Unemployment (Percent)	Median Household (Dollars)	Individuals Below Poverty (Percent)
Los Angeles County	21	32	8	42,189	18
Latinos	22	32	9	33,820	24
African Americans	47	40	16	31,905	24
Pueblo Viejo	30	43	12	22,429	37
Latinos	30	41	11	22,942	37
Central City	40	41	14	22,091	37
Latinos	22	32	11	26,031	37
African Americans	57	53	19	19,065	38

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