

The People's Report:

The Link Between Structural Violence and Crime in Wilmington, Delaware



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Executive Summary

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Wilmington Street Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project

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Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League • United Way of Delaware
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I. Executive Summary

The “Safe Communities” Training and Employment Participatory Action Research Project¹ (also known as the Wilmington Street PAR Project or Wilmington Street PAR family) is a pilot quantitative and qualitative ethnographic community needs assessment of the Eastside and Southbridge neighborhoods of Wilmington, Delaware. This study trained 15 community residents (ages 20-48), all of whom were formally involved with the streets and/or criminal justice system to be street participatory action researchers². The Wilmington Street PAR family documented the relationship between structural opportunity and physical violence in the two aforementioned neighborhoods. Data were collected from mostly street-identified Black men and women, ages 18-35, in the following forms: (a) 520 community survey packets; (b) 24 individual interviews; (c) four dual interviews; (d) three group interviews; and (e) extensive field observations. Also, a fourth group interview, not initially proposed or planned, was conducted with a group of seven mostly older men, ages 21-51, formerly involved with the streets and/or criminal justice system. This group of men is known in the larger Wilmington community as the United Brothers of 9th Street (or UB9)³.

Findings strongly suggest that physical violence in Wilmington, Delaware is deeply tied to profound notions of structural inequality. Residents, by and large, report countless incidences of being directly and/or indirectly exposed to experiences of physical violence in the forms of: (1) interpersonal assaults; (2) knifings; (3) shootings; (4) drug use/sales of drugs; and (5) homicide—to more structural forms of violence such as: (1) unemployment; (2) poor schooling opportunities; (3) unhealthy living conditions; or (4) “failing” or “corrupt” civic and political leadership. In addition, residents spoke extensively about what they perceive as “unfair” or invasive law enforcement procedures including being: (1) profiled and frisked; (2) caught up in raids or sweeps; (3) detained without detention; (4) arrested; and/or (5) incarcerated.

Nonetheless, the spirit of community residents remains unusually high, positive, or optimistic despite the fact that most participants report being inundated by social and structural violence. Participants, overall, were found to demonstrate positively high levels of: (1) psychological well-being; (2) social well-being; (3) attitudes toward education; (4) and attitudes toward employment. That is, while community residents are overwhelmed with physical violence as well as blocked opportunities, the data strongly suggest that study participants love themselves; they love their families and communities; they want to work; and they want quality educational opportunity.

¹ The official title of the grant submitted to and funded by First State Community Action/American Recovery Reinvestment Act. The Wilmington Street PAR project is the unofficial name of the project.

² Participatory action research (PAR) is characterized by including members of the population under study, on the actual research team (Payne, 2006; Payne, 2011).

³ United Brothers of 9th Street (UB9) is a civic organization made up of Black men from 9th street located in the Eastside of Wilmington, Delaware. These men, many of whom were previously involved with the streets, have dedicated themselves to servicing the Eastside and larger Wilmington community by working firsthand with those presently caught up in the streets and/or criminal justice system.

Meet Some Participants

- **Richard (19)**: Richard is a single, light-skinned, 19-year old-Black male. I first met Richard at the funeral of his 16-year-old friend, Dayveair Golden, who died from gun violence in Southbridge on December 9, 2009. Melodie Robinson, a Street PAR member, is the Godmother of Dayveair and good friend to his mother, Yadira, a young lady we later interviewed for this study. At the funeral repast, Richard exclaimed, “Make sure to capture in your (research) project how some Black youth in Southbridge live in homes with refrigerators with no food in them...or live in homes with no heat during the winter... Make sure to capture that in your (research) project.”

Richard’s small, thin bodily frame almost seems out of place with his giant and optimistic spirit. He lives in Southbridge and, on occasion, stays with his mother and eight-year-old sister in suburban Newark, Delaware. His father died several years ago under suspicious circumstances. Richard dropped out of school in 9th grade and later acquired his G.E.D. Currently, he is unemployed. Admittedly, he “ran the streets” of Wilmington and had been jailed for a short stint. In fact, he was 14 when he was first placed on probation.

- **Leslie (31)**: Leslie is a single, light brown-skinned, 31-year-old Black woman with three children—two girls and one boy—ranging from ages three to 12. Her skin, particularly within the creases of her face, carries the vestiges of deep fatigue. At the time of the interview, Leslie was technically homeless, staying with her children in a variety of places on the Eastside for the last four years. Leslie attributes her son misbehaving in school and her daughter engaging in negative behavior to her unemployment and unstable living situation. Leslie says, “One woman [at a social agency]... told me... that if I don't find housin', that she was gonna call... DFS [Department of Family Services] ... [to] take my kids away because I don't have housing for my kids.”
- **Rennie Rox (35)**: Rennie Rox is a single, light-skinned, 35-year-old Black male who resides on the Eastside. He says his family is “established” on the Eastside, particularly on or around “9th and Pine,” underscoring that his family is well known and has lived for some time in that section of the city. Rennie graduated in 1993 from John Dickinson High School, which is located in Newark, Delaware. He is well known in the Wilmington community for being a street videographer and owner/CEO of *Rennie Rox Films*. Rennie admits to formerly engaging in the sale of narcotics. In fact, he speaks of how his father and other family members and loved ones sold illegal narcotics as well. These experiences eventually culminated in Rennie’s incarceration at age 19, when he was sentenced to 10 years for drug possession. His two stints in prison became the catalysts for Rennie to make a major, positive change in his life.
- **Lanise (34)**: Lanise is a single, dark-skinned, 34-year-old Black woman who is majoring in nursing at Delaware Tech Community College in Wilmington, Delaware. Her worldview is grounded in Orthodox Sunni Islam, which she attributes to saving her from this world. “Once I became Muslim and I entered Islam,” she says, “... my life

changed... This is the foundation of the very essence of how I run my household. ... Actually, [Islam] came to me through a dream.”

Lanise is originally from Chester, Pennsylvania but has lived in Southbridge since October 2008. Unfortunately, she lost her father at the age of 13 and presently has an estranged relationship with her mother. Lanise lives with her four sons, ages three to 11, in public housing or “the projects” in Southbridge. She is very concerned about the physical violence she observes in her neighborhood, given that she is a mother with young children.

Survey Findings

The study’s survey sample consists of 520 young, Black American men and women between the ages of 18 and 35, who are mostly street-identified and/or were involved with the criminal justice system⁴. Women make up about 60% of participants while men account for nearly 40%. All participants have been directly and/or indirectly impacted by physical violence. Participants, on average, were 25 years of age (SD=5.41). Also, most residents in this study resided on the Eastside. In fact, at the time of the study, 64% of participants lived on the Eastside, while about 23% resided in the significantly smaller, Southbridge community. About 13% of participants lived outside of these two neighborhoods but report frequenting the Eastside and Southbridge communities.

Education

Approximately 44% (N=503) of the study sample had less than a high school diploma, most (41.4%) of whom reported dropping out at some point during high school. Conversely, about 56% of participants reported having a high school diploma, and a little over 6% reported having post-secondary educational experience. **Alarmingly, 59% of participants reported that their fathers never graduated from high school (40.6%), or that they do not know their father’s level of educational attainment (18.6%).**

Employment

Employment opportunities are bleak for most residents surveyed. Approximately 64% (N=504) of study participants were unemployed, 54% of whom were actively looking for work. Employment outcomes are more revealing when exploring employment status in relation to gender. **Sixty-eight percent of men in this study reported being unemployed, 57% of whom were actively looking for work. Women reported similarly, in that approximately 63% were unemployed, 54% of whom were actively looking for work.**

⁴ Data reported are generated from a “representative” sample. Results can be generalizable to the larger Black youth and young adult (18-35) population in the Eastside and Southbridge neighborhoods in Wilmington, Delaware. Quota sampling techniques were used to systematically stratify the sample by race, gender and age.

Living Conditions

Most residents (64%) described their living quarters as meeting the criteria for low-income housing.

Arrests and Incarceration

Arrest data strongly suggest that interactions between police and community residents were mostly negative (e.g., arrests) and are not complemented by enough pro-social activities between community residents and the police. **A critical mass of youth and young adults were repeatedly arrested and/or exposed to fellow residents being arrested in the Eastside and Southbridge communities.**

Fifty-seven percent (N=517) of this sample, poignantly, reported being, “picked up, arrested, or taken away by police” at some point in their lives. Of those arrested, one-third reported being arrested between one and four times, while approximately 13% of those arrested noted that they were arrested or taken away by police more than 12 times in their life. This result suggests a smaller variant of individuals are being repeatedly arrested. Sixty-two percent (N=279) of those arrested indicated that they were arrested within a year prior to completing the study’s survey.

About 80% of participants (N=519) had “seen someone else picked up, arrested, or taken away by police” at some point in their lives. Forty-six percent of participants had seen someone being arrested at least nine or more times in their life. **Fifty-four percent reported witnessing someone being arrested *within the last week*, and approximately 77% reported seeing someone being arrested *within the last three months* prior to completing the survey.**

Healthcare

Most participants (70%/N=514) indicated they had access to healthcare, with sixty-four percent (N=507) reporting Medicaid as their healthcare provider. Women (78%) reported greater usage of Medicaid than men (44%). Also, a relatively small number of participants (12%/ N=498) reported having gone to the emergency room as a result of an act of violence (N=498).

Physical Violence

Poignantly, a majority of participants reported losing at least one family member (55%/498) and/or at least one friend (59%/N=495) to gun violence. Approximately 55% (n=517) indicated that they were, at some juncture, “slapped, punched, or hit by someone.” Twenty-percent (N=514) reported being “jumped” or “chased by gangs or individuals.” About nine percent reported being accosted by a group of people 12 times or more in their life. **Approximately 25%(N=516) reported that they had been attacked or stabbed with a knife at least once in their lifetimes**, eight percent of whom reported this occurring 12 or more times. **Also, approximately 20% (N=516) reported that they had been shot at least once in their lifetimes**, six percent of whom reported this occurring 12 or more times.

Psychological and Social Well-Being

Data strongly suggest that participants love themselves, families and local communities, thus challenging status quo interpretations of low-income Black youth. **Approximately 85% (N=519) reported being happy or very happy “these days”.** **Approximately 94% (N=518) of participants found themselves to be a “useful person to have around,” and 76% (N=19) of participants reported that they “feel responsible to make their community better.”**

Attitudes Toward Law Enforcement

Findings suggest that participants, overall, held negative attitudes toward the police. Respondents asserted police unfairly accosted or “harassed” community residents as well as made them feel “unsafe.” **About 50% (N=517) indicated that they “strongly disagree” or “disagree” with, “Police are here to protect me.”** **Approximately, 80% (N=518) reported that they “agree” or “strongly agree” with, “The police give people a hard time for no reason.”** Also, **64% indicated that they (N=517) either “strongly disagree” or “disagree” with, “I feel comfortable when I see police on the streets.”** **And 72% (N=519) reported that they “strongly disagree” or “disagree” with the item, “Police respect me.”** Men were found to have slightly more negative attitudes toward the police than women.

Experiences with Law Enforcement

Most participants experienced some form of physical contact with police, although a smaller variant of the sample appeared to have been more regularly in negative contact (e.g., stopped, arrested, caught in a sweep, etc.) with police within the year prior to completing this survey. Also, gender was found to be significant with respect to contact with law enforcement. Men generally had more contact with police in comparison to women.

Stopped

Approximately 58% (N=518) of participants reported being “stopped by police” within the last year. Sixty-one percent of men noted being stopped, while only 29% of women indicated that they had been stopped within the last year.

Frisked

Twenty-nine percent (N=518) reported being “frisked” by police within the last 12 months. **Fifty-three percent of men, in comparison to only 14% of women, were reportedly “frisked” by police.** Participants (N=147) who reported being stopped within the last year were, on average, frisked in about four of their reported incidents.

Detained without arrest

Eighteen percent of participants (N=516) were “detained without arrest” by police within the last 12 months. **About 30% of men, in comparison to 10% of women, were found to be “detained without arrest” by police.** Participants (N=86) informally detained, reported that this occurred approximately three times within the last year.

Prison Reentry in Wilmington

Most participants surveyed and interviewed argued that employment and educational opportunities provided by most prison re-entry programs in Wilmington were typically lackluster “training programs” that did not result in any tangible outcomes for their clients. **Sixty-three percent (N=511) noted they “strongly disagree” or “disagree” with, “There are good prison re-entry programs in the city of Wilmington.”** About 58% of participants indicated that they (N=518) “strongly disagree” or “disagree” with, “Most people returning home from prison can find a job, if they really want to.” And 57% of respondents (N=512), in like sentiment, “strongly disagree” or “disagree” with, “There are enough educational programs available for people incarcerated in prison.” Findings determined from an, *attitudes toward prison re-entry programs* measure suggest that participants, overall, hold moderately negative attitudes toward available re-entry programs in Wilmington.

Street PAR “Family” Member Outcomes

Street PAR Family Profile. Twelve of the Street PAR family members are men, and three are women, with ages ranging from 20 and 48 years and an average age of 33 at the start of the project in November 2009. Educational status greatly varied for the Street PAR family at the beginning of the study – one dropped out of high school; four had a general equivalency diploma (GED); three had a high school diploma; five had some college; and two had acquired Bachelors of Arts degrees. Ten of the Street PAR members have felony convictions, most of which are non-violent. None of the women have been incarcerated or have a felony conviction. Also, 12 of the Street PAR family members have at least one child. And, it should be underscored that 10 of the Street PAR family members are Sunni Muslim.

- *Employment Outcomes* - **All Street PAR family members received some form of quality employment during and/or after the project’s initial funding period.** Employment opportunities paying \$15-\$20 per hour were provided by: (1) University of Delaware; (2) United Way of Delaware; (3) Christina Cultural Arts Center; and (4) Parkway Academy School District. Most positions secured for Street PAR family members were dependent upon “soft” or grant money. **Six Street PAR family members are presently unemployed.**
- *Education Outcomes* – Five Street PAR family members enrolled in college during and after the project’s initial funding period: **two at the graduate level and three at the undergraduate level.** Also, two members were offered educational opportunities but declined. **Four Street PAR family members (two graduate and two undergraduate students) are currently enrolled in college.**
- *Activism/Action Outcomes* – **The Street PAR family has made a total of 100 formal presentations since November 2009. They included 40 college/university presentations; 39 community presentations, and 21 media presentations.** Sixteen community presentations were made primarily to civic, political, and banking leadership. Twenty-three community presentations were made to local community residents. Numerous traditional and creative or non-traditional “action” products/events were developed and targeted at community members including: (1) monetary and non-

monetary incentives issued to study participants; (2) homicide art exhibit at Christina Cultural Arts Center; (3) feature length documentary of project; (4) mix-CD reflecting the link between structural and physical violence; (5) community barbecue; (6) assistance with organizing the annual Southbridge Community Day; (7) youth violence forum/panel; (8) production of a T-shirt with the PAR emblem; as well as (9) two PSAs on violence (one on physical violence and a second on domestic violence).

Recommendations

A total of 17 recommendations are proposed to address community violence in Wilmington. They are organized under the following four target areas: (1) Physical Violence; (2) Structural Opportunity; (3) Law Enforcement/Criminal Justice System; and (4) Street Outreach and Continued Community-Centered Research and Activism.

I. Physical Violence

(1) Physical Violence Prevention and Intervention Programs – A set of prevention and intervention programs centered on physical violence should be developed, by gender and developmental stage, for Wilmington residents. This program should be designed to address the following forms of physical violence: (1) interpersonal assault; (2) domestic violence; (3) school violence; (4) gun violence; and (5) homicide.

(2) Curriculum Development – Academic curricula should be developed for Wilmington youth at the primary and secondary school levels. Specifically, school districts are encouraged to develop age appropriate lesson plans aimed at educating students about structural opportunity/violence and physical violence. Also, school districts that serve Wilmington youth are encouraged to design course curricula that focus on both the school-to-prison pipeline and prison re-entry social phenomena. Youth should be exposed early on to such topics as they profoundly impact the students' lived experiences. Students should be organized within schools to locate and read as well as conduct and write up statistical analyses on structural and physical violence, in addition to the school-to-prison pipeline and prison re-entry. Also, performance and arts-based curricula should be developed as a way to encourage youth to perform (i.e., theater, film, poetry, music, etc.) and to teach audience members about how structural and physical violence, the school-to-prison pipeline, and prison re-entry are experienced by young people in Wilmington.

(3) Youth and Adult Forums on Physical Violence – Selected Wilmington residents should receive support to organize a series of grassroots discussions in the form of panels, forums, or conferences on physical violence. Such discussions can be held inside schools, community centers, non-profit organizations, and/or universities. Local residents, activists, academics/scholars, as well as civic and political leaders, should be invited to attend and speak at such discussions or forums.

(4) Safe Places – Safe locations or physical sites (i.e. community centers, city parks/playgrounds) should be developed for Wilmington youth and young adults to

constructively commune. Findings of this study strongly suggest that safe gathering spaces will help to offset the frustration felt by youth and young adults in Wilmington. Also, it is recommended that fun or creative as well as educational and counseling-related activities be made available to all youth and young adults that utilize these safe spaces.

II. Structural Opportunity

(1) **Relationship between Banking Community and Wilmington Residents** – An explicit, more aggressive and/or robust relationship needs to be structured between the banking community and low-income Wilmington residents as a way to more effectively improve structural opportunities for said residents. The influence and/or resources provided by the banking community can more effectively assist low-income residents with upward mobility by improving employment/economic, educational, and housing opportunities. Increased structural opportunities will assuredly help to reduce physical violence in Wilmington.

(2) **Improved Educational Opportunity** – Creative and proactive educational programming should be provided to residents. Also, academic scholarships or fellowships should be provided for educational opportunities ranging from G.E.D. to graduate programs. In addition, increased workshops on college enrollment and financial aid should be organized in schools and non-profit organizations.

(3) **Improved Employment Opportunity** – **A concerted effort must be made by city and state leadership to explicitly improve employment or economic opportunities for low-income residents in Wilmington.** Other research and this study profoundly conclude that low-income Black residents want to work. Also, the social science literature reveals that employment or economic opportunity is the best predictor of a reduction in physical violence.

(4) **Improved Housing Opportunity** – A concerted effort should be organized to address neighborhoods blighted by abandoned and/or boarded up buildings throughout the city of Wilmington. Also, it suggested that housing programs be established to inform local residents of opportunities to purchase as opposed to simply renting/leasing housing property. More derelict properties should be converted into affordable housing for local residents, when possible. For a model, see the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Roxbury, Massachusetts at <http://www.dsni.org/>.

(5) **Non-Traditional Childcare Facilities** – Free or subsidized childcare should be made available to any low-income individual, male or female, who is the parent or legal guardian of a child up to age 14.

III. Law Enforcement/Criminal Justice System

(1) **Comprehensive Prison Re-entry Programming** – **This report recommends comprehensive prison re-entry programming with employment at the center of this re-entry effort. This study underscores that effective re-entry cannot occur without “quality” employment opportunities being made available to former inmates. Employment opportunities must go beyond “employment training programs or employment referral**

services.” Further, comprehensive prison re-entry programming, although grounded in economic opportunity, should also include a focus on educational and housing needs, as well as individual and group-based forms of therapy.

(2) Community-Police Programming – A well-resourced and community centered community-policing program is strongly recommended. Local residents must be at the helm of such a program. Also, as in the case of a number of community-police programs throughout the country, this program should not devolve into an unconstructive venting session between residents and police or, for that matter, a forum where local residents are simply expected by law enforcement to reveal the names of suspected neighborhood criminals. This program should comprehensively focus on reducing crime with a focus on the types of crimes taking place in Wilmington neighborhoods as opposed to individual suspects. Also, a community-police partnership should focus proactively on programming in local neighborhoods as a way to preemptively reduce crime.

(3) Law Enforcement – It is suggested for the Wilmington Police Department to more aggressively train law enforcement to work more effectively with community residents. Study results reveal police have made a significant number of local residents feel “harassed,” “bothered,” and “less safe” in their own neighborhoods. It is recommended that more forums between law enforcement and the community be established as a way to discuss and improve interpersonal relationships between police officers and residents.

IV. Street Outreach and Continued Community-Centered Research and Activism

(1) Street Outreach Program – A viable, aggressive, and innovative youth-based, street outreach program should be implemented as a way to offset violence in Wilmington. Youth should be paid to inform young people of the social ills that are plaguing Wilmington and how to effectively address them.

(2) Mayor-Led Street March Campaign – It is recommended that the Wilmington Mayor and/or other local politicians routinely lead marching or walking campaigns on some of the most violent streets in the city. Political leadership should collaborate with civic leadership and local residents at least twice a month by marching at nighttime in the roughest or most challenging streets of Wilmington. New Orleans Mayor Mitchell J. Landrieu employed such a strategy in 2011 in response to New Orleans' violent crime epidemic. Mayor Landrieu decided to walk once a month with a cadre of law enforcement, residents, and civic and political leadership in the most violent neighborhoods in New Orleans as a way to impact and reduce violent crime. According to a *60 Minutes* interview, Mayor Landrieu argued that such walk-throughs “make people feel safer and more connected to him and the police.” See the *60 Minutes* interview conducted by Byron Pitts with Mayor Landrieu entitled “Mitch Landrieu's Big Easy Challenge”, posted 2:33PM on May 1, 2011 at <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7364552n>.

(3) Wilmington Street PAR Institute – **The Wilmington Street PAR family calls for resources to be devoted to the development of a Wilmington-based Street Participatory Acton Research Institute.** Such a research institute could organize a concurrent set of Street PAR studies on various social issues across the city, which would provide invaluable educational

and civic opportunities for local residents, as well as an opportunity to profoundly impact policy from the ground up. Also, local residents could use the institute to develop and execute a research agenda that would be used to organize a platform to legitimize the concerns of local residents citywide.

(4) **City-Wide Street PAR Project on Physical Violence** – Given the study’s results, it is strongly recommended that a citywide Street PAR project on physical violence be conducted throughout Wilmington. **Specifically, it is recommended that a quasi-experimental, multi-method design be organized to study the relationship between structural and physical violence, as well as examine the impact of Street PAR as an intervention, for Street PAR members and the impact of such an intervention on the actual reduction of physical violence within the city of Wilmington.**

(5) **Street PAR Inside Schools** – Street PAR could provide students, particularly those at risk for dropping out and/or not enrolling in college, with a set of quality educational experiences that would lead them to college enrollment. A Street PAR program inside local schools would be two-fold, including: (1) research analysis and a (2) school intervention—designed to support students with graduating from high school and entering post-secondary institutions. **A PAR experience or intervention equips students with an enhanced reading, writing, and analytic skill set which can prepare them for the academic rigor expected at the university level** (Brown, 2010, Fine et al., 2004; Payne & Brown, 2011).

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