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African American Adolescent Females' Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety, Familial Strategies, and Sexual Debut

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Abstract

Sexual debut represents a developmental transition that holds possibility for growth and for risk. Family and neighborhood may impact timing of debut. This qualitative study examined family strategies (e.g., moving, parental monitoring), perceptions of neighborhood, and attitudes about sex and sexual debut among sexually experienced and inexperienced African American adolescent females living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Findings show that more familial strategies were reported by sexually inexperienced females, suggesting that strategies may delay sexual debut. Furthermore, experiences with neighborhood violence related to attitudes about sex and sexual debut, suggesting a linkage between death anxiety and sexual debut among female youth.

For many adolescents, sexual debut marks a significant point in their development, and, though being sexually active is normative for older adolescents (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004), early sexual debut is often associated with health outcomes that affect development (Moore, Miller, Glei, & Morrison, 1995). Thus, some health professionals and families aim to postpone sexual debut as a way to reduce health and developmental risks, particularly among female youth. Given the relatively greater risks associated with sexual activity for urban African American youth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009), and their historically earlier sexual debut (CDC, 2010), it is important to explore factors that may affect sexual debut.

Adolescent sexual development unfolds in a context that includes the family and the community in which the young person lives and interacts, and development is shaped by the meaning that youth make of their experiences (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Swanson, Spencer, dell'Angelo, Harpalani, & Spencer, 2002). African American youth are embedded in a distinct social and cultural milieu with deep historical antecedents that are integral to understanding normative development. Among other factors, neighborhood of residence influences developmental outcomes, and African Americans are much more likely than Whites to live in resource-poor or disadvantaged neighborhoods (South & Crowder, 1997).

Living in a dangerous neighborhood increases the likelihood of early sexual debut (see Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Upchurch, Aneshensel, Sucoff, & Levy-Storms, 1999). In light of this, strategies employed by parents or guardians may serve to balance the risks

posed by socioeconomic conditions, and by race and gender stereotypes (Jarrett & Jefferson, 2003; Swanson et al., 2002). This qualitative study includes sexually experienced and inexperienced female African American youth living in urban low-income communities and documents familial strategies that may influence timing of sexual debut. Although the communities in which this work was conducted are objectively disadvantaged, youth may perceive their neighborhood as positive or negative. Thus, we examined youths' phenomenological perceptions of their neighborhoods, allowing us to take into account how youth experience life in their communities and the impact that these perceptions may have on sexual debut.

Families as Adaptive Units

A number of studies focus on strategies employed by families, heads of households, and youth to protect themselves from neighborhood risks, to address challenges associated with neighborhood disorganization, or to promote social mobility (Brown & Gourdine, 2001; Cobbina, Miller, & Brunson, 2008; Jarrett, 1995; Jarrett & Burton, 1999; Jarrett & Jefferson, 2003, 2004). These studies may give insight relevant to parenting. Because many households in these communities are headed by females, it is likely that women's self-protective strategies shape how they negotiate parenting, especially with daughters. Women respond to threats, in part, by avoiding people and places, and by modulating self-presentation (Brown & Gourdine, 2001; Jarrett & Jefferson, 2004; Jones, 2009; Mullins, Wright, & Jacobs, 2004). These strategies may be transformed into parenting approaches that limit adolescent females' unmonitored activity or reduce the amount of time they spend in the community.

Jarrett (1997) identified a typology of family-based parenting strategies aimed at protecting young people from harm or isolating them from destructive forces in the community. These include family protection strategies (e.g., involving negotiation of space and home confinement), child-monitoring strategies, parental resource-seeking strategies (e.g., identifying and procuring resources from institutions or extended kin networks on behalf of other family members), and in-home learning strategies. Parents also actively instruct children and adolescents by differentiating "good" or "respectable" families from "street" families (Anderson, 1999; Jarrett & Jefferson, 2003), providing cautionary warnings or moralistic tales about neighborhood risks, and teaching children how to act in dangerous situations. Jarrett's studies, which focus largely on families with young children, provide a basis for our exploration of strategies employed in households with adolescents.

Neighborhood Context

Although several studies have demonstrated links between general neighborhood disadvantage and sexual debut in urban African American youth (Lanctôt & Smith, 2001; Upchurch et al., 1999), these studies are limited in scope and are at least a decade old. Neighborhoods are related to developmental and health outcomes (e.g., Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004), with youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods evidencing poorer outcomes. Drawing on the neighborhood effects literature, disadvantaged neighborhoods have been characterized using some or all of the following markers: perceptions of neighborhood safety and adequacy, visible and invisible criminal activity, maintenance of public space, or availability of community resources (Winstanley et al., 2008). Although all of these characteristics have relevance to characterizing neighborhoods, perceptions of personal safety may be particularly important to youths' evaluations of their neighborhoods.

One feature of life in unsafe neighborhoods is exposure to, or fear of, violence (Fishkin, Rohrbach, & Johnson, 1997; Spencer, Dupree, Cunningham, Harpalani, & Muñoz-Miller, 2003), including sexual violence (Cobbina et al., 2008; Jones, 2004, 2009; Mullins et al.,

2004). Prior work suggests that females who perceived the neighborhood as safe and reported lower levels of ambient hazards were more likely to delay sexual debut than those who thought their neighborhood was unsafe (Upchurch et al., 1999). Furthermore, in unsafe environments, young women may become sexually active to gain the protection of a male or as a pleasurable distraction from worry. Alternatively, young women may reduce participation in community life to limit their exposure to violence, which may have the unintended consequence of making it difficult to recruit a partner. Prior work also suggests that females may be less integrated into the neighborhood than are males (Cobbina et al., 2008; Kim, 2010); this may be an outcome of greater parental monitoring or restriction of activity of females.

Neighborhoods are not typically uniformly negative (or positive), and there is growing recognition that disadvantaged neighborhoods have resources, including social resources, that may buffer negatives aspects of living in the community (Jarrett, 2003; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). The fact that some African American youth residing in disadvantaged communities become successful adults is in keeping with the broader literature on resilience (Jarrett, 1995; Luthar, 2006). When economic and institutional resources are low, social resources in communities may be especially important (Swanson et al., 2002). Although a number of social resources and strengths have the potential to affect development, we focus on the role of families, specifically on strategies that affect where youth live, go to school, or how they are monitored.

African American family configurations have developed in response to the conditions of their urban neighborhoods, including pervasive racial segregation and limited mobility (Brewster, 1994b; South & Crowder, 1997). Frequently, kin networks are structured around a multigenerational core of women that includes relatives through blood and marriage and also includes close friends who are considered kin. Family members may live dispersed across a number of households in multiple neighborhoods but remain integrally involved in activities such as parenting or providing resources. Family configurations are also influenced by early parenting. For individuals who foresee few opportunities for achieving adult status through traditionally sanctioned economic routes, sexual debut and parenthood may serve as an alternative path to adulthood (Anderson, 1999; Brewster, 1994a; Burton, 1990; Jarrett & Burton, 1999). Family structures involving early parenthood reflect a unique adaptation to an expected shorter life span (Burton, 1990) or blocked opportunities (Anderson, 1999), but parents who have witnessed the challenges of early parenthood may wish to protect their own daughters from this outcome by taking actions that may delay her sexual debut.

Theoretical work by Spencer et al. (2003) suggests that factors such as familial strategies, and youth's phenomenological experiences of their neighborhoods, have the potential to buffer the negative impact of a risky environment, leading to more adaptive outcomes among youth. To fill a gap in our understanding of the association between disadvantage and sexual debut, and how neighborhood violence may affect adolescent sexual debut, a more nuanced analysis is needed focusing on the variation in experiences of youth growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods, familial strategies and their relationship to sexual debut, and perceptions of sex.

This Study

The goal of this exploratory qualitative investigation is to provide a better understanding of the potential linkages among familial strategies, perceptions of neighborhood and sexual debut in a sample of 15- to 17-year-old African American females living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. We analyzed sexually experienced and inexperienced adolescent females'

attitudes toward their neighborhoods and sexual debut, while also examining transcripts for evidence of familial strategies that could protect these adolescents from neighborhood risks. By comparing the number and type of strategies between sexually experienced and inexperienced respondents, we aim to shed light on whether the familial practices may contribute to delaying sexual debut by mitigating negative neighborhood experiences.

Method

This study is part of a larger community-based qualitative investigation examining ecological factors that affect social and sexual development among urban African American youth. The study was conducted in predominately African American neighborhoods in two U.S. cities with high rates of HIV/STIs. The Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) at all sponsoring institutions approved study procedures.

Participants

We recruited a purposive sample of youth to obtain approximately equal representation by gender and by sexual experience. Of the 95 respondents screened for eligibility, eight were ineligible and six declined participation, resulting in a sample of 81 male and female participants ranging in age from 15 to 17 years. As the current analyses focus on females, we analyzed data from the 39 females ($n = 19$ sexually experienced, $n = 20$ sexually inexperienced). One sexually experienced female completed a partial interview. Thus, we used the 19 sexually experienced females with complete data on topics related to this article. *Sexual experience* was defined as having sexual intercourse. The mean age of female participants was 16.

Procedures

Fieldwork took place at youth-serving, community-based agencies in the study communities and was conducted by highly trained, ethnic minority staff with prior experience working with similar populations. Staff used several approaches to identify potential participants including nominations by agency staff, approaching youth at the agency, and snowball sampling. Eligibility was determined by screening conducted by study staff. Inclusion criteria included being African American, heterosexually oriented, and between ages 15 and 17.

Eligible youth were interviewed under private conditions by study staff at the community organizations. All female youth were interviewed by someone of the same gender. We obtained written informed consent from parent/guardians and assent from youth prior to the interview. Youth received cash remuneration for their participation in one semistructured interview (about 2 hours in length). The study team conducted regular meetings throughout data collection to monitor and to advise on field activity. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy by staff.

Measures

The study team developed, pilot tested, and revised instruments prior to fielding the study. Interviewers completed a 11/2 day training on the study and the instrument and demonstrated proficiency prior to going into the field. Semistructured interviews were designed to address ecological factors that may affect social development and sexual health. In this study, we focused on perceptions of, and experiences in, the neighborhood, familial strategies, and attitudes toward sex. Items on the neighborhood included open-ended questions focused on how youth perceived their neighborhood (e.g., What is it like living in your neighborhood?), with prompts that elicited further data (e.g., length of residence; likes/dislikes about current and prior neighborhood). Information on familial strategies was

elicited in the context of broader questions that asked about family throughout the interview and often were revealed as youth discussed a variety of issues (e.g., what respondent has learned from family about being a teenage girl or about sexual issues). Finally, attitudes about sex were obtained through queries about when it is appropriate to have sex (e.g., Do you think it is ok for teenage girls and guys to have sex of any kind?; What age do you think it is ok for a girl to have sex of any kind?) with probes that elicited information about why the youth held these opinions or elicited a story reflecting their beliefs. These data are a subset of a longer interview that addressed a range of topics related to gender and sexuality. The interview protocol is available from the second author.

Analyses

Using a team approach (Stern, 1991), we conducted qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this approach, investigators categorize content by themes and systematically compare across cases to identify typical patterns of, and variation in, experience (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Prior to developing a coding scheme, transcripts were read and summarized to identify relevant content by two analysts highly trained in qualitative methods. One analyst developed the coding scheme in consultation with the secondary analyst, coded the data, and then discussed application of codes with the other analyst to ensure that coding rang true. Additionally, a subset of transcripts was coded by the second analyst, demonstrating agreement in analyses. Interviews were coded for (1) respondents' evaluations of their neighborhoods, (2) potential familial strategies to reduce exposure to risk in the neighborhood, and (3) respondents' attitudes toward sexuality. Over a period of months, the analysts met regularly to discuss coding schemes, findings, and interpretation; additionally findings were shared with the larger research group for confirmation.

Sexual activity status—Information on respondents' sexual activity status—sexually experienced or sexually inexperienced—was obtained during study screening. We confirmed information about sexual experience in reviewing transcripts.

Neighborhood evaluations—Initial reading of transcripts identified variation among respondents in evaluation of neighborhoods suggesting three categories: positive, negative, or mixed (positive and negative) evaluations. To identify patterns associated with evaluations, we grouped respondents based on these evaluations and examined similarities and differences in sexual experience (experienced/inexperienced).

Neighborhood violence and sex—We coded respondent comments about sex and reasons that young people have for choosing to have sex or not have sex, and examined variation on attitudes about sex based on sexual experience and on evaluation of neighborhoods.

Familial strategies—Familial strategies were explored based on preliminary coding of transcripts and a review of the literature. Identified strategies included moving, cloistering (i.e., staying inside the home), spending time outside the neighborhood, attending school outside the neighborhood, occupying multiple residences, parental monitoring (providing limits and oversight, e.g., curfews, checking in by phone, knowing friends and their families, knowing planned activities and associates), and parental instruction (verbal guidance, advising not to fight or when to fight, how to behave in relationships, not to have sex) (See Table 1). Data were analyzed for differences in number and type of strategies by level of sexual experience (experienced/inexperienced).

Results

Overview

In the sections that follow, we present our findings on attitudes toward the neighborhood and on neighborhood violence and sex. This is followed by presentation of the familial strategies identified and how familial strategies differed among sexually experienced and sexually inexperienced females.

Attitudes Toward Neighborhoods

Neighborhoods were viewed as positive, negative, or mixed. About one half of all respondents ($n = 19$) rated their neighborhoods as mixed (having positive and negative aspects or qualities); this group included approximately equal numbers of sexually experienced and inexperienced respondents. Just over one fourth of the respondents rated their neighborhoods negatively, and the remainder rated it positively.

Although sexual experience did not differentiate among those who rated the neighborhood as mixed, those who were sexually experienced were more likely to rate their neighborhood negatively ($n = 9$ negative, $n = 2$ positive). In contrast, respondents who had not had sex were equally likely to rate their neighborhood as positive ($n = 6$) or negative ($n = 6$).

The following quotations provide examples of a variety of views of the neighborhood from sexually inexperienced (presented first) and sexually experienced youth.

It can be calm at times and it could be loud at times, too. It's just the company you keep basically. You have to know how to stay out of trouble around there. You've got to be very careful. (Mixed, Respondent D, 15-year-old, sexually inexperienced)

I've been there my whole life, so I'm used to it ... some people wouldn't be able to take it. ... Well it's my community. I don't really like—it's not that I don't like anything about it, but there's a whole lot of downfalls about living there. Yeah. (Mixed, Respondent I, 17-year-old, sexually inexperienced)

I don't really go outside around there, so. I'm kind of in the house, so it's kind of boring to me. (Negative, Respondent L, 15-year-old, sexually inexperienced)

It's quiet. It's quiet. It's not like over here, even though it's right up the street, but it's not like a lot of cars passing by. It's just like—I don't know. There's not a lot of stuff happening. (Positive, Respondent E, 15-year-old, sexually inexperienced)

It's a lot of trauma. Like you've just got to stay away from a lot of people because they cause trouble. ... It's crazy. (Negative, Respondent R, 16-year-old, sexually experienced)

It's a pretty nice neighborhood ... nothing really goes down in my neighborhood. Not that I know of. I think I live in a good neighborhood. I'm happy where I live at. I don't ever see like a lot of like young boys outside and stuff like that. At least on my street. (Positive, Respondent C, 16-year-old, sexually experienced)

In my neighborhood ... is a whole bunch of killing and stuff going on. ... But living in my neighborhood, I feel safe when I'm in my house. Or like if I'm out somewhere, I feel pretty safe ... most of them are getting killed, or how they're missing, or something like that ... mostly that's on the news. (Mixed, Respondent A, 15-year-old, sexually experienced)

In this neighborhood ... you notice something new every day, either death or a birth, something good or something bad. So I say this neighborhood is good. It's a

good and bad community, like the people in it, I get along really well. ... But the community, I feel like it should be better and it's kind of a struggle. ... All this violence ... the gang-related activities ... there should be more jobs out for people, homeless people should be helped instead of, and all the drugs, I think that's a bad too. (Mixed, Respondent B, 15-year-old, sexually experienced)

Additionally, when we examined neighborhood evaluations and familial strategies, we found that sexually inexperienced females who rated the neighborhood positively or mixed had more strategies per respondent than those who rated the neighborhood negatively.

Neighborhood Violence and Sex

Analysis of respondents' attitudes toward sex suggests that neighborhood violence may bear on sexual debut. *Violence*, as operationalized here, refers to acts of public physical aggression outside of the context of intimate dating or partner relationships. About 20% of respondents discussed violence as a reason that they, or others, chose to have sex. Several respondents said that they became sexually active because neighborhood violence made the future uncertain, and others identified sex as a strategy to cope with problems.

Young girls today—a lot of 'em are dying and stuff from like gun—like violence ... I be telling a lot of young girls ... when times come like that ... and you not ready, it's not that hard to walk away [from sex]. (Respondent H, 16-year-old, sexually inexperienced)

Because you don't know if you're gonna die ... if I was a virgin ... when I'm dead I would be thinking like, "Dang, I wish I would have did this and I wish I would have did that." (Respondent D, 16-year-old, sexually experienced)

People get killed a lot. There's a lotta people pregnant, yeah. Everybody's sleeping with each other, everybody's sleeping with each other. (Respondent O, 17-year-old, sexually experienced)

I just go for it. Because now these days people just dying at any point. So I just be like, "No. I don't have time for that (i.e., for games). Like we're just about to be together ... just like people was dying so fast. And I think life's too short to like play hecka games ... because you never know when it's time for you to go. (Respondent H, 17-year-old, sexually experienced)

Some people just be wanting them [children] young ... 'Cause they don't know what's gonna happen. It's just so crazy now. ... There's hecka people be getting killed and stuff. (Respondent J, 17-year-old, sexually experienced)

Familial Strategies

Seven familial strategies were identified in this study. As noted in Table 1, these strategies have the potential to affect youths' experiences and exposures to influences in the environment. Such strategies may also have a psychosocial impact through their influence on the youths' exposure to various new environments, to their sense of belonging to a community or peer group, or to their belief that they are valued by a parent or guardian. In this way, familial strategies may serve as protective factors or buffers to stressors in the environment.

A comparison of sexually inexperienced and experienced females reveals notable differences between the two groups in terms of familial strategies (see Table 2). Eighty percent of females who had not had their sexual debut reported at least one strategy; of these, more than one half reported two or three strategies. These strategies included: moving neighborhoods ($n = 5$), cloistering ($n = 5$), spending time outside the neighborhood ($n = 3$),

attending school outside the neighborhood ($n = 6$), living in multiple residences ($n = 1$), parental monitoring ($n = 4$), and parental instruction ($n = 4$) (Table 2). Two sexually inexperienced respondents reported no familial strategies. In describing their environments, one female adolescent noted that her block was “safe” and “quiet.” The second described spending time with friends mostly, though not entirely, at her house.

In contrast, sexually experienced females evidenced fewer familial strategies. Just more than one half of this group reported at least one strategy including moving ($n = 5$), cloistering ($n = 1$), spending time outside neighborhood ($n = 3$), attending school outside the neighborhood ($n = 6$), and parental instruction ($n = 3$). Only four sexually active respondents reported multiple strategies. Three respondents reported two familial strategies, and one reported three.

Strikingly, one fourth of the sample ($n = 10$) reported having moved within the past several years. Youth in both groups reported moving. Among those who had moved, we examined assessments of the new neighborhood. Three respondents assessed the new neighborhood as comparatively less safe than the old neighborhood; all three youth were sexually active. The remaining seven respondents thought their new neighborhoods were safer. A dominant theme among respondents who had moved was the recognition that the change in residence was a familial adaptation to neighborhood violence. Of the seven youth who viewed the move as a response to neighborhood violence, five had not had sex, and two were sexually experienced. The following quotes reflect respondents’ evaluations of their moves.

I: Do you like it better here than over there?

R: Here. Over there it’s just like drama.

I: What kind of drama?

R: Crimes, you know, people shooting and stuff, so yeah. (Respondent E, 15-year-old, sexually inexperienced)

It’s different compared to my old neighborhood ... feel more safe over here ... it’s quiet so, you just walk down the street. You don’t expect anything bad to happen ... [where] I used to live ... always hear about somebody getting hurt, gangs and it was just bad over there. Burglary and everything. So I feel safer where I am now. (Respondent K, 15-year-old, sexually inexperienced)

I just love [old neighborhood] ... it just calm, quiet ... people get along ... like it really wasn’t in like drugs over there. ... And now that I moved to [new neighborhood], it’s just drugs, drugs ... a lot of stuff that you can get in trouble in. (Respondent D, 16-year-old, sexually experienced)

I was born in [current/new city], but my grandmother adopted me and they took me down [to another state] when I was 4 years old, ‘cause they didn’t want me being raised in no town like this. (Respondent O, 17-year-old, sexually experienced)

Where I live now, it’s more like ... it’s a more built-in like neighborhood ... it’s more catered to the kids ... we have a center right on our block. ... But it’s just more built in like better. (Respondent H, 17-year-old, sexually experienced)

R: It was decent [old neighborhood] because this is where I’ve been living since kindergarten, so this is the only neighborhood I know, but it has its ups and downs living here as far as my brother being involved in gangs and protecting my family, so it was somewhat bad.

I: So moving was – part of moving was to get away from that?

R: Yes. (Respondent P, 15-year-old, sexually experienced)

Although numerous familial strategies were identified in our analyses, there was limited discussion of strategies in the interviews. An exception was the explicit identification of parental/guardian instruction as a reason for not becoming sexually active that was made by several sexually inexperienced youth. For example, one respondent, who lives with her aunt, said that she does not have a boyfriend because her aunt forbids it, but if she lived with her mother this would not be the case. Another respondent replied that she did not have sex because her “mom and grandpa were crazy” (i.e., would react strongly). Because the impact of familial strategies on sexual debut may be indirect, it is not surprising that youth did not frequently discuss these issues together.

Discussion

Our qualitative findings suggest that variation in timing of sexual debut among adolescent females in the communities we studied may be shaped by experiences and attitudes toward neighborhood and by familial strategies. We found that sexually active youth were more likely to view their neighborhood in negative terms, as unsafe or violent, and some sexually experienced females raised neighborhood violence as a reason for having sex. Further, fewer familial strategies were found among sexually active youth compared to those who had not yet experienced sexual debut.

Studies of the relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and sexual debut have not directly assessed violence (e.g., Brewster, Billy, & Grady, 1993; Cubbin, Santelli, Brindis, & Braveman, 2005); our findings suggest that violence may contribute to this relationship. Residents of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods are far more likely to experience violence than those living in the most advantaged communities (Lauritsen & White, 2001). With regard to sexual debut, prior work has shown that gang involvement, an activity that is fraught with violence, increases the likelihood of early onset of sex (Lancôt & Smith, 2001). Some sexually experienced females’ attitudes toward sex reflect the reality of neighborhood violence in a number of ways. These females report a desire to live in the moment rather than delaying experiences. This is one pragmatic response to living in an environment where the prevalence and randomness of neighborhood violence makes the future uncertain.

Adolescents who are exposed to neighborhood violence often have experienced the death of similarly-aged friends, acquaintances, or family members (Way, 1998), making the possibility of death real, rather than abstract. This exposure to violence may lead to existential anxiety related to the inevitability of death. One possible explanation for a relationship between neighborhood violence and sexual debut lies in terror management theory (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004). This perspective posits that individuals draw on symbolic (Solomon et al., 2004; Wisman, 2007) and presymbolic mechanisms to cope with the conflict between the desire to live forever and the fact of death (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Koole, 2004; Yalom, 1980). Both mechanisms work by reducing awareness of death. The symbolic does so by presenting a worldview that buffers anxiety and enhances self-esteem; presymbolic mechanisms, on the other hand, include “precultural behaviors” such as sleeping, eating, or sex that reduce selffocus (Wisman, 2007). Drawing on this perspective, one may posit that some adolescents who are exposed to violence may be more likely to become sexually active to mitigate death anxiety. Our finding that some females discussed sex in the context of violence suggests that examination

of existential anxiety among youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods may be a productive avenue for future investigations of sexual debut.

In contrast to our findings among sexually experienced youth, we found that, among the sexually inexperienced, those who viewed their neighborhood positively reported a greater number of familial strategies. The familial strategies to neighborhood disadvantage we identified correspond to some of the family-based parenting strategies identified in prior work (Jarrett, 1997) and include family protection strategies and resource-seeking strategies. Our findings show that youth with more strategies were less likely to have experienced sexual debut, suggesting that familial strategies may have an impact on this transitional behavior. These findings are in keeping with theoretical propositions that suggest that positive social factors can serve to buffer the risks associated with living in a disadvantaged environment (Evans, Kim, Ting, Tesher, & Shannis, 2007; Spencer, 2006).

Among the strategies identified in this study, moving residences may result in changes of the greatest scope, as it removes the adolescent from one social milieu and immerses her in another. One fourth of our sample reported a recent move. Stack (1994) correlated moving to increased likelihood of sexual debut. However, we found that sexually experienced and sexually inexperienced youth were equally likely to have moved. As with other nonnormative transitions, a move can serve as an impetus for developmental change (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), and the impact of a move on sexual debut may be shaped by the nature and timing of the event, as well as the phenomenological experience of the youth. Strikingly, sexually inexperienced females reported moving from more dangerous to safer neighborhoods, whereas some sexually experienced respondents moved from safer neighborhoods to communities they perceived to be more dangerous. In the first case, moves may reflect a familial strategy in response to violence or other negative aspects of community life; in the latter case the move may represent a decline in socioeconomic circumstances or other conditions. Also, in the latter case, the move may not reflect an active parenting strategy. Our findings suggest the need for more nuanced approaches to studying changes in residence that explore reasons for moves, timing of moves, characteristics of old and new neighborhoods, and the impact of moves on family structure and the social conditions for the youth.

Other familial strategies included parental monitoring, shifting residences and keeping adolescents inside the house, reflecting approaches that restrict or regulate exposure to the environment to greater or lesser degrees. Notably, cloistering, a more restrictive form of parental control, was reported almost exclusively by females who had not yet had sex. Staying inside may reduce the likelihood of sexual activity directly by reducing access to potential partners, or indirectly by limiting exposure to violence, and with it, the perceived need to live in the moment. However, youth respond to these strategies in different ways, as reflected by one sexually active respondent who reported calling males to her home to have sex, because she was required to stay inside. One would suspect that parental figures were not present in the home in this situation, reflecting the challenges that working parents face in providing appropriate levels of monitoring (Jarrett, Jefferson, & Kelly, 2010) even as they institute restrictions. Thus, cloistering may be an effective strategy with compliant youth or in situations where there is adult monitoring. Further, because the home in African American communities is a place of active socialization, where family bonds and identities are shaped (Jarrett, 1995; Jarrett et al., 2010), cloistering may have additional indirect bearing on sexual debut by fostering intergenerational attachments and a strong sense of values as “respectable.”

The existing literature highlights the role of monitoring in disadvantaged neighborhoods and also indicates potential obstacles to it. For example, Brewster (1994a) interpreted her

findings that the likelihood of first intercourse increased as the percentage of neighborhood females in full-time employment increased, as an indirect effect of lowered parental monitoring. Research suggests that parental monitoring is increasingly associated with delayed sexual debut (or age of childbearing) as neighborhood disorder increases (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; Roche & Leventhal, 2009; Roche et al., 2005). And parental intervention may be facilitated by accurate knowledge of adolescents' experiences. Some evidence suggests that parents do not have accurate perceptions of their younger children's exposure to violence (Ceballo, Dahl, Aretakis, & Ramirez, 2001). Because parents frequently have less direct observation of adolescents' experiences, we suspect that parents may be poorly informed about youths' exposure to violence, making it difficult to provide needed monitoring and support.

We found that time spent outside of the neighborhood did not distinguish between the youth who had experienced their sexual debut and those who had not. We had expected that traveling outside the neighborhood, or attending school elsewhere, might provide a temporary escape from violence and expose the adolescent to norms suggestive of other potential futures, and thus have bearing on timing of sexual debut. In particular, the choice to attend school outside of a neighborhood is often made in an effort to find a more positive academic and social environment for the adolescent. Although this may be the case, an alternative is also possible. Attending school in other communities may create a sense of not belonging; that is, a youth may feel that she no longer fits in the neighborhood, nor does she fit in the new school or the community surrounding the school. Because our data are cross-sectional, we do not know if the choice to attend school outside the neighborhood was prompted by the adolescent's sexual debut, or other behavior that the parent hoped to extinguish by changing the youth's school setting.

Although we don't always know what prompted the family strategies observed in this study, we have evidence that some familial strategies may be a response to specific events in the lives of youths that reflect community violence. Future studies addressing these issues may want to include the perspective of parent/guardians, as well as youths to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of strategies. Future work that examines the impact of strategies over time would increase our understanding of how familial strategies shape sexual transitions during adolescence.

Limitations

The analyses presented here focused on urban African American female youth between ages 15 and 17 living in two U.S. cities, and findings may not generalize to other populations, age groups, or to males. Qualitative studies require smaller samples, and these analyses are based on 39 adolescent females. Further, this study was not designed to focus specifically on familial strategies or on neighborhood violence. However, qualitative studies provide opportunities for discovery, and these findings suggest avenues for future work addressing sexual debut among urban African American female youth.

Summary and Conclusions

Our finding—that number, more than type, of strategies distinguishing those who had delayed sex from those who had already started having sex—is intriguing. It may be that parents who are actively working to create a positive developmental trajectory for their children are likely to seek multiple ways to achieve this, thus creating a protective force. The strategies employed by parents in this study may lead to a more organized and structured environment, reflecting a pattern that has been shown to have positive benefits (Fisher & Feldman, 1998) by dampening the effects of a chaotic environment (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Although this study is focused on a specific developmental transition that can

have negative outcomes, our findings are in concert with other areas of research demonstrating the positive impact of responsive parenting for youth with cumulative risk exposure (Evans et al., 2007). Age of sexual debut is an important developmental marker in this population particularly because earlier childbearing strongly shapes females' future life chances. In poorer neighborhoods, choices made as an adolescent will have a much greater cumulative effect—either positive or negative—on development simply because the dearth of economic and educational resources makes it much less likely that she will transition from one developmental trajectory to another (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; Jarrett, 1998). Future research would benefit from a longitudinal investigation of the long-term effects of neighborhood safety, familial strategies, and age on sexual debut.

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Table 1

Possible Effects of Familial Strategies on Youth

Strategy	Possible Effect	
	General	Psychosocial
Moving	May increase or decrease exposure to violence and/or sexual activity; increase or decrease access to social opportunities like employment, positive social outlets	May impact sense of belonging, ability to make friends
Cloistering	May limit exposure to violence or opportunity for sexual activity	May impact ability to build and maintain friendships with peers, may cause boredom
Time outside neighborhood	May increase exposure to opportunities that are not available in the neighborhood; may provide opportunity for violence or sexual activity if unsupervised	May result in exposure to different attitudes/racism
School out of neighborhood	May increase exposure to opportunities that aren't available in the neighborhood	May result in exposure to different attitudes/racism
Multiple residences	May provide opportunity to selectively avoid home or neighborhood conflict; may create possibility for supervision from other adults	May create a broader network of adults to serve as role models
Parental monitoring	May limit opportunities for sexual activity or violent behavior; may protect from violence	May create a sense of being valued by parents or may result in feelings of isolation or frustration
Parental instruction	May influence sexual or violent behavior; may protect from violence by teaching child what places are safe/unsafe and how to respect people	May create a sense of being valued by parent

Table 2
Number of Familial Strategies for Sexually Experienced and Sexually Inexperienced Youth

Adaptation	Respondents																				Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	
Sexually inexperienced																					
Moving	x				x			x		x							x				5
Cloistering											x						x		x		5
Time outside neighborhood																					3
School outside neighborhood	x				x			x						x					x		6
Multiple residences	x																				1
Parental monitoring				x											x					x	4
Parental instruction																x					4
Sexually experienced																					
Moving							x					x									5
Cloistering										x						x					1
Time outside neighborhood									x												3
School outside neighborhood												x									6
Multiple residences																					0
Parental monitoring																					0
Parental instruction																			x		3