

Social Mobility for Girls Born Into Poverty: How Do African American Women Born Into Poverty Achieve Middle Class Status?

A dissertation submitted

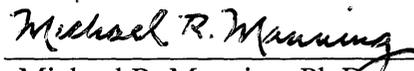
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Dawn Jeffries

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Michael R. Manning, Ph.D.
Chair

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Committee Members

Adrienne D. Dixon, Ph.D. University of Illinois
Jennifer Robin, Ph.D. Bradley University

Abstract

Social mobility for girls born into poverty in Peoria, Illinois, seems nearly impossible. The social genome model suggests five strong starts and ten dimensions for children to achieve middle-class status. The dimensions are difficult and, in most cases, impossible for children born into poverty. A child cannot choose or select certain family circumstances or schools. This study follows the lives of 13 women born into poverty. Eight of the women achieved middle-class status and five did not. The study provides the circumstances the women experienced on their path to middle class. The social genome model is complemented with qualitative insights through metacognition and sociological imagination. This combination provides insight on how the eight women achieved middle-class status. They developed their own version of human capital as a result of the heliotropic effect, hard work, admiration and emulation, developing a stronger sense of self, hope, support from others, and fierce resolve. We also see how difficult it is for African American women who do not receive child support from partners as well as women with criminal records to ever achieve social mobility. The results from the study led to the development of a new grassroots model called The GLOW Girls L²E²A²D²E³R²S³ model¹. The model is designed to combine the tenants of the social genome model and insights from the women who achieved middle class. This combination will be used for programming for Girls Light Our Way.

¹ Trademark pending

Dedication

First, I do all things to please God the Father. So first, I dedicate this document to Him.

Next, I dedicated this work to my husband for supporting me unconditionally in all things. For the hours spent reading every draft. For lovingly keeping me accountable through completion. And most importantly, for loving me.

To my father for keeping me on task. For being patient and understanding through all the calls I couldn't linger on because I had to study for, read about, and write "this paper." For encouraging me and reminding me that I could do this every step of the way.

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To my PETALS (GLOW pilot): Babies, you take my breath away with all you are accomplishing in life. Please continue to press forward. I am always here for you.

To the GLOW Girls, I have dedicated my life to you and to this work. I want to give you the world in a world that doubts you. I want to give you a plan when there's no plan for you. I want to give you a strength unimaginable in a world that considers you weak. You are a secret weapon of wellness, self-efficacy, and literacies of power. The world will know who you are.

I want to dedicate this work to my cousin Patricia Tatum, my Pat. I loved her so much. Whenever I was proud of an accomplishment, won an award, or even dressed up for an event, she was always included in the "look what I did" text. She always let me know she was proud of me. She was also proud of the GLOW Girls and one of our biggest cheerleaders. She died senselessly due to this poorly managed pandemic. I am dedicating this body of work to her. I know she would be proud. She embodies the spirit of the $L^2E^2A^2D^2E^3R^2S^3$ model. She lived it every day. I miss her immensely.

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Prologue

A Personal Story—A Grassroots Intervention

After nearly 20 years on Wall Street, I left the comforts of my downtown office and view of the Hudson River. I gave my apartment keys to a wise young lady I had given a job right out of college. She was a business school graduate with a 3.8 GPA at Southern University. She was bright. She was excelling. She made me proud. I knew I changed her life through a gesture. I gave her a job and a salary commensurate with her skills. I had a connection to the university. The job offer was the product of social capital and relationships.

My husband and I moved from Newark, New Jersey, to Newark, Ohio, to start our new life together. Then I met a teenage girl who was born and raised in the small Midwest town. This chance meeting was at the end of her junior year of high school at her cousin's high school graduation. She asked if I could help her get into college as I had with her cousin. I had mentored her cousin the year before, and she was accepted to a few good schools. She ultimately decided not to go to college, and I was devastated. I know I am not responsible for all of her cousin's life decisions, but I felt as if I had failed her. So after reflections and prayer, I decided to try again. My primary goal was to use the next 12 months to get her into college. We worked hard at it. I taught her as many lessons from my high school years, from college, and from corporate America as her brain would allow. We created a plan for her. It included us

sitting her down with the head of a program called A Call to College. She walked us through their entire four-year college access process. I took the young woman to college fairs, primarily visiting with historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). My husband and I reviewed all of her college essays. I supported her emotionally and let her know I believed in her. I helped her reason through and apply critical thinking to naysayers who caused doubt. I kept her accountable at every step of the process, including deadlines for applications and essays. I applied tough love and encouraged her to believe in herself and push herself to reach each goal. I repeated words of hope and high expectations. She applied to several colleges and universities with various levels of expected acceptance. She chose to attend Howard University in Washington, DC. She even received the American Jurisprudence Award (AmJur). The AmJur award is given to the student with the highest grade of a course. She is now a law clerk for a prestigious judge in the DC/Maryland area. As I recall, when the young lady was leaving town, she sent a text with the following:

We are about to leave now. I just wanted to say thank you. You made me believe I am better than I ever thought I could be. Sometimes, you pushed me so hard I wasn't sure if we were gonna make it. But we did. I love you and I will call you when we get there.

That was the beginning of a new and true life's purpose. The purpose for my research. I believed I had a chance to make a difference in girls' lives with love and motivation.

In 2012, my husband and I moved to Peoria, Illinois. A few months later, with a few friends, I started a pilot program for a handful of girls. The program was located at a local high school on Peoria's south side. As with most schools on the south sides of American cities, this one had challenges. The pilot program revealed that the girls required more than I could offer them at that time. They needed more time. The current program and its offerings needed to be more robust. The program in its current state was not enough to improve their pathway to a successful life and upward social mobility to the middle class. I sought insight from my PhD colleagues. I was inspired to do more research. The research led to my enrollment in an executive masters of business (EMBA) program. I wanted to be a better leader for them. Shortly after, I decided to pursue a doctorate as well because the EMBA was not sufficient, nor did it provide insight on the root causes of their behaviors.

The girls in my program revealed a multitude of issues. This became evident in the midst of my EMBA thesis. There were issues of poverty, nutritional, and physical wellness. Opportunities they deserved were not easily obtained. I believed doctoral research would set me on the path to uncover grassroots solutions.

In 2014, that ten-member pilot program graduated to a fully-fledged not-for-profit organization, Girls Light Our Way (GLOW), to improve the lives of local girls through physical, nutritional, and social-emotional health education, financial

literacy, and self-efficacy. The pilot program and GLOW have since won multiple awards in the community and the region².

The foregoing prologue reflects my motivation for conducting this dissertation research. I simply want to learn as much as I can to help myself and others create the best possible programs that will assist young African American women born into poverty in their plight out of poverty and into middle-class status.

² The pilot program won second best program in the Midwest region for youth-based programs of nearly 60 other organizations. In 2017, while I was sitting in doctoral class, I received messages via text. The program went on to win first place in the region of the same organization. I have received several community service awards for GLOW programming, including the Peoria Public Schools Community Service Award. I have also received the Drum Major Award for Education at the Martin Luther King Community celebration. In 2019, GLOW was the featured nonprofit, and I was a speaker at the Caterpillar, Inc.'s Women in Leadership Summit. I also received the Doer of Deeds award sponsored by local State Representative Jehan Gordon Booth. I recently received the 2019 Citizen of the Year Award from the Theta Xi Chapter of Omega Psi Phi, Inc. And earlier this year, I received a Visionary for 2020 from the Ohio Minority Business Enterprise organization. GLOW continues to evolve and grow in its singular pursuit of enriching the lives of these girls.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Children born into poverty do not succeed at the same rate as their more affluent peers (Duncan, Magnuson, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2012). Without intervention, inequality continues to expand (Sawhill & Karpilow, 2014). This includes inequality in health, education, and social development (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, 2013). These children are more likely to face violence (Dennison, 2019) and social injustices throughout their lives (Henderson & Baffour, 2015).

Peoria, Illinois, is a small industrial midwestern city with a population of a little over 100,000. Like most industrial towns, it struggles with issues of poverty, unemployment, segregation, racial inequity, and a failing school district (Berube, 2019). These struggles are similar to other cities in the region. According to social and economic mobility studies, a city like Peoria is a prime example of a “faltering” legacy city (Berube, 2019). Peoria was a prosperous manufacturing town in the 1990s. It is currently experiencing the cumulative effect of economic downturns of the recession in 2001 (Langdon, McMenamin, & Krolic, 2002) and particularly the recession in 2008, called the “blue collar depression” (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2010). It is considered one of the “worst places for African Americans to live” (Frohlich, Sauter, & Stebbins, 2016). In 2017, Peoria, Illinois, was ranked the sixth most segregated metro area in the country (Comen, 2019b). According to the same source, the city was in the top 10% of metro areas with severe median income disparities at \$28,019 for African Americans vs. \$60,570 for whites. Comen (2019b)

also reports that in 2017, Peoria had one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation at 25.2% for African Americans compared to 5.3% for whites; the overall Illinois unemployment rate was 6.1%. The poverty rate in Peoria was 34.5% for African Americans versus 9% for whites (Comen, 2019b). These factors gave rise to the critical need for programs like Girls Light Our Way (GLOW).

There are close to 800 nonprofit organizations in Peoria, according to Nonprofit Locator (n.d.). The data reveal that most of these organizations have missions to address education, family and financial stability, health, and basic services (i.e. food, shelter, respite from domestic abuse) (Nonprofit Locator, n.d.). The same source reports that these nonprofits receive funding from the regional United Way, the local community foundation, corporate organizations, and other small to midsized foundations. The funders request outcomes to ensure their funding is having an impact. However, the reporting does not get granular enough to determine how impactful these outcomes are in addressing poverty reduction, social mobility, and unemployment. Funding is used to pay for salaries, staff salaries attributed to programming, buildings, and upper-mid-tier staffing benefits (Nonprofit Locator, n.d.). Despite the well-intended aid, poverty and unemployment still persist in Peoria.

Delving into the information, I discovered extensive research on poverty, race, place, and opportunity. It suggests that where a child grows up significantly impacts her or his social mobility. Thus, it is almost impossible for a child born into poverty in

Peoria to reach the middle class (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014). Forty-two percent of African Americans born in the bottom tenth of the income distribution remained in that same bracket as adults (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). Although ongoing research on matrices of oppression, inequality, and wealth gaps continue and are still underway; most distinguished scholars have not been able to offer a practical ground-level solution. They are unable to adequately address deeply rooted and complex challenges posed by cities like Peoria. Research to date has offered diverse recommendations for local, state, and federal governments to implement expensive interventions (Chetty, Hendren, & Katz, 2016). Although the situation appears bleak, my personal experience suggests that some African American women do escape poverty in Peoria, and I desire to know how this happens. This quest forms the basis of the dissertation.

There is one central research question investigated in this study with appropriate sub-questions. This question is as follows:

- 1) For African American millennial women from Peoria, Illinois, born into poverty, what are the factors and personal experiences they express that led to their upward mobility in achieving middle-class status?
 - a. Are the social genome model (SGM) strong starts predictive of achieving middle-class status?
 - i. Can one achieve middle-class status without experiencing all of the SGM strong starts?

- b. What factors emerge that differentiated the Achievers and Aspirers to reach or not reach middle-class status?
 - i. For the Achievers, what perceived barriers did they navigate to achieve social mobility and reach middle-class status?
 - ii. For the Aspirers, what perceived barriers are they currently navigating to achieve social mobility and reach middle-class status?

This dissertation’s initial foundation rests on findings from social mobility research. I researched the phenomena to assess challenges, barriers, and pathways toward upward mobility. In the literature review, I present driving factors of social mobility, including forms of capital, literacy, and geographical situations. Secondly, I looked to the tenets and framework of social mobility through the lens of the social genome model (SGM) and the five “strong starts” developed by scholars at the Brookings Institution (Sawhill & Reeves, 2016). The SGM framework provides a quantitative modelling for the life course criteria to achieve social mobility and middle-class status (Sawhill & Reeves, 2016). Unfortunately, the model does not specify practical processes to achieve the defined benchmarks. It lacks the three main components of sociological imagination—“biography, history, and society” (Uprichard, 2012)—that we need to learn how these women experienced life during the stages within the model. Nor does it provide historical or societal contexts.

The SGM model presumes that policy intervention is widely impactful. However, certain interventions cannot achieve equal impact. For example, if one poor child comes to school hungry at the end of the month, she or he may have difficulties learning and retaining information, while another poor child may have access to food from a food bank but is suffering from having experienced a trauma. In such cases, we cannot fully know the causal impact of policy interventions on the thresholds for either child. Indeed, researchers have admitted, “Not only is there no perfect data set for this work, but modeling the life course is extraordinarily complicated. No model can ever fully capture all of the complexities of reality” (Sawhill & Reeves, 2016, p. 11), nor can it account or control for human agency. The SGM model describes the impact of implemented programs but does not consider factors such as changes in political parties and program funding. In addition, most of the programs were located in large cities, not small towns. Winship and Owen (2013), the architects of the model, acknowledged,

In defense of our model, it is parameterized mostly on a sample of children born in the 1980s and 1990s. The Perry Preschool Project was implemented during the 1960s and Abecedarian in the 1970s, and the Chicago CPC evaluation was conducted in the 1980s. The children participating in these programs were probably more disadvantaged than the target population we specified. Nevertheless, we would prefer to have come closer to the real-world results than we did. (p. 24)

The methods section will provide the procedures I used to examine the experiences of 13 women. It will also provide a general overview of the scores and comparative statistics. In the findings section, I review their lives and the access or lack of access

to the SGM benchmarks—themes I called the “pillars of poverty.” There are a total of 52 pillars of poverty discussed. They include poverty pillars experienced within the five strong starts and the dimensions of those strong starts, which are school as a place of refuge, good and bad teachers, the shame of poverty, racist teachers, racism at work, pet to threat, power distance, and the effect of criminal activities.

The second set of pillars of poverty are related to instability at home. Those pillars are poor living conditions, foster care and shelter, the nature of blended families, multiple homes and multiple schools, and drugs in the home. The third set of pillars were related to adverse childhood events (ACEs), such as polyvictimization and trauma. They were unsupportive families, repression of memories, and domestic violence at home. The final pillars are conjoining pillars. They are desperation, abandonment, conspecific aggression, adultification, policy failure, racism, classism, and sexism, lack of resources, lack of literacies, and being stuck. Other conjoining pillars were internalized oppression and negative concepts of self. Finally, I discussed and differentiated which factors contributed to middle-class attainment. They included resoluteness, positive concepts of self, support systems, and heliotropic effect.

Some women in this study were able to establish successful day-to-day processes for escaping poverty and increasing social mobility without the sweeping, expensive, and unlikely policy-based changes recommended by many of today’s scholars (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017). When the participants’ parents’ safety nets fell short, they

had to resort to alternative economies, styling hair, lying about their age to get jobs before working age, or moving out of their homes so there would be one less mouth to feed. This is not to challenge the integrity of such recommendations or suggest that all policy recommendations are not feasible. However, in today's polarized climate, it is clear that very few such recommendations will be implemented. Bill Clinton, a Democrat, often suggested parents who owed child support should pay it as if it were a solution to reduce a mother's poverty status and a support for welfare reform (Clinton, 1995). He was known to say, "governments don't raise children; parents do" (as cited in Sawhill, Reeves, & Howard, 2013, para 25). He subsequently enacted welfare reform policy detrimental to African American women in particular (Alfred, 2007). As we discovered, these girls generally could neither rely on their government nor their parents to help them escape poverty. In many cases, they had to "raise themselves." Many of the girls in this study were self-reliant and self-led in many respects—even if they had or did not have parents.

Results of this study suggest a synthesized version of the strong starts into a grassroots model, plausible interventions, partnerships, and practices to aid girls' escape from poverty. It is called The GLOW Girl L²E²A²D²E³R²S³ model³. My new hope is this will improve their chances at sustained upward social mobility. The conclusions and recommendations are the nexus of my lifelong journey to give them

³ Trademark pending

more. “More” in this case means more for GLOW’s grassroots effort of breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

This study supports and extends the foundation of social mobility research and literature by identifying factors and experiences of thirteen African American women. It deepens the research by defining how eight of the thirteen achieved, and five still aspire to achieve social mobility. Finally, using the social genome model as a framework to test for social mobility, I was able to identify gaps in the model. I was also able to extend and challenge and provide insights for improvement for the model’s stages and criteria.

Summary

In this introduction, I have provided a general overview on why this study is so critical for girls in GLOW and perhaps girls across the country. I have also highlighted areas I believe are deficient within the SGM and the five strong starts to help me operationalize success factors to help girls achieve middle-class status. In the next chapter, I will provide an extensive review of the research context—Peoria, Illinois. This review will provide essential information necessary to understand the limitations and opportunities for social mobility that exist in this research community. Chapter 2 will be followed by a more traditional literature review that will provide key insights on social mobility, the social genome model, and the five strong starts that will be used in the study.

Chapter 2: Research Context: Peoria, Illinois

Rationale and Context

Factors required to achieve social mobility are substantially beyond a child's control in the early to adolescent years and likely their transition to adulthood years. A child cannot choose the parental situation or their day-to-day home or school life. A child cannot choose her own neighborhood or make choices for her parents or relatives. She cannot choose her school or level of economic wealth or suffering. She cannot decide which levels of stress to accept or not. Hence, this chapter that reviews the economic and social realities in Peoria, Illinois, is critical to understanding the challenges and opportunities for those born into poverty to achieve social mobility to the middle class.

According to Ratcliffe and Kalish (2017), of the 9 million children [in America], 11.8% "are persistently poor...over 40% of black children are persistently poor compared to 6% of white children. Fifty-six percent of persistently poor children are black, while 36% are white and 8% are of other race or ethnicities" (p. 2). Ratcliffe and Kalish (2017) employed trajectory analysis to identify correlations between employment, school, and the persistence of poverty for children, and consequently their lack of upward mobility. Their study revealed that 90% of the children who have never been poor graduate high school, compared to only 62% of the persistently poor (Ratcliffe & Kalish, 2017). Systemic changes are needed to correct structural racism

and other forms of oppression in Peoria and other cities across America (Marsh, 2013).

Social mobility in Peoria, Illinois

Peoria is still one of the worst cities in the nation for African Americans to live in. In 2017, Peoria, Illinois, had the highest unemployment rate in the nation. The city ranked sixth amongst the most segregated metro areas in the country. It tops the list of metro areas with severe median income disparities in the nation. It has one of the highest rates of poverty in the country. The gaps are apparent, especially when compared to whites (eRepublic, 2019).

Single women in Peoria

In 2019, Comen (2019a) reported that Peoria is one of the “toughest cities to be a single mother” (para. 3). The median income for single mothers is \$24,084. Approximately, 88% of single mothers are in the labor force in Peoria. This is higher than the 82.4% national figure. Single mothers in Peoria have to work 52.1 hours a week to pay their rent. However, 56.7% of their children aged three to four years old are enrolled in school, which is better than the national average of 47.5% (Comen, 2019a).

In Peoria, The United Way of Central Illinois is the third largest funder to local charities after federal and state government funding, according to a former executive director (Heart of Illinois United Way, n.d.). Funding to charities from the local United Way ebbs and flows with the rise and fall of the local, state, and national

economy. Furthermore, the beneficiaries of many of these programs are stigmatized and vilified, with the assumption that they are taking advantage of the system (Marsh, 2013).

Overview of inequality for Peoria schools

Peoria is divided into the north and south sides. According to U.S. Census data, median property tax payments on the north side of Peoria range from \$3,850 to \$6,492 (as cited in Advameg, Inc., n.d.). Additionally, median property tax payments for the south side of Peoria range from \$810 to \$4,016. The same source reports that median income on the south side of Peoria ranges from \$19,705 to \$44,235, whereas median income on the north side of Peoria ranges from \$61,368 to \$111,809. The south side tax and income figures have increased in recent years due to gentrification. Moreover, schools on the south side are failing while schools on the north side are rated as top schools (Public School Review, 2020).

GLOW conducts programming in two middle schools and two high schools. All four schools are failing. They significantly underperform compared to their peer schools on the north side of Peoria. The schools on the north side are considered top performers. The schools on the south side are not.

A cover story in Peoria's local newspaper presented a local city councilman's anger at the public school's behavior statistics for boys and girls (Abeyta, 2016). These statistics revealed that police visits to the schools for disturbances and burglary were

up from the previous year. Internal disciplinary issues for disobedience (particularly disrespect for authority) and disruptions were also up from the previous year. The cover story revealed that other trends were declining, such as cutting class, bad language, and police visits for investigations and medical reasons. It is critical to note that African American girls (and boys) are treated more punitively by those in positions of authority (Abeyta, 2016), and they incur harsher penalties (Epstein et al., 2017). According to the Center for American Progress, the state does not meet criteria for career and technical education (as cited in Jimenez & Sargrad, 2018).

In this next section, the status in Peoria for African Americans is summarized with respect to the following dimensions: in school, in postsecondary education, in the labor market, and for family. These dimensions are then contrasted with the strong starts, which are more fully reviewed in Chapter 3.

In school

In Peoria, less than 25% of students met eighth grade reading/math levels in the town's public schools (Weinzimmer, Blahusova, & Kotik, 2017). School appropriate behavior can be demonstrating the desire to work for good grades, being attentive and not disrupting class, showing up for school and showing up on time (Finn & Rock, 1997). Adverse childhood experiences can negatively impact a child's education and behaviors at school as well as cause toxic stress (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Toxic stress-related conditions include "living in under-resourced or racially segregated neighborhoods, frequently moving, and experiencing food

insecurity” (para. 3) and other factors related to poverty, systemic racism, and limited educational opportunities.

According to the Civil Rights Data Collection (2015), African Americans make up 56.6% of the total district enrollment: They make up 74% of total in school suspensions, 76% of out of school suspensions, and 80% of expulsions. Many of the children exhibit behaviors in school associated with “polyvictimization” (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby, & Kracke, 2009). Polyvictimization refers to having experienced multiple victimizations, such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, bullying, and exposure to family violence. The definition emphasizes experiencing multiple different kinds of victimization, rather than multiple episodes of the same kind of victimization (Finkelhor et al., 2009).

In postsecondary education

In the 2018-19 school year, of the three high schools in the district—one in the northern part of town and two others in the south side of the city—the two south-side schools are both in the bottom 5% of schools in the state. Graduation rates are 64% and 58% (Illinois State Board of Education, 2019). According to the same source, chronic absenteeism at the high schools is 92% and 91%, respectively.

Each year of college and education beyond high school typically increases income by about 10% (Reeves & Grannis, 2014). The grading system and level of education in Peoria may not match or reconcile easily with other districts in the model. How

standard is a 2.5 GPA across the country? High-achieving students still struggle to succeed in their college-level courses, as noted by some parents. I have witnessed students with 3.0 GPAs (and higher) struggle in college. Finally, students who choose to enlist in the military have trouble with the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test (Speer, 2017). This can serve as an equalizer across the country for educational and academic grade comparisons.

For example, girls in the south-side local Peoria high schools tend to broadly choose the local community college versus middle- and upper-class girls, who choose more prestigious four-year colleges and universities. Haveman and Smeeding believe the United States system of “higher education reinforces generational patterns of income inequality and is far less oriented toward social mobility than it should be” (as cited in Nunn, Johnson, Monro, Bickerstaffe, & Kelsey, 2007, p. 44). There was no certainty that a grammar school education would lead to a professional career. Arguably, having qualifications, these individuals had more options at the end of their secondary schooling.

In the labor market

In the labor market, the unemployment rate in 2016 was 8.2% for the white population and 9.3% for the Black population; the town was deemed the worst city in the country for African Americans (Frohlich et al., 2016). Regarding criminal records, statistics are not easily identified. However, given the discipline statistics mentioned above, it is clear that escaping a criminal record will be difficult for many

girls. As Weaver—the executive director of Project Access in San Antonio, Texas—describes, “Rich kids go to therapy. Poor kids go to jail” (as cited in McNeel, 2019, para. 24).

For family

In 2016, the town had a teenage pregnancy rate of 8.4%, versus 6% at the state level.

The teenage pregnancy rate for the United States as a whole was approximately 9% (Weinzimmer et al., 2017).

Problems With Intervention Systems

The social genome model (SGM), to be more fully described in Chapter 3, provides an effective benchmark for life stages (Sawhill & Reeves, 2016). The model falls short geographically, and the interventions are not specific to Peoria. The model uses the Perry Preschool Project, Abecedarian, and the Chicago CPC intervention systems. A local Peoria-based early childhood intervention program at the Valeska Hinton School provided a whole-family intervention (Helm & Boos, 1995). However, it did not reach the full population of young school-aged children. The program has since “lost much of its funding and familial reach,” according to a discussion with a former program administrator (S. Burke, personal communication, October 5, 2019).

Local agency leaders in Peoria also explained that programs such as Upward Bound, now called TRIO (Students Support Services Program), as well as a local program called Tomorrow’s Scientists, Technologists, and Managers (TSTM) have been designed to provide interventions to improve participants’ chances for reaching the

middle class (A. Shaw & L. Bryson, personal communication, July 3, 2019).

However, these programs have never reached the masses of children in Peoria due to lack of funding and access.

After listening to conversations among school employees and students, it is clear that day-to-day education is not sufficient in the classrooms. This failure is not always due to the teachers' lack of desire, yet it is a contributing factor for the students. One of the individuals in the class boldly exclaimed of the teachers,

They act like they don't want to be here. They say we don't want to learn. That's because they asses don't wanna teach! One of my teachers just gives me a packet and the only time she teaches is when someone from administration is in the class. (Student⁴, personal communication, March 5, 2019)

Other students (personal communication, March 5, 2019) also shared that they only learned from teachers when the principal audited the class because in many cases the teachers often gave them daily packets requiring them to self-teach. There seemed to be a sense of "academic futility" among students (D'hondt, Eccles, Van Houtte, & Stevens, 2016) and a palpable need for intervention.

Interventions require funding. In 2015, Illinois provided 29% less state funding to children at the highest level of poverty than the previous year (The Education Trust, 2017). Furthermore, districts serving the most students of color receive 18% less in

⁴ Student(s) are unnamed in personal communications here because they are minors.

funding than districts serving the fewest students of color, supporting the assertion that “better schools get better teachers” (The Education Trust, 2017).

According to the summative designations of the 25 schools in the district, only one school is exemplary, 11 are commendable, six are underperforming, and 8 are considered lowest performing. Two of the three high schools are “lowest performing” and on the south side of the city. The third high school primarily consists of white middle-to-upper-class students from the northern part of the city (Illinois State Board of Education, 2019). Although scholars are well-intended and provide important insights on social mobility, the proposed interventions and recommendations are expensive, out-of-touch, difficult to implement, and practically impossible to pass in today’s financial, political, and race-sensitive climate. Implementing and executing such recommendations are particularly difficult in small urban towns like Peoria, Illinois. Cities with a declining tax base tend not have funding interventions of this nature.

Children from Peoria do not have access to many of the programs referenced and included in the SGM. In fact, some children do not have any intervention programming. This skews comparison to the model and indicates a comparative gap. However, in the absence of other consistent well-tested models, the SGM can serve as a barometer within the overall project. The narratives can shed light on what happens

when children change neighborhoods or schools as well as when they experience other occurrences deemed typical among the participants.

Quantitative research on poverty and social mobility traditionally reports cohort-based data over certain timeframes (Sawhill & Reeves, 2016) and contextual frames (Sawhill, Winship, & Grannis, 2012). However, there is limited metacognitive research that has been conducted in the area of life-long-processes, experiences, and presenting narratives for social and economic mobility. I believe there is value in letting people from similar backgrounds tell us what they did and what they need, using their own words.

I chose to interview young millennial women born into poverty to hear their recollections and insights. I chose to let them tell me what they did and needed. They told me their life experiences—kindergarten through college and their young corporate lives. Some provided insight into what they believe the next generation needs to move out of poverty and into the middle class. Ladson-Billings and Tate studied the experiences of African American girls and young women in grades K-12. Their study found that encouraging the women and girls to reflect and narrate their experiences allowed them to “name their reality” (as cited in Neal-Jackson, 2018).

The strategies and recommendations from this study are designed to benefit young girls in Peoria, Illinois. I believed it was most appropriate to learn from women born

into poverty there. The participants were able to provide consistent local and historical context across generations of African American women. The “criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined [level of] importance” (Patton, 2002, p. 238). The stories and context are familiar and resemble the lives of the girls I hope to impact.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

This literature review will focus on two research streams: Social mobility and the social genome model (SGM) with the strong starts. Social mobility will be defined. Relevant literature will reinforce the definition and factors. Other factors discussed include social capital, the early influences, employment, and the labor market. The review will show the relationship of the factors to social mobility. It will also show the components of social mobility included in the model. The SGM will be reviewed. The model gives rise to strong starts within five key life stages. These will be defined and reviewed. The strong start areas are 1) in life, 2) in school, 3) in postsecondary education, 4) in the labor market, and 5) for family. The chapter ends with a general summary of this section.

Social Mobility

Social mobility is the degree a girl's social, income, or occupational status can change throughout her life. This includes the movement of her children and subsequent generations up or down the social ladder. It can also be defined as the movement or circulation of a girl, her family, or groups within a social space. Movement up or down the social mobility ladder is mapped by status, occupation, income, and other variables that define her ("social mobility," 2015). Many studies speak to the intergenerational nature of poverty transmission. For example, results suggest that when a mother is educated, her children are better educated (Maralani, 2013).

Thompson (2004) discussed distinct patterns of mobility. After multiple observations and interviews, he found children generally took on the occupation of their parents based on what they observed, both good and bad. However, the observations also extended to aunts, uncles, and other extended family. Thompson further described social mobility for women, which speaks to breadwinners and single mothers. The men who were upwardly socially mobile contrasted sharply with women risers. Put simply, men who were risers almost always rose with a wife who was there in the background and remained at the time of interview in a continuing marriage (Thompson, 2004). By contrast, women either rose with a rather reluctant man in tow—or almost equally often, in many cases—rose after they had freed themselves from their husband. For women, divorce was a catalyst for rising as well as for falling. While education is a mediating role toward social mobility, other factors limit its role such as class and educational participation, often driven and limited by familial influence and attainment which is driven by class (Nunn et al., 2007).

Traditionally, the role of the age-old paradigms of institutionalized and structural racism, sexism, and classism are forms of oppression and inequality. Their role in social mobility has been ignored (Rycroft, 2018). According to Ladd, the typical explanation for inequality is personal choice and thus it must be deserved (as cited in Marsh, 2013). However, if the opportunity for equality has never been real for children, their parents, or the parents before them, inequality, in this sense, does not seem to be a personal choice (Rycroft, 2018). The government has not, and does not,

provide equal resources for schooling, skills training, or job opportunities to all (Rycroft, 2018). This discrepancy is largely due to prejudice, discrimination, and segregation.

Early Influences and Education

There are three major areas that influence a child's trajectory in her initial years. The first area influencing a girl's life is her family structure, her parents, other caregivers, and her level of education. The second area is her preschool-aged care, home life, and preschool education. The third area is her income demographic. Parenting behaviors differ across socioeconomic status and education levels. Typically, higher socioeconomic levels translate to better education within family structures and childhood experience. In 2004, Esping-Anderson said that "the race is already half-way run even before children begin school" (as cited in Nunn et al., 2007, p. 33). These topics will also be discussed later in the review of strong starts.

There is some agreement that education has a mediating role in social mobility.

However, it does not guarantee it:

Even though the idea that education leads to eradication of poverty thus increasing social mobility persists, it is still very much debatable as there are exogenous factors to be considered such as the outcomes of education, changes in the labor market, opportunities for employment and distribution of wealth. (Tee, Lui, Selvadurai, Hoon, & Radzi, 2017)

People who live in poverty tend to have limited experiences and make more conservative decisions regarding education. This ultimately confines their

opportunities (Nunn et al., 2007) and overall economic mobility. More recent discussions amongst educators, state, and local officials around the merits of career and technical education are underway. Graduates with technical or applied science associate degrees out-earn bachelor degree holders by \$2,000 to \$11,000 in first-year earnings (College Measures, 2013); the most beneficial boost is seen by those with jobs that pay a median income of \$55,000 or more and require education below a bachelor degree per year (Carnevale, Strohl, Cheah, & Ridley, 2017). However, there are still no guaranteed outcomes for social mobility (K. Johnson & Hendricks, 2019). Parental involvement in a child's education may be the most important factor for completion and success. Again, parental involvement tends to vary by social class (Nunn et al., 2007).

Job and Labor Market

Black women have the highest job participation rate in the United States labor market and higher rates of educational attainment than almost any group, yet as a group, they have the least wealth of all groups (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). In other words, Black women are overeducated relative to their wealth attainment and career achievement. These facts do not secure upward social mobility or wealth accumulation in a meaningful way. Median wealth for single Black women without a bachelor degree is \$500 versus \$8,000 for white women without a bachelor degree (National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, 2019). The same source reports that median wealth for married Black women without a bachelor degree is \$25,000 versus \$117,200 for married white women without a bachelor degree. Median wealth for

single Black women with a bachelor degree is \$5,000 versus \$35,000 for single white women with a bachelor degree. And median wealth for married Black women with bachelor degree is \$45,000 versus \$260,000 for married white women with a bachelor degree (National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, 2019). These types of figures impact intergenerational mobility.

A study of outbound job searches (where companies search for workers) by Black, Hasan, and Koning (2020) found that “Hispanic and African Americans...are disadvantaged in the labor market” (p. 17). The study also found “African Americans have considerably lower rates of referrals than Whites and Hispanic workers” (Black et al., 2020, p. 17). Some less educated single women with children had to resort to government assistance since unemployment rose among less educated men who were not as capable of caring for their families when compared to their educated skilled counterparts. According to McLanahan and Jacobsen (2015), the

factor driving family change was the decline in employment and earnings among low-skilled men, which made them less able to support a family and therefore less attractive on the marriage market...welfare state policies in the USA discouraged marriage among poor mothers by imposing a steep income test on public benefits. Given the uncertainty of the low wage labor market, welfare benefits provided more security than marriage for women with low levels of education. (p. 16)

Inequality can be institutionally explained from the perspectives of labor relations, private ownership, and social assistance, where there has traditionally been no appetite for change or improvement (Marsh, 2013) to effect social mobility. In labor

relations, power rests with the institution and not the laborer; as a result of private ownership and the overall skew of the distribution and accumulation of wealth, the working class is exploited, as the top-income quintile holds the bulk of total income. When income gaps are examined, race and gender gaps become apparent (Marsh, 2013). Social assistance programs such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) are designed to serve as a bridge when wages are insufficient (Marsh, 2013). In addition, local charities often address these gaps.

The increased unemployment (Zinn, 1989) and decline in safety nets contribute to the inability to effectively provide for and adequately raise children (R. Hill, 1989). Policymakers have not cohesively sought to replenish or fill those gaps. Sometimes, certain family members turn to alternative economies to fill the gaps and feed their families. These alternatives contribute to the introduction of crack and cocaine and other drugs. The epidemic consumed most of a generation (Hamid, 2012). And the intergenerational trends continue through use of more illicit modern drugs (American Addiction Centers, 2019).

Why the SGM model and Strong Start Dimensions Versus Other Models?

Studies showing the correlation between education and income exist ad nauseum, which highlight the relationships between race and racial gaps (Kershaw, 1992). However, they do not address other factors impacting social mobility (i.e. criminal

record, neighborhood). Some studies speak of personality qualities and school-based functioning (Skinner, McHale, Wood, & Telfer, 2019). While these correlations speak to certain emotions and negative teacher/student occurrences due to race, they do not address the full-scale, long-term range of emotions young women experience. Some studies provide a phenomenological approach and information on young African American women's experiences in a segment of their early careers (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). Yet, they are void of antecedents to the experiences. One longitudinal study covered intergenerational income mobility for daughters (Chadwick & Solon, 2002), but the race and family structures were dissimilar to the majority of the participants' structures.

Another longitudinal study conducted in Baltimore, Maryland, contained a multivariate model that seemed promising (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005). It mapped a few factors such as socioeconomic status, early intervention, and grades from the first grade to overall attainment by age 22. Nevertheless, it was not qualitative nor comprehensive enough to provide a sufficient framework for this study. In addition, many studies lack qualitative data. Some articles rightfully report that some African Americans have experienced gains in social mobility. However, they do not give credence to girls who were born into poverty. Statistically, these girls are not likely to move up the social mobility ladder in a postindustrial society. Again, articles like these provide statistics without much on the ecological context and experiences from childhood to adulthood.

I could have researched social mobility for girls born into poverty in Peoria, Illinois, generically or generally, but I decided that process would not have been sufficient to address my research question. Instead, I selected the SGM and strong start dimensions because together they provided

- 1) the most robust data points to operationalize identifiable and accessible criteria across all of the participants in this study,
- 2) longitudinal data and previously researched criteria at each life stage,
- 3) understandable comparatives at each life stage regardless of class status, and
- 4) more flexibility to explore experiences, solutions, and rationale for participants escaping poverty or remaining in poverty.

Social Genome Model and Benchmark for Social Mobility

A precursor to the SGM and strong starts, scholars described how agency (Whitehead & Pearson, 2006) and personal responsibility (Haskins, 2009) were the keys to social mobility. It was called “the success sequence.” The success sequence purported that a woman should graduate high school, go to college, get a job, and get married before having children. This sequence was deemed the steps women should take to avoid poverty (Whitehead & Pearson, 2006). According to its authors, the social genome model (SGM)

demonstrates how pathways (were) taken by seventy six percent of close to six thousand children in their sample. It shows that: “success in all four stages before adulthood is actually the most common pathway for children to take between birth and age 29, with over one-quarter of children taking that route, and 81 percent of them achieving

middle class status. Of those who fail in all four life stages, a group that is only 8 percent of our sample, just 24 percent become middle class by age 40... if they can get on track by age ten and stay on track [their chance of reaching middle class improves]. (Sawhill & Reeves, 2016, p. 9)

In essence, it is a life cycle model. It describes “five life stages (after circumstances at birth), with a corresponding set of success measures at the end of each stage”

(Sawhill & Reeves, 2016, p. 69). The SGM provides a frame and understanding of the pathways to the middle class and simulates the impact of policy interventions on rates of mobility (Sawhill & Reeves, 2016). The popular “Five Strong Starts to Boost Social Mobility” (Reeves & Grannis, 2014) established ten functional checkpoints that operationalized the research and model. Today, these five areas are a barometer of success and curriculum guide for the GLOW program and its participants. Each area has two subcomponents that provide criteria and benchmarks for successful pathways to the middle class.

The SGM outlines the general criteria required to achieve middle-class status (Sawhill & Reeves, 2016). The model developers also looked to policy simulations/gyrations to determine the impact on social mobility. The model provides a sufficient general overview and criteria for the successful transition to middle class, yet it does not address certain practical experiences for those born into poverty. In fairness, such a model cannot provide cognitive insights beyond “good behavior,” “no criminal record,” and “sexual behaviors related to pregnancy before marriage” (Sawhill & Reeves, 2016). Furthermore, the model lacks details and circumstances

for getting off/back on track. It ignores individual experiences and does not bring context/climate into account. The model does not allow for adult childhood experiences/events: In addition to the factors and criteria previously noted, past research has also found that other studies reveal lack of social mobility is due to “unobserved family characteristics” (R. Hill, 1998, p. 6). R. Hill (1998) suggests the following:

the husband-wife-children triad in Africa should not be characterized as a “nuclear family” since this unit does not provide socialization, economic production and emotional support by itself in isolation. In short, the conjugal units in Africa do not perform all of the traditional functions of a family since those functions are performed by the extended family networks. Thus, the African extended family is the African family, while the conjugal or “nuclear” family is the European family... [these and other structures] are a part of network of extended family members. (p. 17)

Like the African culture, some family characteristics should also include the extended family and not just traditional parents. This includes the depth and magnitude of investment in a child’s human capital as well as the quality of local public goods, schools, neighborhoods, and peers (Derenoncourt, 2019).

Next, I will discuss research directly related to each of the five areas. Each area has two sub-dimensions. The discussion provides additional foundation and background for my research. The strong starts incorporate each of the points described below.

A Strong Start in Life: Born to an Educated Mother or Capable Parents

Mothers' education is used in the SGM as an indicator of parental education because, among children with a parent in the home, the vast majority live in mother-only or two-parent families. In the SGM sample, only four percent live in father-only families with no mother present. This approach provides a consistent measure of parental education for most children living with at least one parent. Mothers and fathers tend to have similar educational attainments (Hernandez & Napierala, 2014).

Broadly, mothers with a bachelor degree have significantly lower federal poverty and low-income rates, higher family median income, and are more likely to have a full-time job. Their children have higher proficiencies in reading and math by the eighth grade. Their children are more likely to be enrolled in prekindergarten on time, graduate high school on time, and have better health and health insurance (Hernandez & Napierala, 2014). Most scholars agree that the direct effect of parental status, once education is accounted for, is nonzero and a relatively minor factor in social mobility (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Sewell, Haller, & Portes 1969; Sewell & Hauser 1975).

Abelev (2009) studied how lower-class children are often not enrolled in extracurricular activities and other activities she called "the middle-class habitus." Overall, they are not accustomed to the same experiences as their peers are when they reach college and the workforce (Abelev, 2009). They will likely lack social capital related to those experiences. A famous study by Hart and Risley (2003) highlighted a

difference in the amount of words heard by children based on their socioeconomic status. They revealed that children of mothers and parents on welfare heard about 615 words per hour, working-class children heard 1,250 words, and children from professional families heard 2,150 words. This would be a gap of about 30 million fewer words by age three, exacerbating the disadvantage when compared to children of higher socioeconomic statuses and throughout life (Hart & Risley, 2003).

Data from the SGM has also suggested that early and frequent interventions improve a child's chances for reaching the middle class and closing the education and income gap by 70% (Sawhill & Karpilow, 2014). However, in many cases, intervention is sporadic or absent. Only four percent of Black children are enrolled in high-quality preschool programs (Gillespie, 2019).

A Strong Start in School: Acceptable Pre-Reading and Math Skills and Demonstrating School-Appropriate Behavior

Currently, the most prevalent mechanism to assess human capital is the relationship between education and earnings (Sawhill & Reeves, 2016). Middle school grades are known to determine “students’ likelihood of graduating from high school and leaving high school with a strong probability of success in college” (Allensworth, Gwynne, Moore, & de la Torre, 2014, p. 1). In other words, students with lower grades in middle school reduce their opportunity for success in high school. In fact, most children born into poverty are not prepared for school by age five (Reeves & Grannis, 2014). A longitudinal study in Baltimore, Maryland, found African American

students were more likely not to have acceptable behavior and were more likely to be suspended or expelled without ever receiving services or supports by fourth grade (Bettencourt, Gross, Ho, & Perrin, 2018). The authors of the study cautioned the information was

problematic to consider racial/ethnic disparities without also considering the social context in which these disparities exist [67]. In fact, studies have found that once socioeconomic status is accounted for, the disparity between African American and White students' academic performance is generally reduced. It is possible that teachers' assessments of students' social-behavioral readiness on the MMSR may be biased by teachers' own cultural perspectives, and there is some evidence that teachers' ratings may systematically disadvantage African American and male students. (p. 44)

A Strong Start in Postsecondary Education: Graduated High School With Acceptable GPA of at Least 2.5 and Enroll in Postsecondary Education

A California study proved high school grades tend to be the strongest predictor of four-year college outcomes for all academic disciplines, campuses, and freshman cohorts (Geiser & Santelices, 2007). Acceptable grades were considered to be half Bs and half Cs (Finn & Rock, 1997). Reeves and Grannis (2014) report that low-income students are more likely to drop out of high school and are also more likely to have scores that signal their lack of college-readiness. Many of today's corporate markets typically require skills that exceed a high school education (Reeves & Grannis, 2014). Many students have to deal with the attitude-achievement gap (Mickelson, 1990). The girls want to do well, but their grades do not reflect this desire.

A Strong Start in the Labor Market: A Postsecondary Degree With No Criminal Record

Higher income opportunities for low-income students who graduate with a four-year degree improve by more than 40% (Reeves & Howard, 2013). However, more than half of the low-income students who enroll in community college do not move to four-year institutions nor get their associates degree (Karpilow & Reeves, 2013). And according to a National Center for Education Statistics (2019) report, only 40% of African Americans graduated from college in 2016. Studies have shown unemployment rates are correlated with incarceration rates, especially for African Americans (Chiricos & Delone, 1992).

A lack of college degree coupled with having a criminal record is a marker of difficult economic standing. Imprisonment has a negative impact on wages and employment, especially when compared to someone who has not been imprisoned (Western, Kling, & Weiman, 2001). In addition, for African Americans, race combined with previous incarceration remain impediments to employment (Decker, Ortiz, Spohn, & Hedberg, 2015)

A Strong Start for Family: Get Married and Have a Job Before Having the First Child

Females in poverty are five times more likely to have a child before 21 than females who are not (Duncan et al., 2012). Some scholars believe youth should take responsibility for their education, sexual behavior, marriage, and work (Haskins, 2009). The phenomena evolved, took root, and became known as “The Success

Sequence” (Haskins & Sawhill, 2013). Eventually, both Reeves (Johns Hopkins University School of Education, 2018) and Wang (2018) described variations of the phenomena in the way we came to learn it, as a part of every American girl/boy’s dream: go to college (meet your spouse), get married, have planned babies, and live happily ever after (Reeves, Rodrigue, & Gold, 2015). The rationale for this sequence is that children born to married parents are less likely to grow up in poverty (Reeves & Grannis, 2014). Ratcliffe and Kalish (2017) found the most successful individuals are those who avoid teen pregnancy, have higher high school completion rates, and enroll in colleges. Varying levels of poverty and characteristics prevail for those who move out of poverty. For example, “only 16 percent of persistently poor children are consistently connected to work or school as young adults, are not poor in their late 20s, and considered ‘most successful’” (Ratcliffe & Kalish, 2017, p. 2).

Summary of Literature Review

This literature review demonstrates how social mobility is driven by social and cultural capital, other forms of capital, education, and subsequent choices made with and without them. It depends on early influences such as a person’s family structure and parental education. It also depends on the job and labor market. Middle-class parents traditionally identify the best scenarios to improve their children’s social mobility (Nunn et al., 2007).

Chapter 4: Methodology

With narrative as our vantage point, we have a point of reference, a life and a ground to stand on, for imagining what experience is and for imagining how it might be studied and represented in the researchers' texts. In this view, experience is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, we reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate self and others, including the young and those such as researchers who are new to their communities.

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. iii)

Overview of Research Methods

This study will be the metacognitive sociological imagination of 13 women.

According to Mills, sociological imagination is an intersectional matrix of “biography, history, and society” (as cited in Moritz & Lysaker, 2018, p. 128). Using Peoria, Illinois, as the setting context and various local and national trends to provide the societal context, the participants will provide their biographies and history.

I used semi-structured and open-ended interviews of eight millennial women born into poverty who have attained middle-class income status and five women who have not. I also added insights and personal reflections of insights from members of the Peoria community to fill in gaps and add color and framing to the narrative. These members of the Peoria community included professionals who were the heads of agencies such as the Urban League and TRIO, the current superintendent who was a principal at that time these women were in school, the head of Peoria Public Schools' social and emotional learning programming, as well as pastors of churches.

Since poverty, inequality, racism, and segregation have remained consistent for over 100 years, I decided to search for grassroots and personal experiences of others to mold a model for processes to get out of poverty. This study uses a narrative case study of millennial African American women who came from poverty and have achieved middle-class status in comparison to African American women who are still in poverty. Eight young African American women who moved from poverty to middle class were identified and interviewed. Five young African American women remaining in poverty were also interviewed. The narratives derived from my interviews are a set of co-constructed stories between myself and the participants. I say co-constructed because I was looking for answers to specific questions about their life experiences. I wanted to learn about their cognitive processes for achieving or not achieving middle-class status. This provided insight on how the participants see themselves and their lives. They were analyzed for themes and collective meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I studied the data for similarities, differences, and nuances between the two groups.

Narrative Case Study Approach

As I spoke to colleagues to determine who might qualify for the study and the best ways to reach them, it was brought to my attention that their stories would touch on trends of inequality, racism, white resentment, relational aggression, trauma, and polyvictimization. Their experiences will speak to various forms of social capital: their geography, places, and neighborhoods, literacies, and other themes described in the literature review. Maxwell (1996) suggests narrative case studies as a “conceptual

framework... of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories supporting and informing [my] research” (p. 238). It is the participants’ “lived experiences and perceptions of the experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 115). In addition, since scholars admit their models are deficient (Winship & Owen, 2013), excluding peer influence and certain family characteristics, I hoped to uncover some of these features and more during the interviews.

“Narrative methods can be considered ‘real world measures’ that are appropriate when ‘real life problems’ are investigated” (Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2019, para. 4). Their oral history and recollections are a way of understanding their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative stories allow for “translucent windows into cultural meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 116). The compilation of the cross case analysis allows for synthesis, according to Yin—as well as patterns, similarities, and differences, according to Miles and Huberman (as cited in DeVilbiss, 2014).

Criteria for Participant Selection

As a first step in recruiting study participants, I developed criteria with respect to age, poverty, and middle-class status. These criteria were used to assure that my sampling strategy identified participants representative of the groupings. This provided a sample to analyze comparisons within and across individuals who had moved from poverty to the middle class and those who remained in poverty.

Age

The millennials cohort was selected because they are the youngest generation of professionals to experience certain aspects of the “internet of things” in a meaningful way. These include social media, cyberbullying, and other phenomena. Older cohorts did not. According to the Pew Research Center, being born between 1981 to 1996 is the definition of millennials (as cited in Dimock, 2019). The New York State Economics association consider millennials as those born between 1977 to 1996 (as cited in Ikwueze, 2014). The Global Web Index (2019) defined millennials as born between 1983 and 1996. I decided to recruit participants from the widest range possible from these sources. I looked for women whose births ranged from 1977 to 1996.

I expected them to provide a frame of reference relevant to the current middle and high school generations. In addition, they have had at least 5 to 15 years of experience within corporate trade-based sectors. This experience provided them with a full grasp of interaction with individuals of different races and backgrounds. They were able to speak to their professional careers in their ecological setting within the context of today’s social and political constructs. They have learned lessons. They have mastered a few navigational tools and experienced enough challenges and setbacks to describe their modern-day methods of circumvention.

Poverty

Poverty in Illinois was determined and measured using three sources: the federal U.S. Census guidelines, Health and Human Services poverty guidelines, and a presumed

level of poverty based on urban program participation. Since participants were likely not aware of nor remember their parents' salaries as far back as 1986 and such, I gleaned situations of poverty by determining whether their parents met certain criteria associated with living in poverty such as receiving welfare and/or food stamps, acquiring food from foodbanks, and whether they participated in certain community programs with income and poverty level triggers (e.g., Upward Bound). Poverty was also determined by reviewing guidelines to participate in these programs.

Middle class

Participants were asked to provide their salary or salary range depending on their level of comfort. Median salary ranges were determined by U.S. Census Bureau data for African Americans (Guzman, 2019). The median income range for African Americans was used, given the persistent salary gap by race, in order to provide a “middle-class African American” salary. The general and generic middle-class salary ranges were obtained from a Pew Research Center study and interactive database (Bennett, Fry, & Kochhar, 2020). In 2018, median middle-class income was \$61,937 in the U.S. In 2017, median income in Illinois was \$64,493; it was \$65,030 in 2018. For African Americans, the 2018 median income was \$41,511 for households—up from \$40,880 in 2017 (Guzman, 2019).

To ensure the participants reached middle-class status, I entered the salary, family size, and race into the Pew Research Center's income calculator (Bennett et al.,

2020). The resulting number indicated the women's class position. This was also a method for validating their class status.

Participant Recruitment

In total, eight woman who had achieved middle-class status and five women aspiring to flee from poverty were recruited. Through snowball sampling, I used a recruitment announcement to identify women who had achieved middle-class status (Noy, 2008).

The announcement was sent directly to Peoria, Illinois, professionals, colleagues, current and former community agency and organization leaders, pastors, school principals and teachers, the Peoria public school superintendent, local news reporters, and politicians. Finally, the announcement was posted and circulated on social media.

I requested and received permission from the Peoria City/County Health Department to gain access to women in the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) program.

Eligibility for the WIC program per their guidelines are as follows:

To be eligible for WIC, applicants must have income at or below an income level or standard set by the state agency or be determined automatically income-eligible based on participation in certain programs. *Income Standard.* The state agency's income standard must be between 100 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (issued each year by the Department of Health and Human Services), but cannot be more than 185 percent of the federal poverty income guidelines. (Peoria City/County Health Department, n.d., "WIC Program Overview")

As a result, I did not need to confirm or qualify their financial and poverty status. A booth was set up at the entrance of the WIC room at the agency. Staff were informed of the study and asked to refer the women to the booth. In addition, after their check-

in, women were greeted, informed of the tenets of the study, and asked if they were interested in participating. Participants 2, 3, 4, and 5 were obtained from the study in this manner. One of the participants was referred by a school teacher at one of the local middle schools. She knew the participant personally and was aware of her financial status and personal situations. This will be discussed in the upcoming chapter. This participant also received cash assistance and WIC, which nullified the need to verify her income level.

Interview Protocol

Each interview was videotaped for later review and coding. Interviews were videotaped to recall and document and observe body language and facial emotions, which is recommended by Angrosino (as cited in DeVilbiss, 2014). Furthermore, Farber suggests that language and emotions may be lost to my personal memories and notes (as cited in DeVilbiss, 2014). I made this decision because I believed the observed cues would be impactful. Each interview was described within a set of interview notes. I wanted to capture their experiences lived and narrated from their perspective in the moment to get their own framing and understanding of the experience (Andersen & Collins, 1992) as well as my own.

Participants' recollections and the meaning they placed on their experiences also helped me to determine a framework for coding. When I interviewed the participants who have achieved middle class, I provided an overview of SGM. However, I did not provide the overview to the women who have not achieved middle class, as I did not

want to cause alarm, concern, or feelings of failure. I also provided an overview of the Girls Light Our Way program. I intend to use some of their successful strategies to benefit the program and the girls. Then, I asked each participant to walk me through their lives as they remembered them from as far back as kindergarten to the present. From time to time, I inserted questions to ensure I could collect data for each of the SGM benchmarks such as behavior, parental involvement from childhood, or grades (i.e., grades in fourth grade, eighth grade, and high school). As they described their childhood through adulthood, I took notes on their level of poverty as they recalled it. For example, if they lived in certain housing projects, their parents were required to have a minimum/maximum income level, which confirmed their poverty level. I also wanted to understand their awareness and feelings about their own poverty at that time. I wanted to glean their processes and decisions for getting out of poverty and into the middle class or any deterrents for escaping poverty and the lower class.

Each participant was offered \$25 per hour for their time and insight. The interviews as well as my notes and reflections were transcribed and coded for themes. If I needed second interviews, further clarity, or additional insights, participants were given \$25 per hour again. Once coding, transcriptions, vignettes, and assessments were complete, I gave my understanding of their life story and situations. Each participant signed consent forms which described the purpose, process, and nature of the study.

Vignettes are used later in this study to support theory and additional theories, literature, and insights. Interviews uncovered new information, processes, and patterns of support. The data collected in this study will be retained for seven years for the purposes of discussion with the participants and further insights. It will not be retained in a public form. The information is maintained on a computer with facial recognition and a personal identification code.

Operationalizing the Strong Starts

Each study participant was evaluated with respect to the strong starts identified by the social genome model research (Winship & Owen, 2013). This assessment was made from information obtained during self-reported participant interviews. I wanted to learn how they themselves operationalized, achieved, or failed to achieve the five strong start areas and their ten underlying dimensions within their lives.

The interviews began with a request that each participant provide an overview of her family structure and levels of family background and parental education. Given the nature of the mother's role, I was sure to gather information on the nature of each participant's relationship with their mothers.

Classification of Participants

Women who have achieved middle-class status are classified as Achievers. The women who have not yet achieved middle-class status were identified as Aspirers. The women who have not achieved middle-class status aspire to do so and work every day in hopes of making it their reality. Each participant was compared to the

ten strong start components. This comparison determined which component they met within the model's criteria. Participants' experiences were compared intragroup and intergroup. The comparison provided insight on their lives, life choices, triggers, similarities, and differences.

Data Analysis and Scoring

Each participant was segregated in a file for notes and insights. First- and second-order coding was done online in Word and Excel. I searched for similar themes and phrasing to highlight life situations often found with people in poverty and typical poverty-related barriers. I removed information to identify barriers some of the women could not change or overcome such as race. Finally, I reviewed the data to identify strategies the women used and still use to cope with and/or navigate out of poverty.

I created a rudimentary scoring system to compare the participants' experiences. I assigned cumulative scores to the ten strong start dimensions (10) and the barriers—"pillars of poverty" (52). The higher the strong start dimensions, the better the score; and the lower the pillars, the better the score. In other words, for the strong start dimensions, if you reached a score of 10, you have a better chance of reaching middle-class status. For the pillars of poverty, lower scores meant there were fewer barriers related to poverty. Higher scores in the pillars of poverty category translated to more significant and complex trauma, toxic stress, and life challenges. Most

categories were awarded a single point per applicable category. However, certain categories were measured slightly differently.

For example, graduating from college received a full 1 point versus receiving an associate certificate in baking or a home health aide certificate, which received half of a point. Or if the participant was born to an educated mother, she received a full point. Finally, if a father was the capable parent initially but later started using drugs, that participant would receive half of a point. The full table of results is shown in Appendix A.

The findings follow in the next chapter. This is followed by a discussion in Chapter 6, and Chapter 7 offers conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 5: Findings

This section begins with revisiting the research question. Next, I provide tables with scores and statistics representing the strong start dimensions results. This is followed by summary discussions of the Achievers and Aspirers compared to the five strong start areas and ten dimensions.

Although my findings suggest that the strong start dimensions provide a broad understanding of the struggles of social mobility, these dimensions are too general to provide a specific understanding of the barriers young African American women face growing up in poverty. Using the rich data collected from my interviewees, I was able to offer more detailed examples of the experiences that underlie the ten dimensions of the strong starts. These experiences were coined the “pillars of poverty,” and they are presented next. The pillars of poverty tables reflect the participants’ experiences within each strong start life stage. The tables are followed by narratives and insights on the participants’ experiences and perceptions. The data presented is designed to show the complexity and multi-layered nature of poverty-based disadvantages in each participant’s life. These pillars created stifling and heavy burdens on the participants. The burdens accumulated and mounted into cumulative disadvantage that the Aspirers have not yet overcome.

Many of the pillars were experienced across a multitude of the life stages and dimensions. As such, I discuss them within each of the five strong start areas. I hope

the reader can glimpse the heaviness and maturity of the challenges experienced before the ages of nine, 17, and into adulthood. The eight general categories of the pillars of poverty experienced by the participants are 1) unstable home life, 2) abuse, 3) negative school related issues, 4) extra personal demands (adultification), 5) criminality, 6) resources, 7) personal issues, and 8) other forms of polyvictimization.

The final section of this chapter describes the differentiating factors between the Achievers and Aspirers. These were factors and processes the eight Achievers deployed and likely their primary rationales for middle-class attainment. Those factors were 1) triggered resolve, 2) hope, 3) hard work early, 4) heliotropic effect, 5) human capital, 6) support, and 7) admiration and emulation.

Revisiting the Research Question

- 1) For African American millennial women from Peoria, Illinois, born into poverty, what are the factors and personal experiences they express that led to their upward mobility in achieving middle-class status?
 - a. Are the social genome model (SGM) strong starts predictive of achieving middle-class status?
 - i. Can one achieve middle-class status without experiencing all of the SGM strong starts?
 - b. What factors emerge that differentiated the Achievers and Aspirers to reach or not reach middle-class status?

- i. For the Achievers, what perceived barriers did they navigate to achieve social mobility and reach middle-class status?
- ii. For the Aspirers, what perceived barriers are they currently navigating to achieve social mobility and reach middle-class status?

Revisiting the Ten Strong Start Dimensions and Five Strong Start Categories

Below are the 10 strong start dimensions and their respective strong start category and life phase.

- 1) Educated Mom (Life)
- 2) Capable Parents (Life)
- 3) Acceptable Pre-Reading and Math (School)
- 4) School Appropriate Behavior (School)
- 5) Graduate High School With a 2.5, or Above (Postsecondary)
- 6) Enroll in Postsecondary Education (Postsecondary)
- 7) Postsecondary Degree (Labor Market)
- 8) No Criminal Record (Labor Market)
- 9) Married Before First Child (Family)
- 10) Job Before First Child (Family)

Achievers and the strong start dimensions

The following table represents the detailed scores for each Achiever in each of the ten strong start dimensions. Each Achiever could score up to ten points:

Table 1. Achievers and the Five Strong Start Areas and Ten Dimensions

FSS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Educated Mother			.5 ^L				.5 ^L	
Capable Parents			.5		1			
Reading/Math Scores	1	1	.5	.5	.5	.5	1	
Appropriate Behavior	1	1	1	1	B	.5	1	
Graduate High School w/ 2.5 GPA		1	1	1	1	1	1	
Enroll in Postsecondary Education	1		1	.5	1	1	1	.5
Postsecondary Degree			1		1 ^D	1	1 ^M	
No Criminal Conviction	1	1	1 ^{CA}	1 ^{NL, CA}	1	1	1	1 ^{NI}

FSS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Married Before First Child	1 ^P		1	1	1 ^M			
Job Before First Child	1	1	1	1	1	1 ^{**}	1	1
Totals	6	5	8	6	7.5	6.5	7.5	2.5

Source: Interviews with middle-class participants

B—0 because she was bullied; teacher/school discretion was harsh

CA—Engaged in criminal activity

NI—Near incarceration

M—Master degree

D—Doctoral candidate

L—Went to school later; Achiever 3's mother has some community college credits; Participant 7's mother went back to nursing school to get her license.

M—Miscarriage

P—Pregnant during wedding, mother went back to school during high school years

T—Father was capable at the start but started doing drugs

F—Fluctuated

** Had just graduated from law school and studying for bar exam

Discussion of the Achievers' strong start dimension results

Achievers are considered women who have achieved middle-class status according to the federal standards. The respondents who were considered Achievers were the African American women who were able to move from poverty and the bottom income quintile to middle class. A total of eight Achievers were interviewed. The table above provides a description of Achievers with a comparison to the ten strong start dimensions. Among the eight Achievers, six of them had non-educated mothers. Achiever 3's mother received "some schooling" at the local community college. Just before high school, Achiever 7's mother went to nursing school. Six of the Achievers had parents who were not capable while only one (Achiever 5) had parents who were both capable; the mother worked occasionally and the father was educated. Achiever 3's parents were temporarily capable. They went into poverty because the mother did not work during the earlier school years, and the father started using drugs heavily. Three of the Achievers (1, 2, and 7) had consistently good reading and math scores, while the remaining Achievers had occasional bouts of good and bad reading and math scores, notably Achievers 3 and 6. For Achiever 4, grades were never a priority. She said she only did what was needed to pass.

All Achievers except Achiever 5 had "appropriate" behavior in school. Occasionally, teachers labeled the participants' behaviors "bad" for inappropriate cause such as coming to school unkept or racist behavior. All of them graduated high school. Only Achiever 2 did not enroll in college. She was scheduled to enlist in the armed

services, but she got pregnant. Four Achievers (3, 5, 6 and 7) have postsecondary degrees. Achiever 7 has a master degree and Achiever 5 is pursuing her doctorate. None of the Achievers had criminal convictions, although two were to near-incarceration (4 and 8). Achiever 8's mother had to deplete her savings to hire a lawyer and have her record expunged. Two (3 and 4) actually engaged in criminal activity. Achievers 1 and 4 were married before their first child. Achievers 2, 6, 7, and 8 were not. Achievers 3 and 5 do not have children—although Achiever 5 suffered a miscarriage and would otherwise have had a child (unclaimed by the father) before marriage.

Five of the Achievers had their first child after being employed, while Achiever 6 was studying for the bar exam when she got pregnant. Most were working relatively low-waged jobs when they learned of their pregnancy. Two Achievers are single with full careers at a university and Fortune 500 company, respectively. They do not have children. Two of the Achievers are married. One of the married Achievers has a child from a prior relationship. One Achiever was married before her first child but later divorced and had a second out of wedlock. She is now a single mother. Another single Achiever has three children.

The results suggest that all but one Achiever was able to secure upward social mobility and had taken action immediately toward their current careers before having the first child. The outliers in this group are Achievers 2 and 8. Achiever 2 never

enrolled in postsecondary school, nor did she graduate from college. However, she has typically worked two jobs. In addition, life lessons and her former Junior Reserve Officer’s Training Corp training provided the discipline needed to achieve middle-class status. Achiever 8 only scored 2.5, yet she had the highest salary and income compared to all of the Achievers. She received support from a mentor. In addition, her fortitude, will to succeed, and ingenuity helped her to achieve middle-class status.

Aspirers and the strong start dimensions

The following table represents the detailed scores for the Aspirers compared the ten strong start dimensions. Each Aspirer could score up to ten points.

Table 2. Aspirers and the Five Strong Start Areas and Ten Dimensions

FSS	1	2	3	4	5
Educated Mother			1		
Capable Parents			1		1
Reading/Math Scores			.5	1	
Appropriate Behavior			1	1	
Graduate High School w/ 2.5 GPA	1		1		
Enroll in Postsecondary Education	.5		.5	.5	.5
Postsecondary Degree	.5 ^H		.5 ^A	.5 ^H	.5 ^H

FSS	1	2	3	4	5
No Criminal Conviction*		.5*		1	
Married before First Child					
Job Before First Child	1	1	1	1	1
Totals	1	3.5*	6.5	5	4

Source: Interviews with participants who did not proceed to middle class or who are in the process of working their way up to the middle class

P—Partial: Father became addicted to drugs

All Aspirers spent time in jail

H—Home health care certificate

A—Associate degree

*Participant was arrested and on trial but later found not guilty; during time of the trial, she missed several opportunities.

Discussion of the Aspirers' strong start dimension results

The participants who were considered Aspirers in this study were the African American women who have not reached the middle class. Yet they work hard every day and want better lives for their children. The women in the Aspirers category therefore still live in poverty, as they qualify for the WIC and Link programs. Five Aspirers participated in this study, and only one had an educated mother or capable parents. Aspirer 1's stepmother was a nurse and her father had a trade. Her family was large, her parents were separated, and her dad was addicted to drugs. Aspirers 1, 2, and 5 did not have good reading and math scores during middle school. Aspirer 1 had a learning disability in school and was alienated.

The scores for the other two during middle school years fluctuated between Bs, Cs, Ds and Fs. Only Aspirers 3 and 4 had appropriate behavior in school. Aspirers 2 and

5 did not graduate high school. Aspirer 3 was the only one to earn an associate degree (in baking and pastry arts). Aspirers 2, 4, and 5 earned certificates as home health aides. However, they could never work at the jobs for extended amounts of time to make headway into the company or move up. Three Aspirers (1, 3, and 5) had criminal convictions and spent time in jail. Aspirer 2 went to jail for a time but was later cleared of the charge. All of the Aspirers had some form of employment (in retail or a low-paying equivalent) before having their children.

All Aspirers gave birth to their first child before marriage. They were all single and had more than one child. Aspirer 1 had eleven children. Aspirer 2 had four children. Aspirer 3 had two children. Aspirer 4 had three children. And Aspirer 5 had eight children. This suggests that getting married before the first child improves the likelihood of the African American women in Peoria to move from lower-class to middle-class status. The number of children a woman has likely impacts her ability to move to the middle class. Outliers in the group were Aspirers 3 and 4. Aspirer 3 had educated parents, but they separated and the father was generally present but not very involved. She also had the stain of a criminal record and did not receive child support for her first child. Aspirer 4 had three children with three different men. None of them pay child support. So she is supporting her children on a single income.

Strong start dimensions—Statistical comparison

The statistical data in the table below summarizes the preceding data for Achievers and Aspirers:

Table 3. Strong Start Dimension Statistics

Strong Starts	#Ach	% of Ach	# of Asp	% of Asp	Total	% of Total	# Diff Ach vs Asp	Diff Ach vs Asp
Educated Mother	0.5	6%	2	40%	2.5	19%	-1.5	-34%
Capable Parents	1.5	19%	2	40%	3.5	27%	-0.5	-21%
Reading/Math Scores	5	63%	1.5	30%	6.5	50%	3.5	33%
Appropriate Behavior	6	75%	2	40%	8	62%	4	35%
Graduate High School w/ 2.5 GPA	6	75%	2	40%	8	62%	4	35%
Enroll in Postsecondary Ed.	7	88%	2	40%	9	69%	5	48%
Postsecondary Degree	4	50%	2	40%	6	46%	2	10%
No Criminal Conviction	8	100%	1.5	30%	9.5	73%	6.5	70%
Married Before First Child	4	50%	0	0%	4	31%	4	50%
Job Before First Child	8	100%	5	100%	13	100%	3	0%

Source: Participant interviews and results:

Ach#—The number of Achievers who met the category

Ach%—The percentage of the total 8 Achievers

Asp#—The number of Aspirers who met the category

Total—The total number of Achievers and Aspirers who met the category

Total%—The percent of the total 13 participants who met the category

Ach/Asp—Represents the difference between Achievers and Aspirers. A negative (-) number means there were X number more Aspirers than Achievers. And a positive (+) number means there were X number more Achievers than Aspirers for the participants.

Ach/Asp%Diff—Represents the percentage difference between the Aspirers and Achievers. A negative (-) % means there were X% more Aspirers than Achievers. And a positive (+) % means there were X% more Achievers than Aspirers for the participants.

The Achievers did better than the Aspirers in all of the strong starts except having educated mothers/capable parents. Within the strong start in life, 34% more of the Aspirers had an educated mother, and 21% more of the Aspirers had capable parents. Within the strong start in school, 33% more of the Achievers had good reading and math scores, and 35% more of the Achievers had appropriate behavior in school.

Within the strong start in school, 35% more of the Achievers graduated with at least a 2.5 GPA, and 48% more of the Achievers enrolled in postsecondary education.

Within the strong start in the labor market, 10% more of the Achievers received a postsecondary degree and 70% more of the Achievers did not have a criminal conviction. Within the strong start for a family, 50% more of the Achievers were married before their first child. All of the Achievers and Aspirers had a job before their first child.

Acceptable reading and math scores, appropriate behavior, graduating high school with a 2.5, or above, and enrolling in postsecondary education had a moderate impact on the difference between achievement, as differences ranged between 33-35%.

However, the type of postsecondary degree was critical in current salary differences.

This supports research that certain trades schools help to obtain jobs and some financial stability. Yet some salaries may not be sufficient to reach middle-class status. Finally, more Achievers were either married before having children, didn't have children, or received child support from one or several of their former mates.

To summarize the findings, more of the Aspirers had educated mothers and capable parents than the Achievers. However, Achievers outnumbered and outscored the Aspirers in the remaining 8 dimensions. None of the Aspirers were married before their first child. As you can see from these data presented in the tables, middle-class status can be achieved without experiencing or possessing all of the criteria in the SGM or strong start dimensions.

The average score for the Achievers was 6.5 versus the Aspirers average score of 4. This suggests the differentiating factors are found in the themes underlying or beyond what can be captured in the strong start dimensional criteria. Their stories are more complex and include factors for meeting or missing middle-class achievement. Having a child out-of-wedlock may not be as significant a factor in middle-class achievement. However, support from former mates, the children's fathers, seems critical. In addition, a criminal record also will have a significant impact on achievement and career outcomes.

Pillars of Poverty Within the Strong Start Dimensions

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the interview data allowed me to uncover further themes (called the pillars of poverty) within each of the strong start dimensions. I viewed the strong start dimensions as 4 life stages, collapsing two of the strong start dimensions (in school and postsecondary) into one life stage. The first life stage reflects the early years & foundational aspects of the “strong start in life”

phase. The pillars of poverty within this stage reflect the instability at the foundational level of participants' lives. It also reflects aspects of difficulty in their home lives. The second life stage reflects the pillars of poverty in participants' school years. I combined the "in school" and "in postsecondary" strong start. Most of the issues spanned all of their school years. The third life stage reflects issues at participants' jobs, as reflected in "the labor market" strong start. Finally, the last life stage encompasses pillars of poverty as they occurred in participants' adulthood. They are reflected in the "for a family" strong start category.

I identified 52 pillars of poverty within the four life stages. Looking at the data with these extended pillars provides greater insight into the experiences of the young women interviewed and can help to understand not only the struggles that these young women faced but also the factors that helped these women escape poverty. I offer metacognitive narratives within each pillar of poverty that provide abbreviated insights on the experiences of the participants. It is designed to provide an overview and representative samplings of their most poignant reflections and metacognition within each pillar. Here I attempt to provide the reader with a sense of each participant's perceptions of their experiences and decisions.

Pillars of poverty in the early and foundational years

Most of the pillars of poverty experienced during this stage of life can be attributed to not having educated mothers or capable parents. The participants were in poor living conditions and were in multiple homes and schools. They were also forced to live

around drugs. They had adult-like responsibilities at a very young age. In some cases, they were and felt abandoned by a parent or caregivers.

Life stage 1: Strong start in life—Educated mother, capable parents

Poor living conditions

Based on the stories told by the participants, it is evident that the women lived in poor conditions growing up, both in their own homes and foster care. When living at home with their parents, living conditions for the participants were typically in small and/or overcrowded living spaces.

Aspirer 1 had to endure living in a foster home overcrowded with dogs and cats. She said the house “smelled like dog shit all the time.” Due to the living conditions in her home, she felt that she could not stay there, but she also could not go outside because her foster mom would report her as “not in the home”—even when sometimes she would only be on the porch to get fresh air. She also noted that in her current apartment complex, there were cockroaches and she could see rats and mice moving in the walls. She wanted to leave but could not afford it. Moving out of her home was not any better for Aspirer 2, as she had to contend with living on park benches and outside gas stations. Then she would go to school where it was safe to sleep more.

The living conditions did not change upon moving to foster care. She indicated that she used to literally live “in closets,” and other tiny confined spaces. Achiever 8 also

narrated how her family would be without lights, and she described the struggles they underwent in their neighborhood. Aspirer 2 explained,

I got put out of my aunt's. I slept on park benches and at gas stations... I applied everywhere. I was collecting unemployment and Link. I got a job in Indianapolis, but it fell through because my case was still pending.

Achiever 8 stated,

Things got a little better but we struggled. I remember one day, our lights got cut off and our neighbor felt so sad for us because my sister [ill with cancer] was still on medical things and you can't be in the house and be on medical things not having Cilco [the local gas and electric company].

Multiple homes, multiple schools

Most of the participants seemed to have had multiple homes and to have changed schools frequently. Until her brother started paying the bills, Achiever 4 had to live in different shelters. They could not afford a home, and their mother was on public assistance.

An example of the experience of moving to a different school and culture can be seen in Aspirer 2: She indicated that she went to several different schools that included Wittier, Kingman, Roosevelt, Tyng Primary and Trewyn. Achiever 2 indicated that she liked her first school, Roosevelt. However, the change to Harrison School made her hate going to school. Unlike Roosevelt, the students at Harrison School were rowdy, and she did not like that. She said, "I didn't fit in. I was terrified." She ended

up going back to her grandmother's, where it was more structured to attend middle school. Specifically, Achiever 2 stated,

The first six, seven years of my life, I went to a school called Roosevelt. I really liked that school. I started third grade there (at the projects where they moved to) at Harrison school. I hated it. The kids were a lot more rowdy than I was used to. I would have went to the middle school down there but the middle school I didn't want to go there. I moved back with my grandmother. I was kind of back and forth between my mom and my grandmother.

The different schools offered different experiences. Some of participants hated the change in schools. Achiever 5 also changed schools a lot. She went to three different schools (Woodrow Wilson, Harrison and Tyng school). Aspirer 5 also indicated that she had moved to Blaine Sumner School in Peoria for fifth through seventh grades where she had many issues. She described it to be "very ghetto." She said the schools didn't know how to handle bullies and fighting.

Drugs in the home

Most of the participants indicated that crime was common in Peoria. Crime weaved its way through aspects of each participant's story from childhood to date. The themes of crime emerged due to personal experiences with drug dealer boyfriends, family members, and parents' partners. Most of the participants asserted that their loved ones sold drugs as a means of caring for their families. Participants such as Aspirer 3 admitted to having been arrested for stealing. Her reason for stealing was because she had no money and wanted something to eat. Aspirer 4's boyfriend threatened to kill her kids and threw the gun at her. He was later arrested. She also faced violence from her uncle who pointed a gun at her.

As previously discussed, Achiever 4's brother sold drugs to take care of their mentally ill mother. His selling drugs put her in the company of his friends. One of those friends became her boyfriend who beat her until she miscarried. Her decision to engage in drug use and sale was motivated by the need to "live that fast life" and look good. She needed and wanted to come out of poverty. Some of them were driven by the enormous responsibilities and adultification they had at young ages. This is attributed to a fractured community and particularly the family unit.

Achiever 3 stated that her relationship with the person she knew resulted in her helping the person to sell drugs at her job. Achiever 3 indicated that she got involved in moving drugs knowingly during her summer job because she didn't want to keep asking her mother for money. Achiever 4 also stated she was "involved in drug trafficking" with the guys she dated through high school. Achiever 4 seemed to have been involved in drugs because of the family by "driving them to make drops."

The crime rate in Peoria is well captured by Aspirer 3's narrative. The respondent indicated that children were victims of the crime. It seems crime limited the freedom of the African American children in Peoria to enjoy experiences of childhood. Aspirer 3 said, "Children risked their lives every day. Some would get shot for being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Many of the participants were involved in crime both knowingly and unknowingly. Some have spent time in jail. The involvement in criminal activities occurred without knowing in some cases. Achiever 8 was taken to jail because she was riding with her boyfriend who had drug paraphernalia found in the car during a stop and search. She indicated that her boyfriend took advantage of her and framed her, which resulted in her arrest. She stated,

I drove this guy to another town so I could get money for my bills. But I didn't know there was a warrant out for his arrest and he was transporting drugs. He told the cops the drugs were for me. I got arrested for harboring a fugitive but I told the cops he wasn't in my house. I let them search my house and he wasn't there. I just didn't know he was hiding in the basement of the apartment facility. So I got arrested." Her mother hired a lawyer and she was eventually freed of all charges.

Aspirer 5's boyfriend convinced her to carry a bookbag that had a gun hidden inside. She only wanted to go into the school to eat, but an officer pulled her aside to pat her down and used a metal detector. The officer found a gun inside the bookbag. Her boyfriend asked her to bear the burden and not to disclose that he was the owner of the bag or the confiscated gun.

Achiever 2 had several boyfriends and live-in boyfriends who sold drugs. Sometimes, a boyfriend tried to sell them from the house until she forbade it. Eventually, she decided she "didn't want that life," broke up with the boyfriend, and made him move back home with his family. Drugs were prevalent in the housing projects and neighborhoods of Peoria. And the impact is apparent on participants' lives.

Experiences in foster care

An educated mother and capable parents would be less likely to lose a child to the foster care system. Foster care experiences impacted every aspect of a participant's behavior from the start. Achiever 6 and two Aspirers (1 and 2) were consistently in foster care at various times of their lives. Achiever 4 lived with relatives and friends, with periodic foster care episodes that were previously described. Her mother was mentally ill. She had to live away from her mother during bouts with lucidity. As soon as her brother reached his teens, he sold drugs to take care of them and their mother. Achiever 6 and Aspirers 1 and 2 reported horrific stories of rape, lies, poor living conditions, and harsh treatment.

Aspirer 1's experiences of foster care are filled by stories of pain and mistreatment. She described how many times she was barely fed or clothed. Aspirer 1 ran away from foster care often due to mistreatment. As previously described, a foster mom had several dogs and the house reeked of dog feces. Aspirer 2 also faced harsh treatments with the foster parents who were white and African American. She indicated that her Black foster parents used to torture her and other children and lock them up in closets.

Achiever 6 said she was in so many foster situations she had to write them all down in preparation for the interview. Achiever 6 recalled a time that she was beaten by her foster parent with a curtain rod. She also indicated another foster mom abused her mentally, with language of colorism by telling her that she was too black and falsely

accusing her of stealing. The nature of and changes in her environment did not help early childhood development. Changing the environment meant changing schools, finding new friends, and acclimating to new conditions, which at a tender age presented various challenges.

Achiever 6 and Aspirer 1 reported that many foster parents would lie to social workers and wouldn't buy them clothes. They both spoke of how a system of agencies who would use the same suite of foster parents regardless of the lies they told. They believed it was because they did not believe the children and had grown comfortable with the relationship with the foster parents. They both believed it was a way to maintain revenue for both parties.

Blended families

The views shared by the participants also indicated that most of them came from large families. The nature of the family unit among African Americans in Peoria seemed to hold them back and limit their social mobility. Achiever 2 and Aspirer 3 were from a family of eight siblings while Aspirer 1 was from a family 6. Achiever 1 was from a family of 11. The fact that most of the families had children from different fathers complicated their relationships.

The experiences shared by the participants indicated that the fathers of their siblings sometimes mistreated them. They did not treat them as their own kids. Cases of sexual assault by the siblings' fathers were also reported. The fact that the siblings

were from different fathers also meant that some of the siblings received preferential treatment. This affected them emotionally and the way they related to each other.

Abandonment issues

Issues of abandonment were expressed throughout the interviews. Themes of parental and familial abandonment emerged from the views shared by the participants. Aspirer 2, for example, indicated she was abandoned, first by her mother and then by her aunt. Aspirer 2 felt she was left alone when she was facing her toughest moments, when she was facing a case of being falsely accused of selling drugs. Aspirer 2 also expressed feeling abandoned from the lack of support from her family. During her graduation, none of the family members came to support her, and she had no one to clap for her. Nor would her family allow her to live with them. She said “I had a city full of family and nobody would let me stay with them.”

Although she lived with her father and stepmom, she never felt comfortable. Aspirer 1 believed her mother abandoned her when she left town. Aspirer 1 kept running away because she missed her mom as she “always felt like an outsider.” Achievers 2 and 6 felt a sense of abandonment by their mothers because both mothers were on drugs. Achiever 2 also felt a sense of abandonment by her father, as he went to prison for molesting her half-sister. Achiever 3 believes her father abandoned her for a period. Achiever 4’s father did not know she existed until her stepmother saw and recognized the familiarity of her face at a barbeque and correctly guessed she was her husband’s “illegitimate” child.

Although she had her father's love, Achiever 5 felt abandoned by her mother.

Achiever 6's father didn't know she was even born. He gave her mother money for an abortion. Her mother used the money to buy drugs instead. Achiever 7's father left her mother when Achiever 7 was a child, so she felt abandoned by him. Aspirer 4's father left when she was five. Aspirer 2 felt abandoned by her mother, as her mother's was the place she was molested, abused, and "fell" from a broken window, breaking both of her legs. Subsequently, she felt abandoned by her family-at-large. Achiever 8 felt abandoned by her family. They rarely came to her mother's sick sister or she and her brother's aid. Her mom was "the black sheep" of the family. Aspirer 5's mother and father divorced in her late teens. The markings of abandonment were still prevalent. The divorce led her mother to sell off the things Aspirer 5 held dear and that she'd shared with her father.

Aspirer 5 also narrated experiences of abandonment by her family following her encounter with law enforcement agents. She indicated that she could not find a job because of her record, she could not find a place to live, and this experience caused her lot of pain. Aspirer 2 stated, "I didn't have anyone to depend on. My mom acted like my enemy. My aunt who took me in had put me out. I was on my own. My dad couldn't help me either." Abandonment began for Achiever 3 when she said "I first realized my dad had an alcohol problem and something wasn't quite normal."

The participants also expressed the feeling of abandonment among residents of Peoria. The markings of abandonment are still prevalent in many of the participants' lives. Many of the Achievers admit going to therapy.

Adultification

Adultification is a phenomenon in which children are assigned adult responsibilities and punishments in ways that are more adult-like than their peers (Goff et al., 2014). Achievers 1, 2, and 8, and Aspirers 1 and 5 had to care for themselves and their younger siblings, in many cases while parents were either working, away doing drugs, etc. Achiever 4's mother was mentally ill at times, she had to fend for herself. In many cases, the participants were not able to study or go to school because they had to do chores or care for a sick sibling while their mothers were at work. The following table summarizes the discussion and compares Achievers and Aspirers within the pillars of poverty for a strong start in life.

Table 4. Strong Start in Life

	#Ach	% of Ach	# of Asp	% of Asp	Total	% of Total	# Diff Ach vs Asp	Diff Ach vs Asp
Poor Living Conditions	7	88%	2	40%	9	69%	5	48%
Foster Care & Shelter	2	25%	2	40%	4	31%	0	-15%
Blended Families	6	75%	5	100%	11	85%	1	-25%
Multiple Homes/Multiple Schools	3	38%	3	60%	6	46%	0	-23%
Drugs at Home	6	75%	3	60%	9	69%	3	15%
Abandonment	8	100%	4	80%	12	92%	4	20%
Adultification (Adult-like duties, harsher punishment, job in school)	6	75%	3	60%	9	69%	3	15%
Tortured (While in foster care, early foundational)	0	0%	1	20%	1	8%	-1	-20%

Within the first strong start, I noted that more of the Achievers than Aspirers experienced poor living conditions, drugs at home, abandonment and adultification. Forty-eight percent more Achievers had poor living conditions, 15% more drugs at home, 20% more abandonment, and 15% more adultification. More Aspirers than Achievers experienced living in foster care and/or shelters, with living blended families, living in multiple homes and attending multiple schools. I noted that 15% more Aspirers lived in foster care and or shelters, 25% more were from blended families, and 43% more lived in multiple homes and attended multiple schools. Also, one of the Aspirers was tortured while in foster care.

Pillars of poverty during the school years

The participants experienced broad pillars of poverty during their school years. They were not motivated to excel in school or further their education. Some considered their school system to be subpar. Yet some used school as a place of refuge to eat, sleep, and escape issues and domestic violence at home. They faced homelessness and internalized depression. Many of them faced racism and classism. They were bullied and were ashamed of their poverty-stricken lives. Many of them acted out of desperation and did not feel supported by family members.

Life stage 2 (combined): Strong start in school—Acceptable pre-reading and math scores as well as appropriate school behavior + Strong start in postsecondary—Graduate with above a 2.5 GPA, enroll in postsecondary education

The shame and pain of poverty

The participants all expressed shame and pain related to living in poverty. Having to live in poverty made the young girls feel different, ashamed and avoid association

with other girls from families better off than they were. The stories shared by the participants indicated that in some cases they were looked down upon because of their socioeconomic status. For Achiever 4, the main cause of shame, discomfort, and uncertainty was shifting from one relative or friend's home, or one shelter to another. She felt uncomfortable being singled out in school for living in shelters. She did not want her friends to know. She also accepted the lifestyle of her brother and boyfriend because she was able to get clothes and cars. This outwardly removed some of her shame. She resorted to night club dancing and sex work to take care of her family.

Achiever 4 stated,

Yeah, it was tough because you know you're embarrassed like aw man I gotta go to the shelter. It was just uncomfortable. Just being in a shelter. You don't want your friends to know that's where you're at, in the shelter... people just looking at you different. Their own perception of your situation.

However, she indicated that some of her friends were comfortable with her living in shelters.

Achiever 8 also gave stories of shame associated with poverty. Her mother could not afford to buy her better clothing and she was bullied for it. Her teachers labeled her as a "bad kid" because she was poorly dressed. However, her main concern was the condition of her mother. She indicated that she felt bad to see her mother wake up every day and struggle to make ends meet. She felt bad not being able to have money to buy her clothes or even a car. For Achiever 8, the shame of poverty came as a

motivation rather than a hindrance to her success. She wanted more, she wanted to change the condition of her family. She stated,

I said I just feel bad, mom's getting up every day. She's catching the bus. She outside in the cold...[I was] walking to school every day to Peoria High. I used to think why do these girls get to ride by me in their cars and look down on me? Not having the capability to buy my own clothes. Just because my momma didn't have it.

Achiever 3's family would not go to food banks because of pride and shame. Her aunt had to deliver food. She would hide in the car when they went to sidewalk sales because she was afraid to be seen by her classmates. Also, when she ran out of money or credit on their account at school, she was given peanut butter and jelly for lunch. It was a clear sign of being singled out and not having money. Achiever 3 felt it was inappropriate and shameful for her to be seen with her parents at garage sales and yard sales. She chose to stay in the car so she could avoid being seen by fellow students. She feared they would make fun of her. It appears Achiever 2 had internalized the oppression that poor people face in Peoria.

During their stories, each participant hung their heads or looked aside as they described their lives and the shame they felt.

Lack of motivation

Achiever 1 expressed the view that her education was not up to par. She believed that all schools in Peoria were subpar.

Some of the participants prioritized work over education. Achiever 4 indicated that she focused too much on her “work” and had little time for academics. This could likely be the driver for her current success. However, it may have impeded the social mobility for other African American women in Peoria. Achiever 4 stated,

I was just focused on the work. That was another reason why I probably didn't focus too much in on as far as academic wise because I wanted to go to work to make sure I had enough money for whatever it is I needed.

Achiever 8 is an example of many of the participants' stories of school in Peoria. Indicating how little schoolteachers and principals pushed furthering education, Achiever 8 stated that she had never heard about college education. During her childhood, she believed that the highest academic qualification one had to strive towards was a high school diploma. Achiever 8 stated: “Growing up, I never heard, ‘You should go to college or maybe you should pursue this.’ It was, ‘Get your high school diploma!’ That’s all I heard.”

Polyvictimization, trauma, and the impact of adverse childhood events
Polyvictimization refers to a situation where participants experience multiple forms of trauma, compounded over time. These forms of trauma were rarely addressed by the study participants with a professional. The experiences shared by the respondents suggested that African American women in Peoria faced trauma that compounded over long periods of time. I noted that for most of the participants, trauma started early in their childhood, continued through their teenage lives, and spilled into their

adulthood. Some were molested, sexually abused by their parents' boyfriends, foster parents, or other relatives.

School as a place of refuge

I placed many of the participants within this category. Home for many is believed to be (and should be) a place of refuge under the best of circumstances. However, some participants considered school as that place of refuge for peace. They needed peace away from the chaos at home. Sometimes school was the only place they could rely on a consistent meal. Again, Achiever 8 recalls herself going to school:

As a young kid, all I thought was at least when I went to school I ate. I made sure I ate. If I could stay after school and eat, I did that too because that's how I knew I was going to get full.

Achiever 2 mentioned she would be “glad to get to school so I don't have to hear my mom and dad argue.” Achiever 4 said, “School was fun. I played sports and I ran track just like my brother.”

Racism—Racist teachers

Stories shared by the participants indicated they faced racial abuse from their teachers. This was the case for both Achievers and Aspirers. Aspirer 2 indicated that the white teachers “acted like we were lower than them.” Aspirer 3 also felt that she received harsher treatment from some of her white teachers. Issues of racism stick out in my mind from a story shared by one of the interviewees about her math teacher:

This math teacher was so mean, demeaning, and racist. She just treated Black kids real bad. I don't remember anything specific besides the feeling—she was a math teacher. She made us feel stupid. And I couldn't learn like that [under those circumstances]. To this day, I still can't do math. I couldn't do it at school [because of how she made me

feel]. [And, because of that I would] come home with a bad grade and guess what? I got a whoopin.

Achiever 3 also indicated that she was racially abused by a white teacher. She told me,

I always felt like she had a stronger tone when she was talking to me. I remember I had to go to the bathroom, and she would not let me go to the bathroom. And I peed on myself. I just always felt like she didn't like me.

Racist classmates

Several Achievers and Aspirers recall incidents with racist classmates that stood out.

The Black students were abused by their white counterparts. It emerged from the experience shared by Aspirer 3, which was also during a time that she began to experience racism from teachers. Kids would tell her that her skin was dirty and other insults about her weight and her natural hair. She was told that her hair was frizzy and that she needed a straightener or hot comb. She was called dirty and nasty and told she smelled weird. And the common denominator of her bullies was that they were mostly white students.

She was occasionally bullied by others because of her weight. Her interest in after school programs and other activities within the school dwindled because of how she was treated and the bullies who she interacted with. She said, "They called me stupid and somebody called me Nigger every day until I left." Achiever 5 stated that "the Black students hung together and the white students hung together."

Classism

Classism is associated with the selective treatment of individuals based on their socioeconomic class. Most of the African American girls came from families from a lower socioeconomic class. The encounters between such girls and children from higher socioeconomic classes may also be characterized by prejudice. The participants felt alienated based on socioeconomic class. Each of the participants was painfully aware of classism during their childhood even if it was not through formal nomenclature.

The story shared by Aspirer 3 depicts the experiences of classism. When she entered high school, she joined an a cappella group and color guard. It was around this time when she started getting bullied again. She said “It was common to get bullied if you were not wearing name brand clothing, had a cool car, or you were just missing the ‘it’ factor”—all assets typical of middle-class kids in the school.

At that time, there were people from the middle class and people who lived in the neighborhoods with less poverty than her own and from different sides of the city and different classes. Some sections of the city were characterized by poverty, insecurity, tiny houses, and few playgrounds for children—while other parts of the city had better housing, and children could play freely in the streets and had good schools. These good schools were those such as Roosevelt, which was attended by Achiever 2 and seemed to have students from higher social-economic classes compared to schools like Harrison. The students in Harrison Middle School were rowdy, and the

teachers did not care about the students' academics. The only Aspirer who spoke to any extent about classicism was Aspirer 3. Her experience is listed above.

In fact, class difference made the biggest impression on Achievers. Achiever 3 recalled a time during elementary school:

Being from the south end and people asking *oh where do you live? Oh no my mom said I can't come there to play with you. We can't be friends because of where you're from. Yeah very open and blatant like no nope we can't. I can't be your friend because you stay on the south side, south end.* Really that piece was hurtful. Makes you clam up. And question kind of who you are and well what's wrong with where I live or where I'm from?

The following occurrences are additional examples of the participants coming to realize their class difference: Achiever 1 went to sleepover at a classmate's and realized they lived in a better neighborhood. Achiever 2 noticed clothing differences at her new school (differing school cultures). Achievers 3 and 5 were bussed to school on the north side of town. Achiever 6 noticed her brother's new middle-class lifestyle as a businessman. Achiever 7 recalled being a student at the gifted school. Her white classmates went on skiing trips, and she was not included or invited. Achiever 8 observed the class difference through observing her aunt, who was married. They both worked professional jobs at Caterpillar. Each of the participant's reflections were vivid. Their memories suggested the lasting impression of the first time they became aware of class differences. The Aspirers did not discuss stories of this nature. This awareness could have also been a supporting trigger for further resolve.

Gender bias at school

Aspirer 4 shared a story. She felt it was inappropriate for her to be made to wear spandex shorts while playing basketball. She indicated that she did not want to play volleyball because they wouldn't let her wear basketball shorts. She also recalled a time arguing with one guy and things got verbal, but not physical, and he was signaling to her to "suck his dick." She would get called "bitch and bougie" by different guys who wanted her. While working at a local nonprofit, her manager was a pervert and kept whispering in her ear.

Desperation

The theme of desperation emerged from the stories shared by the participants. All the participants expressed desperation at some stage in their childhood living in the Peoria. Much of the desperation is associated with the inability of the participants to meet their own needs. The lack of housing, clothing, food, and even friendship emerged as reasons creating feelings of desperation in participants. The stories also indicated that desperation resulted in the participants engaging in otherwise unacceptable behavior and activities such as drug abuse, unprotected sex resulting in early pregnancies, and skipping classes.

Aspirer 1 ended up behind bars and on parole because she engaged in activities getting her in trouble. Aspirer 1 frequently ran away from foster homes to her relatives. She said, "I didn't understand. I wanted to be with my mama." She was desperate to see her mother. During her time in foster care, Aspirer 1 noted that her life took a downhill turn because she missed her family. She would run away from

foster care homes to be with family. She was desperate for familial kindred fellowship. Achiever 8 was able to eventually succeed in her life, although she too experienced desperation at stages. She felt that despite her best efforts, she would not be able to get out of Peoria. She called Peoria “a dark place.” She felt frustrated with the neighbors who assumed they were thieves despite the fact that they had not stolen. Achiever 3 sold drugs to earn money because she was desperate to ease the burden off of her mother. Achiever 7 was desperate to feel needed and wanted, which caused her to engage in risky sexual behavior that ultimately ended in pregnancy.

Internalized oppression

I believe a well-read and capable mother will know enough about the world and self-esteem to support her child—or that capable parents can support and reassure their child to build her self-esteem. It seemed extremely difficult for these women to live in a town and situations filled with abject poverty and racism. The participants heard and endured harsh circumstances. A child was told she was a bad kid for coming to school a little unkept and hungry. A child was made to urinate on herself in front of an entire class of middle school children. Their spirits were breaking, and they were not sure that they did not deserve it.

The challenges and the different forms of oppression faced by African American women in Peoria seemed to have been internalized by some of the participants. The form of oppression that seemed to have been internalized most was bullying. Aspirers 1 and 3 shared experiences of bullying by other kids. This form of oppression seemed

to have been aggravated by race. Bullying experienced by Aspirer 3 caused her to have low self-confidence, which might have had a negative impact on her social mobility.

Achiever 8 talked of being disciplined because of bad things she did. According to her experiences, it seems the disciplining approach adopted by schools in Peoria made the African American girls feel bad and believe that they were bad. Achiever 8 stated, “Now in my mind, I’m that bad kid. Who wants to be the bad kid?” Achiever 8 narrated experiences of being told that she was ugly. She indicated that people did not want to make friends with her. Boys did not want to have anything to do with her. It seemed that Achiever 8 internalized the abuse. This was evident by her admission that she believed she was ugly. She admitted that she was a broken kid and believed that she could not dress. I was ugly. Several participants mentioned, “I was broken.” Achiever 1 belittles her job title. “Oh, I’m just a hostess” (the name of the position was changed to protect confidentiality).

Domestic violence and in-home activity

The participants, while growing up, were also affected by the relationship between their parents. The views shared by Achiever 8 suggested that her childhood was marred by the sadness of seeing her parents fight. She indicated that her parents were “always arguing and fighting all the time.” Aspirer 5 also provided insights that showed that the relationship between the parents significantly affected the African American girls Peoria. She indicated that her father was involved in infidelity. He

often fought with her mother. It was due to the unstable nature of her family that she started skipping classes and avoided going to school. She indicated that by the time she was in high school, the arguments at home were bad, and the parents were engaged in physical fights. She also indicated that in some cases, her mother would use the kids as pawns to get at their dad.

Achiever 1 told a poignant and vivid story of a six-year-old experience. Her mother's boyfriend beat her mother so badly that her eyes were so swollen, she could not see. She and her sister had to quickly teach their three-year-old sister how to hold their newborn sister's head so she and her five-year-old sister could go to the neighbor to call the police. Achiever 8 and Aspirer 5's parents would have big arguments and frequent physical fights.

Achiever 2 stated that she could not trust her father because "I've been touched as a child and so I had already kind of had my guard up." Achiever 6 narrated the experience of hearing about her sister being raped by another foster kid, which caused her a lot of pain. She also stated that her foster parents sexually abused her and her sister and beat her with a curtain rod.

The participants also shared experiences of mental abuse and where they were beaten and put in cages or forced to miss meals. Aspirer 2 stated that when she was in foster care, she had African American parents who subjected the kids to torture and locked

them in closets. Achiever 8 narrated an experience where her family was accused of being thieves because their father would steal to buy drugs. They were shamed and driven out of their home because the neighbors did not want to associate with them. This experience was traumatizing to the children. Several participants also shared chilling and traumatizing experiences of seeing their parents fight. One had to see her mother being raped while passed out and high on drugs. These experiences seemed to have shaped the life goals and aspirations of the African American girls. I also noted that the participants who were exposed to traumatizing experiences in their childhood were most likely to experience violent intimate relationships during their teenage years. Achiever 6's mother and uncles forced her to fight siblings for sport and placed bets on who would win. All of the experience described by participants thus far indicate the prevalence of polyvictimization.

Unsupportive family members

Each of the participants described their extended families. In certain cases, their families promoted graduating from high school, although very little assistance was provided morally or instructionally. Many times, families acted as leeches to take participants' money or resources whenever they became available. Some of the participants indicated that they lived in unsupportive families that were not supportive. Aspirer 1 indicated she believed her stepmother and biological dad were mean when in essence, they were enforcing good child and house rules. This caused her to run away from home. However, things did not get better for Aspirer 1 since her experience with foster parents was worse (dogs and dirty clothes). Aspirer 3 indicated

that her parents were not available to support her because they were committed to their jobs. Instead of supporting the education of their children, Aspirer 5 indicated that her parents fought. The conflict between her parents was the reason she skipped classes.

Achiever 2 also indicated that her mother was not supportive. According to her, her mother did not care about her grades. She stated,

I love my mom. Love her to death, but my mom was like mentally, physically emotionally very abusive. I would have to hear [abusiveness] that from her how he [her dad] didn't want me. Like I said I had very low self-esteem. Very low.

Some Achievers had to endure parents or relatives who were not supportive. Achiever 6's mother was addicted to crack and could not help. The lack of support from her immediate family forced her, together with her sister, to bounce between relatives who were not helpful. Aspirer 2 told of a time when her grandmother would get social security checks intended for Aspirer 2's care. However, her grandmother would lie, create an excuse, and say she had not received them. Eventually, Aspirer 2 was able to go to one of the Peoria Social Service offices to make arrangements to receive the funds directly.

Achiever 8 recalled several times she did not have family support as a child. Her mother was considered "the black sheep" of the family. As a result, many times the family treated all of her mother's children with disdain. She said they were reluctantly

helpful at best. Her efforts to break away from poverty seemed to have been curtailed once by her father who was addicted to drugs. She indicated that her father stole her money and would frequently pull them down whenever he came back. Achiever 8 stated,

I put my money under my mattress. The money's gone. I'm like okay, where is my money? Well the money is gone. Daddy's gone too. Every time my daddy came back, he didn't do nothing but just pull us down again. We stayed on St. James just a little more. He starts stealing again.

Policy failure

Every participant spoke of not having money, food, food stamps, cash assistance, or earnings to make it from the beginning of the month to the end of the month.

Achievers 1, 2, and 8 as well as Aspirers 1 and 2 all spoke on one accord: “The beginning of the month was like Christmas”—suggesting that the public benefits that arrived at the beginning of the month were not enough to feed the family or ensure fully paid utilities through the end of the month. They “borrowed electricity,” sugar, flour, and water from neighbors. Or in the case of Aspirer 1, her aunt and aunt’s children ate all the food they could at the beginning of the month; her children didn’t have enough to eat from the middle to the end of the month. And while Achiever 8’s mother had a job, the supplement was still “never enough” so they had “ketchup sandwiches” or “air sandwiches.”

Aspirer 1 said she “could never save enough money to get my own apartment because I was using all my check to pay rent to my aunt.” The food would be gone in days.

Her cousins ate it all. She could never make enough money at her retail jobs to cover expenses and accumulate savings. Christmas presents were luxuries. All of the participants reported getting very little at Christmas. Achievers 1 and 8 spoke of going to a local agency to get a free toy.

Achiever 7 spoke of hunger that coincided with earlier times of day. She recalls “not eating until like 10 o’clock when she got home from work.” Aspirer 1 spoke of times when she would get food stamps, and she would purchase food for the family when she lived with her aunt and all of their children. She said, “the food would be gone in two days.” She and Aspirer 2 also reflected on times when foster parents would not feed them—or they would not feed them enough.

Other policy failures are discussed throughout this chapter. They include numerous issues within the public-school system, poor housing conditions, lack of race-neutral criminal judgements, and inept foster care activities.

Good teachers and bad teachers

The quality and attitude of teachers impacts a child and their mental and social wellbeing as early as preschool. The participants’ experiences are shared within this section, as they reflect interaction with teachers from early ages through high school. This treatment and sometimes harassment likely impacted their life trajectories for better or worse.

Just like in any schools, the stories shared by the participants indicated that teachers in Peoria varied. They indicated that some were good while others were bad. The good teachers positively influenced the participants to focus on their academics and to work hard towards better grades and a better life. However, bad teachers were the main reasons why some of the participants performed poorly in school or simply did not complete high school.

Achiever 3 shared stories of her encounters with good teachers. She indicated that in her third grade and eighth grade she had good teachers who influenced her academic performance. She attributes her success and love of math and science to a third-grade teacher. Her teachers were able to help her with her homework and created time for her. She stated,

He [third-grade teacher, white male] was really awesome. He kind of opened my eyes to math and science through the use of the weather station....For me, at the time, I would go and ask him [another teacher in eighth grade] homework questions and he would sit down and really take his time and walk you through. Just him taking the time to explain that was the initial okay, he's a pretty cool guy.

Achiever 6 indicated that some of the teachers motivated her and believed in her, which made her work hard.

Achievers 3 and 6 also had stories to the contrary. Achiever 6 indicated that some of the teachers were not supportive:

Some teachers they're like *I know you can do this. You know you can do this* and they're harder on you. So, you tend to work harder in those classes. Then other classes you just go in and they just didn't care.

Aspirer 1 recalled being pulled from class because of her clothes. Instead of being given alternative clothing, she was made to feel bad about it, as her foster mom and case worker lied about it.

Aspirer 5 encountered bad teachers during high school. She indicated that the overall attitudes of the teachers were that "if you were weak-minded enough to allow other students to distract you, then you didn't even need to be there." She, therefore, suffered bullying, but she was not able to report the bullies to her teachers. She did not finish high school.

Aspirer 2 told of a time during her senior year of high school when she was about to move into an apartment. Her high school counselor gave her furniture for her new home. Her teacher gave her clothes for her newborn child to last a year.

The following table summarizes the discussion and compares Achievers and Aspirers within the pillars of poverty for a strong start in school and postsecondary education.

Table 5. Strong Start in School

	#Ach	% of Ach	# of Asp	% of Asp	Total	% of Total	# Diff Ach vs Asp	Diff Ach vs Asp
Lack of Motivation: “Nobody Pushed Me”	4	50%	2	40%	6	46%	2	10%
School as a Place of Refuge	4	50%	1	20%	5	38%	3	30%
Bad Teachers (Absent of racism)	2	25%	3	60%	5	38%	-1	-35%
Racist Teachers	4	50%	4	80%	8	62%	0	-30%
Bullied	5	63%	4	80%	9	69%	1	-18%
Racist Classmates	4	50%	1	20%	5	38%	3	30%
Domestic Violence at Home	3	38%	3	60%	6	46%	0	-23%
Criminal Activities	4	50%	4	80%	8	62%	0	-30%

	#Ach	% of Ach	# of Asp	% of Asp	Total	% of Total	# Diff Ach vs Asp	Diff Ach vs Asp
Hunger	7	88%	2	40%	9	69%	5	48%
Truancy	3	38%	4	80%	7	54%	-1	-43%
Subpar Education	5	63%	3	60%	8	62%	2	3%
College Was Not Emphasized	5	63%	5	100%	10	77%	0	-38%
Gender Bias	0	0%	1	20%	1	8%	-1	-20%
Sexually Abused	1	13%	3	60%	4	31%	-2	-48%
Lack of Family Support	3	38%	3	60%	6	46%	0	-23%
Policy Failure	3	38%	3	60%	6	46%	0	-23%
Classism	8	100%	5	100%	13	100%	3	0%
Desperation/ Acted out of Desperation	2	25%	3	60%	5	38%	-1	-35%
Shame of Poverty	8	100%	5	100%	13	100%	3	0%
Internalized Oppression	4	50%	2	40%	6	46%	2	10%

	#Ach	% of Ach	# of Asp	% of Asp	Total	% of Total	# Diff Ach vs Asp	Diff Ach vs Asp
Difficult Relationship With Mother	4	50%	2	40%	6	46%	2	10%
Homeless	2	25%	2	40%	4	31%	0	-15%
Mental Illness in the Immediate Family (Ach4, mom; Ach6, brother)	2	25%	0	0%	2	15%	2	25%
Issues With Caseworkers, Housing Admin	1	13%	1	20%	2	15%	0	-8%
One of Many Kids	3	38%	5	100%	8	62%	-2	-63%
Incarceration in the Family (Abandonment)	2	25%	1	20%	3	23%	1	5%

Initially, I focused on anything above 20%. I did not intend to negate the importance of pillars or issues with lower percentage differences, but I selected 20% and higher as the initial cut-off figure given the multitude of items.

Within this strong start, I noted that more Achievers than Aspirers saw school as a place of refuge, had racist classmates, experienced hunger, and had mental illness in the immediate family. Thirty percent more of the Achievers thought of school as a place of refuge, 30% more had racist classmates, 48% more experienced hunger, and 25% more had mental illness in their immediate family.

Results below 20% showed more as follows: 10% of Achievers believed they were not pushed or motivated enough, 3% more believed their education was subpar, and 10% more had difficulties with their mothers and had internalized oppression. Also, 5% more had a family member in jail.

More Aspirers had bad teachers, racist teachers, experienced domestic violence at home, participated in criminal activities, were truant, were not informed about the importance of college, experience gender bias, were sexually abused, lacked family support, experienced policy failure, acted out of desperation, and were one of many kids. Results showed 35% more had teachers, 30% had racist teachers, 23% more experienced domestic violence at home, 30% more participated in criminal activities, 43% more were truant, 38% more were not informed about the importance of college,

20% more experienced gender bias, 48% more were sexually abused, 23% more lacked family support, 23% more experienced policy failure, 35% more acted out of desperation, and 63% more were one of many kids.

Insights on results below 20% showed that 18% more Aspirers were bullied, 15% more spent time being homeless, and of the participants who spent time in foster care, 8% more had issues with caseworkers or housing employees.

Pillars of poverty at the job

In this stage, and on their jobs, participants experienced pillars related to racism and gender. As a result of subpar education and uneducated parents, they also lacked certain forms of social capital and literacies. Since only four of the participants received college degrees, they lacked financial literacy. They also lacked social capital to get access to resources. That said, even with degrees and relatively stable jobs, they still experienced issues at work. These issues were more evolved, nuanced, “polite,” covert, and structural within the ultimate competition for money and power.

Life stage 3: Strong start in labor market—A postsecondary degree, no criminal conviction

This section highlights themes related to experiences when the participants were obtaining a postsecondary degree as well as their experiences in the job market.

Racism at work

I noted that most of the racial abuse that these African American women faced in the workplace came from white women. I also noted that women in Peoria face racism in the workplace. Experiences shared by Achiever 5 suggested that African American

women are underpaid despite their qualifications. Achiever 5 told me that white women with less experience were paid more than her. She also said that people of color were treated differently. Achiever 8 shared her experience where white women at her place of work did not trust her work even when she was doing her best. She noted that white women felt they needed to express their power just to make her feel inadequate, despite her being their boss.

Racism was also experienced in the workplace. Experiences of racism that were shared by Achiever 3 could be a case of intersectionality between race and gender. Achiever 3, being the head of one of the teams in her workplace, was not trusted by “mostly white males and they second guess and question” her at every turn. She believed she was looked down upon because of her gender and the color of her skin. After additional discussion, it seemed she had to deal with racial aggression from men and women:

I think that she was uncomfortable, and I felt like at times that maybe she was upset about my success because her kids aren't living up to her expectations, I guess. And because of the fact that it took her 25 plus years to get to be a level 10 (one level above Achiever 3) ... She got married at 18. Had a kid. Got a bachelor's degree in business administration or something and kind of just worked her way through the company. Would always talk about *I wish my kid was...* Everything was just very *oh you're not doing that right. Why would you do it like that?* Everything was nitpicked to death....

Achiever 1 described the pay difference she discovered between herself and employees she trained (he was being paid more). She called the matter out to her supervisor who corrected it. Then she recalled a new female supervisor treating her

oddly until she notified that supervisor that she was not interested in her job.

Achiever 8 stated,

White women were always the worst. It's still till today. Till today they are the worst. Those are always my challenge within the work equation is Caucasian women. They always feel like they have power. More power than I do. If they couldn't get what they want outta me they always went to a superior who was a man and then those conversations are had.

After being on the job for several months, when Achiever 7 did not see an opportunity for upward mobility for African American women at the various companies she worked for, she resigned. The companies included a Fortune 500 banking company and a higher education organization. She stated "You know, millennials, we choose to leave, we can go somewhere else rather than wait or fight for an opportunity." She watched African American women she admired ruminate over decisions on how to respond to a white colleague. She saw them treated harsher than her white colleagues. Achiever 7 also saw unfairness at her jobs where Black women were treated unfairly, fired, nitpicked, and unnecessarily challenged. She said white women were coddled and typically given "a pass." She went on to say,

I got tired of seeing African American women who were smarter than everyone else be constantly under white people's thumbs. They were made to seem like they could never do enough. They were always stressed out. They would call them to do *everything* but still hold them down. And you know, I'm a millennial. So, I left. But it wasn't much different at the next jobs. Here we are the women who know the children's situations but they give the middle manager financial aid job to a white woman. They even created jobs for white women. They are not there to serve the students. They are self-serving, setting themselves up for the next promotion while the students are failing. They were preparing to create a position for another white woman over me. They make it seem like they've worked so hard to get to

where they are. People believe them. They try to seem to have a cool and calm and demeanor ...that's because they haven't been through anything real.... Not a daily struggle [like we do] for their handouts... I wasn't havin' it. So, I left.

Achiever 3 was treated harshly by her peers, her staff, and some of her managers. She chose to stay. She mentioned she was always ready and armed with more than enough information to answer questions and anticipated challenges.

Achiever 5 described a traumatic experience at a university where she previously worked. Her manager and coworkers lied about her, bullied her, nitpicked her actions, harassed her, and “paper-trailed” her until they were able to fire her. In other words, her manager recorded incidents, including lies and falsehoods, until there was enough information in her file to fire her “for cause.” She did not know what was going on until they came to her office to escort her out. During the conversation, she refuted the information with notes, dates, and supporting emails. The human resources representative told her to go home while they investigated it. They still fired her and gave her a severance if she agreed not to sue the higher learning institution.

Power distance

At her first job, Achiever 6 discovered the prison guards were raping the juvenile boys in trafficking-like fashion. The warden was aware. She toiled over when, whether, and how to disclose the information. When she did decide to discuss it with a supposedly unrelated third-party, that party informed the warden. Soon, she was

intentionally put in compromising situations with inmates by her supervisors. She was eventually fired for a minor (and possibly incorrect) infraction.

Conspecific aggression

An attorney, Borman was asked to discuss this topic at a conference. She believes

There is a biological imperative. And that is animal and it is in the animal kingdom. And it's also in ours (women). And it is generally referred to in animals as conspecific aggression when animals take out aggression on peers or people that they contend are after the same thing. What is it that women are after when they take off against other women? Well fundamentally and biologically, it is to protect their resources which are, I hate to say this, generally other men or men so that they can create a family and then protect their children from other women.

She suggested that women compete covertly when they are high ranking in their respective communities. Many times, competition comes in the forms of harassment, bullying, rumors, criticism, and taking pleasure in another's misfortune. Achiever 8 indicated that she faced the most criticism and second-guessing from the women in her workplace. She further indicated that the negative treatment of women by fellow women still exists to date. It was a female manager who demoted her despite what she believed was stellar work. She was replaced by a man. He was lazy, and eventually that man was fired. Then she was promoted to the vice president position, which is a testament to her hard work and qualifications. Achiever 8 stated,

White women were always the worst. It's still till today.... This big shot, she comes in, "um I really like what you do but I want to bring someone else in who's more sales focused, sales oriented." I kind of want you to work under them. When they need something, you give it to them. So basically, she demoted me. I didn't care for her. She was always working me. This woman was emailing me, texting me all times of night. Do you have this? We need this. I just felt like they

stretched me so thin. They got me running all over the different markets.

She continued to work hard. The bank went through a restructuring, the person she reported to and his boss (her old manager) were both fired. She was promoted to her old manager's job.

While Achiever 6 was in law school, a white female classmate outright lied about her. The classmate had earplugs in her ears and claimed she overheard Achiever 6 threatening another classmate. The classmates submitted a written complaint, and Achiever 6 decided to call for a school trial. When the classmates were cross-examined during the trial, they admitted they lied. If Achiever 6 had not been strong enough, or if she had not had the tools or resources to defend herself, she would have been expelled from school. Achiever 6 admitted she was frequently subjected to acts of conspecific aggression, racism, bigotry, and hate during law school.

Pet to threat syndrome

The “pet to threat” scenarios reflect cases where African American women (and women in general) are employed as subordinates and are viewed as “pets” in a corporate position. As soon as they start to understand, cope, and thrive within the workplace, they become more of a threat. Based on the stories told by the participants in this study, African American women who are employed are sometimes viewed as pets. Achiever 3 shared experiences of her workplace which indicated that she was treated as the department pet. However, Achiever 3—due to her perseverance, work

ethic, continued preparedness, hard work, and innovation—was later viewed as a threat, especially by her colleagues and even the white female employees.

Achiever 8 also shared experiences of being treated as a pet in the workplace. She shared how white women and male colleagues behaved as if they had control over her. She indicated that white women always felt like they had

more power than I do. And when we were restructuring the organization, they made it a point to tell me I would be fired because I was nonessential. But when they were fired, they immediately asked their boss why wasn't I fired instead of them.

Her original manager started nitpicking her and her work. And her same-level colleague stopped sharing critical data she needed to complete her tasks. Both were efforts to undermine her progress. In essence, when she joined the firm as a very junior staff member, she was not seen as a threat but a pet. As she began to ascend in stature in the firm, she became a threat.

Gender bias at work

This theme occurred in the job market era. Gender abuse and bias emerged from the stories shared by the participants. From time to time, it was difficult whether an incident was due more to race or gender. I have provided examples of obvious gender-based incidents in this section.

African American female employees seemed to get lower pay. Achiever 1 raised issues related to gender bias in payment. She noted that her male trainees “got paid

more than her while she was training them.” She cited a case of a man who was “dumber than rocks” but received higher pay.

The story shared by Achiever 8 concerning her promotion in the workplace and the way people viewed it betrays the negative perception of successful working women. Achiever 8 indicated that people did not believe she was promoted because of her hard work and merit. The experiences of Achiever 8 show the challenges that African American working women have to endure simply because they were women. She indicated that people did not believe her and they were saying things under their breath like she “was having an affair” with the manager at the company and that was why she was promoted. This event may have been a racially motivated occurrence. However, her coworkers believed she could only be promoted as a function of an affair versus talent. This speaks to gender bias.

Lack of resources and literacies

The lack of resources was a story line repeated in the different narratives of the participants. It emerged from the stories shared about being without sufficient resources where the participants and their families were not able to meet their needs. They had to survive hard conditions. They were not be able to move away to seek a better life. The lack of resources was highlighted as one of the contributing factors of young African American women being involved in crime. Aspirer 2 shared a touching story on the challenges associated with the lack of resources. She indicated that she had to sleep on park benches and even at a gas station, which exposed her to

the harsh side of life at a very tender age. Aspirer 3 attributed the inability of families to move out of Peoria due to the lack of resources. She indicated that there was nowhere they could move since they lacked money. They therefore ended up being “stuck in the same place with the same people.”

Lack of financial literacy

Financial literacy emerged as an important factor that determined the ability of the participants to break away from poverty. The money choices that the participants made determined whether they were able to save up enough to be able to secure their financial future. Some of them made financial decisions they regretted.

Aspirer 3 was not able to save money she made in school. According to Aspirer 3, poor people in Peoria did not have the opportunity to learn about budgeting and how to use money. Aspirer 3 stated, “While in Peoria, no one taught you anything.” She did not know how to do taxes, make a budget; she regrets not taking a money management class. She stated that she spent money on things she didn’t need. Any of her money decisions she tied to being young and dumb. Aspirer 3 did not know at the time the importance of saving or paying bills on time because she always had someone to take care of her. Achiever 7 gave her money to her boyfriend. Aspirer 2 gave her money to family. Aspirer 1 would buy too much food early in the month rather than pacing purchases—only to have the food eaten in the first two days by her aunt’s children.

The Achievers gained financial accuracy acumen as they spent more time in college and secondary schools. In addition, Achiever 7 and 8 are currently bankers. Although Achiever 7 hated her housing situation, she eventually came to understand why her mother never moved from them from the cramped living conditions. Her mother chose not to live outsider their means. The rent included utilities, which reduced overall expenses. After receiving insight and guidance from her clients (her “johns”), Achiever 4 developed a stronger finance and business acumen. She became a real estate owner and landlord. She also maintained a sense of “hustle” from her days assisting her brother in his business within the alternative economy (i.e. selling drugs).

Achiever 1 and her husband managed their finances effectively enough to purchase a larger family home. Achiever 6 learned about saving and managing finances from her final foster mom. She recently purchased a new home for herself and her daughter in a quiet middle-class neighborhood. The following table summarizes the discussion and compares Achievers and Aspirers within the pillars of poverty for a strong start in the labor market.

Table 6. Strong Start in Labor Market

	#Ach	% of Ach	# of Asp	% of Asp	Total	% of Total	# Diff Ach vs Asp	Diff Ach vs Asp
Racism at Work	3	38%	2	40%	5	38%	1	-3%
Pet to Threat	4	50%	1	20%	5	38%	3	30%
Low Literacies of Power: Financial Literacy, Critical Consciousness	0	0%	2.5	50%	2.5	19%	-2.5	-50%
Relational Aggression/Conspecific Aggression	5	63%	1	20%	6	46%	4	43%
Gender Bias at Work	3	38%	1	20%	4	31%	2	18%
Power Distance	1	13%	1	20%	2	15%	0	-8%
Access (Couldn't get to work so had to quit)	0	0%	1	20%	1	8%	-1	-20%

Within this strong start, I noted that more Achievers than Aspirers experienced pet to threat, experienced relational aggression, and gender bias. Thirty percent more of the Achievers experienced pet to threat, 43% more experienced relational aggression, and 18% more experienced gender bias. More Aspirers than Achievers experienced racism at work, had low literacies of power, and experienced power distance. One Aspirer had issues with getting to work. Three percent more of the Aspirers experienced racism at work, 50% more had low literacies of power, and 8% more experienced power distance.

Pillars of poverty during adulthood

Life stage 4: Strong start for a family—Get married before first child, have a job before first child

Normalization of pregnancy

All of the participants in the study described how pregnancy was normal for girls as early as middle school. Achiever 1 described being in middle school with a pregnant classmate. Achievers 1 and 4 were married before their first child. Achievers 2, 6, 7, and 8 were not. Achievers 3 and 5 do not have children, although Achiever 5 suffered a miscarriage and would otherwise have had a child (unclaimed by the father) before marriage. Five of the Achievers had their first child after being employed in their current fields of employment. While Achiever 6 was studying for the bar exam, she took a celebratory trip with a friend and got pregnant.

“Stuck” in Peoria: Lack of a support system

Most of the participants considered living and remaining in Peoria as being “stuck.”

The participants’ recollections of their experiences of living in Peoria revealed a

sense of dissatisfaction and the inability to break away from difficult situations. Some of the participants did not consider Peoria to be a nice place. Aspirer 3 felt living in Peoria was a tragedy she could not escape. She indicated that the region was not safe for children and felt suffocated with problems they could not address. According to Aspirer 3, living in Peoria was more tragic for those who did not have parental support. For example, she said,

Peoria is a place of sadness, desperation, and rage. It holds a lot of tragedy. People want to get out but they can't. It is hard to grow in Peoria if you don't have a support system. People feel suffocated from facing the same people with the same problems. And with a lack of money, you can't do anything or go anywhere so you are stuck in the same place with the same people.

Aspirer 3 also noted that she could not find a support system in Peoria. The participant expressed feelings of entrapment; she stated that "you just can't have a fresh start."

Achiever 5 also shared her experiences about being stuck in Peoria. According to her, there are people who never left Peoria. They just kept up the drama of that area and were stuck in what she called "Peoria complex." She described the area as a place where "everybody knew everybody and everybody's business." Achiever 5 gave a description of other people. She was able to break away once she went to college. She pointed out, "I wasn't in that realm anymore when I went to college." Achiever 3 shared similar sentiments:

I feel like everybody [student, in particular] from Peoria, every Black person from Peoria needs to get and have some sort of HBCU

experience whether that's just going to visit one or going to one. It was everything. It was amazing to see us on every different level. I had Black professors, and I hadn't had a Black teacher since the first grade.

She suggested college experiences and seeing African American students on a college and university setting, outside of Peoria, would be meaningful. She also suggested that seeing African American professors would also be meaningful. Perhaps the prospect of "seeing" and "experiencing" HBCUs and African American professors, whatever the school, would be meaningful enough to leave and not remain "stuck" in Peoria.

Drugs within participants' lives

In some form, drugs were a part of each participant's life or lifestyle. This is an overarching theme, and it did not settle within any of the life stages or surface in any particular phase. This could simply be a function of geography (neighborhoods) and poverty.

Drugs impacted every participants life in some way. Achiever 1's mother's boyfriends used and/or sold drugs. Achiever 2 and Aspirer 1's mothers used drugs. Achievers 3 and 8 and Aspirer 3 had fathers who used drugs. Achiever 3 sold drugs. Achiever 4's brother (her father-figure) sold drugs. Achiever 6's mother had live-in boyfriends who sold drugs. She "dated" them as a way to get drugs without paying for them. Achievers 4 and 8 as well as Aspirer 2 had boyfriends who sold drugs. Drug use and sales impacted, and in many cases prohibited, parental ability to lead and

nurture effectively in their homes. It also reduced their ability to obtain jobs and financial resources needed to care for families.

Domestic/Mental abuse occurring during participants' adulthood
Domestic abuse during adulthood is a theme that is prominent in the stories told by the Aspirers. Most of the Aspirers faced domestic abuse instigated by their intimate partners. Some of the girls were misled and introduced to drugs; some of their relationships resulted in being irresponsible with money.

Aspirer 2 narrated a situation from relationships where in the beginning, her boyfriend was nice and kind. Then he flipped from helping her to being very violent, emotionally and physically. He always wanted money. He made her take back their stuff in exchange for money to buy drugs. She pleased him because a DCFS case was not quite closed and she did not want to get another one. She was afraid to lose her children. He made her late to work all the time: emotional abuse. Aspirer 2 also suffered issues from a boyfriend she entrusted with her son. She worked double shift after double shift. She had someone watch her son and discovered he was most likely molesting him. Aspirer 2 was also taken advantage of by a friend who promised to help her record and sign to a label.

Aspirer 3 also suffered both domestic and emotional abuse. He was controlling her money and did not allow her to socialize with anyone. She felt that he was holding her back while she was still growing up—the guy who would steal just to have

something to do. He ended up persuading her to steal; he was a smooth talker. She never thought that she would be okay with stealing, and he made it sound cool. He would convince her to have sex in public with him and then make her feel bad for it. Aspirer 4's story also revealed that she had suffered mental abuse during her teenage years. When she got pregnant, her boyfriend did not claim the baby, which made her feel bad. In 2008, her boyfriend persuaded her to have an abortion, and she felt terrible. Aspirer 5's boyfriend was extremely abusive. Once he beat her so badly, she blacked out and ran over him with her car trying to get away from him. She went to jail a second time for that.

Achiever 4 shared a story where she was a perpetrator of her own forms of abuse. She indicated that the experiences of the previous relationship made her abusive. When she later met a good and a non-abusive boyfriend, she turned out to be the abuser. She took advantage of his goodness and mistreated him. Achiever 4 stated,

It was a good relationship. He wasn't abusive; he was totally different. So, I didn't treat him good. I took advantage of him. I was the victim in my last relationship then I became the abuser in my second relationship.

Aspirer 2 also shared a story where she was molested by her mom's boyfriend and his nephews. She indicated that at some point, the mistreatment resulted in her falling (or being pushed) out of a window. She broke both legs and wrists in the fall. She also indicated that her mother was abused by her boyfriend. With another boyfriend, her

mother wanted to leave but he threatened to kill her and her kids he and threw the gun at her.

Repression of ACE-based memories

Some of the participants seemed to have gone through traumatizing events that they would rather not talk about or that they simply blocked/blurred their own memories.

Achiever 6, while narrating her experiences of living in foster care, seemed to have challenges recalling the trauma she was subjected to under the care of her foster mother. Achiever 6 said the following about an incident with her foster mother: “I can’t remember why I called the police on her, but I remember it must have been something bad enough for me to call them.” She went on to say that her foster mother beat her with a curtain rod.

Achiever 2 also portrayed the feeling of unease when talking about the experiences of seeing her mother struggle with drug abuse and sexual abuse. Achiever 2 stated that there were things that she would rather not talk about, especially with her mother. She stated,

I don’t talk to her about certain things; it’s one of those things where you’re just like ‘it is what it is.’ Because my mother called the office and lied on me to have me put out of my apartment because I wouldn’t let her move in with me.

Aspirer 3 also seemed to dislike recalling the experiences of living with her parents. She stated, “When I last viewed my childhood home, I wanted to puke. There were

many bad memories, like when my parents were fighting. And it was only the bad memories that would flood back, none of the good ones.”

Negative concepts about “self”

Concepts of self emerged from this study unexpectedly. Self-worth, self-leadership, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-doubt, self-blame, self-reliant, and self-made choices.

Achievers’ lives changed with the change in direction of a flurry of self-related ideals.

Poverty seemed to turn the participants inward but some of the Aspirers’

circumstances (some self-made) seemed difficult to resolve without significant resources. The theme related to self-esteem was prominently featured in the stories told.

Achiever 2 seemed to have had issues with her self-esteem. She indicated that she did not have the best clothes and shoes and felt that she was disliked by her peers. Aspirer 1 had a learning disability in school and said, “I stayed to myself.” Achiever 3 also displayed signs of poor self-esteem during her childhood. According to the stories she told, it emerged that the abuse she encountered made her feel she was different, and she started to think lowly of herself:

You notice that you’re different, but to have your differences pointed out to you, that became a huge obstacle for me and for my self-esteem that I dealt with even into high school.

As with most young girls, the self-esteem of the participants seemed to have been fragile and easily affected by their social interactions. Achiever 8 had issues with self-esteem. Being told she was ugly had a negative impact on her self-esteem. However,

her self-esteem was boosted by the boy who liked her. She indicated that her self-esteem boomed. Achiever 8 stated,

Now what you got to remember; I was a broken kid. All my life people called me ugly. You couldn't dress. A boy liked me. Someone gave me some attention. My self-esteem was boom. I'm like *I have a guy that likes me and he's giving me attention.*

Most of the Achievers appeared to be self-driven, which could have informed their positive social mobility. The stories shared by the Achievers depicted them as individuals who were self-driven to succeed even in difficult situations. Achiever 3 indicated that she had the innate drive to succeed in education because she wanted to get a scholarship. Achiever 4 was also able to complete high school because she was self-driven to get a job. The stories shared by Achiever 8 indicated she took it upon herself to ensure that she focused on things that would drive her career forward even if it meant sacrificing her desire to go to school. Achiever 3 stated,

So, I knew I needed to get scholarships. I feel like high school for me it turned into—I mean I had fun but, in some ways, it turned into a job because I knew that I wanted to get out.

Achievers also seemed to have had self-efficacy while growing up, as indicated by their stories attesting to a belief in their ability to achieve whatever they wanted to. Aspirers did not share any significant self-efficacy related stories during their childhood.

While at her workplace, Achiever 8 did not doubt her ability to learn from others. Due to self-belief, Achiever 8 was able to gain skills by learning from others, which

led to her success and promotion at her place of work. Achiever 2 also believed she could do better in academics. She believed that she could go further in her life and achieve great things. This could have motivated her success. Achiever 2 stated,

They could have been a lot better but I felt like I didn't try. I didn't put forth the effort as much as I probably should have. Then you know you want to go further in life. To be able to go further you have to make sure you're doing good in school.

Achiever 8 stated,

So, I began to talk like them and walk like them. Be assertive like them. Put on my suit like them. Began to show that hey I have confidence; I can be a leader as well. I start going on the calls meeting billionaires, millionaires, bringing in new business. Closing deals with them.

The Achievers seemed to have had issues related to self-discipline at some point in their lives. Self-discipline seemed to have been influenced by their close social network. The participants who were able to maintain their self-discipline seemed to have excelled in school. They made it through their tough childhood and the challenges associated with growing up in Peoria. Achiever 1 indicated that it was her discipline which led her to avoid getting pregnant despite her peers getting pregnant in middle school. She noted that she knew she had to take care of her siblings. She also noted she had bills to pay, giving her a reason to work hard and avoid indulging in activities that could jeopardize her ability to provide for her siblings.

Self-respect also emerged from the stories shared by the participants. The young African American girls in Peoria had to have high self-respect to maneuver through

the challenges of teenage years. The choices made by the young African American girls were based on how much they respected and upheld their values. Aspirer 3 knew that engaging in theft and crime was wrong and went against her values. However, she seemed to have lost some self-respect upon meeting the boyfriend who made stealing look cool. She eventually ended up engaging in that habit. Achiever 4's boyfriend seemed to have had a negative impact on her self-respect. She states, "So I lost a lot of my self-respect during that time in my life. I met him when I was 17."

The concept of self-worth seemed to have influenced the decisions made by the young African American girls in Peoria. Achiever 8 provides a good example of how self-worth is important for young African American girls growing up in the neighborhoods that struggle with crime and poverty. She indicated that she decided to have sex with her boyfriend because she thought he would leave if she did not. However, the main reason for her decision was because she was broken. Being told that she was ugly seemed to have injured her self-worth. She thought she could not get another boyfriend and therefore she had to have sex with that person to keep him.

Achiever 7 stated,

I was broken. I had no sense of self-worth. My dad would send me money, and I would give it all to my boyfriend so he would stay with me. After I started having sex, I was always consumed and distracted by boys. I defined my self-worth by what they wanted. Because I thought each boy was gonna marry me.

Then, one day, she said she knew:

I didn't want that for my life. So I took a break from the boys, pursued other hobbies, and figured out what I really liked. I took my baby to Chicago. I leveraged my own resources and cultivated myself. I exposed myself to more things and I protected my time.

Like many of the other Achievers, she found self-worth and self-love.

The Aspirers were still striving and working through various aspects of self-worth, self-esteem, self-discipline, and other self-based concepts. They spoke more of worrying about concerns like providing for their children, unstable homes, and poor grades. Aspirer 1's daughter ran away from home just as she did. Her daughter was a junior in high school and already had her first child. It seemed the Aspirers were not as self-assured to control their lives and their futures. The Achievers' reflections of self seemed more evolved than the Aspirers. The details will be discussed further in the next section. The following table summarizes the discussion and compares Achievers and Aspirers within the pillars of poverty for a strong start for a family.

Table 7. Strong Start for a Family

	#Ach	% of Ach	# of Asp	% of Asp	Total	% of Total	# Diff Ach vs Asp	Diff Ach vs Asp
Pregnancy Normalized in Neighborhood	8	100%	5	100%	13	100%	3	0%
Domestic Abuse in Own Relationship	3	38%	3	60%	6	46%	0	-23%
Repression of Memories	3	38%	2	40%	5	38%	1	-3%
No Relationship With Father	4	50%	3	60%	7	54%	1	-10%
Lack of Resources & Support, Felt “Stuck”	3	38%	2	40%	5	38%	1	-3%
Unattended Negative Concepts of Self (in adulthood)	0	0%	5	100%	5	38%	-5	-100%
Drugs in their Homes as Adults	3	38%	2	40%	5	38%	1	-3%
Learning Disability (in adulthood)	0	0%	1	20%	1	8%	-1	-20%
No High School Diploma	0	0%	2	40%	2	15%	-2	-40%

	#Ach	% of Ach	# of Asp	% of Asp	Total	% of Total	# Diff Ach vs Asp	Diff Ach vs Asp
No Child Support/Cannot Compensate for Childrearing Alone	0	0%	3	60%	3	23%	-3	-60%
Circumstances Too Difficult to Overcome (to date)	0	0%	2.5	50%	2.5	19%	-2.5	-50%

Within this strong start, I noted that pregnancy was normalized everywhere. All of the Aspirers had some unattended negative concepts of self. The Aspirers outranked the Achievers in every other pillar of poverty within this strong start. Twenty-three percent more experienced domestic abuse in their own relationships, 3% more repressed memories, 10% more did not have a relationship with their father, 3% more lacked resources and support, 3% more dealt with drugs in their homes as adults, 40% more did not receive high school diplomas, 60% more do not receive child support, and 50% more have circumstances that are too difficult to overcome. One of the Aspirers also had a learning disability.

The table below collapses summary scores using the pillar of poverty themes for each of the strong start dimensions. These findings are presented in the four life-stage categories. The first score reflects “early years and foundational aspects” of the strong start in life phase. The pillars of poverty within this stage reflect the instability at the foundational level of their lives. It also reflects aspects of participants’ difficulties in their home lives. The second set of scores reflect the pillars of poverty in participants’ school years. I combined the “in school” and “in postsecondary” strong starts. Most of the issues spanned all of their school years. The third set of scores reflect issues at jobs as categorized in the “labor market” strong start. Finally, the last set of scores represents the pillars of poverty as they occurred in participants’ adulthood. They are reflected in the “for a family” strong start category that can be seen in the following table.

Table 8. Overall Pillars of Poverty within the Strong Start Phases—Scores

Strong Starts	Ach1	Ach2	Ach3	Ach4	Ach5	Ach6	Ach7	Ach8	Asp1	Asp2	Asp3	Asp4	Asp5
In Life:													
Educated Mom/Capable Parents	5	6	3	7	3	7	2	5	7	7	3	3	3
In School *	10	16	8	11	10	12	8	18	19	18	12	9	14
In the Labor Market:													
Postsecondary Degree/No Criminal Record	3	0	2	0	2	3	3	3	4.5	.5	.5	.5	3.5
For a Family:													
Married Before First Child/Job Before First Child	2	5	2	4	4	4	2	1	5	7	6.5	4	8
Totals	20	27	15	22	19	26	15	27	35.5	32.5	22	16.5	28.5

Source: Participant Interviews: “In school” includes strong start 2, which includes acceptable pre-reading and math scores, and appropriate behavior in school; it also includes strong start 3, which includes graduating high school with a 2.5 or above and enrolling in postsecondary education

Discussion of Pillar Scores

Achievers had an average score of 21, whereas Aspirers had an average score of 27.

The bulk of the pillar scores rest in the “in school” category since most of participants’ years were spent in school. Detailed comparisons are made in the pillars of poverty statistical discussion.

Achievers

During the “in life” phase, Achievers 3, 5, and 7 experienced fewer pillars compared to the rest of their cohort. Similar to their strong start scores, Achievers 2 and 8 were outliers and had more poverty-based pillars than the other 6 Achievers. Within the “in school” stage, Achievers 3 and 7 had the lowest scores and suffered from fewer pillars than the remainder of their cohort. For example, neither reported pillars of lack of motivation, domestic violence, subpar education (they went to better Peoria Public schools than the others), homelessness, caseworker issues, or truancy. Scores in the “labor market” category were relatively low. However, Achievers 2 and 4 never reported issues in the area. They seemed to have mild mannered demeanors. That said, neither went to college and their jobs were more operational in nature.

There were 10 pillars in the “for family” category, and none of the Achievers scored over 4 except for Achiever 2. Achiever 2 had drugs in her home as an adult, no relationship with her father at that time (he was in jail), and she mentioned issues of domestic violence in her adulthood. The scores ranged from 15–27, representing

broad differences based on life situations. The individual narratives in the appendices provide additional insight on each participant's plight.

Aspirers

Aspirer 4 discussed the lowest number of pillars of the Aspirer cohort with 16.5, followed by Aspirer 3. The "in life" category revealed Aspirers 1 and 2 had the most issues. Unlike the other Aspirers, they recalled poor living conditions and issues within the foster care system. All of the Aspirers were a part of a blended family. Aspirer 3 had both parents. Both she and Aspirer 4 had reasonable living conditions. Neither had adultification issues nor foster care issues. Aspirer 4 did not experience drugs in the home.

Aspirers 3, 4 and 5 had the fewest issues in the "in school" category. However, Aspirer 5 never finished high school, and Aspirer 4 was occasionally truant. That said, she had better primary and middle school experiences, as she went to a nearby Catholic school and recalls teachers who cared. Again, Aspirers 1 and 2 had the highest numbers in this category. In the "labor market" category, the figures are relatively consistent but all higher than Achievers. The Aspirers worked lower waged jobs than the Achievers as well. Aspirers 2 and 5 had the highest figures in the "for family" category. They recalled more domestic violence and mental abuse from partners, and they had issues with child support. Overall, the Aspirers reported more disadvantages, abuse, and issues within school and family than the Achievers.

An understanding of the fifty-two pillars of poverty experienced within strong start stages and ten dimensions helps the goal of offer insight into the multiple disadvantages for participants and people like them over the course of nearly forty years.

For example, earning good reading and math scores can be difficult to achieve when a girl is having difficulty at home with an unsupportive family and if she relies on school as a place of refuge in hopes of it being a safe space. However, if she had racist and harsh teachers, a 2.5 could be nearly impossible. This is an example of the difficulty of meeting what seems like simple criteria.

Additional details and comparisons are discussed in the following section. Again, accompanying vignettes provide metacognition-based insight and experiences from the participants' points-of-view.

Factors for achieving middle-class status

There were different factors that propelled these African American women to achieve middle-class status. Also, the influence of each of the factors is subjective and depends on the context. Some of the Aspirers displayed characteristics identified as being beneficial for upward social mobility. These factors include resoluteness, hope, courage, self-respect, self-efficacy, improved self-esteem, hard work, and having support. The participants also displayed different combinations of factors associated

with upward social mobility. The factors are described in greater detail in the following pages.

Supportive family

Achievers recalled some semblances of support. Achiever 2 received support and encouragement from her father. She believed that her father instilled a lot of values in her. Her father encouraged her to focus on academics. He would sometimes send money to help her with school items or during Christmas. The support from her father made her settle in school and focus more on education. She stated,

He instilled I believe a lot of values talking to him. He's all about school. So that weekend he ended up sending me some money for me to get me a pair of shoes. He sent the money and again that Christmas. So that weekend he ended up sending me some money for me to get me a pair of shoes.

Achiever 3 was supported by her uncle who, according to her, was “a really strong leader and always gave encouragement.” Achiever 4 was lucky to get support from her brother’s father. However, her real father was not there for her during her childhood, since he didn’t know she had ever been born. Achiever 4 stated,

He [her father] was not involved in my life. At all. I didn’t have a relationship with my dad growing up. My brother’s father played a big part. He had really played a big part in both of our lives.

Achiever 6 lived with one of her brothers and his wife for several months while she looked for a job in Peoria. She received fatherly support from a foster parent in her early years. What she remembers most is the time he called her “his daughter.” It meant a lot to her. And, as previously discussed, she received support and insight

from her final foster mom. She recalls her driving her to college and helping her get settled into her dorm.

Achiever 7's mother and father supported her and her son while she completed college, both financially and with their time. Her son lived with her mother during Achiever 7's first semester of college.

Resoluteness; fierce resolve

The most vivid examples of resoluteness surfaced during my discussions with Achievers. They each became resolute, firm, and unwavering in the conviction to get out of poverty. Their resolve was apparent in how they masterfully used every shred of the support, resources, and opportunities made available to them. While faced with the need to provide for her family and take care of her siblings, Achiever 2 noted that she had to work hard so she could change the state of her family. She acknowledged that they could not continue living in poverty. Achiever 2 stated,

Like I said she depended on me a lot. Watching my siblings at the age of nine and ten. You see all this and even as a child you just think I know this can't be life. But as I start getting older and notice I need to make sure I'm doing my work.

Achiever 3 was also determined to leave home because to her it was hell. She states, "Home was hell. Really from second to fifth and then until I decided to leave." The resoluteness of Achiever 3 also emerged from her decision to quit sports because she thought it was consuming the time meant for academics. Her determination to continue school is evinced in her decision to pay for school with all she had. She was

determined to use academics as a springboard to break away from the poverty that was at home. Achiever 3 stated, “I just didn’t like it [basketball] anymore. It just felt it was very time consuming. I felt like it was affecting my grades.” And once in college, she experienced a financial setback. So, she worked more, took on student loan debt, and used credit cards to finance her senior year because as she said, “I was going to make it happen absolutely. I was not coming back home.”

Achiever 8’s resoluteness emerged from her desire to get her family out of poverty. From a young age, Achiever 8 resolved to help her mom live a better life. Her determination to help her mother is seen through her efforts to get her a car. She called the bank, pretending to be her aunt, in order to find out if the aunt would be able to cosign for a loan. So when she received the paperwork and presented it to her aunt, the loan had already been approved. Achiever 8 stated,

I said I just feel bad, mom’s getting up every day. I said, will you help my mom? I said it was already approved. All she had to do was go in and sign the papers. It was done. Then she was like you’re going to be that one that’s going to always try to figure it out. So, my mother had her car. My mother got her car. She was going back and forth to work.

Achiever 8 also lied about her age to get a job so she could help with the bills.

Achiever 6 shared,

My mother and her boyfriend’s room had a beaded curtain as a door, which meant you could see everything going on. My mother was so high and damn near unconscious that her boyfriend was raping her while she just laid there. After that I said I will never put myself in a

situation where I'm letting anybody do anything to me against my will.
Ever!

Achiever 1 moved in with her boyfriend (now husband). She wanted to get away from all the caretaking responsibilities to live life on her own and for herself. She quit community college because she felt she was "only working to pay for school" and "couldn't save any money." They saved money and bought a house.

The responses of Aspirers did not seem to encompass as much resolve as the Achievers. The causal effects are too difficult to sift through and decipher. An event that triggered an Achiever toward fierce resolve did not cause a similar emotion in the Aspirer. In some cases, a life circumstances presented a quagmire of challenges. Those challenges were so difficult, it made hope difficult to find. Some of the challenges are listed in the "hope" section that follows.

Achievers had fierce resolve. The triggers also initiated the processes toward more positive and improved "concepts of self." This term generally refers to self-love, self-respect, self-drive, self-efficacy, self-belief, self-worth, and self-leadership.

Improved concepts of self

It was apparent the Achievers were still working through some of their self-related issues. However, it was apparent that they, and perhaps their therapists, had made enough progress to reach a higher sense of self-worth. It was apparent they were passing this thought process, encouragement, and mode of thinking on to their

children. They were sure to share their expectations for providing better lives for their children.

Hope (the noun!)

High hopes were reflected in Achiever 1's expectation for a better life for her children. She and her husband purchased and moved into a bigger house and a better neighborhood. Achiever 2 always ensured that her children study, and she helped them with homework. Achiever 3 was thinking about a husband but has enough patience and self-love to wait for a suitable mate rather than settle down without strategic thought. Perhaps her current beau will propose. Achiever 4 has written her second book and started a new business venture on the west coast. Achiever 5 was in the early stages of her doctoral research proposal. She wanted to use her research to help resolve diversity issues. She was looking for new work opportunities. Achiever 6 made sure her daughter was well taken care of with all of her needs and some of her wants. Achiever 7 was a pillar in the Peoria Community. Her husband recently completed his doctorate of education. Achiever 8's son was on his way to college. She was well regarded in the community as well.

Achiever 8 had hoped for a better life, to break free from poverty, and help her mother live a better life. Hope kept her going. She revealed that her dream was to ensure her family did not struggle anymore. Achiever 8 stated,

I always used to think, *how am I ever going to get away from this?* Me and my creative mind; all I used to think about when I was a little girl is *when I get older my momma ain't gone have to work. No more of the struggle. I'mma take care of my whole family.* That was my dream.

In some cases, the Aspirers showed glimpses of hope. However, Aspirer 1 seemed to have experienced life's challenges in such a mean way that at times it sounded like she had very little hope. Achiever 1's children were scattered around the region. She could not afford to care for them all. Her mother and her ex-boyfriend were supporting her by raising some of her children. Her ex-boyfriend had the four she and he parented. Her mother had 3 of her other children. Achiever 2 was still working through family issues. She was working and trying (hoping) for a record deal. Aspirer 3 just received a promotion. She and her boyfriend recently moved to a better neighborhood. She may have been closer to feeling hope similar to the Achievers, although she was still dependent on the government subsidy.

On one hand, this spoke to a sense of financial literacy since she had a partner to share expenses. However, it also confirmed she was still dependent on a government subsidies. Aspirer 4 was extremely worried for her son. This emphasized how keenly aware she was of the school system and situations her son may get involved in. It also emphasized that she cannot afford to put him in better school. The felony charge in Aspirer 5's background has crushed numerous dreams. She has been fired from several jobs once the background checks have been completed. During the time of our interview, she was preparing paperwork to request an exemption so she might be able to keep a steady job.

This is not to suggest the Aspirers had lost hope. However, their challenges put them at a deficit as they pursued their goals to care for their children just as every other mother wishes. The Aspirers were more focused on the next week's and month's bills rather than retirement or college for their children.

Disciplined hard work versus lack of discipline

Stories shared by Achievers portrayed them as hard workers. The Achievers rose from humble beginnings, and they were able to wade through difficult situations to reach the middle-class status. All of them were born to poor families, and they attended local schools that had their own challenges. Even in the workplace, the Achievers appeared to work hard to get promotions and get better pay. Achiever 8 is an example of a hard-working African American woman who rose from poor backgrounds and achieved middle-class status. It was from the hard work that she was recognized and given the promotion. Even after the change of management, Achiever 8 was able to survive and later be promoted to a vice president position because of her hard work and perseverance.

Achiever 8 stated,

People were like, *no way. How did you get that promotion?* Blessed and highly favored. I didn't touch nobody. Nobody touched me. I got it because I worked hard. His family took me in under their wing. They loved me. They brought in this guy from a bigger bank; I just felt like they stretched me. I wanted to quit. Structure changed again. Then my next promotion comes in. They're like *we're going to promote you to Vice President.*

That said, every participant worked hard in their own respective ways to provide for their families. What is important to note about hard work in these instances is the

timing. Achievers displayed the habits of hard work much earlier than the Aspirers. This may have been because the Aspirers were still struggling to overcome other pillars of poverty related to their criminal records, abusive relationships, or lack of financial literacy. Nevertheless, I believe the Achievers outworked the Aspirers by starting earlier in the life stages.

Heliotropic effect

Stories shared by the Achievers point towards heliotropic effects as an enabler of the transition of African American women to middle-class status. According to D'Amato et al., "the heliotropic effect is the attraction of all living systems toward positive energy and away from negative energy, or toward that which is life giving and away from that which is life depleting" (as cited in Cameron, Mora, Leutscher, & Calarco, 2011, p. 288). In this study, the heliotropic effect was evident throughout many aspects of the participants' stories at home, at a friend's home, in a couple of foster homes, in schools, at afterschool/intervention programs, and intermittently throughout their lives.

For Achiever 1, it was her best friend's parents. Achiever 1 is one of two married participants. When she went to her childhood friend's home for a sleepover, she discovered her friend's parents were together at the home and married. For Achiever 2, an example of it was her father, for a time. For Achiever 3, the coordinator and tutor of the local TSTM program, her uncle, and her middle school science teacher were heliotropic influences. For Achiever 4, heliotropic influences turned out to be a

couple of her clients, her “johns,” who were local businessmen: They provided her with business knowledge that in turn gave her the courage to start another type of business—a legitimate business.

For Achiever 5, her father, her sorority, and eventually her mother were her examples. Achiever 6 made Felicia Rashad’s character, Claire Huxtable, the successful lawyer, her heliotropic influence. For Achiever 7, her mother and one or two of her African American female managers became hers. Achiever 8 had several employers who believed in her enough to hire and promote her. By observing how her fellow employees worked, Achiever 8 was energized to improve her skills and emulate their mannerisms, dress code, timeliness, and demeanors. Achiever 8, from observing how well her new employees worked and dressed, stated, “I put on my suit like them. Show that, hey I have confidence; I can be a leader as well.” This resulted in her honing her skills and being successful in her work to become a senior vice president at a regional bank.

The Aspirers had fewer impactful heliotropic notable events or influences. However, Aspirer 1 had three women: The first was her grandmother, a well-known pillar in the Taft community where she currently resides. The second was a woman who helped Aspirer 1 get her children from the foster system after she was released from jail (this woman would also house Aspirer 1’s daughter when she and Aspirer 1 have

problems). The third woman would keep Aspirer 1's children whenever she ran out of food while living at her aunts. This indicates the cyclicity of nature.

Aspirer 3's sister taught her how to manage bills and money and a new boyfriend who treats her with respect. Aspirer 4 had a manager who believed in her. Aspirer 5 had a manager who took a chance on her and continues to encourage her.

Human capital

In 1776, the forefather of classical economics, Smith, described human capital in a way that suits the Achievers—and to a much lesser extent the Aspirers. “The acquisition of...talents during...education, study, or apprenticeship, costs a real expense, which is capital in [a] person. Those talents [are] part of his fortune [and] likewise that of society” (bk. 2, ch. 1, para. 17). During the study, the Achievers were able to demonstrate an accumulation and “acquisition” of talent, education, and experience. The “investors” were people who supported them along their lives as they gained these assets.

In addition to outlining the factors the Achievers used collectively to achieve middle-class status, this section provided data and findings of experiences for each participant over the course of their lives in Peoria, Illinois, reflecting how difficult life circumstances can be amid the effects, disadvantages, and pillars of poverty. The discussion in the next section not only offers responses to the research questions, it provides succinct insights on participants' human capital accumulation.

For African American millennial women from Peoria, Illinois, born into poverty, what are the factors and personal experiences they express that led to their upward mobility in achieving middle-class status?

The 52 pillars of poverty were a view into the experiences of the participants as they each pursued middle-class status. Some achieved it. Some did not.

Are the social genome model (SGM) strong starts predictive of achieving middle-class status?

Yes, they are to some extent. The Achievers outscored the Aspirers. However, the tenants of the SGM Model were not enough and were not sufficient to predict achievement. There were outliers in both groups of participants. The model and strong starts need to be supplemented with metacognition and sociological imagination. Those two factors tell more of the story behind the hurdles and barriers many of these women faced and continue to face.

Can one achieve middle-class status without experiencing all of the SGM strong starts?

Yes. Since none of the participants achieved all of the strong starts, metacognition and sociological imagination provided clues to the mechanisms Achievers deployed to achieve middle-class status. Those two factors also provided insight on what precluded the Aspirers from achieving middle-class status.

What factors emerge that differentiated the Achievers and Aspirers to reach or not reach middle-class status?

For the Achievers, what perceived barriers did they navigate to achieve social mobility and reach middle-class status?

Achievers demonstrated capacity in the following areas: They had supportive family, they demonstrated resoluteness (event-triggered) and a fierce resolve, their sense of self improved with successes, they had hope, they worked hard earlier than the

Aspirers, they took hold of influences with heliotropic effects, they created their own woven human capital and literacies of power, they emulated successful people they admired, and the corporate Achievers specifically(not the self-employed) demonstrated coping skills and identity shifting.

For the Aspirers, what perceived barriers are they currently navigating to achieve social mobility and reach middle-class status?
Summarily, the primary barriers to middle-class achievement for the Aspirers were having a criminal record, lack of family support, lack of financial support from their children's fathers and family, and low financial literacy. Their senses of self were not as high as the Achievers, and they had low financial literacy.

The figure below illustrates a summation of these responses to the research questions.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION For African-American millennial women from Peoria born in poverty, what are the factors and personal experiences they express that led to their upward mobility in achieving middle class status?

Are the SGM-Strong Starts predictive of achieving middle class status?

They are – to an extent. You must consider the factors represented by the 52 pillars of poverty. They achieved by coping with the pillars.

Can one achieve middle class status without experiencing all of the SGM-strong starts?

Yes, they can. Through Metacognition and Sociological Imagination we learn HOW they achieved.

What factors emerge that differentiated the Achievers and Aspirers to reach or not reach middle class status?

ACHIEVERS—How They Achieved

- + Supportive family
- + Resoluteness (event-triggered); Fierce resolve
- + Improved concepts of self
- + Hope (the noun!); Human Becoming Theory
- + Early-disciplined hard work
- + Heliotropic effect
- + Identity-shifting & coping mechanisms
- + Human capital (and Literacies of Power) accumulation
- + Admiration emulation

ASPIRERS—Why They Still Aspire

- Criminal record
- Lack of family support
- Lack of child support
- Issues of self
- Low financial literacy

Figure 1. Summary Responses to the Research Questions

Chapter 6: Discussion

Introduction

Upon assessment of the literature, I noted a gap in understanding of processes adopted by the millennial African American women who are growing up in poverty and have yet able to achieve middle-class status. The general questions I needed answers to included understanding the processes and factors for achieving middle-class status and social mobility among millennial African American women born into poverty in Peoria. I needed to know which factors and processes women who have achieved middle-class status have enacted that are different from those who are still striving to achieve upward social mobility. I needed to explore the relevant factors within the social genome model that impact achievement. Findings from this study provided answers to all these questions.

Following my recruitment approach, which included the use of flyers, a total of 13 African American women participants who met the recruitment criteria agreed to take part in the study. Five of the participants who were Aspirers (who in this study referred to the women who have not achieved middle-class status yet) and eight Achievers participated in the study. With consent from the participants, I collected data. It included video recording, notetaking, and in some cases full transcription of the narratives. Thematic analysis of the findings led to the identification of various themes related to poverty and barriers to social mobility. Factors and processes that

facilitate upward social mobility also emerged. In this section, I will provide an in-depth analysis and discussion of the findings.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings from the study provide insights into the processes that the African American women in Peoria used to attain middle-class status. They also provide an understanding of the important factors within the social genome model that have an impact on the achievements of middle-class status among the African American millennial women in Peoria. Insights on issues caused by poverty also emerged from the findings. By establishing how the findings fit within the existing framework of literature, one is able to understand the social change implications of the study. The study addresses gaps in the literature, the SGM, and the strong starts model that are important in informing the changes that need to be adopted at the grassroots level and areas for further research.

Metacognition

When former President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama wrote *Dreams from My Father* and *Becoming*, respectively, they provided readers with metacognition and sociological imagination. They provided biographies in their own voice. They provided personal reflections. They provided historical details on what was going on in the country at pivotal points in their lives. They provided context for how that history impacted their lives. Readers can gain an understanding of how they and their families navigated certain historical frames in our country. Readers are also privy to their personal reflections and feelings in those times.

Metacognition, put simply, is thinking about what you know. It is a series of reflections on your experiences and decisions based on your personal worldview of those experiences. The term originated with psychologist John Flavell. In essence, he considered it “cognition about cognition: knowing about one’s own knowledge and applying that knowledge in practice (as cited in Braad, Degens, & IJsselsteijn, 2020, p. 54). When Fleming (2014) discussed the role of metacognition in all areas of life, he concluded and summarized it as follows:

an internal tribunal that rules on the soundness of our mental representations, such as a memory or judgment, [It] is how we identify our limitations and compensate for them, not only for spotting weakness,... it also kicks in when you assess your strengths,...and, serves as a foundation for learning and success (p. 33).

Metacognition has four components: metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive experiences, metacognitive goals or tasks, and metacognitive actions or strategies. Metacognitive knowledge is defined by Flavell as “stored world knowledge” (as cited in Moritz & Lysaker, 2018, p. 21). Metacognitive experiences are “conscious reflections about cognitive processes. A metacognitive goal is a way of “assessing one’s knowledge.” A metacognitive strategy is the action taken to address the assessed conclusion (Moritz & Lysaker, 2018). In this study, the participants were continuously providing their own knowledge, experiences, tasks, actions, and strategies. They qualified and verbally assessed their actions based on their worldview and experiences.

Sociological Imagination

C. Wright Mills is known for establishing the concept of sociological imagination. In a discussion on literary lives within biographical sketches, D. Ellis (2020) quotes Mills who said,

It is by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society. (p. 97)

Edwards (2002) placed the definition within a context that speaks to the experiences of the participants in this study. He suggested “personal troubles are public issues arising from the changing forms of social inequalities, as these are produced from generation to generation” (Edwards, 2002, p. 527). In this study, I am the “biographer,” so-to-speak. The narratives in the study provide personal accounts of each woman’s “personal troubles.” Their troubles were and are consequential manifestations of systemic social issues of race, class, gender, and poverty reflected in each participant’s experience. The troubles are presented as pillars within each stage of life from birth to date. The historical information is presented within the birth years selected for this study (millennials: 1977–1996), deemed the early years. Those years span two notable economic recessions, in 2001 and 2007.

We are entering a third recession experience in 2020 as I conclude this chapter. However, over the course of participants’ lifetimes, there was a double-dip recession that began in 1980 and ended in 1982 (Kyer, 2016) and another in 1991 (Wu, Stevenson, Chen, & Güner, 2002). The contextual frame of social mobility is

provided with the social and economic backdrop of a faltering midwestern city: Peoria, Illinois.

Metacognition and sociological imagination are two critical forms with which readers gain a more informed view of the backdrop for the social genome model's criteria. They provide historical reference. They provide insights on the participants' personal struggles, trials, and experiences. The participants provide readers with an understanding of the thought processes and rationale for their actions. As "biographer," I combined the details of both the model and pillars accompanied by metacognition and sociological imagination to present the most informed story of their lives and experiences.

Poverty

Findings from this study confirm that residents of Peoria struggle with issues of poverty just like many other old industrial Midwest cities (Berube, 2019). Issues of poverty identified among the participants provide a backdrop for social mobility in this study. They also provide an understanding of the barriers and struggles that women go through as they try to achieve upward social mobility.

One of the key issues related to poverty that emerged from the study involved poor living conditions. Participants who have not achieved middle-class status seem to have more recollections of a bad and poor living condition. Participants described a matrix of compounding poor living conditions: substandard education, foster care

system, bad choices with ramifications, multiple children (caring for children is expensive in the best of times and exponentially difficult for poverty-stricken families), jail, resources, literacies, furthering education.

For example, Aspirer 1 mentioned her current apartment has roaches in the walls. A recent article reinforced her poor living conditions in the entire tenement (Parker, 2019). The young African American women who have not achieved middle-class status struggled with poor living conditions during their childhood. This included sleeping on park benches and at gas stations. Issues of poverty are also linked to the experiences of foster care. Due to their mother's issues, some girls had to move to foster care where they reported having faced horrific treatment. They reported instances of rape and harsh treatment. All of the participants narrated experiencing shame of being poor.

Findings agree with the poverty-based, place-based, literature, current context, and poverty levels in Peoria (Comen & Sauter, 2017). The city has been indicated as the worst city in the country for African Americans, with the unemployment rate at about 9.3% (Frohlich et al., 2016). This study also supports Ratcliffe and Kalish's (2017) assertion that most of the African American children are persistently poor in cities such as Peoria. Poverty issues that emerged from this study can be associated with the intergenerational nature of poverty transmission described by Maralani (2013). The Aspirers' stories are a testament that it still persists. Explanations include less state

funding (The Education Trust, 2017), poorer school districts, and lack of access to resources.

Poverty influences the achievement of middle-class status among Black women in Peoria. In a recent interview, I argued that the girls who are born into poverty are “doomed from the womb,” as research tells us their chances of achieving middle-class status are slim (Center for Values-Driven Leadership, 2019, para. 18). The literature suggests that young women who are born into poverty in cities like Peoria do not have the strong start needed to break away from poverty and attain middle-class status (Chetty et al., 2014). I uncovered processes for achieving middle-class status from the Achievers’ stories. I will discuss those processes in the next section.

The Chetty et al. study (2014) indicated that socioeconomic gaps influence early indicators of success such as in academics and social connectedness. The story shared by the Aspirers clearly indicates that poverty among African American girls reduces their chances of going to college and even to form the social network required to propel them to middle-class status. According to the obtained findings, African American girls born into poverty are forced to engage in non-academic activities that disrupt their learning. Some of the African American girls are forced to work at an early age to support their family while some engage in inappropriate behaviors such as stealing or selling drugs to make ends meet.

Neighborhoods

Literature suggests that poor African American young women in poor neighborhoods such as Peoria's have limited social capital and therefore, they are less likely to achieve upward social mobility (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). The study had mixed results. All of the women in the study lived in poor neighborhoods. Yet I learned that eight of the 13 women in the study achieved middle-class status. That said, most urban low-income neighborhoods remain segregated. Residents of those neighborhoods are still in poverty and remained locked in intergenerational poverty (Owens, 2014). This might also be considered proximity capital. The "theory of place" within the sociology of education refers to the geographical locational impact on social mobility and social capital called "proximity capital" (O. Johnson, 2012). While some believe education drives social mobility, the neighborhood (i.e., "place") in which one lives cannot be taken for granted.

Family Structure

The nature, structure, and characteristics of the family in terms of nature, size, and structure also seemed to play an important role as a barrier to the upward social mobility among young African American women in Peoria. One must be mindful that the structure of African American families contains a web of relations—grandmothers, aunts, cousins, close friends—adopted aunts and uncles. Almost all participants were from families with single or divorced parents. Their mothers were responsible for their upbringing—however, not always alone. Billingsley said that

In every neighborhood of any size in the country, a wide variety of family structures will be represented. This range and variety does not

suggest, as some commentaries hold, that the Negro family is falling apart, but rather that these families are fully capable of surviving by adapting to the historical and contemporary social and economic conditions facing the Negro people. (as cited in Williams, 1973, p. 39)

This suggests a possible barrier to upward social mobility. The findings of the study support the literature that living in uneducated single-parent families is associated with limited chances of advancing for the middle-class status. Due to impact and determinants of poverty, uneducated single mothers do not appear capable of providing the necessary and adequate resources and support for their girls. As such, they lack a good foundation to ensure greater success in the movement towards middle-class status. This is more pronounced among families living in poverty. It should, however, be noted that the existing literature points towards the rather limited influence that men have on women who rise to middle-class status. Men who were risers almost always rose with a wife who was there in the background and remained at the time of interview in a continuing marriage. But by contrast, the women either rose with a rather reluctant man in tow, or almost equally often, in many cases, rose after they had freed themselves from their husband: At least for women, divorce was a catalyst for rising as well as for falling (Thompson, 2004). Since Peoria is one of the toughest places to be a single mother, young African American girls of single mothers are likely to face bleak chances for advancing their aspirations of breaking out of poverty (Comen, 2019a).

There has been a shift from family structures described in a 1973 study that concluded the most dominant family structure among African Americans is where the husband and wife are present. The authors indicated that African American families with an absent father were rare. In this study, most fathers are absent in Peoria. The absence of fathers could be associated with the challenges that are faced by African American girls. They are made to grow up with the absence of a father or a complex relationship with father figures. Also, their mother's boyfriends in most cases aggravate their relationships with their fathers. Sometimes, individuals who feel scorned act as gatekeepers of access to the girl.

Further exploration of the nature of the family and its impact on the upward mobility of young African American women into the middle class in Peoria also revealed that the quality of the relationship between the father and the mother is important. Most participants who lived in families where parents openly disagreed or the mother was abused or abandoned by the father or boyfriend experienced limited progress towards middle-class status as a family. Such experiences likely caused internalized oppression (Marsh, 2013).

Large families may have impacted the ability of the parents to provide the necessary support for the young girls. However, this study did not support the size of the family as a barrier to upward social mobility as it relates to the participants' childhood family size. On the other hand, the family size and number of children of the Aspirers

likely played a role. Family sizes did not impede the Achievers reaching middle class. They broke the cycle of poverty specifically for themselves. Their siblings have varying stories of upward mobility.

Racism

Racism also emerged as one of the barriers towards upward social mobility among young African American women in Peoria. The findings of this study support the conclusion made by Kim (2018) who noted that Black women experience more racism than other ethnic groups. The effect of racism was more pronounced when it was perpetrated by teachers and in foster homes. Experiences reported of racism among Black girls in school corroborate the existing literature, which indicates African American women and girls are treated harshly and punished more excessively (Epstein et al., 2017; Wun, 2016). However, the findings of this study do not provide a clear link between racism (acting alone) and the advancement of women towards middle-class status.

Both the Aspirers and the Achievers experienced racism in school, aside from Aspirer 5's experience. It should be noted that Aspirer 5 was told at sentencing she would be used as an example and sent to the juvenile detention center for a felony. In this case, I assert this is a situation of race and bias for a girl who was gullible enough to hold her boyfriend's backpack. It completely changed the trajectory of her life. It has changed her occupational options to date. I do not believe a white girl would have suffered the same penalty, as supported by the findings of Epstein et al. (2017). This,

therefore, suggests that the role of racism as a barrier to the social mobility of young African American women achieving middle-class status could be associated with how each of them dealt with the experience of racism. It is also likely that the negative effect of racism is potentiated by the presence of other barriers, such as gender bias and classism, within the matrix of oppression, which will be discussed further in the subsequent paragraphs.

Lack of Support—Lack of Motivation

Another barrier reported was lack of support and motivation. I noted that women who did not receive motivation and support had slim chances of advancing to middle-class status. The lack of support and resulting negative effects for achievement can be understood based on DeRue's (2011) adaptive leadership theory. DeRue (2011) argued that progress is an interactive and contextual embedded process. Therefore, there are various players that impact the progress of African American girls into middle-class status. The players such as parents, relatives, teachers, peers, mentors, and administrators did not complete their role to facilitate effective social mobility for these participants. However, it seemed participants' network of relatives may not have had resources themselves. My grandmother used to say, "you can't get blood from a turnip." They gave what they had, all they had. It just was not enough. However, teachers and administrators who may have had the access didn't always use their resources or social capital to promote within the Aspirers' lives.

Stories of girls “acting out” in school as a result of poverty, stresses, or not receiving support at home, or not receiving sufficient guidance emerged from the study. Acting out in school is associated with indiscipline and contextual factors of poverty and trauma, which according to McNeel (2019) limits the advancement of young women towards middle-class status (McNeel, 2019). The comparison of the characteristics of the Aspirers at the five strong starts indicated that most of the Aspirers did not have the generally appropriate behavior in school. The study does not link the lack of support directly to the discipline of young African American girls in school. However, the study points out to a connection but not the extent of it, since childhood psychological evaluations were not available for participants.

Therefore, this topic should be further assessed by future researchers to identify individual intervention. Certain social and emotional work can be done in the classroom. In this vein, endogenous capital may be considered, as relationships mattered in both the Achievers and Aspirers lives. While DeFilippis and Durlauf originally defined human capital as occurring by way of “human interactions,” the definition has since been expanded to locate this capital within individuals and communities (as cited in O. Johnson, 2012, p. 40). The author further makes the case that this kind of endogenous capital has long been a part of the understanding of social capital, drawing on Du Bois’s assertion that the most significant influences on one’s “thought, life, work, crime, wealth, and pauperism” are one’s associations (p. 40).

Polyvictimization

Experiences of trauma and victimization also emerged as one of the barriers to the advancement of African American girls to middle-class status. The stories shared by the participants revealed that both the Achievers and the Aspirers experienced multiple cases of trauma in childhood. While other researchers have indicated that trauma and polyvictimization are associated with limited social mobility, the current study seems to indicate that even the Achievers who experienced trauma went on to succeed (Finkelhor et al., 2009). This points towards cumulative disadvantage (Nurius, Prince, & Rocha, 2015), the possible complicated web of barriers that together (not singly) may act against the progress of African American girls towards the middle-class status.

Criminal Activities

Based on the findings of this study, the involvement of the participants in criminal activities presented a barrier to their progress to middle-class status. Involvement in criminal activities is associated with poverty issues. Some of the participants indicated that they engaged in criminal activity such as stealing and selling drugs to make ends meet. Various researchers agree that children from low-income households are likely to engage in crime (O. Johnson, 2012). The engagement in criminal activities derails the progress of young African American women to middle-class status by limiting the time they engage in constructive activities such as academics.

Having a record of criminal activity also limits employment opportunities.

Participants indicated that some employers could not employ them because they had a record of criminal activities. These findings agree with the literature and SGM model that for one to have a strong start and be able to advance to middle-class status, they need to avoid a criminal record (Reeves & Grannis, 2014). According to Pager (2003), African Americans are not half as likely to receive employment consideration after a criminal conviction. Yet in most cases African American non-offenders still fall behind whites with prior felonies (Pager, 2003).

Internalized Oppression

The findings of this study also suggest that internalized oppression impacts negatively on the advancement of young African American girls from poverty to middle-class status. Stories told by the participants indicated that African American girls in Peoria are subjected to abuse, which sometimes makes them doubt their value in society. Internalized oppression is evidenced by the stories of the willingness of some of the participants to accept the prevailing conditions and give up on their ambitions to change their lives (K. S. Banks, 2018).

According to this study, internalized oppression causes low self-confidence and a low sense of self-worth. This negatively impacts social mobility. Achievers experienced internalized oppression, although the study suggests that the barrier working alone cannot fully explain the difference between those who are able to advance to middle-class status and those who remain in poverty. The fact that some of the Achievers

experienced internalized oppression and still advanced to middle-class status needs further scrutiny.

Unsupportive Family

An unsupportive family also presents a significant barrier to the advancement of African American girls towards middle-class status. Unlike some Achievers, most of the Aspirers did not get as much family support, and they ended up not attaining middle-class status. Adultification, parental abuse, drugs, and whether or not the mother/parents worked each had some impact on participants parental relationships. Such children grow up with resentment, and sometimes they failed to connect with important people and network. Hence, they have limited social capital needed to advance to middle-class status (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

The limited support that is given to the African American girls by parents, teachers, extended family, etc. could be associated with the perception that African American girls have the ability to take care of themselves as adults do. The study that was carried out by Epstein et al. (2017) noted that unlike their white counterparts, the African American girls are given less support, less maturing, less protection, and are comforted less. Epstein et al. (2017) also indicated that African American girls are viewed as being more adult-like by their teachers and other white adults compared to white girls. This explains why they usually receive harsher punishment. Based on this understanding, adultification of African American girls needs to be minimized and

corrected. African American girls should receive support and mechanisms of support as they grow up. This phenomenon is still difficult and requires additional study.

Achiever 8 noted that she had to work hard to ensure that she could offer her mother a better life. The reported findings regarding the enabling effect of family on the African American women's resolve for upward social mobility corroborate the findings by Higginbotham and Weber (1992), who argued that African American women's success is not solely dependent on their career goals. Higginbotham and Weber (1992) noted the family and the wider community influence on the upward social mobility among African American women.

Good Teachers and Bad Teachers

Teachers can also act as a support or barrier of social mobility among African American girls in poor neighborhoods such as Peoria. As evident from this study, the Achievers fondly remembered their teachers and indicated that they motivated them. However, the Aspirers shared stories of bad relationships with teachers. Some indicated that they encountered bad teachers during high school, which contributed to their inability to obtain good grades, which supports the existing work on the critical role that teachers play in the social mobility of young children (Kelly, 2010).

According to Kelly (2010), white teachers who use their cultures, dominant culture in instruction are typically not supportive of minorities. This has a negative impact on minority students' performance and can derail their advancement to middle-class status (O. Johnson, 2012). Weiner (2002) noted,

During an hour-long science lesson, the teacher grouped students around her, seated on the floor. Closest to her were white middle-class students, farthest were the darkest-skinned, working-class children. The teacher consistently called on two white middle-class boys, commending them for correct answers and coaxing them to correctness if they gave an inaccurate or partial response. The female student called on most frequently was a quiet white middle-class girl who sat at the teacher's knee. The three African American boys were constantly reprimanded for misbehaving, although their conduct seemed to me not significantly different from that of other squirming children who exchanged whispered comments with one another. The three boys raised their hands a few times to answer questions but were never called on. (p. 369)

Weiner shows an instance of racism and sexism in this example. Similarly, the participants all spoke of teachers who cared and teachers who did not.

Hale (1986) referred to studies and demonstrates that African American children's ideal learning styles is driven by their home environments. She mentioned Silberman and Holt's studies, which pointed out that African American homes are filled with stimulation, intensity, and variety (as cited in Hale, 1986). Moreover, white children may have a "greater tolerance" for the monotony than African American children, which could attribute success and behavioral differences. White teachers traditionally account for the largest percentage of all teachers compared to minority teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Boykin explained that for Black children, schools and teachers/teaching tend to be "monotonous, boring, and sterile" (as cited in Hale, 1986, p. 78). He concluded that

affective stimulation and verivistic stimulation are necessary for the Black child to be motivated to achieve in an academic setting. Without this stimulation Black children become turned off and seek other

arenas for achievement and expression... and increase the soulfulness of the academic task setting. (as cited in Hale, 1986, p. 79)

The most effective teaching for African American children included varied vocals and rhythmic interplay. This is similar to African American mothers' call-and-response directives for home chores and responsibilities (Hale, 1986)

White teachers were and likely are still bound to expect "appropriate behavior" to be more monotonous versus stimuli-filled. None of the participants mentioned vibrant teaching or instruction.

Poor Partner Choices

Poor partner choice is another barrier to the advancement of African American women to the middle-class status in Peoria. African American girls in Peoria experienced aggressions that are mainly perpetrated by their boyfriends or family members. The lack of coping skills and resources to avoid domestic abuse may also result in the inability to advance to middle-class status (Waasdorp, Bagdi, & Bradshaw, 2010).

Since many of the participants had unintended pregnancies, they were either in long-term relationships or did not believe they would get pregnant. Use of condoms or other forms of birth control tend to be lower in the African American communities (McLaurin-Jones, Lashley, & Marshall, 2017). There was also a gap in knowledge regarding sexual behavior. None of the participants discussed pregnancy prevention

programs. Almost all of the participants had abandonment issues with their fathers, and in some cases, their mothers.

Abandonment Issues

Another barrier was abandonment. All participants experienced issues of abandonment. They felt left alone by their families and expressed that lack of support while they were facing difficult times. Vandell and several colleagues alluded to the negative effect of abandonment on upward social mobility and the ability of women to break away from poverty by indicating that supportive relationships during critical stages of African American women development are key in supporting progress towards middle-class status (Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015). The issues of abandonment and how it affects the progress of African American young women in Peoria towards middle-class status can also be understood based on the literature on social capital (Caiazza & Putnam, 2005; Hirsch, Mickus & Boerger, 2002). In this case abandonment of Aspirers is viewed and more apparent as the lack of support from families and other relevant entities.

Fathers who play with their children teach a balance between aggression and timidity. They teach self-control and which forms of physical violence are acceptable and not (Snarey, 1993). A mother's attitude about the absence of a father impacts a girl's attitudes towards their fathers. Delinquent girls are more likely a product of broken homes (Hetherington, 1972). An absent father has been linked to promiscuous behavior (B. Ellis, McFadyen-Ketchum, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1999) and children

who are less trusting (Jacquet & Surra, 2001). Fatherless daughters miss out on testing a loving relationship with a man as they would in a father-daughter relationship, which could impact their partner selection (Secunda, 1992).

Attachment theory asserts daughters form parent-child bonds during their early years. Girls without fathers, or fathers who have chosen not to offer love, tend to have lower self-esteem, lower self-worth and less of a basis for self-identity development since she receives less or no praise from her father (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000).

Lack of Financial Literacy

Financial literacy appeared to be a major contributor to social mobility among African American girls in Peoria. The young women who lacked financial literacy were unable to plan their wealth to ensure effective advancement to middle-class status. Aspirer 3 is an example of how poor financial literacy is a major impediment to the attainment of middle-class status. Despite having a job and earning good money, the participant made poor financial decisions that she ended up regretting. The findings of this study corroborate the existing work on the importance of literacy principles such as financing goals, budgeting, and investments in the advancement of an individual to the middle-class status (Mbazigwe, 2013). The existing literature advocates for young women to improve financial literacy to enable them to carefully and knowledgeably spend their money, reduce the effects of labor market volatility, and ensure that they maintain their jobs (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009).

Desperation

Desperation was experienced by both the Achievers and Aspirers. It should, however, be noted that literature indicates gender abuse and bias limit the social mobility of women (Marsh, 2013). Desperation could be the main reason why some of the Aspirers from poor backgrounds and without food engaged in criminal activities. It is also likely that the decision to have sex at school age could be out of desperation, especially among the African American girls who indicated that they feared losing their boyfriends. Therefore, although desperation itself is not shown to cause limited chances of advancing to middle-class, the study suggests that the outcome of desperation is linked with the failure of women to attain the goal of reaching the middle-class status.

Forms of Racism

White rage

Carol Anderson coined the term “white rage” and describes in the following way.

[White] rage is not [always] about visible violence, but rather it works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies [corporations and schools]. It wreaks havoc subtly, almost imperceptibly. Too imperceptibly, certainly, for a nation consistently drawn to the spectacular—to what it can see. It’s not the Klan. White rage doesn’t have to wear sheets, burn crosses, or take to the streets. Working the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively. (Anderson, 2016, p. 3)

Pet to threat

Anderson (2016) said, “For every advance African Americans make...no matter how small, how trivial...white America is there to push back with the full weight of its most cherished and diabolical institutions...the courts and the police” (p. 3).

The other challenge that emerged from this study is the issue of women being viewed as “pets” in the workplace. African American women face aggressive treatment by their colleagues. The study noted that most of the mistreatment of the African American women comes from white women’s conspecific aggression, supremacy. Being treated as a “pet” can be an impediment to the transition of women to middle-class status especially for those women who are not able to persevere and develop a thick skin or other coping mechanisms (Turban, Freeman & Waber, 2017) in the face of bigotry.

Privilege and fragility

There are a growing number of studies that point to the privileged nature of white women (Culver, 2017). However, evidence also suggests that when interacting with white women and girls, white people are not likely to be convinced about their racism fragility and entitlement (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018). Nuru, and Arendt (2019) further noted that because of white fragility, any slight form of challenge or healthy competition is met by intolerable and often offensive moves that can lead to racial abuse of African American women.

Nuru and Arendt (2019) noted that white women use their defense of their fragility as a means to achieve entitlement while degrading African American women. It should be noted that addressing the issue of white fragility is challenging since many whites are in denial (Nuru & Arendt, 2019). Such women are likely to view African

American women who are expressive as being a threat since white women often want African American women to act like white women believe they should. Establishing cultural competence in the workplace is one of the solutions to address this issue. There is a need to promote competence and sensitivity for all cultures in various environments. Addressing the issue of cultural competence should be driven by the fact that African American and white women face different types of challenges, and it is impractical to adopt a generalist approach (Carby, 2007; Thomlinson, 2012).

DiAngelo's (2011, 2018) description of white fragility provides insights into the difficulty of these cases and racism, especially among white women. She argued that white women are inexperienced, uncomfortable, and anxious when talking about matters of race. DiAngelo (2011, 2018) indicated that individualism, meritocracy, and the belief that the opinion of white women matters more than that of African American women characterize white fragility.

The treatment of Achievers 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 by white women, especially those who challenged their every actions, could be interpreted as white fragility and downright bigotry and racism. It is likely that such women believed their opinion mattered more than that of Achiever 5, who were their leaders, counterparts, and sometimes employees. Frankenberg (1996) argued that there is need to recognize white fragility, which is expressed in the literature. She advocates for more inquiry into white-skin privilege—especially in the social setting such as at work and in the schools.

Race, class, and gender

Race, class, and gender matter because they remain the foundations for systems of power and inequality that, despite our nation's diversity, continue to be among the most significant social facts of people's lives.
(Andersen & Collins, 2016b, p. 400)

Black feminist theory acknowledges that African American women face several forms of oppression—specifically race, class, and gender. The combination of oppressions has been called a “double whammy” (Nkomo & Cox, 1989) or “double jeopardy” (Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Others call it “triple whammy” (G. Robinson & Nelson, 2010), “triple jeopardy” (Rosenfield, 2012) and “interlocking oppressions” (Combahee River Collective, 1973), referring to race, class, and gender. Crenshaw uses the term “intersectionality,” which has taken hold in modern literature. She suggests, “Black women's Blackness or femaleness sometimes has placed their needs and perspectives at the margin of the feminist and Black liberationist agendas” and their needs on the whole are never really acknowledged or met (Crenshaw, 2020, “B. The Significance of Doctrinal Treatment of Intersectionality,” para.2).

Along the full spectrum of African American women's daily experiences, they face various combinations and permutations of race, class, and gender inequities, aggressions, oppressions, and experiences. Andersen and Collins' (2016b) matrix of domination model, also called “the difference framework,” (p. 6) focuses on unique group experiences, such as processes of race, class, and gender. It provides a framework to view and pinpoint group experiences (Andersen & Collins, 2016b). The

model also allows the additive approach of “triple jeopardy” (race, class, and gender) for Black women versus a “double jeopardy” (race and class) for Black men.

The triple jeopardy framework addresses and allows for the multitude of and combinations of experiences African American women face. It provides an in-depth view of race, class, and gender because it addresses structural and institutional systems of power within the United States (Andersen & Collins, 2016b, p. 5). Ortiz (2015) describes how a “larger social matrix works to develop dominant ideologies and systems of domination whereby dominant forms of knowledge can be created and used to train individuals who have been socialized to be compliant” (p. 61).

Based on interviews with young female professionals probing the costs and benefits of navigating the workplace, Dickens & Chavez (2018) examined how African American women’s corporate experiences within the various matrices often give rise to stress regarding “managing interpersonal rejection: [the] frozen effect” (p. 766): One professional shared that she “checked out of conversations” (p. 766) because of experiences of discrimination. This behavior typically results in issues of feeling left out, lower self-esteem, and a likely invitation for more racist behaviors from others (Harnois, 2010). African American women face more occupational oppression and barriers in their careers than women of any other persuasion or background (Lean In, 2020).

In addition, young female professionals have to deal with relational aggression and internalized oppression in various forms (K. S. Banks, 2018) while some scholars believe that African Americans add to or participate in their own oppression (Leonardo, 2004) with bullying tactics against each other. However, as it is with most bullying, “hurt people hurt people” (p. 72). Harden et al. (2015) suggest that bullying tends to occur more often between members of the same ethnic group.

Intersectionality: Interlocking oppressions—Systems of power and equality

Andersen and Collins (2016a) considered race, class, and gender as “systemic forms of inequality” which, when combined, become “intersectional systems of inequality” (p. 2). These factors combine for multiplied disadvantage. A Black woman is neither white nor male, and poor. As a result, she typically ends up at the bottom of most social structures and lacks dominance (Andersen & Collins, 2016a).

One participant detailed how she went to a dinner party at a physician’s elaborate home. The physician explained that his wealth was not due to his current local practice, but due his company’s provision of medical exams and other services to men (likely minorities) in prison. There is ongoing growth rate for minority men in prison. Interestingly, imprisonment is highest amongst African American and Latina women. He said, “crime pays,” meaning there is a steady revenue in the prison system for business owners.

Systemic and institutionalized racism

Issues of poverty, racial wealth and income inequality, wage stagnation, and the cost of higher education disproportionately impact people of color (The Next System Project, 2019). N. Banks (2019) alternatively suggested as an explanatory factor the negative attitudes towards Black women since slavery, which play out to this day in current wage gaps.

What are the odds of making it out?

According to Chetty and his colleagues (2014), a child born into the bottom quintile with parents from that same quintile has only a 7.5% chance of moving to the top quintile. This rate is the general average. The opportunity can be as low as nearly 5% in southern towns such as Charlotte, North Carolina, and Atlanta, Georgia.

Conversely, the opportunity to move to the top quintile was as high as 12% in western towns such as San Jose, California (Chetty et al., 2014). Others suggest that a child born into the bottom quintile will likely remain at a rate of about 40%, but they will require significant and frequent intervention; the intervention studied by these scholars does not exist in Peoria, Illinois,

Working poor—Food stamps

Low income families' work schedules vary, which can cause unstable income (Schenck-Fontaine, Gassman-Pines, & Hill, 2017). The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was designed to smooth income for recipients by assisting them with the purchase of food each month. It is intended to augment monthly salaries to provide food for the family. However, since income varies, and

SNAP does not cover enough food, many families suffer more toward the end of the month when the food runs out. (Schenck-Fontaine et al., 2017).

The study reviewed coping mechanisms and habits during the intra-month food insecurity. Their study found that strategies included borrowing money and going to food banks (Schenck-Fontaine et al., 2017). The majority of the SNAP benefits were exhausted during the first week of the month. While borrowing money only exacerbated the cycle, families were more prone to borrow from other family members to avoid the stress and stigma of being seen in a foodbank line (Schenck-Fontaine et al., 2017). However, the reviewers could not ferret out whether borrowings were only for food or to cover other economic shortages (Schenck-Fontaine et al., 2017).

Some studies were able to connect declines in test scores (Gassman-Pines & Bellows, 2015) and spikes in disciplinary episodes associated with food shortages for low-income SNAP recipients toward the endings of each month (Gennetian, Roopa, Hess, Winn, & George, 2015). Borrowing is also largely contingent on the other family members' stability and depth of resources (Schenck-Fontaine et al., 2017).

Problems at school: Kindergarten–16

Throughout K-12 and enduring through college, girls of color are disadvantaged and experience barriers to their academic success (Neal-Jackson, 2018). Race and racism permeate the lives and experiences of African American girls throughout high school

(Neal-Jackson, 2018). They are treated harshly and punished more excessively than girls of other races (Epstein et al., 2017; Wun, 2016). Discriminatory treatment, coupled with race and class, impacts Black girls' occupational goals; they tend to plan for limited futures because they lack the resources of their middle-class peers (Hardie, 2015). Furthermore, many first-generation college-eligible students do not enroll or graduate due to their K-12 experiences and resource deficiencies (Winkle-Wagner, 2008).

Overlooked, underpaid, less frequently promoted

Access barriers are glaring realities for many Black women, while blocked opportunity based on race is invisible to most white women. There is much sociological research to support racial discrimination in hiring, clustering of people of color in sectors of the economy, and blocked career mobility for Black women, even those with professional training.

(as cited in Higginbotham, 2004, attributing Browne, Feagin, & Sikes)

African American women are often in the shadows in the workplace—a legacy of years of invisibility in domestic and service work—where their contributions are attributed to others or simply ignored (Collins, 2000). African American women earn sixty- three cents, Latina women earn fifty-four cents, white women earn seventy-nine cents, and Asian women earn eighty-seven cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men (National Partnership for Women & Families, 2017). According to another National Partnership for Women and Families (2019) report, the wage gap is caused by bias, discrimination, stereotypes, social norms, and minimal workplace support for family. Regardless of industry, African American women can expect to be

underpaid for similar work compared to their counterparts of practically all other races and genders (Kim, 2008).

Issues with white women

White women, regardless of class, were socialized into positions of power, safety, and comfort because de jure and de facto segregation granted even the poorest white women permission to denigrate any Black person, regardless of class and place.

(Porter & James, 2016)

Framing and understanding the relationship between Black and white women is complex, as people are not all the same. However, many white women are not sensitive to race or racism and its role in job opportunity and mobility, especially as it relates to Black women. They often do not acknowledge how race and racism bar Black women's talents and hard work from reward (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Bonstead-Bruns & Weber, 2001). When Frankenberg spoke of her own work against racism, she explained,

Too often, I witnessed situations in which, as predominantly white feminist workplaces, classrooms, or organizations...rapidly deteriorated into painful, ugly processes in which racial tension and conflict actually got worse....There were...multiple ways in which racism of wider culture was simply replayed....As a white feminist...I had not previously known that I was "being racist" and that I had never set out to...the desires and intentions had little effect on outcomes...because we are well-meaning, the idea of being a part of the problem of racism was genuinely shocking to us...and terrifying...we don't know the rules...and didn't know how to prevent it from happening. (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 8)

Because teachers and professionals see race work as external to their daily experiences, they traditionally do not realize the manners they perpetuate it. And they

tend to be ok with the status quo as long as they maintain supremacy and domination (Frankenberg, 1993). The author stated,

The oppressed can see with the greatest clarity not only their own position but also that of the oppressor/privileged, and indeed the shape of the system as a whole...white women were “missing” or “not getting” the significance of race in either our or anyone else’s experience...because we were race privileged. (p. 8)

Many times, white women tend to practice “turning it around” when they are the undefined “definers of other people”; they are an “unmarked category” where others have one. (p. 197)

Additionally, they turn to “white culture as the norm” and “a point of reference” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 197) to attempt to force others seemed to be metered; this was a mode of marginalization for several of the participants in the study.

To modernize the discussion, the organization Working Women held a town hall discussion in 2005. At the town hall, they took a real-time digital poll survey and posed a candid question. “Who Really Trusts Whom at Work?”

Seconds later, results flashed up on a 12-foot screen. Only 9 percent said they distrusted Black women, 9 percent distrusted Asian-American women and 3 percent Latinas-but a whopping 40 percent of the women didn’t trust white women. An audible gasp filled the room, followed by an awkward silence. (as cited in Gill, 2006, p. 80)

A couple of months later at a multicultural conference held by the same organization, the following reasons were brought to light as the belief around the actions of white women. First, race trumps gender, one reason being that when men are in charge and when issues of gender arise in corporations, white women are rewarded with the results of promotions before women of color (Gill, 2006). For example, a software

manager at IBM, a woman of color, described how race trumps gender and how race is seen as capital in the case of some white men and women:

Many white women who have succeeded have been trusted by white men. They may behave and act like white men because these men were their role models. As a result, women of color may feel that white women are more aligned with white men than they are with them. We all naturally tend to gravitate toward people who look and act like us. So once white women are accepted into the white male workforce, behavior modeling takes place. The distrust that many women of color feel for their white counterparts has a lot to do with race playing more of a role than gender. (Gill, 2006, p. 84)

Similarly, Neal-Jackson's (2018) meta-analysis describes that rather than focusing on achievements, white women tend to praise or criticize behaviors as helpful or protective behaviors. For example, a student performed, excelled, and demonstrated academic excellence equal to white girls in a class. However, when asked about the Black girl's high school performance the teacher stated "She's an average student, I would say, but oh, what a helper. She always helps out others [students] who don't understand work or are having some problem" (Neal-Jackson, 2018, p. 515).

Several studies demonstrate participants' shifts from achievement to their personalities and projected low expectations for Black girls' futures (Neal-Jackson, 2018). This finding is not limited to teachers and is likely pervasive in corporate, government, and community structures as well. Neal-Jackson (2018) described Hill-Collin's framing of white expectations as follows:

Historically, Black women have experienced patterns of economic and social subjugation based precisely on expectations that their sole

purpose in work and life was to support the interests of white people and not that of their family or community. (p. 518)

Summarily, this discussion provides insights on behaviors and factors to support current and centuries-old differences in the wages, hiring statistics, promotions, microaggressions, and all-out violent aggressions that African American women and girls' have historically and continually experienced in the United States. Begun by white men who sought to own every aspect of a Black woman through slavery, which often included forced sexual subjugation, white supremacists then committed additional violations of aggression by further attempting to dehumanize the image of Black women through perpetuating fabricated images of their sexuality (Jennings, 1990). This aggression and dehumanization are continued in the form of police brutalization and the reconstructed bondage of prisons, which—despite being well documented by M. S. Irving (2007), Jacobs (2017), and others—persists in relative silence.

These brutalizations continue to manifest in the treatment of Black women as objects in systemic ways (Richie, 2012) such as the embedded segregation in our education system (Sohoni & Saporito, 2009) and an ignorant foster-care system prone to assumptions rooted in bigotry about Black women's care and nurturing (Dominelli, 2018; McMahan & Allen-Meares, 1992, Roberts, 2012). In situations like this, attempts to “fix the system” through policy change is akin to the assertion often misattributed to Einstein but nevertheless genius in its exactitude that “the definition

of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results” (as cited in O’Toole, 2017, p. 93).

Whiteness

A book written called *The Wages of Whiteness* was born out of an old study by W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois, in his study, discussed in *Black Reconstruction*, described poorer whites after the Civil War, and the acceptance of low wages. He believed winning exceeded “political success” and “economic results.” Du Bois (1935) said the following:

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage they were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white...police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness...[They] would rather have a low wage upon which they could eke out an existence than see colored labor with a decent wage. White labor saw in every advance of Negroes a threat to their racial prerogatives. (pp. 700-701)

Whiteness was and remains a psychological wage because although many whites were (and remain) poor, whiteness has a currency-like value. White privilege, white supremacy, racial accumulation, and white investment (Leonardo, 2004) relate to the advantages of being white: advantages received, inherited, and gained simply for whiteness. The girls in this study, and African American women in general, will never be able to accumulate upward mobility in similar forms and fashions as white women. A director at Sodexo believed the following of white women:

I've observed it; I've heard about it. ... some older white women who are senior leaders because they rose through the ranks at a different time, when women had to be more manipulative and conniving to

succeed in a man's world. They're part of the huge Boomer generation and faced so much competition. The strategies that worked for them in the past are the ones they continue to use. Some Caucasian women also see women of color who are younger or more educated as a threat. (as cited in Gill, 2006, p. 4)

Gill also recalled Dina Beach Lynch, a diversity consultant, who believed white women are willing to be vocal on gender matters but not race matters. She consulted a mixed group of women as they discussed whether to press for a woman on an impending C-Suite hire.

The women of color in the room wanted the group to push for a minority woman. The white women stubbornly disagreed. “We're going to ruin our chances by bringing up the race thing... Let's just be thankful to get a woman ... The conversation went around in circles.... the group didn't mention race in its recommendations... the job went to a white man. (as cited in Gill, 2006, p. 1)

This provides additional support for more promotions and positions for white women and ultimately higher wages than Black women.

Relational aggression

Relational aggression is “the use of a relationship to hurt others, quietly.” It is known to be more insidious, deceitful, and harder to detect” (Maceo, 2019). Additionally referred to as “crabs-in-the-barrel” syndrome, Aaron and Smith define this term as the process of watching crabs in a barrel pull each other down in the hopes of making it to the top of the barrel or perish together (as cited in Miller, 2016).

Relational aggression can also be caused by societal pressures (society’s expectation of leadership characteristics), structural design (the culture of the corporation impedes

diversity and supportiveness through poor recruitment and retention efforts), and lack of accountability (lack of monitoring for discriminatory practices, which breeds a competitive dynamic characterized by discouragement and discounting others' success, lateral violence, and betrayal of in-group members in an especially prevalent manner for African Americans and women) (Miller, 2016). Relational aggression refers to the culturally adapted method of problem solving the wrong way. For example, "girls are likely to express their anger by manipulating others' social standing, such as gossiping, and threatening to withdraw friendships" (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relational aggression is "related to peer relationship problems, social processing deficits, and internalizing and externalizing symptoms" (Crick, 1995, p. 1) as well as lack of coping skills (Waasdorp et al., 2010). Finally, some scholars call for culturally relevant interventions and programs to teach conflict resolution (Leff et al., 2009). White women can be seen as perpetrators of relational aggression toward Black women.

Borman (2019) and Burbank (1987) provided insight into the aggression by women that is directed towards other women. According to the author, aggression by women towards other women could be associated with competition or as a defense mechanism. Burbank (1987) noted that competition among women for recognition can lead to aggression. The stories shared by the participants showed that women can be aggressive towards each other as they compete for friends in schools, or at the workplace as they compete for recognition and promotion. Burbank (1987) indicated

that competition among women could be explained based on evolutionary biology. Although Burbank (1987) did not provide a link between women's aggression and their ability to achieve upward social mobility, the findings of this study suggest that aggression can negatively affect academic performance and the ability to connect with fellow employees.

J. S. Hill, Kim, & Williams (2016) noted that there is a need to address discrimination against women (especially African American women) in their places of work. The researchers noted that aggression towards women greatly impedes their professional progress. J. S. Hill et al. (2016) argued that even small forms of aggression (microaggressions) can have a toll on the progress of women in the workplace, noting that most of the participants faced microaggressions at school and work in the form of being doubted and being looked down upon by both males and females daily. Other studies have confirmed similar results and their detrimental effects on Black women and girls. In a recent study of several school-aged groups totaling just over a hundred Black youth, English et al. (2020) tracked daily microaggressions in multiple formats experienced by each youth in the various cohorts, measuring these instances against 14-day depression slopes. Ambiguity did not exist in their conclusion:

Contemporary Black adolescents live in an unequivocally racialized world characterized by racial inequities...and treatment based on generationally-intractable stereotypes associated with Black skin...highlight[ing] the urgent, continual, and multidimensional nature of racial discrimination for contemporary Black adolescents and...necessitate[ing] concomitant policy and practice that fights to institutionally prevent and treat the negative effects of racial discrimination for Black youth. (English et al., 2020, p. 10)

Another 2020 study conducted by Henderson et al. found that teachers, school personnel and peers were all perpetrators of racial harassment conducted through “subtle assaults and racial slights” (p. 458). This harassment is perpetrated by teachers, administrators, classmates and schoolmates, and work colleagues. Even some wage gaps can be attributed to workplace harassment. According to a YMCA study, nearly two thirds of all Black women experience workplace harassment and discrimination; and about 25% experience sexual harassment (as cited in National Partnership for Women and Families, 2019). Aggression against Black females has existed from America’s beginning, starts at birth for them, and does not cease across their entire lives.

Internalized oppression

When people from targeted groups internalize myths and misinformation, it can cause them to feel (often unconsciously) that in some way they are inherently not as worthy, capable, intelligent, beautiful, good, etc. as people outside their group. They turn the experience of oppression or discrimination inward. They begin to feel that stereotypes and misinformation that society communicates are true and they act as if they were true. This is called internalized oppression.

(Community Tool Box, 2019)

The quotation above reflects a scenario of internalized oppression. From the time African slaves came to the United States, they were considered a fraction of a person, specifically 3/5 of a person (Leonardo, 2004). This and other oppressions have permeated the lives of African American women and men ever since. The most prevalent examples of internalized oppression for Black girls manifests in the form of

changing appearances due to dissatisfaction with their own (K. S. Banks, 2018), or shying away from math- and science-related fields because they think those fields are for boys (Community Tool Box, 2019). K. S. Banks (K. S. Banks, 2018) studied internalized oppression as the result of racism, finding it causes stress, low self-esteem, mental distress, “major depressive disorder,” “negative personal evaluations” (p. 94), and/or living up to stereotypes.

Nigrescience theory identifies how race impacts a person’s sense of self. It offers a cross racial identity scale (a three sub-scale mechanism) to focus on racial oppressions and a multidimensional inventory for Black identity to identify private regard for racial oppression (K. S. Banks, 2018). It is difficult not to assert and project that many young women make career choices in cosmetology because they are made to feel ugly inside, less than others. Another frequent choice is to be a certified nursing assistant—one of the lowest levels of nursing chosen, likely to heal internal wounds.

Human Capital

Social mobility is also identified as traits, relationships, and prestige a middle-class mother or parents can bring but a woman born into poverty can only work toward. Most importantly, the Achievers accumulated and even created their own rudimentary versions of human capital.

In Goldin's (2019) study of human capital, she used the Oxford Dictionary definition of human capital, defined as

the skills the labor force possesses and is regarded as a resource or asset. It encompasses the notion that there are investments in people (e.g., education, training, health) and that these investments increase an individual's productivity. (p. 1)

The Achievers accumulated it over their lifetime. The Aspirers did not accumulate enough of it to escape poverty. The pathway to the middle class is not always through education. Only 40% of young people in the United States receive an associate or college degree. Halperin calls this group "the forgotten half" (as cited in Schoon, 2015) Achievers 1, 2, 4, and 8 have all made it to the middle class without a college degree, and neither do they have certifications. These women crafted a form of human capital that suits their personalities and style. Each one has risen through the ranks at their respective organizations. Achiever 4 is an author, playwright, and successful entrepreneur. Twenty seven percent of people in the United States are a few credits shy of an associate degree. They are reported to earn more than the average bachelor-degreed individual. These participants give credence to an alternative pathway to the middle class. This phenomenon needs to be explored further.

Literacies of Power

To have been literate yesterday, in a world defined primarily by relatively static book technologies, does not ensure that one is fully literate today.

(Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek, & Henry, 2013)

Literacies of Power in this study related to financial, media, print-based, and technology or digital literacy. Critical consciousness is also a type of literacy.

Financial literacy

Financial literacy is the ability to understand how money works: how someone makes, manages, invests, and expends money (especially when one donates to charity) to help others. In-depth knowledge of financial literacy is required to understand how money works and how it can work for you—even when you are sleeping—by investing in profitable areas like the stock or money market. To understand money and how it works, it is important to understand common financial literacy principles, such as financial goals, budgeting, investments, superannuation, contracts, and employment models (Mbazigwe, 2013).

Hardaway and McLoyd (2009) described the conundrum of achieving middle-class status as an African American. New middle-class African Americans generally do not inherit wealth. While they are working to build wealth, Hardaway and McLoyd (2009) argue that there are many factors encouraging their downward mobility, including the economy, labor market volatility, maintaining a job, and assisting parents and extended family members.

Low levels of financial literacy were particularly evident with the Aspirers. Evidence emerged and became apparent that Achievers gained it over time. It became apparent through their shared stories and decisions related to finance.

Media literacy

Rather than observing the various media forms submissively, media literacy allows others to view media as strategic and critical thinkers. Media literacy empowers the viewer/reader to analyze, evaluate, and challenge the medium in each of its various forms. These literacies are critical as women and girls view their images on multimodal formats (Camilli-Trujillo & Römer-Pieretti, 2017). When girls have media literacy, it empowers them to judge and assess the meaning and use of the content. “Students need to develop the capacity to speak up, to negotiate, and to be able to engage critically with the conditions of their working lives” (New London Group, 1996).

Print-based literacy

Print-based literacy and scientific literacy also plays a role in perpetuating racism in schools and later in life. Van Belle (2010) also argued that the cultural, social, and economic capital are linked to literacy competencies that are constructed in school texts. Van Belle (2010) stated the participation of African Americans in most of the literacy is different from that of whites. The African Americans are represented as working-class who engage in labor while whites are represented as successful middle-class individuals who have high scientific, print mathematics, and academic literacy. This form of representation, if not addressed, negatively affects the way African American girls perceive their future, which could derail their transition to middle-class. In the award-winning documentary *Miss Representation*, Marian Wright Edelman put it this way: “You can’t be what you can’t see” (as cited in Newsom, 2011). It is racism in a different frame.

Critical literacy and critical consciousness

Freire described literacy keenly in the statement, “Read the Word. Read the World” (Freire, 1970, p. 5) The term critical literacy refers to use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life (Luke, 2012).

In essence, critical literacy and critical consciousness refers to the awakening, acknowledgement, and analysis of current marginalization and the development of one’s own form of political and personal self-efficacy (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Critical consciousness focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding and awareness of the world relating to “power relations that exist within social relationships and societal structures.” It allows for, and often encourages the perception and exposure of social and political contradictions (C. Jacobs, 2016). Gordon and Thomas (1990) called the it “political economic literacy-the capacity to understand the interlocutory, systemic alignments which sustain and reinforce race, class, and gender biases within the larger society” (p. 72).

Twenty-first century literacy: Technology literacy and The Great Digital Divide

Twenty-first-century education often does not go far enough to provide the tools and capital girls need for social mobility. African American girls typically do not have laptops in their homes, and their homework is still handwritten. High school juniors and seniors are forced to complete college applications on their cellphones at school or where wi-fi is available. Given the advances of technology and globalization, inner

city children are disproportionately left behind and lack most “critical literacies” (i.e., the capacity to comprehend) and “orality” (i.e., the capacity to speak and discuss language effectively (Gordon & Thomas, 1990).

At the time this dissertation was written, the world was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and children in Peoria were adapting to digital learning. Eighty percent of Peoria’s middle-class children are signing into the Peoria Public Schools digital tools, while only 30% of the children in the poorer zip codes log in or have access. I discussed this statistic with the GLOW Girls. The girls said they want to log on, but some had not received the laptops being loaned to them by the school district. Other girls were so unfamiliar with the technology, they simply did not log in. Their parents were not equipped to assist them. The pandemic has highlighted digital inequality in a trackable way (L. Robinson et al., 2015). Scholars should do intervention-based research studies to find ways to reduce the inequity.

Factors and Process for Upward Social Mobility Among Black Women in Peoria, Illinois

The findings present various factors that facilitate upward social mobility among African American women in Peoria. These factors are mainly the personal attributes of the participants. Previous authors have indicated that factors associated with self, such as resolve and self-efficacy and belief have significant influence on social mobility (Phan, Ngu & Alrashidi, 2018; Phan et al., 2019). One of the factors is resoluteness, which was observed to facilitate women to push through hard and tough

situations (Phan et al., 2019). Unlike the Aspirers, the Achievers showed fierce resoluteness, which enabled them to break away from poverty. Even in the workplace, the Achievers showed resoluteness to overcome a myriad of challenges. I also noted the Achievers are hard-working women who in the face of adversity put in extra effort to ensure that they emerged successful. In the workplace, the Achievers were able to work hard and earn their promotion. A similar trend of hard work among the Achievers was also reported in school.

Hope

I also noted that having hope is crucial for African American women to continue working hard and believe that there are better days ahead. Achiever 8 was able to work hard and stretch her limits even after being demoted. In her mind, she believed she would eventually get recognized and rewarded. She was right. She was eventually promoted. Evidence from literature indicates that hope and hard work are two important factors that facilitate women of color to develop and reach their potential (Agarwal & Farndale, 2017). The human becoming theory by Parse (1997) provides a basis for the understanding of hope among the women in Peoria. The theory of human becoming enables the linking of hope with other possible selves or ideals such as resoluteness and self-efficacy.

According to the theory, people give meaning to life through imaging, valuing, and “languaging” (Parse, 1997; Wang, 2000). Resolute picturing portrays an individual's imaging of how things could be in the future (Parse, 1997). As noted in the study, the

Achievers developed an image of what they would want to be in the future and resolutely focused on achieving the imaged future. According to the theory, individuals are able to imagine possibilities of the future based on their past experiences, the present moment, and future prospects (Wang, 2000). Imaging of the future possibilities by African American girls is greatly influenced by the constraints of poverty. Based on an individual's resoluteness and self-efficacy, the state of poverty, with encouragement, can be enabling in that it can make African American girls seek to change their present state (Guelder, Britton & Terwilliger, 2011), as evinced in stories told by the Achievers. However, for African American girls who lack resoluteness and self-efficacy, they may be more likely to view poverty as a constraint. This is evident from stories told by the Aspirers who never thought that they could break away from poverty. The effect of poverty on self-imaging among girls is described by Prince (2014), where she indicated that place-based experiences such as entrapment can be internalized. Prince (2014) noted that the encoding of the possible selves is then influenced by the internalized experiences of being poor.

Considering the findings of this study and the theory of human becoming, there is a need to influence the present moment for the African American girls living in poverty by providing structures and support that will enable them to develop future images that will propel them to middle-class status (Guelder et al., 2011). Self-efficacy and resoluteness seem to be connected. Phan et al. (2019) noted that personal resolve leads to self-efficacy, which is important to promoting academic striving.

There are other important issues related to self that promote the achievement of middle-class status among African American girls if they need to be self-driven. This might explain the reason why, even without support and motivation, some of the Achievers were able to push themselves to achieve middle-class status. The study also revealed that women who achieved middle-class status had self-belief. With self-belief, African Americans are able to overcome their doubts and work their way to middle class. Achiever 2 indicated that even though she was not performing well in school, she knew she could do better. She eventually graduated high school and enrolled in college. Achiever 8, in her place of work, believed that she could gain skills by learning from others. Due to her self-belief, she was able to learn the skills; she became successful and she was promoted. Self-belief is important psychological capital that has been shown to be important in the positive development of women of color (Agarwal & Farndale, 2017).

Another key attribute of self is self-discipline. I noted that self-discipline enabled the Achievers to pursue good behaviors and avoid engaging in activities that jeopardized their ability to move to middle-class status. Achiever 1 displayed a high sense of self-discipline by avoiding pregnancy while her peers were getting pregnant in middle school. She noted that she knew she had to take care of her siblings. The highlighted factors associated with psychological capital among African American women have been shown to decrease the barriers that limit the effective utilization of available

resources to achieve middle-class status (Bradley, Postlethwaite, Klotz, Hamdani, & Brown 2012; Simonet, Narayan, & Nelson, 2015; Wanless, 2016).

Coultas (1989) noted that the support of the family, friends and the community is important in ensuring that the African American girls develop self-esteem and self-efficacy. The author argued that through this support, they are able to counter the dominant culture by stunting the full weight of it and overcoming the obstacles they faced either in school or at the workplace. The study also noted that some African American girls in Peoria lacked support from their family and some simply lacked consistent support (Coultas, 1989). Future researchers need to focus on this area.

Identity shifting and other coping mechanisms

Some African American women decide to engage in assimilation and “identity shifting” to “fit in” with their coworkers and managers. Some African American women believe shifting makes white managers, regardless of gender, more comfortable, as people traditionally enjoy working with “like” versus those who are not like. African American women are told to find similarities and common interests. Identity shifting professional African American women typically have to shift their identities away from their traditional cultural norms to “conform to professional standards and dominant culture values” (Dickens & Chavez, 2018).

While these mechanisms are exhausting, they may be considered a form of and deployment of cultural competence and cultural literacy. Achievers occasionally used

identity shifting to blend into their work cultures. This shifting was less apparent with the Aspirers. Both the Aspirers and Achievers showed evidence of coping mechanisms as they all shared stories. The “emotional tax” (Travis, Thorpe-Mascon, & McCluney, 2016) was evident in certain segments of the work-related stories; an emotional tax is the

heightened experience of being different from peers at work because of your gender and/or race/ethnicity and the associated detrimental effects on health, wellbeing, and the ability to thrive at work [that] can deplete Black employees’ sense of well-being by making them feel that they have to be “on guard,” disrupting sleep patterns, reducing their sense of “psychological safety,” and diminishing their ability to contribute at work. (p. 2)

The Achievers are currently addressing emotional tax through counseling and therapy. Other protective factors were deployed such as quitting their jobs to pursue other opportunities with less toxic environments.

What was most interesting with the Achievers, while they no longer faced the pillars related to poverty, was that their pillars had evolved and matured into situations related race and gender. The pillars of poverty evolved into “weapons of degradation and oppression.” These weapons were used and wielded in their corporations, firms, and educational institutions to maintain supremacy power (real or otherwise), as I discussed in the pet to threat section. The “weapons” were used primarily by white women and mechanized as tools revealing their nature as adversaries instead of allies. Summarily, the corporate and institution-based Achievers experienced structural racism and systems of oppression.

Racism seems to have been amplified in the corporate Achiever's poverty escape experience. They have navigated the barriers and challenges of achieving middle-class status. Yet these women have been thrust into another pillar-like form. They have to protect themselves against the weapon of racism. They are faced with something that seems even harder. They are using the coping mechanisms to live a different life. They clearly do not wish to face any form of "recidivism" into poverty. So, they use therapy to manage their past and current pillars.

One of the primary reasons African American start their own businesses is because they can then create the environment they wish they'd always had. It has been shown that the "catalyst for making the leap into entrepreneurship often was poor treatment and the perception of being undervalued in the workplace" (Gines, 2018, p. 6). Based on the corporate Achievers' perspectives, human capital and thriving within a psychologically safe environment is farfetched. I was disappointed to learn scholars like Edmondson and Schein—well known scholars in the corporate psychological safety space—rarely or sparsely discuss race in their work.

It is difficult to accept research on psychological safety when race is omitted. This is where some of the real work could have happened, and it seemed to have been ignored and bypassed in some works. At any rate, African American women in the study have had to deal with various forms of matrix-based and overlapping forms of

systemic oppression. As the women of the Combahee River Collective stated, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective, 1973, p. 1). African American women are not free.

Heliotropic effect

I have often spoken of the wonderful property of the heliotrope, which turns itself round with the sun, even on a cloudy day, so great is its love of that luminary. But at night it closes its azure flower, as if from missing its rays.

—Pliny

Heliotropic has Greek and Latin origins. Helios was the god of the sun in Greek mythology. The prefix “helio” (2020) appears in a number of sun-related English words. The term “tropos” (2020) means “to turn.” It has given rise to the term “heliotropic effect,” suggesting individuals naturally turn toward light, energy, and life-giving people and mechanisms that amplify and buffer (Cameron et al., 2011). The effect takes shape for individuals psychologically, visually, and socially (Cameron & Levine, 2006).

Psychologically, for example, the effect occurs when a teacher tells a child “I know you can do better than this,” and expects as much. Visually, it occurs when a person can visualize their success, whereby visualization of success leads to it (Cameron & Levine, 2006). Socially, it occurs when individuals are around, “even briefly,” someone who is virtuous, optimistic, and has positive behaviors encouraging them

expect improvements in their lives. (Ryff, 1991). When people are positive energizers, performance has been known to improve exponentially: “We tend to flourish in their presence” (Cameron & Levine, 2006, p. 24). Bandura’s self-efficacy theory and Tolman’s scholarship also suggest learned behaviors are reproduced when they are rewarded (as cited in Harvey and Delfabbro, 2004). An example from this study is Achiever 3, who explored and eventually continued into a science and engineering career because her interests were supported and rewarded.

The current study also highlighted a heliotropic effect as one of the enablers of the transition of women to middle-class status. Cameron et al. (2011) argued that positive practices in the workplace have a positive effect on people. This can be seen in Achiever 8’s story where the positive practices of employees her place of work nudged her to work towards honing her skills and progress in her profession. Cameron et al. (2011) also indicated that negative practices could also result in reverse effects. As noted in the study, following the change in management, Achiever 8 was subjected to negative experiences at work and at some point, she felt like quitting. The practices and organizational culture greatly impact on the progress of African American women in their workplace and their chances of transitioning to middle-class status. There is, therefore, a need to educate the business owners and other stakeholders on the need to establish positive practices that are culturally competent and sensitive to the needs and cultures of different employees.

Admiration & emulation

Admiration is defined by Sarapin, Christy, Lareau, Krakow, and Jensen (2015) as

a positive emotion, which is usually written about in conjunction with similar other emotions. The objective of this study is to determine whether admiration manifests as something distinguishable from these other feelings people have. Admiration is typically described as an “other-praising,” adaptive emotion that facilitates emulation or learning. Admiration is often discussed in terms of its ability to motivate and help humans learn adaptive behaviors. (p. 96)

This is in keeping with Bandura’s social learning and social cognitive learning that provides background on learning through observation of others—such as direct observation of mentors, friends, older relatives, parents, coworkers, managers, and also media-based influences (Bandura, 2001). Zimmerman (2002) believed children modeled behaviors of adults who reinforced their behaviors: Similarly, model “similarity” (p. 6) refers to imitating behaviors of people of the same background, such as race and gender. Achievers in this study imitated behaviors of people they admired. Achiever 8 imitated behaviors of successful bankers throughout her career. Achiever 6 imitated and emulated the occupational and social organizational choices of Phylicia Rashad’s character, Claire Huxtable. Achiever 6 is an attorney and a member of the same sorority as Claire Huxtable.

Also, a study of cumulative cultural evolution theory, where someone copies the end results of behavior, was also supportive. Cumulative effects become apparent even when girls have opportunities only for emulation (Caldwell & Millen, 2009)

In addition, findings highlighted the limitations of the SGM in describing the criteria for a successful transition to middle-class among African American women in poor neighborhoods such as Peoria.

Limitations of the Model and Strong Starts

According to the SGM, there are various factors considered as strong starts that girls need to have for them to successfully move from poverty to middle-class status (Reeves & Grannis, 2014). The model is sufficient at a strategic level. However, the suggestions made by scholars regarding SGM do not fully reflect what was observed among the African American women in Peoria who transitioned to middle-class.

First, the model is not culturally relevant. One of the strong starts that seem to contradict what was observed in this study is the need for girls to have an educated mother or capable parents. One Achiever's mother went back to school. According to the findings of this study, the women who made it to the middle-class status did not have educated mothers or capable parents.

Based on this study, it seems that the existing SGM does not address the practical experiences of African American girls who are born into poverty. However, it should be noted that various researchers support SGM's assertions that maternal education positively influences the well-being of the child (Parveen & Alam, 2008). Ara (2012) reported that the academic performance of children with educated mothers is higher. Sticht and McDonald (1990) concluded that one of the best ways to reach the children and improve their future success is by educating the mother. Researchers have also

indicated that maternal education is associated with self-efficacy among girls (Abuya, Mumah, Austrian, Mutisya, & Kabiru, 2018). It is evident that there are many studies that support the fact that the education of mothers influences the success of children. The contrary evidence obtained in this study needs to be further assessed to determine whether there are underlying issues that define the observed disparity. A 2.5 grade point average is not consistent across the country and certainly not within Peoria county.

The authors admitted that the model does not quantify or qualify matters like self-esteem or other mental modes which can improve or deter a girl's ability to move through life to achieve or not achieve middle-class success (Winship & Owen, 2013). The SGM also fails to take into consideration the experiences of African American women and their actions after obtaining jobs. As noted in the study, one can successfully finish high school, enroll in college, not have a criminal record, get a job, and get married, but the inability to plan well her resources determines whether that person achieves or not the middle-class status.

Issues such as financial literacy are highlighted in this study as being very important in determining the transition to the middle-class and should be incorporated into the existing SGM for it to be sensitive to African American women who were born into poverty. The current SGM also fails to take into consideration peer pressure and the effect of formed relationships. As noted from the outcomes of the study, effects of

formed relationships, such as relational aggression, abuse by intimate partners, and the association with parents, greatly determines the transition to meet that influence in the ability of African American girls to continue the path to a successful life.

Additionally, the current SGM does not take other family characteristics into consideration. One important family characteristic is whether the parents were ever together. In a few cases, parents were divorced. That said, most mothers were single and uneducated. The Achievers defied current research on the mother's education as a significant factor for middle-class achievement (Hernandez & Napierala, 2014). The SGM and strong start scholars should consider varied family characteristics and other formed relationships especially when referring to African American girls living in poverty. The model should also consider a broader spectrum of intervention mechanisms. However, despite the highlighted limitations of the existing SGM in describing the transition of African American women born into poverty to middle-class, I believe all of the factors are relevant.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations associated with this study is the fact that the researcher relied on past events that were recalled by the participants. The data collected in this study included action, events, and experiences that occurred years before the date of the interview. Participants may have forgotten some of the events or might have misreported some of the occurrences. Misreporting or failure to recall the impact of the exact occurrence weighs on the credibility of the obtained results.

The other limitation is the approach used to recruit participants. I used non-random approaches to recruit participants. This approach is associated with a non-representative study sample. Therefore, the study sample may not provide an accurate representation of African American girls from disadvantaged families in Peoria based solely on those who were targeted in this study.

While I believed the Aspirers, their stories reached a point of saturation. I wish I could have found three more Aspirers to match the number of Achievers. They would have provided the comfort of equally sized samples on achievement and lack of achievement. Although their stories provided a saturation point of insight for conclusions, three more Aspirers may have had other unique data points to consider. The lack of a representative sample renders the obtained study findings non-generalizable. However, there is a need to appreciate the fact that the study approach adopted focused more on contextual issues as well as the personal experiences of each of the participants. The study focused on how participants recollected their stories rather than developing universal truths about the research phenomenon. Therefore, although the findings will be used to propose social change implications, there is a need to note that the study did not prioritize issues related to objective findings that are often seen as more generalizable.

The other possible limitation is associated with the influence that I may have had on the findings. I am a strong advocate of the need to enable African American girls from disadvantaged families to realize their goal of advancing to middle-class status. Therefore, it is possible my interpretation of the stories provided by the participants might have been skewed by my perceptions and preconceived ideas associated with the ability of the SGM to explain the situation of African American girls in Peoria and the factors that act as barriers towards their transition to the middle-class.

Chapter 7: Recommendations and Conclusions

This section provides recommendations and conclusions on how well the findings of the study addressed the gap in understanding of the processes adopted by the millennial African American women who grew up in poverty and achieved middle-class status. Included are recommendations for future studies based on knowledge gaps emerging from the discussion, a description of the social change implications associated with the findings, and a conclusion based on the understanding of the processes for achieving middle-class and social mobility among African American women in Peoria. I will also provide a conclusion on how the SGM addresses the transition of African American girls from poverty to middle class and provide suggested adjustments to the model to make it relevant to African American girls in Peoria. Finally, a model for grassroots programming will be offered.

Recommendations for Future Research

The discussion of findings reveals there are gaps that still exist in the understanding of the processes African American women born into poverty use in their transition to middle-class status. One of the gaps that deserves further assessment relates to the effect of educated mothers and capable parents on the transition to the middle class among African American women born into poverty. Although the current study indicated that being born to an educated mother did not hinder eight of the 13 girls from reaching the middle-class, those findings defy and contradict existing literature. The disparity may be linked to the unique context of the eight participants. Further

assessment of the disparity should be reviewed to determine whether indeed an educated mother and capable parents provide strong starts to African American women in their transition—and if there may be substitutes for these factors that provide African American girls assistance in achieving social mobility.

Also worthy of further study is the connection between the lack of support and indiscipline cases among African American women within school. Acting out behaviors were difficult to specify as discreet causes for inappropriate behaviors. A study to decipher whether behavioral results were due to a teacher's lack of cultural competence should be studied intensely for intervention. Also, issues at home, general mental health, or other cognitive or neuroscientific issues could have been the causes for acting out behaviors. However, schools seemed ill-equipped to address mental health issues. District administrations should conduct pilot programs to replace resource officers with psychologists and study the results. Results of such a study of this nature can guide intervention and programming. They may even consider hiring psychologists on the school resource officer teams.

The SGM suggests maintaining appropriate behavior in school for the African American women who are transitioning from poverty to middle-class. There is a need to further assess whether the acting out behaviors are linked to availability of support from their families, abandonment, or other issues. This relationship will guide

grassroots programming action and broader interventions to promote the enhanced transition of African American women in Peoria to middle class.

The findings of this study seem to indicate that both the Achievers and Aspirers experienced internalized oppression and negative concepts of self. However, the Achievers went on to transition to the middle class while the Aspirers are still in the process. Further study is needed to understand how the Achievers deal with internalized oppression. The understanding will give insights into unique processes and potential intervention mechanisms.

The findings provided insights into the role of the heliotropic effects in the workplace as an enabler of the transition of African American women to middle-class status. Heliotropic effects were only reported by a few of the Achievers. There is limited literature on how heliotropic effects affect social mobility among African American women in poor neighborhoods such as Peoria. Future research should focus on this area.

Findings also call for a study with significantly more participants. These include both those who have achieved middle-class status and those who have not. In addition, the study should include a segment where participants can specifically state what *they* believe will help them to achieve middle-class status. After former President Clinton's statement about how "governments don't raise people; parents do" (as cited

in Sawhill, Reeves, & Howard, 2013, para 25), he pushed for “responsible parenting” and suggested we should not “punish them because they are poor” nor should we “put them or their children out on the street” (Clinton, 1995, p. 135). A metacognitive social imagination-based study should be conducted on more women born into poverty, including single mothers in poverty. Let their reflections, biographies, and historical context guide what they need. We should understand what they needed during their childhood through college and what they need now. Results may provide an opportunity to synthesize a process without the “agita” of waiting on the government. Perhaps the answer is not about funding.

There is also an opportunity to analyze and study relationships between the pillars of poverty and their effects on poverty. For example, Achievers who had caregiving responsibilities for siblings (adultification) had fewer children and achieved middle-class status when compared to the Aspirers. Also, relationships within the pillars of the “strong start in life” could also be examined. Achievers had more instances of poor living conditions, drugs at home, and feelings of abandonment than Aspirers. However, Aspirers had more issues within the foster care system, blended families, and multiple homes and schools. What were the causal effects of the combination of the Achiever-specific versus the Aspirer-specific pillars?

Finally, the findings provided insights on how familial, community, and other support structures play a role in social mobility. A rigorous study of the relationship between

support structures and social mobility should be performed. It may provide a better understanding of the forms of capital young women need to achieve middle-class status. A link between various support structures and social mobility will help to identify useful interventions.

Social Change Implications

The study advanced information that is likely to have positive social implications.

This study provides evidence on the processes adopted by the millennial African American women who grew up in poverty to achieve middle-class status. This information provides a unique understanding of the processes for achieving middle-class status and social mobility among African American women in Peoria, Illinois. Peoria, Illinois-based poverty has stifling challenges and barriers to escape. This study is likely to guide, support, and start the conversation about the intervention needed to transition disadvantaged African American girls to the middle class.

The stories told are likely to promote positive social change by empowering both grassroots organizations and the girls they support. The information in each area can be targeted to provide support for processes to succeed in helping a young woman obtain her ambition of breaking away from poverty. The findings indicate that it is possible for grassroots actors to find ways of enhancing girls' forms of capital. The findings encourage grassroots forms of activities and structures that promote counseling services, academic, and psychological support to African American girls.

These interventions will enhance their self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and they will promote self-discipline.

What also emerges from this study is the need to support African American girls in their development of positive self-images. Having attributes of self that promote the attainment of upward social mobility is vital. There is, therefore, a need for various stakeholders—such as individuals involved in the development of urban fiction—to focus on this issue. According to Gibson (2016), urban fiction provides a powerful platform upon which the issues related to self and the aspiration of African American women can be positively influenced.

The findings of the study also identified challenges and barriers for mobility to the middle-class. By pointing a spotlight on those areas, this study may help promote and encourage the systemic grassroots interventions to target needed areas of focus. The findings of this study point to that effect. Although it is not new, the study points to all of the traditional forms of poverty, race, class, and gender. It placed a spotlight on themes like bad teachers and harsh treatment of African American girls in school. The study reinforces existing research related to excess or unfair discipline. It points a spotlight on the foster care system and the management of our children's lives and education. The spotlight is pointed on employers who do not give fair and equal employment, promotion, and remuneration opportunities to African American women.

We need not be victims of change, destined for one future or another according to either a predetermined plan or random chaos. Both individually and collectively, we can learn how to have change happen through us, not to us! (Laszlo, 2018)

Recommendation for a Grassroots Model: The L²E²A²D²E³R²S³ Model⁵

The L²E²A²D²E³R²S³ model is developed to leverage the experiences young African American women have shared during their struggles to escape poverty. Their experiences have shown me there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. However, if it all starts with the having an educated mom and an educated mom is not available, then substitutes can fill the void. I recommend that any executive director, program director, teacher, counselor, or any other child-centered occupation in Peoria, Illinois, that has the right credentials and level of education should be available as a substitute.

Understanding the unique cultural aspects of young African American women is required of a substitute. We simply do not live in a homogenous society. If a potential substitute does not have these caring and cultural skills, then I politely suggest that they should be doing something else.

The dimensions of the L²E²A²D²E³R²S³ model are defined as follows:

L – Love and care for them unconditionally. You may be their only source of peace.

⁵ Trademark pending

L – Listen to them. Hear their joys and pains so you can build better programming to address their needs.

E – Explain everything to them. Explain the hard truths of their current poverty-based situation. They are intelligent and astute. They are waiting for someone to pour into them. They will listen. And, they won't forget. Explain the process of earning the rewards of various forms of capital and literacies of power.

E – Expose them to new things/people/cultures. Show them what success looks like. Show them successfully married and loving couples. Show them nice houses. Take them places they've never dreamed of. Plant and cast seeds widely and expect a few to take root and bear fruit. Introduce them to all types of successful people—people who look like them and some who don't from various professions and occupations. Give them examples of people to admire and emulate. Introduce them to different cultures, foods, art, rituals. Take them to nice restaurants so they learn to feel comfortable in new and different settings.

A – Advocate for them. Be their voice until they find their own.

A – Ask them what they want. Ask them what they need. Usually they will tell you.

D – Dine with them. Share fellowship over dinner. They like to eat. Sometimes they are hungry. Listen to the desires of their heart when they share them. And if they don't talk to you, eavesdrop when they talk to their friends at the table. You will learn a lot.

D – Develop agile and timely issue-based programming to address their specific issues and needs. Use design thinking and rapid, evolving prototype pilots to test for effectiveness of this type of programming.

E – Educate them. Literally educate them. School systems fall short. Stand in the education-attainment gap. Provide tutoring or additional educational resources they need to thrive and compete.

E – Implement and advocate for Equity-based treatment at all levels. Equality falls short. Implement Equity! Always strive toward achieving Equity!

E – Engage teachers and anyone who chastises children for “inappropriate” behavior. Teach them how African American children learn best. Challenge traditional thinking on how children learn and behave.

R – Voting is more than a Right. Teach them that voting is a Responsibility. Voting should be like a tax and Required for all United States citizens.

R – African American girls and women are United States citizens. Respect their rights as such.

S – Support and Soothe them. Encourage and lovingly “push them” to pursue their life’s dreams. Let them know it is ok to try. Be there to help them succeed and develop self-efficacy. Support and encourage them to dream. And move some mountains to help them achieve those dreams. Support them as they climb mountains of their own.

S – Social capital will be critical to influence their lives despite all their hard work. I cannot do this work alone. I have developed a network of people who either love me

or my girls. I use social capital to address their needs where I personally cannot.

Social Capital derived networks can accomplish what may be impossible for the girls or me alone.

S – Be the Servant Leader they need because this is where the real work happens.

Additional recommendations for nonprofits, school administrators, corporations, and legislators

Variations of the L²E²A²D²E³R²S³ model should be implemented in nonprofits, school districts and administrations, corporations, and in city, state, and local legislative bodies. The corporate and school specific variations are under development. However, recommendations for practice in corporations and schools are discussed. Finally, the details of the model for legislators is presented and discussed below.

Cultural biased policies and practices in corporations

Corporations should be required to operate on behalf of ALL stakeholders—not just their shareholders. If profits are gained by harming United States citizens, the company should be required to pay a fine for the harm in a manner befitting those harmed. For example, if a pipeline causes cancer to citizens who live near it, the company should be fined the amount required to settle medical debt. In addition, the company should be required to research and develop less harmful and safe methods and practices.

Corporations all have policies related to anti-discrimination. However, race and gender discrimination happen every day. Race and gender discrimination have

happened for centuries. They still happen. Within corporations, task forces should be set aside to do a systemic review of their discriminatory practices. A good place to start would be a longitudinal review of settled racial and gender bias cases. These might be cases where high-priced legal defense teams were brought in because the offenders believed the situations were so bad they could not win without investing significant resources.

Once the cases have been reviewed, human resources, legal, and business management staff should create teams from various levels within the firm to develop policies and procedures to handle these egregious offenses. Then, an external culturally diverse team should be hired to review cases brought against firms—especially cases that were either dismissed or hidden internally. Typically, someone always has a file (i.e., an employee EOC) to identify a missed opportunity to right and correct discriminatory practices. Often, these were cases center on a situation where the employee raised issues and was then forced to resign or face retaliation.

Each of these teams should be led by senior management (those with real clout) and staffed by people of color with varying levels of authority. Finally, a cultural bias question should be applied to hiring, firing, discipline, and promotion decisions made within the firm. The cultural test would ask a question of African American women: “If she were white...”

For, example the question could be framed in the following manner “How would her discipline, career track, or opportunities to display her talents be different if she were white?” A foster care related question would be “what proof and confirmation can you provide that demonstrates the birth mother cannot provide food, shelter, and a safe environment (in their vibrant setting)?” If not, “why can’t you confirm? What steps did you take to confirm whether the mother and/or birth father can or cannot provide the basics?” There will be plenty of examples of hiring, firing, promotion, disciplinary, training opportunities, and lack of comprehensive reviews due to bias where white women or a more favorable class received the more favorable decision. This can be used as the barometer. When the responses are not reasonable, as I would expect, employers and managers should be reprimanded and terminated. The corrective actions should be enacted and backdated.

The same cultural question should be applied within schools. A systemic review should be conducted of biased behaviors in the forms of reprimands, suspensions, expulsions, and favoritism by each teacher within a district. The reviews can be risk-based, starting with the most egregious cases of practices previously mentioned. Racist, unsupported, and biased behaviors should be reprimanded through termination, withholding raises, and fewer opportunities for advancement. Teachers should be responsible for reporting their behaviors to a panel of parents and community members who represent the racial makeup of the schools they serve. A licensed psychologist should be provided for with district funding. These funds can

be carved from various school training, activities, and any other per-student monies received by the district. Districts can submit for grants to fund the oversight committees and psychologists. Again, the allocation of the funding should be the responsibility of an academically and fiscally competent person of the same race as the students they serve.

Legislative policy and practice

I believe policy has been central in causing and perpetuating the pillars of poverty. Many of the participants' pillars of poverty experiences are a direct result of policies enacted by legislation and practices within systems of oppression. The systems are foster care, welfare, prison, child protection, corporations, school districts, and even nonprofits.

The various policies that have been initiated and perpetuated—as far back as the Emancipation Proclamation (when Lincoln's executive order freed the slaves), which stated “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude,” and the Thirteenth Amendment, which states that “except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted” shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”—are coordinated and should be seen as violence and rage against African Americans, including African American women. I am reiterating the definition of Anderson's (2016) term “white rage” here (also included in Chapter 6) because of its particular cogency in this context:

[White] rage is not [always] about visible violence, but rather it works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government

bureaucracies [corporations and schools]. It wreaks havoc subtly, almost imperceptibly. Too imperceptibly, certainly, for a nation consistently drawn to the spectacular—to what it can see. It's not the Klan. White rage doesn't have to wear sheets, burn crosses, or take to the streets. Working the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively. (p. 3)

As such, instead of working to disrupt the systems from a policy perspective, I believe the best work can be enacted by teaching the children to see how this rage impacts their daily lives. They can use this form of literacy to vote for legislators who are supportive of their lives and girls in families like theirs. This grassroots idea takes time and years of grooming. However, the model's implementation can start now.

I do not like recommending policy or legislative ideas because it is expensive. Policy does not eradicate poverty. I also do not like to recommend policy because people have historically found ways to undermine, reverse, and create loopholes against it. With this historical reference, I believe recommending policy is a cop-out.

Here are a few examples of undermining and reversing legislation and activities. Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) supposedly ended school segregation. Today, school districts have been parsed to provide better funding, teachers, and resources to the wealthier districts, thereby maintaining much of the segregation. Federal Fair Housing laws were enacted to eliminate housing discrimination (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.), while redlining retained the tenants of the segregation. It contributes to enduring unemployment due to both “race and space”

(Zenou & Boccard, 2000). Within the 1930s, the Aid to Families with Dependent Children was used to aid white and widowed women or poor families with children as a function of social security. However, when women of color began to request the aid, the program began receiving negative connotations and was revised to include duration limits (Alfred, 2007).

President Clinton practically eliminated substantive assistance for African American women and perpetuated years of them working to develop informal networks and creative ways to make it to the next month's check (Radley, 2018). In addition, if you recall Peoria's employment statistics, getting a job has always been easier for a white woman compared to African American women. The Voting Rights Act gave African Americans the right to vote. Meanwhile, significant forms of voter suppression persist. President Barack Obama and Democratic legislators passed the Affordable Care Act (Levy, Ying, & Bagley, 2020). Republican governors refused Medicaid expansion for their constituents. President Obama's successor has used executive orders to strip away many of the Act's components and benefits (Levy et al., 2020).

However, it is people who drive policy. I would petition the legislator as the person the implement the following ideas within their legislative agendas. Here are

L²E²A²D²E³R²S³ model recommendations for state, local, and federal legislators:

L – Have Love and compassion for people and your constituents.

L – Actively Listen to your constituents. They will share issues related to the pillars of poverty, ACEs, and racism. Enact legislation targeted to fund social services related to these issues. Enact policy to make it illegal, with the potential to lose federal funding, if the pillars are not addressed and poverty reduced. Studies such as this one identified the experiences of achievement and aspirations for middle-class attainment. Do (and fund) more studies. This is a solid way to get confidential, longitudinal data from a metacognitive and sociological imaginative perspective.

E – Enact policy to *explain* how each piece of legislation passed and proposed impacts constituents by zip code (similar to a patient’s bill of rights). This is intended to let all constituents know the exact impact. I would imagine African Americans and poorer white people would also see who promotes legislation that benefits them versus harms them.

E – Policy should require legislators to visit with their constituents to “walk in their shoes” for a day with the current funding from legislation they have passed to gain a real-life understanding of the impact of their legislation—both good and bad.

A – If it were up to me, politicians should be responsible to advocate for all of their constituents, not just their donors or members of their own party.

A – In the same vein as (Listen), enact at least one new piece of legislation within each session based solely on the biggest issue that can be addressed by legislation within a household. For example, if a mother has lost her children for what some may perceive as a minor infraction, enact legislation within agencies to apply the “cultural test” similar to the one discussed in the corporation section. Since there are more

African American children in foster care that any other race agencies, judges should be held to task to justify their decisions. This analysis should be conducted by an independent body based on the same racial makeup as the children. There are more white female social workers and white judges who advocate putting Black children in foster care without applying same benefit of the doubt they would a white mother. A sample cultural test question could be “Would you take this child from her mother and father and place them into foster care if the mother and father were white?”

D – Ensure policy to provide cash and food assistance for working poor women and mothers to meet basic needs per month to ensure it can sustain families (without wasteful spending) until the end of each month.

D – This is similar to many of the items above. Draft and develop policy to address their issues.

E – Ensure funding is sent to the school districts to adequately educate children from early childhood through college. Review standardized test scores and devote proportionately more funding for academics to failing and near-failing schools.

E – Review schools’ staff and administrative behavior remediation statistics.

Decrease funding for schools who do not reprimand fairly. For example, if African Americans receive harsher treatments by teachers, then the school should be placed in a warning, probation, and reduction in Title IX funding. The data should be collected and submitted to a committee created by the Department of Education. They should be led by a diverse group of members but should be weighted more heavily with the members representative of the disadvantaged group. The group can provide the final

review. This committee can do annual audits in a risk-based fashion similar to regulatory bodies like the Federal Reserve examiners.

E – Engage legislators, school board members, anyone involved in child-related processes for children and their behavior. Teach them how African American children learn best. Challenge traditional thinking on how children learn and behave to influence policy regarding school behavior in schools.

R – Voting should be a Requirement. Enact legislation to make voting mandatory. Twenty-two other countries have compulsory voting (Masachi, 2018). Empower the IRS to ensure all US Citizens vote as they monitor tax requirements for all citizens.

R – Legislators should be required to enforce the anti-discrimination laws in cities, states, and municipalities. And they should fine organizations who permit it to occur. In essence, they should Respect everyone’s right to be treated decently. These girls, women, aunts, grandmothers all deserve respect as a person and a citizen.

S – Financially and legislatively support organizations who fundamentally impact the people they serve. If an organization is designed to help women and girls, fund it only when they can show support for ALL women and girls. Fund and support organizations that have truly diverse corporate and nonprofit boards and staff.

S – Social capital is critical for all politicians to enact the types of legislation and policies described above.

S – Be a Servant Leader.

Conclusion

This narrative study used semi-structured and open-ended interviews focused on metacognition and social imagination to assess the processes established by millennial women from Peoria, Illinois. Some participants grew up in poverty to achieve middle-class status and upward social mobility; some did not. The assessment of the identified study goal involved the exploration of how poverty has been experienced in Peoria, Illinois by African American millennial women. I explored the difference in the processes for achieving middle-class status and social mobility between the women who have attained it and those who are still pursuing middle-class status. Finally, the study also explored the relevant factors within the SGM and strong starts framework to determine how they impact the achievement of middle-class status with the focus on identifying the most critical elements for the social mobility and transition to middle class among the African American women in Peoria, Illinois.

Based on the findings, I draw the conclusion that the existing SGM does not provide sufficient explanation of the various factors considered strong starts that girls need for them to successfully move from poverty to middle-class status. The study indicates there is a need to add factors related to experiences of African American women and their actions before and after obtaining jobs, issues related to financial literacy, family characteristics, and formed relationships. The study suggests that one factor girls need for them to achieve upward social mobility is an educated mother or capable parents.

This factor should be included as a strong start when referring to the critical factors for the transition to the middle class among African American women in Peoria.

However, further assessment may be warranted given the evidence provided by the Achievers. Since it is highly unlikely that a girl born into poverty would be born to educated mothers, it may be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study to identify more factors like those in this study with Achievers across the country.

The study concludes that African American millennial women in Peoria who are born to uneducated mothers or parents who are not capable can still transition to middle-class status when they find the resolve and acquire support and resources throughout their journey into adulthood. This conclusion is based on findings that indicated that despite not being born of educated parents (mothers), the Achievers were able to graduate high school and enroll in college, avoid a criminal record, get a job, and transition to the middle class. The study concludes that for African American millennial women in Peoria, Illinois, to transition to the middle class, it is important for them to learn and receive support to behave appropriately in school. Based on these findings, one can conclude that African American millennial women in Peoria should be provided comprehensive guidance on the rationale for avoiding having a child before marriage since avoiding this enhances their transition to middle-class status. And, if she decides not to marry, she should be given comprehensive guidance on the rationale for waiting until she has sufficient income to care for a child or children.

Various forms of racism were discussed throughout the study. The impacts of systemic racism on the lives of the participants are present during every phase of the social genome model. They reflected on race related issues from some of their earliest experiences with teachers, foster care adults, and dishonest social workers to their current work experiences, mostly with white women. More recent experiences were mentioned in the forms of microaggressions, gendered racism, and pet-to-threat incidents. An Achiever recalled observing a manager hire an uneducated white woman instead of an overqualified woman of color who fit the exact job description. In the same way the “Me Too” movement reviewed for systemic sexual abuse, corporations should review for systemic racial abuse and fire the aggressors.

The study also concludes that to be fully understood, there are gaps that need to be addressed for the processes established by millennial women from Peoria who grew up in poverty to achieve middle-class status and social mobility. There is a need for further assessment of the connection between the lack of support and indiscipline cases among African American women within schools. There is also a need to understand how the Achievers deal with internalized oppression. Despite the highlighted gaps, I strongly believe that the presented evidence provides sufficient insight into the processes established by millennial women from Peoria who grew up in poverty to achieve middle-class status and social mobility that facilitates the development of interventions towards positive social change.

As I write, we are in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, and the girls in my GLOW program are subject to the Illinois Shelter in Place order. The situation brings their poverty and lack of access to the forefront, as many of them are without digital access. Recently, the Peoria Public School superintendent and school board decided to distribute laptops to the students. However, the distribution was limited to three computers per family. The girls in large families are not using their siblings' computers. They are forced to use their cell phones. A recent news report uncovered that only 37% of students at the schools in the poorer zip codes were accessing remote learning versus 77% of students in the middle class (Hilyard, 2020).

Finally, I have provided The L²E²A²D²E²R²S³ model for grassroots intervention programming for nonprofits and legislators. The L²E²A²D²E²R²S³ model suggests that all programming and policy for girls born into poverty should include love, listening, explanations, exposure, advocacy, asking questions, dining & feeding, designing relevant programming, support, social capital and servant leadership to assist their transition into the middle class and upward social mobility. The model is in its infancy stage. I will discuss it with my girls. And I will test it and vet it as a part of Girls Light Our Way programming. These girls will continue to show me that girls *do* light our way.

The work begins anew.

Appendix A: Analysis by Individual

Achiever 1

My last pass at the data analysis will be a look at each individual participant. This section presents a series of tables to show each participants’ Strong Start Dimensions scores – called Dimension Scores (DS), their Pillars of Poverty Scores – called PoP Scores, and Criteria and Factors discovered during interviews and reflections of their lives. A short discussion will follow that attempts to determine the factors and forces that helped the achievers obtain middle-class status and the factors and forces that are keeping the aspirers in poverty.

Table 9. Achiever 1

Score Type	Score	Factors
DS	6	Reading/Math Scores, Appropriate Behavior, Enroll in Postsecondary, Educ. No Criminal Conviction, Married before first child, Job before first child
PoP	20	Poor Living Conditions, Blended Families, Drugs @ Home, Abandonment, Adultification (adult-like duties, harsher punishment, job in school), Lack of Motivation - “Nobody Pushed Me”, Domestic Violence @ Home Hunger, Subpar Education (in lack of motivation), College Was Not Emphasized, Lack of Family Support, Policy Failure, Classism, Shame of Poverty, 1 of many kids, Pet to Threat, Relational Aggression - Conspecific Aggression, Gender bias2, Pregnancy normalized in neighborhood, No relationship with father

Source: Adapted from participant interviews

How she achieved middle-class status

Achiever 1 was moved to change her life because of two seminal moments. The first moment occurred at a sleepover at her friend and classmate’s house. She observed the classmate’s parents were married and lived together. The second was sitting on the floor next to her mother and her mother had to call out “Who’s There?” Her mother had been beaten so badly by her boyfriend and her eyes were swollen shut with blood and puss rolling down her cheeks. Achiever 1 decided she wanted the former lifestyle rather than the latter. She married her high school sweetheart to build a protected life for her children. She has used her job as a “To-Go” specialist to build a career. She

has moved up the ranks. She has been offered several promotions. She decided to stay in the current position so she can be a better mother for her children. Achiever 1 is married with an emotionally and financially supportive husband. Their combined salaries put them solidly in the middle class. They own their home in Peoria, IL.

Achiever 2

Table 10. Achiever 2

Score Type	Score	Factors
DS	5	Reading/Math Scores, Appropriate Behavior, Graduate HS w/ 2.5 GPA, No Criminal Conviction, Job before first child
PoP	27	Poor Living Conditions, Blended Families, Multiple Homes/Multiple Schools, Drugs @ Home, Abandonment, Adultification (adult-like duties, harsher punishment, job in school), Lack of Motivation - “Nobody Pushed Me”, School as a place of Refuge, Bullied, Criminal Activities, Hunger, Truancy, Subpar Education, College Was Not Emphasized, Lack of Family Support, Policy Failure, Classism, Shame of Poverty, Internalized Oppression, Difficult Relationship with mother, 1 of many kids, Incarceration in the family, Pregnancy normalized in neighborhood, Domestic/Mental Abuse in Own Relationship w/partner, Repression of Memories, No relationship with father, Drugs in their homes as adults,

Source: Adapted from participant interviews

How she achieved middle-class status

Achiever 2 had several women (i.e., a teacher, a program director, a middle school principal, and a JROTC lead) along her life’s trajectory who were stern and helped to shape her attitude. She is driven and has a military acumen about her financial life and the ability to provide for her children. She got a job right out of high school. She learned how to build relationships and work hard to earn a living. She worked overtime consistently and was the breadwinner. She was engaged to be married to 2 of the children’s father but things changed when she started working longer hours. She got a new job and rose through the ranks as a Caterpillar service provider. In 2016, she was laid off and interviewed for jobs to best suit her family’s lifestyle. She constantly ensures she has a job or two to adequately care for her family and their

needs. She exercises to maintain physical and mental health. She works for the third-party service provider as a manager of the division at a company in Peoria, IL.

Achiever 3

Table 11: Achiever 3

Score Type	Score	Factors
DS	8	Capable Parents, Reading/Math Scores, Appropriate Behavior, Graduate HS w/ 2.5 GPA, Enroll in Postsecondary Educ., Postsecondary Degree, No Criminal Conviction, Married before first child, Job before first child
PoP	15	Poor Living Conditions, Drugs @ Home, Abandonment, Racist Teachers, Bullied, Racist Classmates, Criminal Activities, Hunger, Classism, Desperation, Shame of Poverty, Racism @ Work, Gender bias ² , Pregnancy normalized in neighborhood, Lack of Resources & Support, Felt “Stuck”

Source: Adapted from participant interviews

How she achieved middle-class status

Achiever 3 was focused. Once her science teacher and TSTM Program Director made her interest in science seem normal, she excelled in school. She went to college, is an engineer, and does not have children. She was extremely focused on getting out of her house, NOT being like her father, and never being a burden on her mother. Achiever 3 took control of her grades, etc. when she quit the basketball team because she believed it impacted her grades. Her grades, and participation in TSTM, were good enough to get a scholarship to college. A local prominent couple in the Peoria Community took interest in her and provided support during college career. She worked during college and gained skills. She used her skills to get a job at a fortune 500 company. She has been promoted several times and determined to look in the rearview mirror to see where she came from. However, she is determined never to turn or look back. She lives outside of Illinois.

Achiever 4

Table 12: Achiever 4

Score Type	Score	Factors
DS	6	Reading/Math Scores, Appropriate Behavior, Graduate HS w/ 2.5 GPA, Enroll in Postsecondary Educ., No Criminal Conviction, Married before first child, Job before first child
PoP	22	Poor Living Conditions, Foster Care & Shelter, Blended Families, Multiple Homes/Multiple Schools, Drugs @ Home, Abandonment, Adultification, Lack of Motivation - “Nobody Pushed Me”, School as a place of Refuge, Criminal Activities, Hunger, Subpar Education, College Was Not Emphasized, Classism, Shame of Poverty, Internalized Oppression, Homeless, Mental/Serious Illness in immediate family(Mother), Pregnancy normalized in neighborhood, Domestic/Mental Abuse in Own Relationship w/partner, No relationship with father, Drugs in their homes as adults

Source: Adapted from participant interview

How she achieved middle-class status

In a sense, Achiever 4 learned business skills through training in her brother’s “business.” While it was an alternative economy, she gained the skills nonetheless. Her brother was charming, charismatic, and smart. They were both determined to provide a better life for their family. Her life skills and financial/business guidance and insight from people she trusted to become an author and entrepreneur. Achiever 4 – started her career working fast food. Then she became a dancer and sex worker. During that time, she gained business skills. Her “johns” helped her to build a business. She honed those business skills. She’s currently a landowner, an author, a playwright, and an entrepreneur. She resides in Peoria, IL.

Achiever 5

Table 13: Achiever 5

Score Type	Score	Factors
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DS	7.5	Capable Parents, Reading/Math Scores, Graduate HS w/ 2.5 GPA, Enroll in Postsecondary Educ., Postsecondary Degree, No Criminal Conviction, Married before first child, Job before first child
PoP	19	Blended Families, Abandonment, Adulthood, (adult-like duties, harsher punishment, job in school), Bad Teachers (absent of racism), Racist Teachers, Bullied (listed in shame and classism), Racist Classmates, Domestic Violence @ Home, Truancy (in unsupportive and domestic violence), Classism, Shame of Poverty, Internalized Oppression, Difficult Relationship with mother, Pet to Threat, Relational Aggression - Conspecific Aggression, Pregnancy normalized in neighborhood (in motivation, job), Repression of Memories (in family), Lack of Resources & Support, Felt “Stuck” (in adulthood), Drugs in their homes as adults (in adulthood)

Source: Adapted from participant interviews

How she achieved middle-class status

Achiever 5 had a great start with the love of her father. She eventually felt her mother’s love after a miscarriage. Although school-life was rocky with bullying and self-esteem issues, she had acceptable grades in high school. However, she truly gained her stride when she reached college. Her parents were supportive during her college years. She has always been “a Daddy’s girl” (he was the educated parent). She received support from African American professors and administrators throughout her academic career and master-degree program. She is working toward her doctorate. During college her grades were never below a 3.8. She has worked in higher education ever since she graduated. She lives outside of Illinois.

Achiever 6

Table 14: Achiever 6

Score Type	Score	Factors
DS	6.5	Reading/Math Scores, Appropriate Behavior, Graduate HS w/ 2.5 GPA, Enroll in Postsecondary Educ., Postsecondary Degree, No Criminal Conviction, Job before first child
PoP	26	Poor Living Conditions, Foster Care & Shelter, Blended Families, Multiple Homes/Multiple Schools, Drugs @ Home,

Abandonment, Adultification (adult-like duties, harsher punishment, job in school), Bullied (listed in shame and classism), Racist Classmates, Hunger, Subpar Education (in lack of motivation), College Was Not Emphasized, Sexually Abused, Classism, Shame of Poverty, Difficult Relationship with mother, Homeless, Issues with caseworkers, housing admin, 1 of many kids, Racism @ Work, Relational Aggression - Conspecific Aggression, Power Distance, Pregnancy normalized in neighborhood (in motivation, job), Repression of Memories (in family), No relationship with father, Lack of Resources & Support, Felt “Stuck” (in adulthood)

Source: Adapted from participant interviews

How she achieved middle-class status

Achiever 6 found fierce resolve when she saw her mother being raped while high on drugs. She determined she would never allow her body or mind be used to such detriment. She had teachers along the way to nudge and encouraged her to do better in school. She had a foster mom who gave her a knack for saving and managing money. She used a full ride scholarship provided to children in the foster care system. She went to law school and practices law. During law school she held and won a student trial where she was falsely accused by several white female classmates. She won that case. She has never stopped winning cases. She is a “sought after” attorney in Peoria.

Achiever 7

Table 15: Achiever 7

Score Type	Score	Factors
DS	7.5	Educated Mother, Reading/Math Scores, Appropriate Behavior, Graduate HS w/ 2.5 GPA, \Enroll in Postsecondary Educ., Postsecondary Degree, No Criminal Conviction, Job before first child
PoP	15	Poor Living Conditions, Abandonment, School as a place of Refuge, Racist Teachers, Racist Classmates, Hunger, Classism, Shame of Poverty, Difficult Relationship with mother, Mental/Serious Illness in immediate family - Ach1-sis; Ach4 - mom; Ach6 -bro, Pet to Threat, Relational Aggression -

Conspecific Aggression, Gender bias², Pregnancy normalized in neighborhood (in motivation, job), Domestic/Mental Abuse in Own Relationship w/partner

Source: Adapted from participant interview

How she achieved social mobility

Achiever 7 was able to pursue middle-class status full-on when she was eventually financially supported by BOTH parents. Although she had a newborn son, she used the assistance to take control of her life to finish college. Achiever 7 – was always gifted in math. She went to the district’s gifted school and was mentored by the one of the African American teachers there. Achiever 7 married that teacher’s son. Her husband just received his Doctorate of Education. Her grades fluctuated until she found her stride in high school. She got pregnant just before her Freshman year in college. Her mother kept the baby the first semester of college. Her father started to assist with a few bills during college. She researched and took advantage of every resource the college provided – free services for her child, free health care, school transportation, access to museums, etc. She also received cash assistance and other safety net benefits while at school. She graduated college and got a job. She moved to new jobs with better opportunity and benefits every time she saw African American women being marred by racism. Although she left those jobs behind, she kept and brought new skills from each of the previous jobs. She went back to school and completed her master degree. She works at the Fortune 500 company in Peoria, IL.

Achiever 8

Table 16: Achiever 8

Score Type	Score	Factors
DS	2.5	Enroll in Postsecondary Educ., No Criminal Conviction, Job before first child
PoP	27	Poor Living Conditions, Blended Families, Drugs @ Home, Abandonment, Adulthoodification (adult-like duties, harsher punishment, job in school), Lack of Motivation - “Nobody Pushed Me”, School as a place of Refuge, Bad Teachers (absent of racism), Racist Teachers, Bullied (listed in shame and classism), Domestic Violence @ Home, Criminal Activities deliberate and otherwise (in desperation), Hunger, Truancy (in unsupportive and domestic violence), Subpar Education (in lack

of motivation), College Was Not Emphasized, Lack of Family Support, Policy Failure, Classism, Desperation - Acted out of Desperation, Shame of Poverty, Internalized Oppression, Incarceration in the family (abandonment), Racism @ Work, Pet to Threat, Relational Aggression - Conspecific Aggression, Pregnancy normalized in neighborhood (in motivation, job)

Source: Adapted from participant interviews

How she achieved middle-class status

After being a part of the “black sheep” family in her larger family context, Achiever 8 was resolved and constantly searched for ways to support her mother and family. She lied about her age to get jobs intended for teens. She called ahead to banks to ensure her aunt could cosign for a car loan for her mother. When Achiever 8 got her first job at a bank she was sure to emulate mannerisms and professionalism of people in the banking organization. She continued to develop and shape the mannerisms, professionalism and add her own essence of hard work to be successful in each role. She was mentored by and received promotions from her manager, a well-regarded banker in the Peoria community. If her mother had not hired a lawyer, she would have a criminal record and her life would be completely different. She learned to save and manage her money through trial and error. Her son is a 2020 graduate from one of the local high schools. She is the SVP of a regional bank in Peoria, IL.

Aspirer 1

Table 17: Aspirer 1

Score Type	Score	Factors
DS	1	Job before first child
PoP	35.5	Poor Living Conditions, Foster Care & Shelter, Blended Families, Drugs @ Home, Abandonment, Adulthoodification (adult-like duties, harsher punishment, job in school), Lack of Motivation - “Nobody Pushed Me”, Bad Teachers (absent of racism), Bullied, Racist Teachers, Criminal Activities deliberate and otherwise (in desperation), Hunger, Truancy (in unsupportive and domestic violence), Subpar Education (in lack of motivation), College Was Not Emphasized, Sexually Abused, Lack of Family Support, Policy Failure,

Classism, Desperation - Acted out of Desperation, Shame of Poverty, Internalized Oppression, Difficult Relationship with mother, Homeless, 1 of many kids, Incarceration in the family (abandonment), Racism @ Work, Pet to Threat, Low Literacies of Power - financial literacy, critical consciousness, Access-couldn't get to work, Pregnancy normalized in neighborhood (in motivation, job), Unattended Negative Concepts of Self (in adulthood), Learning disability (in adulthood), No high school diploma, Circumstances too difficult to overcome – to date

Source: Adapted from participant interviews

Why she is still pursuing middle-class status

Aspirer 1 has a criminal record and does not have a high school degree or GED. She has 11 children to care for. She currently works at a local fast food restaurant. She was moving up the ranks. However, when she met with racism and bullying, she rescinded the promotion and went back to a lower position. She does not own a car and has issues with access when a car is required. She also “does hair” – styles hair to cover her monthly bills when cash and food assistance fall short. Although she is resourceful, she does not have enough money, human capital, resources, or “know-how” to get out of her current situation. The criminal record is the most difficult of all the circumstances to overcome and without a high school diploma or GED her chance of middle-class achievement seems impossible.

Aspirer 2

Table 18: Aspirer 2

Score Type	Score	Factors
DS	3.5	Graduate HS w/ 2.5 GPA, Enroll in Postsecondary Educ., Postsecondary Degree, No Criminal Conviction, Job before first child
PoP	33.5	Poor Living Conditions, Foster Care & Shelter, Blended Families, Multiple Homes/Multiple Schools, Drugs @ Home, Abandonment, Adultification (adult-like duties, harsher punishment, job in school), Tortured (in foster care - early foundational), School as a place of Refuge, Bad Teachers (absent of racism), Racist Teachers, Criminal Activities deliberate and otherwise (in desperation), Hunger, Truancy (in

unsupportive and domestic violence), Subpar Education (in lack of motivation), College Was Not Emphasized, Sexually Abused, Lack of Family Support, Policy Failure, Classism, Desperation - Acted out of Desperation, Shame of Poverty, Difficult Relationship with mother, Homeless, 1 of many kids, Incarceration in the family (abandonment), Low Literacies of Power - financial literacy, critical consciousness, Pregnancy normalized in neighborhood (in motivation, job), Domestic/Mental Abuse in Own Relationship w/partner, Repression of Memories (in family), Lack of Resources & Support, Felt “Stuck” (in adulthood), Unattended Negative Concepts of Self (in adulthood), Drugs in their homes as adults (in adulthood), No Child Support & cannot fully compensate for costs of childrearing alone

Source: Adapted from participant interviews

Why she is still pursuing middle-class status

Although Aspirer 2’s charge was overturned, her name may still be revealing false-positive results for employers. Whenever a name arises in a background search, employers abandon their pursuit of the candidate. The false-positive results are speculation. It was not tested or confirmed. Yet the phenomenon is common. She also does not receive child support from her children’s fathers. She has not been able to maintain a steady career due to domestic issues with partners. She wants to pursue a singing career. It seems the hardness of life has taken some of Achiever 2’s drive, initiative, and motivation. It also seems every time she DOES get any semblance of extra money and opportunities to change her life, she allows her family to take advantage of her and gives them her money.

Aspirer 3

Table 19: Aspirer 3

Score Type	Score	Factors
DS	6.5	Educated Mother, Capable Parents, Reading/Math Scores, Appropriate Behavior, Graduate HS w/ 2.5 GPA, Enroll in Postsecondary Educ., Postsecondary Degree, Job before first child
PoP	22	Blended Families, Drugs @ Home, Abandonment, Racist Teachers, Bullied (listed in shame and classism), Racist

Classmates, Domestic Violence @ Home, Criminal Activities deliberate and otherwise (in desperation), College Was Not Emphasized, Lack of Family Support, Policy Failure, Classism, Shame of Poverty, Internalized Oppression, 1 of many kids, Low Literacies of Power - financial literacy, critical consciousness, Pregnancy normalized in neighborhood (in motivation, job), Domestic/Mental Abuse in Own Relationship w/partner, No relationship with father, Lack of Resources & Support, Felt “Stuck” (in adulthood), Unattended Negative Concepts of Self (in adulthood), Drugs in their homes as adults (in adulthood), Circumstances too difficult to overcome - To-Date

Source: Adapted from participant interviews

Why she is still pursuing middle-class status

Aspirer 3 had 2 educated parents. However, home life with her parents seemed to be somewhat troubled. As a biracial girl she withstood racism and bullying and suffered from low self-esteem and self-worth. She did not receive sufficient parental, caregiver, or parental guidance to avoid pitfalls of poor relationships, poor money management, and avoiding criminal elements. That said, Aspirer 3 seems to be the closest to achieving middle-class status because she was recently promoted at her current job. Also, her older sister, once grown was able to teach her how to manage her money and bills. She has a new partner who seems supportive, emotionally and financially. They recently moved in together and had this latest child. If they stay together, and remain employed she may reach middle class. Otherwise, it may be difficult for her to maintain a household in the northern part of town on her own. She would likely need an increase in pay, receive child support from the current father, and to be meticulous with her spending. Otherwise, she could likely remain in poverty.

Aspirer 4

Table 20: Aspirer 4

Score Type	Score	Factors
DS	5	Reading/Math Scores, Appropriate Behavior, Enroll in Postsecondary Educ., Postsecondary Degree, No Criminal Conviction, Job before first child

PoP	16.5	Blended Families, Multiple Homes/Multiple Schools, Abandonment, Bad Teachers (absent of racism), Bullied (listed in shame and classism), Domestic Violence @ Home, Truancy (in unsupportive and domestic violence), College Was Not Emphasized, Gender Bias, Classism, Shame of Poverty, 1 of many kids, Low Literacies of Power - financial literacy, critical consciousness, Pregnancy normalized in neighborhood (in motivation, job), No relationship with father, Unattended Negative Concepts of Self (in adulthood), No Child Support & cannot fully compensate for costs of childrearing alone
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Source: Adapted from participant interviews

Why she is still pursuing middle-class status

Aspirer 4 still has some struggles as a single mother working to support her children. Her mother cares for her children while she works. She does not receive child support from a couple of her children’s father. One child’s father disowns him but the grandparents do not. Another child’s father is in jail. She manages and monitors her spending and her bills. She has skills for making extra money (i.e. baking) although she does not make significant use of the skills. Her mother is a big source of support and assistance. Yet the situation could be tenuous, with an illness or layoff she could fall deeper into poverty.

Aspirer 5

Table 21: Aspirer 5

Score Type	Score	Factors
DS	4	Educated Mother, Capable Parents, Enroll in Postsecondary Educ., Postsecondary Degree, Job before first child
PoP	28.5	Blended Families, Multiple Homes/Multiple Schools, Adultification (adult-like duties, harsher punishment, job in school), Lack of Motivation - “Nobody Pushed Me”, Bad Teachers (absent of racism), Racist Teachers, Bullied (listed in shame and classism), Domestic Violence @ Home, Criminal Activities deliberate and otherwise (in desperation), Truancy (in unsupportive and domestic violence), Subpar Education (in lack of motivation),

College Was Not Emphasized, Sexually Abused, Classism, Desperation - Acted out of Desperation, Shame of Poverty, 1 of many kids, Racism @ Work, Low Literacies of Power - financial literacy, critical consciousness, Gender bias², Power Distance, Pregnancy normalized in neighborhood (in motivation, job), Domestic/Mental Abuse in Own Relationship w/partner, Repression of Memories (in family), No relationship with father, Unattended Negative Concepts of Self (in adulthood), No High School Diploma, No Child Support & cannot fully compensate for costs of childrearing alone, Circumstances too difficult to overcome - To-Date

Source: Adapted from participant interviews

Why she is still pursuing middle-class status

Aspirer 5 has a difficult time maintaining a job because of her criminal record. She is typically the first employee laid off during downturns. Or, when employers learn of her arrest record, she gets fired despite their telling her she is a good employee. She also does not have a high school degree or GED. She also has eight children to care for. She currently lives with the most recently born twin's father. He has a job and seems very thoughtful about their lives and future. The relationship seemed promising. Yet, according to Aspirer 5, they all seemed promising at the beginning.

Appendix B: Narratives

Achievers

Achiever 1

As the second oldest of eleven children, Achiever 1 grew up in a busy apartment with her siblings who were all close in age. Her unwed mother had her and her siblings with different fathers. Money was tight and her mother had to work while having eight small children at home. Achiever 1 doesn't know where rent came from each month. Her grandma helped a lot, extending family assistance and taking some of the pressure off her mother. The family received food stamps. She said the "beginning of the month was like Christmas," but the end of the month was a drought. When the food stamps ran out, she recalled being hungry.

Her mother was the victim of domestic abuse from her boyfriend. Although the boyfriend wouldn't beat her mother in front of the children, Achiever 1 experienced the after-effects of the violence. Once she could hear her mother being abused, so she and her older sister planned to sneak out to use a neighbor's phone to call the police because they had no phone in their house. Her mother's boyfriend tossed the baby in the air and she remembers she and her sister trying to catch the baby. They had to teach their three-year-old sister how to hold the baby's head, so they could leave to call the police. Even as a five-year-old, she knew the violence wasn't normal. He beat her mother until her eyes were swollen shut, and Achiever 1 couldn't recognize her own mother. The boyfriend took his aggression out on her mother. He would later apologize and confess he doesn't know why he did it.

Even from a young age, Achiever 1 could tell when a man was not up to par. Her mother's other boyfriend, the father of her last three siblings, was a drunk and immature. This boyfriend would do nothing for the family. She remembers when her mother was in labor, he did nothing, so she had to walk in knee-high snow to call an ambulance. When the ambulance arrived, the boyfriend said he would "meet 'em there." She knew from that moment she wasn't going to put up with this type of behavior.

Achiever 1 developed a protective stance over her siblings. She would verbally defend and advocate for her siblings. She had to grow up fast and care for her younger siblings after they were born. In the sixth grade, her older sister and she took care of the house, walking to the grocery store with the food stamps and taking a taxi home when there was too much to carry. She never had a car, but her mother bought her a bike to run errands.

During her childhood, her family got help from organizations around Christmas time. Santa would come to their house. She still remembers the best Christmas ever, but

some years it was hit or miss. They received a lot of help from the Boy's and Girl's Club. She loved being involved with the Boy's and Girl's Club; it made a big impact in her life. She got lunch on the weekends and during the summer. It provided the kids with something to do. She remembers the lady who was in charge. No one messed with her.

In elementary school at Harrison Primary, Achiever 1 identified her major influencers were all African American female teachers. She says seeing African American female teachers made her believe she had potential. She vividly remembers her fifth-grade teacher telling her "Oh your handwriting is really nice." This compliment made a great impact and stuck with her until today. The teacher would photocopy her notes and pass them out to the class. She was from the south end of Peoria and came back to teach. Another teacher that made an impact in Achiever 1's life lived across the street from her, and they would trick or treat at her house. She got a grant for laptops and taught her and her siblings how to use them, having them create a PowerPoint presentation on Peoria.

When she was little, she was involved in Girl Scouts. She remembers going on a field trip to the St. Louis Zoo. She stayed at her friend house the night before. She was both a friend and a competitor, challenging Achiever 1 to do well grade-wise. Many of her friends were her motivation to do well. Especially in the accelerated reading program, the friends would challenge each other to earn more points by reading bigger books. Seeing her friend's married parents was the first time Achiever 1 saw a father in the household. She had seen characters on TV like Huxtables, but never before in real life. Her friend's family made her realize that it was normal for parents to be married.

Achiever 1 says that she was nerdy in middle school at Trewyn. She ran track, was on student council, and stuck with books and her close friends. She remembers that her peers were getting pregnant. She can remember at least three babies being born in eighth grade. She personally avoided it because she knew what it was like to care for a child.

In high school at Manual, Achiever 1 said her grades could have been better. She didn't have the push to do things even though she had the potential to do more. She said her education wasn't up to par, but she believed all schools were subpar. She had a 3.0 GPA in high school. She said she just "skipped by." She didn't feel challenged or challenge herself because she didn't know what was out there. Since neither of her parents graduated from high school, her high school graduation was a big deal. Most of the adults around hadn't graduated either. She said she had "no one to guide me" because they didn't know. The school counselors were okay, but they only did the bare minimum. They didn't really push college or trades. They tried to encourage her to go to ICC, but she said there were too many distractions there. She wished she could have gone away for school.

She lived at home until she was eighteen. When she moved out of her mother's home, she moved in with her boyfriend, now husband. She never finished college because of home life responsibilities. She had to work while going to school, needing two jobs to pay the bills. She bought bad cars which required a lot of money. She had two jobs that only paid \$8 an hour. She couldn't keep up with school because she arrived late to class. She said a professor at ICC lived across the street, and they would tell her she could go back to school, but it wasn't her priority. She didn't know college would be so vital. She regrets not finishing college.

Achiever 1 see herself as successful in the sense that she is a wife and mother living in a home they own. She also tries to be a role model for her siblings who are all still in poverty. She views success as living up to your potential. She is proud she is not living in poverty or in subsidized housing. She's comfortable and happy. She said "I want to give my children the best start possible within my means." She values positive memories more than money. She says she would consider the little things in her life successful. She does not live in turmoil and got out of toxic environments. She has learned how to stretch a dollar with couponing and she gives back to her community. She gives her excess to the Salvation Army. She says she doesn't have everything, but she has what she needs. She says "My kids don't have to worry about going hungry for the last half of the month." She is satisfied with life as it is.

Achiever 1 is focusing on teaching her children to go for scholarships, but she and her husband will have to pay if their kids go to college. She has to influence her kids, "put that bug in their ear." She wants college or a trade for her children, and she knows that her occupational choice was influenced by her parents. She doesn't want to miss out on spending time with her children because she made work her baby. Achiever 1 wants to watch them grow up. She is 35-years-old, and her kids are 10 and 6. Her children are the battle she chooses, not money. She tries to expose her children to things and help them be the best they can be. She is currently making school choices for her daughter, whether to send her to Rolling Acres or Sterling. She wants to minimize exposure to bullying and fighting. Her son is attending Whittier. She is concerned about PPS150 schools.

Her bills are the reason to work. School is no longer an option because the help or aid she had before is no longer available. College would be too much a financial burden. She earns about \$40,000 and her husband earns a salary similar to hers. She admits she and her husband need to work on their savings. She knows the value of savings.

Achiever 1 describes her job as "I'm just a to-go specialist." She has been at this job since she was 21. She is assertive. She has received promotions and opportunities for more responsibility. Once she overheard white men discussing what they got paid. She found out that the men were paid more than her even though she was training them. This is when she realized there was a gender pay gap. She had to be a self-

advocate. She asked the manager directly, “What is it that’s so different about me?” She challenged his responses. In the end, he gave her the raise. When he moved to another store, she assisted him, and he gave her another raise without asking. He became an advocate for her, but she realizes that there’s likely still a pay gap. Managers feel intimidated by her, so she constantly has to prove herself. She said that each of her managers have tried to get her to go into management, but she doesn’t want to because of her children. She is holding back her career because of her children and not fear of leadership. She probably leaves an additional \$20,000 on the table, so she can spend time with her family. Her current job gives her freedom to attend events for the kids at school and to bring her kids to doctor’s appointments.

There is also a racial pay gap. There are very few Black people at her job. While no one else can do her job better than me, she sometimes has to explain that just “because you’re in a different position, it doesn’t make me less knowledgeable. I do my homework too.” She experiences microaggressions from the white women who feel threatened by her. She knows that she is not paid on par with them even though she is good at building relationships with the clients, and she takes pride in her occupation.

Achiever 2

Achiever 2 grew up in the Harrison Projects with her older brother and six younger siblings. During her childhood, she spent a lot of time with her grandmother. Her grandmother was a very structured housewife. She grew up around a lot of white people before moving to the projects with her mom. She moved around Peoria a lot, moving as her sister’s father’s job required.

She didn’t realize that her mother was on drugs while she was growing up. She knew something was odd. Her mother was very strict until she drank. She recalls her mother lying around for three or four days straight and seeing spoons that were burned on the bottom. She later learned that her mother was on crack. She remembers hearing her aunts talking about how her mother was the black sheep of the family. Achiever 2 was responsible for making dinner and babysitting all of the time, starting at the age of nine or ten. Sometimes she would be called out of school to babysit her siblings. The people in the neighborhood knew her mom was on drugs, because they were either smoking with her or she was buying from them.

Her mother didn’t keep jobs because of smoking and drinking, and her sister’s father sold drugs. Her younger siblings were abused, especially her younger brother who was physically and mentally abused by their mother. Because of the time she spent living with her grandmother, she remembers thinking “This can’t be life.” Four of her younger siblings were crack babies and later suffered from behavioral issues. Her younger brother was taken away by DCFS and ended up at their grandmother’s.

Achiever 2 went to Roosevelt Magnet school until she was seven-years-old when her mother broke up with her sister's dad, and they were put out of their home. She then attended Harrison Primary School through third grade, but she hated it so much that she chose to move back to her grandmother's to attend Roosevelt for middle school. Her brother moved into their grandmother's too because he was getting in trouble. At Harrison, she remembers being bullied by other kids, saying "I didn't have the best clothes, didn't have the best shoes, and didn't have money." Her self-esteem suffered.

Her grades fluctuated; they could have been better, but she says she didn't try. Her mom wasn't on her to improve her grades, so she wasn't motivated. She also struggled with homework or studying for tests because she didn't have structure at home. At the end of sixth grade, she decided that she didn't want to be embarrassed by her bad grades. Her friends got good grades, and she didn't want to be the odd one out. She started to self-motivate. She knew she wanted to go further in life, so she had to do good in school.

Achiever 2 was the only child in her family who hadn't met their father. This was really difficult growing up and impacted her self-esteem. She finally met her father over the phone at the beginning of her seventh-grade year. During their conversations, he began to instill values in her. He told her that school was important and promoted structure in her life. He had a good job, driving semi-trucks. Her father would send her money clothes, toys and personal products. They talked a lot over the phone until he visited during the summer of her seventh-grade year. It was hard for her to trust him because she had been touched by her younger sisters' dad and she didn't know him. He took her to meet his family; those aunts, uncles, and sisters were so different from what she was used to. He took her shopping and threw away all of her old stuff. He got her hair done. While he was away on work, Achiever 2 stayed with her step-sister, and then he would pick her up. He took her on vacation too. They went to Disney, Sea World, Mexico, and San Bernardino.

When her calls started going to voicemail, she found out that he went to prison for touching his stepdaughter. She felt like she couldn't trust anyone. She had also been touched, so after that she kept her guard up. Her father didn't want her to know what he did. She can't forgive him because he won't admit his wrongdoing, but she still admires the years' worth of values he instilled in her like how a woman should carry herself.

She later found out that he had given her mother money to get an abortion. Her mother decided to have her, kept the money and didn't tell her father. She says "I love her but my mom was mentally, physically, emotionally very abusive." Achiever 2 does not remember her mom ever kissing or hugging her. Her mother would tell her that her dad didn't want her.

Achiever 2 got average grades throughout high school at Manual, mostly Cs. She said some of the teachers knew she was going through things and would try to encourage her, saying "I know you can do this." Other teachers didn't care. She worked harder for the teachers who encouraged her. Throughout her schooling, she vividly recalls special teachers who encouraged her, stayed on her, were hard on her, or teachers she didn't want to disappoint.

In high school, she joined the ROTC and was drill team commander. She was one of the sergeant's favorites and he stayed on her because he knew she could do better. When she got a boyfriend, her grades began to slip because she was skipping school. She was voted battalion commander during her senior year but lost position because of attendance. During this time, she had to work to support her mom, pay the bills, and buy things for her siblings. She remembers that she wanted to do volleyball, but she couldn't stay after school because she had to babysit or go to work. She almost missed her high school graduation because she didn't have enough money, but her boyfriend and grandma paid for her cap, gown, and graduation shirt. She got pregnant right after high school graduation. She had passed the test to go into the armed service, but she couldn't because she was pregnant.

Her relationship with her mom deteriorated because she thought she was grown. She was paying bills, watching the siblings, and didn't want to be there anymore. She asked for emancipation, but her mom didn't allow it because she needed her. Then her younger siblings and her mom were put out of Harrison. Achiever 2 slept at a family friend's for a while before she got an apartment. Her mom came back under the pretense of helping then she moved the kids [her siblings] in. Her mother remained verbally abusive. The cops had a warrant for her mother and put her in jail. She came back bitter. Achiever 2 was getting child support for her younger siblings. Her mother called DCFS and lied to them, but the officer knew what kind of person she was and dismissed it.

When her boyfriend started using drugs and cheating, she knew it would end with him. He wasn't going to change. She was using government assistance and going to pantries. She says "I knew that's not what type of life I wanted." She broke up with the father of her daughter and started dating a new man. Her daughter has no real connection with her father. They moved into Bradley Park. Twelve years later, she is still with that man. He is an excellent father. She always knew she was better than the Harrison lifestyle. She has moved many times since. She has created stability for her daughter.

She only has a high school diploma, but she always manages to work her way up, leaving for a better job. Her first job was as a housekeeper. She then worked as a telemarketer and got promotions within the company. She got pregnant with her second child, her sister moved in, and she had problems with her mother. She got laid off for a month when the company moved to Texas. She started at CAT in Morton but

got laid off again. She got pregnant with her third child and collected unemployment for a year. She eventually started working at CAT again but this time at a lower wage. She figured out what to look for in a company and began to ace interviews. She got an offer at CAT and has received multiple promotions. She was laid off at CAT. She had many options of jobs after that. When she finally settled, she negotiated a better salary and all of the overtime she could want. She also has time to take her daughter to school. She is currently making \$55,000 to \$65,000 per a year.

Achiever 3

Achiever 3 was born at Methodist and grew up in the south end. Her parents were born and raised in Peoria. Her grandparents were tough people. Her father is a librarian. Her mother was a bill collector. Things were challenging at home. She noticed things weren't normal with her dad. Her grandma had dementia. Her aunt went to the food-bank and brought food to them every other week. She believed they didn't qualify for food stamps. It seems like money was irresponsibly spent or they were too proud to accept services. Her household had seven people and one income. Her mom was the backbone of their family; she drove everyone all over the city. She said "She was the glue." She said her home life was hell. Her father was an alcoholic. Her neighbors were cruel and would say things like "You think you're better than us, but I'm selling to your dad."

Her family moved to a new neighborhood. She said Rolling Acres was utopia. She played YMCA basketball, volleyball, and was in band. Her uncle was a support system. He worked in retail management. He encouraged her enough to get off her butt and get her to stop feeling sorry for herself. She knew at sixteen that she was going to leave home.

In elementary school, Achiever 3 was bussed from the South end to the northern schools. Kids would tell her "My mom said I can't come there to play with you, we can't be friends because of where you're from." That hurt her and made her question herself. At the school, she didn't qualify for free lunch, so her parents had to send money to the school. If there was no money in the account, she had to eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She said other kids were middle class and didn't get peanut butter and jelly. She said that was embarrassing. When her family would go to garage sales in northern neighborhoods, she would hide in the car, so she wouldn't be embarrassed.

When she went to Valeska Hinton, she was part of the inaugural class and had a great experience in a diverse population. When she graduated to Northmoor, she was one of the few Black students. This shift made her discover race and classes within race. She noticed the difference impacted self-esteem. When she moved to Rolling Acres, her grades improved. She said one teacher "opened my eyes to math and science through the use of the weather station." She remembers having awesome teachers.

She struggled to make friends in the new neighborhood until fifth grade. By this time, she was no longer the only Black student in her classes.

In middle school, Tomorrow's Scientists, Technicians and Managers Program (TSTM) speakers would come and describe careers and experiences. She remembers thinking "I can do that." The TSTM speakers were from the south end. She was also in the Math & Science program at Purdue for minorities. Again, she realized that there were more people like her. She remembers one teacher saying "He's wonderful. He's the best ever." He would take his time and walk us through the problems while cracking a joke every now and then to be relatable. He was all around a good person who just wanted to see his students win.

When she entered high school, she said "I just feel like I lost confidence during that time period." She carried a lot of embarrassment and shame of poverty. Until she filled out the FAFSA, she had no idea how much or how little money was coming into the household. She had the stress at school and stress at home, and her parents didn't seem to know how to help. Achiever 3's white teachers would single her out. Her teacher spoke in harsher tones to her. She said the white teacher was mean every day. One time her teacher wouldn't let her go to the bathroom, so she peed on herself. She said there was a lot of peer pressure, from boys for sex, from other students if they saw her talking to someone. She was told she was too white sometimes. She felt like an outsider and stayed to herself mostly.

She tried to be involved in sports, but they took up too much time and affected her grades. She got a summer job because she was tired of not having things. She was propositioned to sell drugs from her place of employment. She only did it a few times before she started feeling guilty about it. She was scared of getting caught, so she quit after making \$400. The dealer got caught and went to jail shortly after she quit. The only reason she did it was because she felt guilty asking for stuff from her parents.

When social media like Myspace became popular, students started cyber bullying, spreading gossip, starting fights, and releasing personal information. Her junior year she was living her best life. She had three friends. She got a paid internship at CAT and did summer programs at Project Lead the Way, ICC, and TSTM. She was even the president of TSTM. She was accepted to North Carolina A&T State University by her first semester of her senior year. She did all of the school paperwork and FAFSA paperwork by herself.

She said her grades were really good in high school because "I knew I needed good grades to leave." Her parents didn't have enough money to send her to college, so she needed scholarships. She said the Urban League educated her on college, FAFSA, and tuition. She had a 3.5 GPA in high school and received partial scholarships. Her internships paid for college. Her grades slipped during college and she lost her partial

scholarship. She persisted by taking on more loans. She used all of her resources because “I was going to make it happen absolutely. I was not coming back home.”

After college, she got a job offer for \$60,000 as a civil engineer. She couldn't believe it. She was coming back to the south end of Peoria from NC A&T with a degree in civil engineering. The motto she lives by is “The only thing that stands between a person and what they want in life is merely the will to try and the faith to believe that it's possible.” She has received four promotions in six years.

Working at Pepsi, her life is totally integrated into work. It took a lot to earn her team's respect. She says some contractors won't acknowledge her because of her race and gender and only talk with her white male counterparts. She has learned that she has to ask more questions and learn what management wants and needs. She has to take her time and analyze people to understand their expectations, so she can deliver. White men second guess her all of the time. They question her judgement any chance they get, but she always comes back with facts. White managers are uncomfortable around her, want to touch her hair, are jealous of her success, or nitpick her every move. She has learned from another Black woman who works there. She has watched how that woman handles pressure and questioning with grace and remains on top of her information.

Achiever 4

Achiever 4 grew up on the northside near Woodruff with her older brother who is four years older. Her mother had her when she was twenty-five. She was a nursing student at Bradley University, but she had her thyroid removed and started having issues. Her mother was a stay-at-home mom and her aunts brought them food. Her mother was on medical and government assistance. Achiever 4 and her brother could do whatever they wanted. They would ride bikes around the neighborhood without their mother knowing where they were. Her brother would stay out all night long, and she would stay out all day. She knew something was different with her mother because her friends' parents wouldn't let them stay out.

She and her brother had different fathers. Her brother's father was very involved, helping their mom out a lot because she was his high school sweetheart. He played a big role in all of their lives. He was more of a dad than her own father until he started another family when she was about nine or ten. He then moved to ATL, but he still sent money. Achiever 4's dad was married and wasn't involved in her life. She didn't really have a relationship with her dad while she was growing up. Her dad and mom were just a fling. As an adult, she has a relationship with her father after reconciling with him. Her mother never told him she had gotten pregnant. She has met her father's family and even has a relationship with her half-brother and her dad's ex-wife.

When she was in fourth grade, her brother who was in eighth grade started selling drugs. He suddenly had a lot of money to take care of their home. He became the man of the house. At one point they became homeless and moved from shelter to shelter. This is when her brother got really involved in the drug “lifestyle.” All she knew was the lifestyle and as a result she started dating guys that were also in that lifestyle. It was a fast life, but as long as they didn’t get caught, it was worth it. She said it was a “way to feel comfortable without worrying how we’re going to eat and pay the bills. He would make it happen” by any means necessary.

Achiever 4 said she wasn’t interested in school at all. She was popular and did just enough to finish school. She kept a C average, so she could graduate. She had to help out around the house and started working at age fourteen. She wanted to make sure she could buy what she wanted because she “was always in fear of not having.” She worked at APAC telemarketing, McDonalds, and CVS pharmacy in high school. She thought money was more important than grades. She wanted to go to college for a way out, but she just couldn’t focus. When she was attending Longfellow, she was in shelters, uncomfortable and embarrassed. She was worried about people’s perception of her living in the shelter. She knew people knew they were living in the shelter. Her friends didn’t seem to care because they never mentioned it, and sometimes her friend’s mom would let her stay with them. Government assistance wasn’t enough.

She was involved in cheerleading. Both she and her brother were very athletic and used sports as their outlets. She was a point guard, ran the 200 meters, and was a pitcher in softball. Her brother was also a star athlete in middle school. Her brother was popular at school, and she was known as his little sister. She rode his wave. In high school, she started to date older men and dress in all the latest fashions. She said “I love fashion. I was always ready to go to school to flaunt my fashion.” Her brother bought her clothing to wear at school like Louis V bags from Michigan Ave. Her brother’s drug life gave her all the money she could need.

She dated guys who were similar to her brother. All of her boyfriends were involved in drug trafficking. She dated an older man from Chicago who was really nice, charming, charismatic, but also abusive. He was controlling and would fight her a lot. She was used to the lifestyle that he could provide and it was hard to leave because she liked the material things. She dated him from the ages of seventeen to twenty-one. He was very abusive and during one incident he busted her eardrums and threw her in the trunk of her car. She overlooked all of the abuse because of the trips, the money, and the luxury. He wanted her to be okay with his behavior, cheating, lying, and fighting. He never used her to traffic because he didn’t want her involved. She got pregnant but later had a miscarriage. She thought that the baby would help the relationship, so she was excited.

After the miscarriage, things went back to the way they were before. They also were involved in a motorcycle accident which put her into a coma. She was young and

naïve so she stayed until he got caught and went to prison. Prison allowed her to get out of the relationship. Her brother never wanted her to be involved in drug trafficking. She would sometimes be the driver, but they had a system worked out so she would be able to claim ignorance. The Feds knew who she was, but they only really wanted her brother. He cooperated with them, so they would let her go.

Achiever 4 moved into her own apartment. Her mom moved in with an aunt, and she stopped being so involved with her mom. As a child, she was constantly cleaning because her mother was a hoarder. When her aunt moved to Florida, she had to step up and take care of her mother again. She worked as a CVS pharmacy technician during the day and a stripper at night. She went from dating a dope dealer to a college guy. This relationship became serious even though she didn't treat him very well. He was a nice guy, but she took advantage of him. They got married and had a daughter together, but ended up divorcing.

Her daughter is her gift because she was born on her birthday. She says that "I always imagined my daughter would be nothing like me at all." Her daughter is exactly how she thought she'd be. While she knows the streets, her daughter knows books. She did pharma sales for twelve years. Her brother got out of prison and now works at CAT. She moved in with him, but when he got picked up by the Feds again, she started stripping again. She now had to take care of her own daughter and her brother's five kids. Her brother was her backbone and after he was sent to prison, she struggled to hold everything together. She created relationships with two of the men she met while stripping who were really good customers. They provided financial benefits which took care of her family. Because they didn't know about each other, she scheduled different times for each of them, and whoever gave her more money got more of her time. An encounter with a customer at the strip club where she worked inspired Achiever 4 to start reading the bible, looking for a change. She began looking at life differently. She put together her cleaning service, making connections and knocking on doors. Now she owns property, and her salary is middle class. She makes \$50,000 to \$70,000.

Achiever 5

Achiever 5 grew up in a white neighborhood, and her family was the only Black family. She had two white friends; she could feel the cultural difference even as a young child. She noticed how the parent-child relationship differed by race. Her white friends would talk to their parents in any kind of way. She comes from a blended family. Her brother has a different father. She says "Dad is my best friend." Her dad told her 'I love you' every day. Her mother and her aunt resented how close she was with her father. When she was younger one of her cousins tried to touch her, but her father came to the rescue. After that, she felt weird around her cousin until he eventually went to prison.

She went to Thomas Jefferson for kindergarten. She was a very rebellious and talkative child who would write on things all of the time. In elementary school, she was bullied for being dark-skinned, heavy-set, and having short hair. She began focusing on writing. She won the Young Author's program. In third grade, she was suspended after a white girl told the teacher Achiever 5 told her cousin to stop messing with her or she would hit him. When her father came to school after her suspension, he learned about the no tolerance policy. Her father took her out of public school and enrolled her in a private school where she was the only Black girl in the class. She felt like she didn't belong because she had braids and the white girls didn't and she was heavy-set and they were skinny.

She went back to public school in fifth grade. She had a terrible time in middle school. All of her hair fell out in back and she had to go to school like that. People talked about her hair at school. Most of her friends were lighter than her. She was taller, bigger, and now she had no hair. She started acting out in sixth grade because she was angry about people talking about her. She had friends, but she was still afraid she was being talked about. She was suspended for vulgar language. Her parents were besides themselves, and they didn't know what to do.

High school was the worst time of her life. She went to Richwoods which was predominantly white. Her friends were involved with boys, but boys weren't interested in her. There was a lot of drama in her friend group which she was pulled into. She hated going to school freshman year. She got suspended for defending herself against a boy. During her sophomore year, she lost her virginity and got a car. She got suspended again because she was involved in a fight even though she didn't fight back. The other girl pulled her braids out. She got teased for weeks afterwards. She hated Peoria and everyone in Peoria. She started skipping school junior year. Her boyfriend gave her chlamydia. She got in a fight outside a girl's house because there was drama on social media. She went to Chicago with Upward Bound, but since she didn't behave at school, she was not allowed to go on future trips to New York City or D.C. She was considered one of the "mean girls."

Achiever 5 had a 2.7 GPA in high school and got a 20 on the ACT. She was good at English. Her mom never went to college, and her dad had a master degree. Her mom didn't want her to go to college at first. She started at Western but she was warned that if she messed up, she would have to come home and go to ICC. She got a 3.5 GPA. She shed old friends and became a better person. She loved college and found herself. She said people get stuck in Peoria and live there for the rest of their lives, "They don't do nothing; they want to keep up drama. Everybody knows somebody and everybody's business." When she went to college, she wasn't in that realm anymore. She studied journalism and African American studies. She was awakened to writing and the African American experience in an educational way. She got involved in the Black Students Association (BSA) and was on the executive board. She also joined a sorority.

While in college, she was in an emotionally, mentally, and physically abusive relationship with a man in Peoria. She started having nightmares where she was fighting; she would punch the wall in her sleep. Once she passed out in the shower and woke up bleeding from her mouth. She was depressed. She went to parties and finally felt popular without the stigma of being the mean girl. She said people genuinely liked her and she had a place. Her roommate was her best friend. She was the minority student orientation leader. She had a typical college student life. She got a 4.0 GPA. She had supportive and influential professors. She was mostly inspired by her Black professors. She said “The white professors didn't breathe life into me like my Black professors did.”

She took summer classes, so she didn't have to go home between her junior and senior year. She visited Peoria and got pregnant. She was very upset and told her boyfriend and her parents. She was twenty-one-years-old. Her boyfriend was in disbelief, and her mom said she was ruining her life. When the semester started again, she still attended. She intended to finish college even while she was pregnant. She ended up having a silent miscarriage and was required to take pills to expel the pregnancy tissue. She didn't want to go through the experience at school so she went home to take the pills. She remembers her mom being in the bathroom with her while her dad and boyfriend sat outside, praying. She felt this time of crisis helped them with their mother-daughter relationship. For the rest of her senior year, she was angry and depressed, but she still graduated Cum Laude with a 4.0 GPA.

After her college graduation, she started gaining weight because she was smoking, eating, and sleeping a lot. She applied for a graduate program at Western, but she didn't get accepted because the director said she didn't think Achiever 5 could communicate well in a classroom. She applied to SIU and got accepted. She got an assistantship, so she wouldn't have to pay tuition. She recognized her self-esteem and weight issues. She began Weight Watchers and lost twenty-five to thirty pounds.

Her first job was an ISU RA. She learned the nuances of race and gender and their role in professionalism. Her colleagues would make comments about her hair. Her boss wouldn't take her on recruitment trips because she “didn't smile.” One of her colleagues tried to kill herself, and it wasn't reported. The university told her colleague if she attempted suicide again, they would fire her. Achiever 5 became this woman's advocate.

She started her doctoral program at the University of Illinois. As the youngest of her cohort, she felt imposter syndrome because she only had one year of experience while everyone else had five, six, or twenty years. She worked as an RA director during her doctoral program. The RAs would take advantage of her inexperience. She started to notice inequalities amongst her colleagues. Her white female supervisor would criticize her for being on her phone while saying nothing about her white colleagues

who were on their phone all of the time. Her advisor reflected and admitted to holding her to a different standard. When Trump won, her Latinx colleagues admitted they were afraid, so they had a conversation about white fragility. Her white coworkers lashed out and said they were attacking white people. She believes that Black people are overlooked and oppressed.

She applied for and got the job as program coordinator at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. As soon as she arrived in Madison, she could feel the palpable white supremacist environment of the town. Her program was created to address discrimination, but she was discriminated against by her colleagues. They would lie, fill her work file with lies of insubordination, and bully her. She could see the schemes and systems working against a Black woman in a racist town. Her colleagues would nitpick everything she did, perpetuate microaggression all of the time which created a toxic environment. The workplace became so toxic that she had to go to therapy. Because her boss was incompetent, she ran all of the meetings. Her colleagues made a web of lies to get her fired. She didn't want that on her resume, so she asked to resign. They agreed as long as she didn't sue for wrongful termination. She suffered from PTSD from the workplace.

Achiever 5 now does multicultural and diversity work at a different higher ed institution. There is only one step between her and the president of the university. She has a job she loves but she needs a little more income. She has considered consulting to add income.

Achiever 6

Achiever 6 is from Cleveland. She is one of six children. Her younger brother was a crack baby. DCFS took them away. She went to a Catholic Social Service when she was five-years-old. They were very structured and had a lot of rules. The next home she went to was a pastor or deacon and his wife. The wife was mean to her. Even though the wife was a shade darker, she was made fun and said she was too black and her hair was too nappy. Her foster parents were hard on her. They would falsely accuse her of stealing. When they later found the "stolen" item, they never apologized. She moved to different foster homes and schools often. Every time they changed foster homes, they moved to a different school. Her foster parents did something inappropriate to her and/or her sister. She called the police, but the lady picked up the other line and told the police they were just playing. After that, her foster parent beat her with a curtain rod. Her school called the case worker, and the lady got charged with child endangerment and child abuse. She was in so many foster homes, she can't remember all of them. She had monthly ACR meetings with DCFS, but she never really understood what was going on. Her sister had been raped by another foster kid, so they had to be in specialized homes. She harbors serious regrets for not protecting her sister at the time. Eventually, they went back to their mother.

Her mom was addicted to crack and living at her boyfriend's house. She remembers scouring pads, crack pipes, and crack rocks. She flushed these items down the toilet any time she saw them. Her sister was molested by her mother's boyfriend. Achiever 6 started to resent her mother. That was when she "decided I did not want to be like this woman." She gained strength from the anger and resentment. She had no compassion for her mother, considering her mother disgusting. She would never allow herself to feel so low. She didn't understand her mother's choices. She says "I wanted to be anything but that."

She was taken away again and put back in foster care. After that, she bounced between relatives which weren't better than foster care. She recalls her aunt making her brother sleep on the back porch. While her aunt was less abusive to her, the aunt would still verbally abuse and occasionally deny them food. Her aunts and uncles resent her mother because they had to raise her after their mother died. Her mother was also molested and dropped out of school around eighth or ninth grade.

She is now going to therapy to process and heal from the past. Therapy allowed her to unload all of her issues with her mother, so she could understand the impact this had on her life. People called her a smart mouth because she wasn't afraid to ask follow up questions. She questioned all authority like case workers, teachers, and foster parents. She chose Claire Huxtable as her role model and she admired her cousin who had good grades. She was always an A or B student. At school she and her siblings were bullied. Girls who wore name brand clothing didn't want to play with them. Once she got in a fight with another girl to protect her sister and got suspended. Her mother made the siblings fight each other for sport. They became known as "The Fight Kids." The south side picked on the weak.

She had a foster parent who taught her to be stronger. He supported her and gave her a taste of a father's love. She stood up for herself. He supported this self-advocacy. She recalls an abusive foster mother whose son made advances on her. She told her foster sister who told the foster mother. The foster mother whipped her. At the ACR meeting, the foster mother lied and said she was beating on her younger foster sister and wanted her out. She didn't argue against this, so it went on her record. Her next foster parents were very loose with rules and she enjoyed the freedom. She didn't like the foster mother's boyfriend, but the foster mother taught her how to manage money, set up a bank account, and let her drive her car. After that, she stayed with her cousin for a while. Her cousin-in-law would lock up the food. She eventually left her cousin's house and he reported her as a runaway.

She lived in her car for a while, then with another cousin. That was a better and more loving living situation, but she still wanted to be on her own. The Children's Home Program allowed her to live on her own. She had a monitor who would visit her apartment at odd times and make suggestive comments, but she didn't speak up for herself. She didn't feel safe so she would block the door in the apartment so that the

monitor would have to knock before entering. She was required to leave the program since blocking the door was against policy. She then moved in with her boyfriend, but they broke up soon after. She had to make a decision about college. She was realistic about schools and applied to ISU because her tuition and room and board would be paid for because she was a ward of the state. She received her first D during her first semester. During parents' weekends, she had no one to visit her on campus so she was lonely. She started wanting to find her father. When she asked her mom who her father was, she discovered that when her mom got pregnant with her, she didn't tell the father because he married. Her mother made some calls, and they all talked on the phone.

She lived with her brother for a while. He had two kids and their mother was in jail. Her brother was murdered, so she took the two kids into custody to avoid foster care. The situation was just hopeless. She had no job. She says "just wanted to disappear." She sold her furniture and gave away everything, so they could move to ATL. When the apartment complex tried to place her in an apartment with mold, she filed a lawsuit and won. She used the settlement money to pay for bills, a car, and a trip to Hawaii.

Achiever 6 started prepping for the LSAT. She went to law school and hated it. The school acted like they were excited to have her but the only reason was because school received diversity money. She learned that school officials didn't want Black people there. White boys would get credit when they didn't do anything. SIU law school was filled with prejudiced people. She graduated a year early. After graduation she got pregnant with a guy, she didn't think was husband material. When he learned she was pregnant, he disappeared. He didn't want to have a relationship with their daughter. She was also studying for the bar during this time. She ended up failing the bar by seven point, but passed the second time.

She started advocacy work. She has been sticking up for people so much of her life that it was natural that she worked in that field. Her situation was very stressful. She couldn't get childcare without a job, but she could get a job without childcare. In the end, Lutheran services had to take her brother's children. She worked at IL Mutual, Prairie State Legal Service, and now Kavanaugh Prairie. There are white women there who have less experience than her but are being paid more. She says that people of color are treated differently.

Throughout her life, there were times when at least one person believed in her. Teachers expected her to succeed, and she was a good student. She got all As and Bs for almost her entire school career. People would tell her "You know you're better than this" when her grades or behavior slipped. That was the thing that made her want to keep on track. She was a leader and played mom. Sometimes she wanted to punch people in the face, but she would always remember the consequences. She had one DCFS counselor who was a "white guy, a real cool cat." He always had faith in her

and came to every graduation even when her mom didn't. Having a couple of people on her team meant a lot. She said her mom expected more from her. She learned indirectly from her mom, basically do the opposite of her behavior. She taught herself to have self-esteem.

Achiever 7

Achiever 7 was born in August of 1985. Both of her parents were in their thirties and working. She has two siblings. Her dad was a Navy man. Her mom worked when she was born. Both of her parents went to college. Her father worked at CAT, and her mother worked an hourly blue-collar job. She went to Proctor Daycare with mostly white kids. In elementary school, she was a good student with mostly As and Bs. She had a strong friend circle. She was recommended to Washington Gifted. All of her friends tested too but didn't make it. She was the only one who went.

In fifth grade, her parents got divorced. She was one of four African American students out of 240 students. At the time, she wasn't expecting both an academic challenge and a race challenge. She hadn't experienced it before. There was only one Black teacher in the whole building. She tried to make friends, but she was awkward, tall, skinny, smarter than everybody. She didn't have any Black friends anymore. She felt like she didn't belong. Her grades suffered. A girl told her she had told her mom she made a Black friend. She wasn't invited to anyone's house. Nobody had a crush on her. She tried to fit in. She wore their clothes, watched their movies, listened to their songs.

When she was ten, her sister went to ICC, had a baby, and then went to Western. Her brother went to Lincolnwood College for football. He had schizophrenia and got a girl pregnant. She was still awkward and out of place. She used the computer to connect with people. She suppressed her negative feelings. Her standardized test scores proved that she was brilliant. She was always on the computer at home or at the library. She started sports and was involved in Black Achievers (now Teen Reach) in YMCA. At this time, she didn't see herself as smart. She was involved in church. Her stepmom would pick her up for church every week. Here she was around African American people and normalcy.

School was not going well. There were very affluent people at Washington Gifted. She was close with members of other marginalized groups. She played basketball, did cheer, ran track. Socially, her life was a nightmare. Academically, she couldn't learn or produce. Her dad moved out of the state. She lost her virginity at twelve to a boy from church. She was obsessed with pleasing him. Her grades were Cs, Ds, or Fs, but As or Bs in Spanish. She struggled to turn in her homework. Her brother was living in a mental institution and his son was living with them. Their mom lived in a two-bedroom apartment in a not safe neighborhood after the divorce.

Achiever 7 carried bad study habits into high school at Central. Her test scores were exceptional. She had no African American friends. She joined pompoms and made some African American friends. When her brother moved back in, their family was trapped in the little space. School wasn't her focus. She had no washer or dryer. The family had to choose if they wanted water in the shower or in the kitchen. Her mother was too proud for public aid, so food was expensive. She had to get a credit card to make ends meet. Her mom would get angry at little things. She went to school dances, but she didn't have friends to hang out with. She spent a lot of time in the AOL chatroom and made friends online.

She always knew she wanted to go to college. She wanted to be a fashion designer and knew she wanted to go away. She had a 2.3 or so GPA at Central. The best thing anyone could've done was check on her homework. Her dad was sending money to her. There was not enough money to wash clothes, to get hair done, and to get food. She was depressed. Her mom worked from 4 am to 12 pm. She wouldn't eat dinner till 10pm. They had no cable and no air conditioning. Her boyfriend stole her debit card and she told on him. She started dating a gangster. Nobody could see why she was with him. She says he was "reliable" but really, she was addicted to weed. She got pregnant. She was always distracted by boys. She thought each boy was going to marry her.

While in AP Spanish, the class went to Spain and Portugal, Madrid, Morocco, Corto del Sol. Her daddy paid for it. She didn't have developed hobbies after school. She stopped going to church. She had to go to night and summer school to get credit for high school graduation.

She decided she didn't want to mess up anymore; she wanted to take control. The colleges she applied to didn't have accommodation for girls with babies. She went to the library to research colleges and she enrolled herself. She went to Northern for their fashion program. It was affordable and far. She wanted to try life outside of oppressive surrounding towns. She says "You're so lucky if you reach 21 and don't get pregnant." Her mom kept her baby for the first semester. She stayed in the dorms. For child care assistance, she worked every weekend at the mall, on campus, and was waitlisted for subsidized housing.

For the summer, she worked. Her dad came back because of her pregnancy to save the day. He worked for CAT. She stayed in a bedroom at her dad's house with her son, working and taking classes at ICC. She worked on campus at the bookstore, and she got a discount on books and everything. She worked at Old Navy and bought clothes for her and the baby. She learned to make her schedule work for her. She joined the dance team, BSA, and BSU newsletter. She was invited into the honors program. She took advantage of the knowledge of those around her. She used the school counselor. She got food stamps, WIC, child support, learned how to cook, took

advantage of lots of programs like the child care assistance program (CCAP). Whatever she wanted to know she googled, read, or asked someone successful at it.

She took a break from boys to refocus and pursue other hobbies. She figured out what she really liked. She took her baby to Chicago. She cultivated herself by exposing herself to more things. She took electives seriously. At the financial aid office, there was a Black woman boss who inspired her to want to be that professional woman giving orders. She protected her time, recognizing sex, drinking, smoking, social media, and boys were a distraction. She defined distractions and removed them. College was the fresh start for her. She travelled to Black cities like NY, DC, Alabama, Miami, FL with Pell grant money.

She finished college in fall of '08 with a GPA just shy of 3.0. Her first job was at JP Morgan Chase in risk management and fraud. She realized she enjoyed business. It was cut throat and fast paced. She went to National Louis University for a free master. Her boss was a very vocal republican. She saw African American women under people's thumbs. She understood that she couldn't be afraid to pursue.

Achiever 8

Achiever 8's mom and dad were from New Albany and Leland, Mississippi. Her father went to high school and completed some college courses; he "was the brains." Her parents never married. She remembers they used food stamps to buy groceries. She says we were hungry a lot. She remembered once her brother tried to cook something, forgot about it, and set fire to the carpet in the apartment. She went to Longfellow middle school. She says they struggled most when she was seven-years-old. She recalls "we didn't have food. Our lights were getting cut off. We didn't have water. And my dad got on drugs." Her little sister had brain cancer. They went back and forth to St. Jude in Memphis. Since they didn't have a car, she observed her mother trying to figure out transportation. When the food stamps came to the house, it was like Christmas. They would get to go to the grocery store. Her mom put her dad out and he was living in the streets.

They moved to Lincoln Terrace (Manual Manors) and things were a little better. There was a new sense of community with lots of people and friends. Her sister got sick again. Her mom wasn't getting child support. They were struggling with food, lights, and rent backed up. Her sister died at three-years-old. Her mom hit rock bottom. There was no money to bury her child. Her paternal grandmother had life insurance on all of the grandkids so they were able to pay for a funeral. Her mom began to drink, she was depressed, and her dad was on more drugs. Her parents began to fist fight. Her older brother watched them. When her parents fought, her mom held her own.

They were put out of Manual Manor. Her dad wanted the kids to have a place to stay. They found a nice place on St. James. Her dad was strung out again, stealing from her

and breaking into homes. He stole food stamps and cash. When her dad was in jail, it gave her mom breathing room. Her mom got a job. She was resolved that “Mama ain’t gonna have to work.” She would take care of her whole family one day. She would help poor people. Her dream didn't seem real.

Her other aunt, who worked at the hospital, left Taft to move into a nice house with her daughter. Achiever 8 would stay at the aunt’s. She saw their nice house and car. She lied to employers about her age, so she could work. She was getting bullied because of her ugly clothes and shoes. She was going to use the money for hair and clothes. She stored it under the mattress, but her dad stole it. He also stole from neighbors. The neighbors hated them all because they thought they all were thieves.

They were evicted again. She walked to school at Peoria High School. She said things were tight. She didn't stress her mother. Since her sister died, she was the middle child now. Her brother got what he needed, and the baby sister got what she needed.

She moved so much. She always had a new teacher and principal. She didn't know how to fit in, so she started stealing. She lied about her age again to get another job. Her money boosted her confidence, but she was failing at school because of work. She didn't care about school anymore although her mom said that she couldn't drop out. She couldn't understand how others did well. Her school would call, so she took the phone off the hook. She was doing all she could to avoid going to school. She was growing up too fast and missing her childhood. She got through high school. Instead of receiving assistance, she was labeled and disciplined as the bad kid.

Nobody told her she should go to college. She only heard about getting your high school diploma. She recalls life as “I was a broken kid. People called me ugly, couldn't dress, nappy headed, ain't have no hair. Self-esteem was boom” [bad]. Then comes a guy; she thought he was heaven sent. He had a car, and [nice] clothes. He was a college guy; his dad was an Alpha. He was a drug dealer. Nobody ever told her you should probably stay away from drug dealers. She had never seen money like that before. Her mom said stay away. They got in trouble. He almost brought her down with him. That was her wake up call. She got her diploma but she was still depressed, angry, and bitter.

She went to ICC. She got burned out and basically dropped out. Her friends started having babies. She tried ICC one more time. She typed her resume and didn't know how to dress for an interview. She got the job and got a car. She worked hard and got promoted. It felt great. She started “bumping heads” with the boss. She decided to leave because of the harsh environment. She took a pay cut to get out of the harsh environment. She had 12 credit cards, a car, and less money. She didn't know how to budget money. She didn't know about credit. She said “I had nobody to teach me or show me.” Her car was repossessed.

She started working at a new bank. She was catching rides to interviews. She got the job. The interviewer saw something special about her. She was the only Black person at the bank. She was a fast learner. Her coworkers were jealous of how she's good at building relationships with clients. She got pregnant at twenty-five. Her son's father wasn't a "real man." Her coworkers didn't judge her because they knew her struggle. She got promoted. She says "Not once did I think that girl, they called ugly, the girl they called poor, the girl who went through so much in her life would be where she was." She says "I got an office with a plaque with my name on it. I can't believe this." She watched and emulated coworkers' assertiveness, talked like them, walked like them, dressed like them. A white male mentor took her under his wing. Her mentor took her into his family. She was the subject of office gossip. When her bank was acquired, her coworkers told her she'd be the first fired, but they were the ones who were fired. Then a new white female from Chicago came in and demoted her because she "didn't have sales experience." Her new boss emailed and texted her all night, stretched her thin.

Her dad got out of prison and moved in with her. She found her dad a place to live, but he didn't know how to live on his own. When her father died, she did the planning alone. She helps her family whenever she sees them struggling, especially her mother. Her son says "You act like you're everybody's mom." She feels that most kids don't hear what they need to hear at home. She says nobody ever taught her about credit, nobody ever taught her how to manage my money, nobody ever told her you should probably stay away from drug dealers. They told her she was bad. If that's all they ever hear, what else can they be. She now makes between \$100,000 and \$125,0000.

Aspirers

Aspirer 1

She lives on the North end in the Taft Homes. She says "it's hard staying there because she couldn't go outside." In the years 1997 through 1998, she stayed with her stepmom and dad. Her stepmother is a CNA and has 6 kids. Her Mom lives out of town in Sacramento, CA. She was 2 or 3 when her parents split. She moved in with her dad at 3 years old. She thought her parents were being mean. She went to Irving from kindergarten to fourth grade, one of the best schools in Peoria, before they got bad. She had to walk to school. She says, "Now they (her parents) baby the kids," her mom walks kids to and from school. She wasn't a fan of school because she found it hard to stay focused. The school had programs for the kids. She says the best teacher she had was in second grade.

The school figured out she wasn't picking up the lessons as quickly as the other students and she was placed in Special Ed classes. She remembers her principal. She was B and C student. She was more observant than others. She paid attention to cliques and who was talking about people. She went to Lincoln from fifth grade to

eighth grade. She can remember owning a pair of bell bottoms. She was in fifth grade and the sixth grade girls were mad and wanted to fight over her over the pants. She was moved to another smaller class with 5 kids where she could get more 1 on 1 attention and it was more hands on. She received A, B, and Cs. There were mainly boys in the class. One of the boys in the class was her cousin. Her grandma was a part of Taft Council. The resource center had programs such as arts and crafts in which she participated when she was little. Her grandmother ran the program until she was 10/11 years old. One of her first memories of her grandma was that she talked for the people.

She didn't need friends since she had all of those brothers and sisters. She rode the school bus to school. She didn't want to be at Lincoln because of her outsider life. She was a child that DCFS had placed in the system. She ran away from home at 11/12 years old to the other end of town. Her stepmom/dad tried to explain to her that she didn't have anywhere to go. She went to her cousin-in-law's house who was a drunk and stayed for 3 days and got caught at school. Her dad was furious and asked did she want to go back to system? She was hell on wheels. She said, "There was always someone judging and labeling you [referring to herself], misleading you and case workers would make them feel bad all the time. Some case workers didn't listen to the kids. Some foster parents were good and treat you like one of their children.

Some just wanted the stipend to help with their bills." Her life was downhill for a long time because she wanted to be with family. She was questioned about clothes because for over a year she didn't get any new clothes/shoes. She got into trouble, was put behind bars and placed on parole. She was placed in a children's home. The case worker asked her instead of the foster parent, and she made it seem like she was barely clothed or fed her so she couldn't stay 2 years in that place. During middle school she got in trouble again because she wasn't in school or the foster home and that was a violation of parole. In eighth grade, she was locked up for 1 year because she stole a car. She was placed in the Juvenile Department of Corrections (DOC) Adult education program in Moss. She was released after 7 more months. Once she got out, she went to school at the adult education- juvenile DOC which was different from Juvenile Detention Center (JDC). Illinois Youth Center (IYC) – Waynesville, Chicago, St. Charles. The adult education classes were confusing. They were more for people who were advanced. They had 2 teachers dedicated. It was a barb wired school in Waynesville. Students there had already "been on run" meaning they had run away from home. The next foster parent was overly strict. She was then placed with a lady who should never have foster kids.

While there she worked at McDonald's in East Peoria, trying to keep out of trouble. She started staying with a woman in the program while locked up with a friend's cousin. At 16, DCFS wouldn't move her from that home and she had to live at that home again. She had an advocate at Crittenden. She felt like she was a troubled child and liar. She ran away from there and went back to her family. They asked why and

she said because of the dogs. She then moved someplace else but was only there for a week. She then went to a friend of her dad's, who helped, got her daughter and asked DCFS to let her go and they did. When she was 19, she got an apartment. She worked and tried to go to school but had another baby. She still worked at the McDonalds in East Peoria. She received food stamps (not cash); but not many because she was working.

She wasn't struggling and didn't have many worries with kids. She had more when she had kids. She moved into a duplex apartment but she tried to get someplace else because the apartment had rats in the walls. When she got another apartment, it was worse in the same way. There were rats and mice that she could see. She then moved into another apartment on Spring St. with her boyfriend. There were no windows downstairs and she could see mice. She and her boyfriend moved in with his sister but they fell out. The boyfriend and the dad were still working at McDonald's. For about a month, she couldn't get to work so she quit the job because she couldn't get to work and daycare.

One of her daughters stayed with people back and forth. She was always helping others and gave them food stamps or rent money. She stayed with family and friends for 3 years until she got fed up and she had 3 more babies. She had 11 kids. She used tax money to purchase greyhound tickets to Sacramento to be with her mom. She tried to make it alone and they helped her. She had to stay in a hotel for 2 weeks but she was supposed to look for apartment. She claimed homelessness to receive Sacramento Public Aid. They helped to pay rent. Her mom had a drug problem. Her mother moved in with her and the kids. She gave a 30-day notice and came back to Peoria. Her grandma was sick and grandpa said that nobody could stay. She ended up living with her aunt for 1 ½ years. People were always taking for something and after 2 to 3 days the food was gone and they would end up going without food. They always came up short. She sent kids away to a friend of her dad's house until she got Link and got them back each month.

She was tired of it and moved in with someone else for 1 ½ years and applied for housing. Her application was delayed because she owed a SILCO bill. She had to come up with the money. She received \$95 from the Community Action Agency. She did hair the Taft Houses, starting in 2011 or so. The kids were bullied walking to bus stop. There was constant confrontation with people. Her family tried to bring her down and bring their issues to her, fighting. She stayed 5 years at the Taft Houses until 2015, when she got tired again. She got pregnant with twins. She moved out of town to Waynesville, Missouri where she stayed in a shelter for 3 months until she was able to get her own place. She went to the Good Samaritan Thrift Store to furnish the house. She lived there for a year. In 2016, she lived with her boyfriend's mom for a year. They fell out and he found someone else, so she left and moved in with a family member who helped her get a job for 5 months. She worked with her dad for a year at KFC on Allen.

She was waiting for housing but she owed money. She paid and had to come up with the deposit. Her boyfriend helped to co-parent the four kids. She lived in the Harrison for almost 3 years and worked at KFC. She moved into a one-bedroom apartment and split the kids up. Her boyfriend has his 4 kids and she buys food and clothes. They spend weekends with her. Two of the kids live at her mom's house. Five of the kids live at the Harrison. She barely makes enough money to make ends meet each month and does hair to help make ends meet.

Aspirer 2

Aspirer 2 was born at Methodist Hospital in 1996. She lived on the south side with her grandparents. Her mom graduated high school but she didn't go to college. She was placed in foster care at 6 years old. It was good and bad. She was in there from 6 years to 9 years old. She went to a bunch of different schools including Wittier, Kingman, Roosevelt, Tyng Primary and Trewyn. She was a class clown but she knew she was smart and showed that she could do it. She had C's, D's, and F's but started getting B's in a month because her dad enforced rules. When she was in foster care, she had Black parents. Her first foster home was bad. They tortured kids and locked them in closets.

The second foster home felt homey, this made her miss her parents. This made her act out in schools and she was moved back to first home. Back to hell again. They said she lied and it was covered up. She was fostered by her grandma but they put her somewhere else probably because she was spending too much time with her mom and dad. Her second foster parent died. She saw her first foster mother's husband at church and Walmart and she blacked out. When she was in foster care, she got C's, D's, and F's. She connected with her teacher who was African American. Most of her white teachers were assholes and they acted like the Black students were lower than them. She wore dirty clothes. She loved it at Tyng. At Wittier, they were assholes. Kingman was bad. She stayed there for two years but had good grades. The lunch ladies there were assholes. When she went to Trewyn, she had an attitude. From sixth through eighth grades, she went to Coolidge in Columbia.

Coolidge was a decent school; it wasn't so bad. Her family moved from Martin to Sheridan mid-year at Columbia. They cracked down at Columbia and she would've been kept back and would've had to go to Lindbergh. In eighth grade she went to Woodruff. There were great teachers there and smaller classes. She had a 3.8 GPA her junior year. She had a 127% in algebra. As a reward for good grades, her dad got her nails done and got her a phone. She was a songbird so she would disrupt class. She was emotional and she wanted more out of life. Her mom really didn't know how to connect or talk to her. She was one of eight children; she was number five. Her step mom worked at Equal Recovery. Her dad was incarcerated, now he's the manager of churches in Indianapolis.

Her life at her mom's was horrible. Her mom's boyfriend and nephews were monsters, they broke her wrist. She fell out of a window and broke both of her legs. There was trauma and abuse. Her mom was angry and maybe bipolar. Junior year she met a boy. She was 16 years old and he said he was 18 years old. She remembered him from Calvin Coolidge. She used to sneak off and do teenage stuff. He was actually 20. Her mom found out through text messages because she didn't know how to talk or connect with her. She ran away to her brother's house and found out he was older after they had crossed the line. She went to live with dad and he gave her a 10 pm curfew. She always stayed out later than 10 though. She got pregnant and her dad put her out.

She moved in with her boyfriend and he stayed with his mom and grandma. She got a job which made the grandma mad because of dogs. Her grandma sold dogs. She got pregnant at 17 and lost her job. In high school she was getting social security checks but her grandma was receiving the checks and only giving her some of the money. She was also house hopping with her boyfriend. He left her with his family because he was messing with another girl. She had to push herself during senior year to go to school. She had a city full of family without a bit of help so she stayed everywhere. She wanted more.

Her grandma said she couldn't foster her. She was lying though; she was a foster parent. She ended up paying for room at the baby daddy's aunt's house on California street for 2-3 months. She walked to school in rain, sleet, and snow because she was hungry. School was refuge. She got put out of her aunt's house. She had to sleep on park benches or at gas stations. She called a friend and was able to live with the friend's family. She was 17 and embarrassed. She ended up leaving because she didn't want to burden them. She stayed with her boyfriend's cousin in Lexington Hills and applied for a primary. That was the worst mistake. There were drugs and drinking. She was fending for herself. Her boyfriend's brother stayed there too. At 8 years old, she found out her grandma lied about not being a foster parent.

She got an apartment and her grandma called and told the apartment she was not getting social security checks which caused her approval to be temporarily cancelled. Her counselor at Woodruff gave her a little furniture. Her teacher gave her clothes for her first child. She didn't buy anything for her first child for a year. At Bellachino, she danced at age 18. She graduated high school with a 3.85 GPA. She danced in Spaulding at Fluffers, 3 days a week. She worked at Bellachino's but didn't get enough time. She worked there for 3 months. She says the other girls were all in "the life." She was also attending the Ultimate Medical Academy. She planned on dancing for 6 months.

One night someone came in and told her God doesn't like what you are doing so she cried and left. She went to Vegas with another dancer from the club and was only supposed to strip for 7 days but they didn't have dancer's permits. She says the girl

was a “bug,” and was constantly going off about everything because she was a drug addict. She says she did anything for drugs. The girls’ sugar daddy brought a tv in the room and they got put out of that hotel. It was cold that night so they went to another hotel and paid for it that night. She was straight and narrow after that. Her baby daddy brought her back to Peoria. She’s 18 years old at the time. She graduated as a pharmaceutical tech in chemicals at CVS. Walgreens was her externship, then CVS hired her. She was working on her car. After her graduation she moved to Lexington hills and started working at ResCare. She didn’t see an opportunity to move up so she went to an insurance company for 3 months. She didn’t get past training because she knew it wasn’t for her so she went to Walmart. She worked double shift after double shift. She had someone watch her son; he was most likely molesting her son.

She was caught up in some mess with a friend. They took him to Havana for money. He was selling drugs. It was a long case they kept her there for 4 hours and kept the car. She got dropped off because her mom couldn’t come since she was hurt. This was in 2017. Her car was returned a year later. She spent 2 nights in Peoria. They were then sent to Havana on a \$100,000 bond. Her brother bonded her out for \$120. Her case was completely closed and the charges were dropped. On 3/18/17 she was in the county for 3 days and ResCare could only do so much. She applied everywhere. She was collecting unemployment and Link. She got a job in Indianapolis but it fell through because her case was still open. She also worked at a hair braiding shop but they weren’t paying her right. The owner took advantage of her. She got a job at Kindred Hospital. Her first son’s dad loved to babysit which was a catch 22.

He thought they were back together. They had a fight on camera. She got her kids taken away in less than 30 days. He was a big help at first. He was her emotional support, always knew what to say but he was on drugs. He flipped from helping her to being very violent emotionally and physically. She got a job at Red Cross for \$15 an hour. She worked 50-60 hours a week. She had her kids in daycare. He always wanted money “he was eating off of me.” He made her take back their stuff in exchange for money to buy drugs. She pleased him because her DCFS case wasn’t quite closed and she didn’t want to get another one. He made her late to work all the time. There was a lot of emotional abuse. Red Cross fired her in April 2019. She found out she was pregnant in February. Then she had a miscarriage shortly after on the 16th. She had a fight with her boyfriend the day before the miscarriage then she had a seizure on the bus. She wanted to leave but he threatened to kill her and her kids. She was moving from the Lexington Hill in August. She had her trunk packed one morning at 5 am.

He threatened to kill her kids and threw the gun at her. She went to the police. He has shot at her before. He got arrested. She moved to live with her uncle in Indianapolis between August and September. In September, her uncle got arrested for pointing a gun at her stomach. She worked at HGS between October 2019 and January 2020. She started writing music because she had more to sing about. She didn’t drop the

song because it was of bad quality. Her second song did not have good quality. She says a boy lied and said she would be signed to his label. She recorded her song in a studio for \$10,000 and finally dropped it. She performed at the Contemporary Art Center in November. The DJ said no and cut her mic off. She says her family's always broke and asking for money. [In essence, if she's on WIC she does not have enough money to fully support herself.] She believes her family should only focus on themselves solely.

Aspirer 3

Aspirer 3 was born in October of 1995; she is currently 24 years old. She was born and raised in Peoria, IL. Aspirer 3 was one of eight children, three of which were her mother's daughters from a previous marriage. Her mother, who is white, was from Peoria; she worked at Methodist as a rehab nurse. Her dad was Black, he entered the Marine Corps and upon exiting owned a construction business. They owned a house on Columbia Terrace until her parents split during her sophomore year of high school.

Growing up in Columbia Terrace, their family knew all of their neighbors well. The street was full of kids as all the families had kids. She went to Valeska Hinton and loved going to school. She was very interested in arts and crafts and would frequently attend after school art shows. Additionally, Aspirer 3 was fantastic with math, but she struggled with her English classes. She stated that because of the long hours her parents were working and additional jobs that her older sisters had; there was no one to read to her or help her with reading. However, that did not stop her from maintaining B's in school. During her time at Valeska Hinton her teachers were very involved with their students and would make home visits to check up on them. However, the majority of the teachers that Aspirer 3 had between kindergarten and third grade were white.

After Valeska Hinton, Aspirer 3 went to Garfield school for her fourth-grade year. It was during this time that she had the most difficulties. She had a stutter and would talk to people about attending an after-school program to help her. She was bullied and that took a toll on her self-confidence. It was also during this time that she began to experience racism, kids would tell her that her skin was dirty and other insults. Additional things that she was made fun of for included her weight and her natural hair. She was told that her hair was frizzy and that she needed a straightener or hot comb. Furthermore, she was called dirty and nasty and told that she smelled weird. The common denominator of her bullies was that they were mostly white students.

At the time, her mom worked as the school nurse and was able to help her out. Her interest in after school programs and other activities within the school dwindled because of how she was treated and the bullies that she interacted with. However, she still played basketball and volleyball; but she only played basketball because she was tall not because she was good. Also, during this time her grades dropped to average C's.

When Aspirer 3 entered fifth grade her family moved to Bloomington. Her dad decided to move because of the economy and the shootings that were occurring. Aspirer 3 and her siblings were not allowed to play outside anymore, except in the backyard and they were not allowed to have friends over. This occurred because at the time on Columbia Terrace there were a lot of creeps from the bottom of the hill and a lot of people from Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous around. When her family moved, her older sisters moved into an apartment near Dunkin' Donuts, and Aspirer 3 decided to stay with her grandparents for a little bit.

While staying with her grandparents, Aspirer 3 went to Sterling Middle School. She said that it was a breeze and she was not bullied as much. If she was bullied it was mostly about her weight or occasionally about her hair. It was also during this time that Aspirer 3 began to take Zoloft. But after that year she decided to move out to Bloomington to be with her parents.

Aspirer 3 remained in Bloomington from sixth grade all the way through high school. While in school, she joined the Mathletes and orchestra. Aspirer 3 played the viola for hours on end. When she entered high school, she joined an acapella group and color guard. It was around this time when she started getting bullied again. It was common to get bullied if you were not wearing name brand clothing, have a cool car, or were just missing the "it" factor.

During her sophomore year, Aspirer 3 had an appearance on the MTV show "Made." During this time, she and her friend auditioned for the dance team and ended up making it. She said that dancing was a fun way to exercise and she was able to lose a good amount of weight. It was also through dance where she started to believe in herself and got energy back. Aspirer 3 was also able to wean herself off of antidepressants by her senior year. When she graduated from high school, Aspirer 3 had a 3.2 GPA.

Aspirer 3 applied to Robert Morris University, Illinois State University and Johnson and Wales University in Denver. She ended up attending Johnson and Wales Denver and double majored in baking and pastry arts with a minor in hospitality and mixology with a minor in business management. While at Johnson and Wales she met her best friend. She described her dorm as being small, hot, smelling like boy's feet, and having moldy showers. But she said that having her own space made it worth it.

While at Johnson and Wales Aspirer 3 was supporting herself. She exclaimed that while in Peoria, no one taught you anything. She did not know how to do taxes, make a budget, or fill out a resume. She was able to have an advisor that helped her file for financial aid, but she regrets not taking a money management class. Because she stated that she spent money on things that she didn't need, but would then only be able to eat ramen for the rest of the week. Many of her money decisions she ties to

being young and dumb, and never having her own money before, so she couldn't get just what she wanted when she wanted it. Aspirer 3 did not know at the time the importance of saving or paying bills on time, because she always had someone to take care of her. But she was able to learn from it all. She was able to start controlling her bad habits, such as smoking, removing things that she had that were not necessary, and taking up healthy habits such as biking.

In the year 2015, at the age of 20, Aspirer 3 moved back to Peoria. She worked at Taco Bell with her sister. She worked at Taco Bell for three years, until she felt like she was ready to grow up and be in a relationship and be codependent. She met a guy and entered a relationship with him. The relationship ended up being an abusive relationship. He controlled her money and didn't allow her to socialize with anyone. She felt that he was holding her back while she was still growing up. While Aspirer 3 was working at Taco Bell, she got arrested for stealing from Walmart. She stole because she didn't have money or anything to do. The guy that she was with would steal just to have something to do and then go out. He ended up persuading her to steal because he was a smooth talker. He lived on Howett at the time and she'd seen them shoot up before. She never thought that she would be there for it but he made it sound cool. During this time her self-confidence was a struggle, because of her childhood, and her boyfriend didn't make it any better. She gave an example of having sex in a public park near Lincoln Library, and at the time she was drinking and felt like a badass.

However, afterwards she thinks it was bad, and made her feel like she wasn't working at all, and felt like she was being demeaned. She gave herself just to have it thrown back at her. He called her a slut, a drug addict, and a liar. He constantly put her in a confused headspace. She felt sad without her person. Aspirer 3 said it felt lonely to not have any support, her sister had "her person." She said that you're in a place where something bad has happened like a death in a house and you just can't leave.

During this time Aspirer 3 said that she was young and naive, she didn't know her self-worth and felt like she was above the law. Her boyfriend was abusive, he hit her and they ran inside to fight. Her boyfriend ran out of the back of the building and she let them search; they found him and charged her for "obstruction of justice" and she went to jail for three days on a misdemeanor charge. She thought that this was ironic because every woman in her family has learned a lesson by going to jail. She broke up with her boyfriend, and then got back together with him when she went to jail. She lost her place, but they let her keep her job.

After getting out of jail, Aspirer 3's sister brought her in and taught her some necessary skills in growing up. For example, she taught Aspirer 3 how to create a resume, do her taxes, prioritize her bills, and save her money. Her sister also helped Aspirer 3 sell and get a better car, and helped her get insurance. During this time, she also met a guy at a birthday party for her nephew and niece. He was a football coach

and had known the family for ten years. Taco Bell did not give her the job that they had promised her, so she got a job at KFC working for a dollar more than Taco Bell. In the year that she worked at KFC, Aspirer 3 got together with the guy she met at the birthday party. Then Aspirer 3 got a job at Burger King and was there for only six months when she started questioning what she was doing with her life.

With her boyfriend's help, Aspirer 3 was able to obtain a job at HGS. She was a customer service representative for six to seven months. She had started working when she was pregnant. During this time, Aspirer 3's sister had died due to a surgical error after being intubated for fourteen days. Since she could not afford to take time off, she had to return to work the following day. However, her job gave her two weeks off for bereavement. And five months later she had a son, and returned to work six weeks later.

Not long after returning to work Aspirer 3 was promoted. She was also able to take her first family vacation and that's when she got pregnant with her daughter. Then she got promoted again to the trainer position that she wanted. She wanted this position because she loves the business aspect and crunching numbers with clients.

Currently Aspirer 3 is still a trainer at HGS and her boyfriend is a warehouse manager at Lazy boy. He also has a GED and he coaches Woodruff Junior Football. They qualify for Link, but do not receive cash assistance. Furthermore, Aspirer 3 is still on maternity leave and receives WIC. After she goes back to work, she will still receive WIC, just not as much as she as she currently receives.

Aspirer 3 says that her dad had a lot of issues. He was a drug addict. He would go missing for upwards of ten days. It even got to the point where her mom would hang "Missing Person" signs. He ended up selling part of his business. He was also a veteran, and he would do work as he could, like help renovate a church. He even drove a city bus. He did end up going to jail.

Aspirer 3's kids are her main motivation at this point. She wants them to have a better life and to be able to have a better place to live and be able to have their own room. She has a desire to teach them values and skills that she was never taught.

Aspirer 3 personally says that Peoria holds a lot of tragedy. And that there is a sadness and anger in the city. And she wants to get her children out of the city if possible, especially since she has heard of children being shot for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. She also says that it is hard to grow in Peoria if you don't have a support system. She feels suffocated from facing the same people with the same problems. She states that she doesn't go to the south end anymore. And she gave an example of a woman who used to live next to her grandma and had a garden and neighborhood kids would vandalize and ruin her garden. Another issue she had is that nobody cares about your space. It is also a concern of hers about hearing

shootings down the block and the fact that she couldn't go near Garfield. And with a lack of money, you can't do anything or go anywhere so you are stuck in the same place with the same people.

When Aspirer 3 last viewed her childhood home, she wanted to puke. There were many bad memories, like when her parents were fighting. And it was only the bad memories that would flood back, none of the good ones. And the OSF hospital makes her sick to drive past, and she hasn't been back to East Peoria. Aspirer 3 no longer goes out at night, or downtown because she has been in a lot of arguments there. She believes that when something bad happens in Peoria, you just can't have a fresh start, and it's hard to find a support system. She believes Peorians don't know how to get started or how to get resources.

Aspirer 4

Aspirer 4 was born in 1987 and was raised in a one parent home by her mother. Her dad left when she was five. He moved to Minnesota. On her mother's side, she has a brother who is 26 and a sister who is 25. Her mother went to ICC for a year. Her father had a high school diploma. When her mom was with her dad, she became pregnant eight times but none of the children survived except for Aspirer 4, because her mom had a weak cervix and had to have surgery on it. On her Father's side she has 7 sisters and a brother, 3 of them have the same mother. She met them when she was 15 years old. Her father abused her mom. When he left, she would visit him in the summer. Her father married a woman who treated Aspirer 4 like her own. Her dad was married about four times. When she was with her father, he acted cool and treated her like his daughter. He never brought up his family and Aspirer 4 never really asked even though she had questions. She knew her grandma was a prostitute. Her dad was a rape baby. Her dad is mixed, with a white father. He is a professional body builder and when he's around they go to the gym. Her grandma had a bar and over worked there, but made sure that they had money.

Aspirer 4 went to a few different schools throughout her life. She attended South Side Catholic school from kindergarten to second grade. At this time, she was anti-social and kept to herself. She had nice teachers but the nuns were disciplinary. She remembers going to the chapel once a week and kneeling down in mass. She would see kids get paddled and thought it was weird, and did not understand how adults could let someone else discipline their children. In kindergarten she had a teacher who was nice and helped her with her studies. From third to eighth grade she went to Christ Lutheran, which was a majority all white school, but Aspirer 4 loved the school.

She remembers great teachers and sportsmanship from this school. The teachers at this school expected more. The teachers made it feel like they actually cared and she felt as if time flew by in this school. For third grade, she had a teacher who was strict and didn't take any mess. Aspirer 4 was shy but opened up a little bit when she went

to this new school because the kids were friendly at this school. She had A, B, and Cs and her mom was not a fan of Cs.

In fourth grade, she had a teacher who was a goofball and was laid back but made sure the students had a good work ethic. She had A, B and Cs here as well. In fifth grade she got her first D, most likely because she was slacking, but the rest of her classes she had A, B, and Cs.

Aspirer 4 played different sports and her mother kept them busy, she played basketball and volleyball. Her grandma could not attend any of her games because of work. Her classmates were mixed, Black, white, and Asian. She would go to a few parties or dinners with them and said no one was a saint. Neither of the schools had buses so she had to carpool a lot. She said even though she went to a private school it was not “peaches and cream.”

During school she remembers the science fairs. It was one of the only teams she was on you did not have to try out for, you just signed up and were on the team and it helped to build sportsmanship and teamwork. They taught them what they needed to know because in order to play they had to keep their grades up otherwise they were not allowed to play. During the rest of her time at Christ Lutheran she had all As, Bs and Cs.

She and 6 of her cousins went to the same school and one of her cousins flunked and left and she was hurt because she thought he had just left town. In high school, freshman year was terrible for her. She begged her mom to go to Manual for sophomore year.

There were fights every day, she saw a student get his teeth knocked out and teachers did not care if you came to school or not, or graduated. In high school, she did not want to play volleyball anymore because they would not let her wear basketball shorts. They had to wear black spandex shorts that made her feel uncomfortable or like a “cow” because she was way bigger than her current weight. She smoked weed and cigarettes in the bathroom. She joined JROTC and got on the drill team in order to avoid P.E.

She recalls her friend did stay on the volleyball team, but she dropped out her junior year and went and got her GED, they still stayed in touch even after she dropped out. She recalls one time she was arguing with a boy and things got verbal and he was signaling to her to “suck his dick” and she cussed him out. She stayed at the school and got As, Bs, and Cs.

Sophomore year she was in basketball and would get warmed up by Drill team and ROTC. She did not have boyfriends at this time and would go to dances with her

cousin who flunked out of school. She stayed close with her friend but was in AP. She didn't get in any fights or arguments later.

She recalls a teacher at Christ Lutheran, he stayed on your case. The kids would be disrespectful and would cuss out the teachers, fight the security guards, break trophy cases, and choose rather to show effort or not. Sophomore year she got As, Bs, and Cs.

Junior year "I got a little sliffery." She was on JROTC drill team, a page and got a job at McDonalds by the mall and would work there from 1-9pm. She would leave school and one co-op at 7:55am.

Her friend's mom was a church mom but she started "jipping", smoked weed, and had sex at different houses. Her mom would put her out and she would go to Aspirer 4's and stay in her living room for protection. Aspirer 4 always tried to keep a good reputation, "birds of a feather" don't flock together. She would get called bitch and bougie by different guys who wanted her.

Aspirer 4's mom was also a church mom and was strict. When she skipped school, she would only miss a few hours to avoid getting a call home. She would get her homework from the teacher and Aspirer 4 would sign her mom's name to the letters.

Junior year she had A, B, Cs and 2Ds. She was working at McDonalds still and would try to make up work but she was tired. She was working to get things for herself but also to help her mom, even when her mom didn't ask, Aspirer 4 did it anyway. Her mother taught her to be independent.

Senior year she was involved in JROTC, McDonalds, still a page, but left the co-op for work. Similar to other years she had As, Bs, Cs, and Ds. She was applying to college but not one was calling her back. She had no boyfriend at the time, but grew up with a boy and tried sneaking out one time and went to Woodruff but her mom found out, her mom made her stop working at McDonalds after a couple of weeks. She did not go to prom. In 2005, she graduated for Manual, graduation was hot.

She found out she was pregnant and told the boy she was going to keep it. He didn't claim the baby which she said "grinds my gears." He said he wasn't signing the birth certificate and he never did, which hurt Aspirer 4. Her mom told her to take a DNA test to prove it was his, she proved it. After the baby, she went back to McDonalds for two years and started putting in applications for apartments, she got her first apartment on Taft. She was a single mom, which hurt and she was sad that the dad didn't even ask about the child.

“I’m on a roll”, she was paid every Monday and took the bus to work. “It was on and popping” but then she started drinking. She took care of her first child, her son’s grandma got him every other weekend, her son and his dad were more like brothers.

At 21, she enrolled in ICC in August for child development but left by November. She felt like she had enough schooling by then and liked making money. She started working at Salvation Army because Bob Evans was too far and her [white] male manager was a pervert and kept whispering in her ear. She didn't really tell anyone that and just left.

In 2007, she started at Salvation Army in Lexington Hills. She went there for Silco help and “the lady seen something in me” and offered her the job. She told her she went to ICC for child development but didn't finish and gave her some schooling. She was given the house manager position. The woman told her they need someone who won't get run over or pushed over. She worked Sunday through Tuesday for two years. It was a good experience; she was in the shelter with kids and grown people and was ready for the Salvation Army job. After having conflicts with parents, she was over working in the shelter. She had to take leadership roles which made her wiser, stronger, and taught her to open up.

She left at 27 when the previous director got a different position and the new director wasn't dealing with her, she wanted to be a CNA and was told no going back to her old job. The new manager, a Black lady let her go because she wanted to triangulate her hours. Aspirer 4 told her no because she was studying to become a CNA and she was fired within that year. The director had a caseworker call and terminate her.

She took CNA classes at Spoon River and failed classes. She decided to do home care at Spoon River because she didn't have to be certified. She had another kid in 2010. She moved to River West, to a two bedroom and was there for 12 years. She felt lonely and went to East St. Louis and got pregnant again. In October of 2015, she had another daughter, while she was working at Spoon River in home care. She stayed there until 2017 and tried to get back into being a CNA. She talked to someone at ICC and told her about the second chances program and did the FAFSA and brought up old standings. This program paid for books and uniforms and was better than 6 weeks in ICC. She recalls essays and waiting for approval. She got the flu shot for the first time and got sick for two weeks. She passed on her first try for CNA certification with this program. She failed at Spoon River three times. She started working for Help at Home and they worked around her schedule, and she was able to work around her mom's schedule and usually worked 7 am to 3 pm.

She started house hunting which is difficult, but did the Scatter Site Program at River West and had a smooth transition from there. She is trying to build credit in order to get a loan for the kid's birthdays and holidays. She writes down everything to get on top of the billing cycle and even manages light usage, boy's haircut, and supplies. She

is determined to make ends meet; she is going to take care of her kids. She is on all of them, and wants them to be concerned when she's not, she wants to raise them to be independent. Being a single mom is overwhelming and stressful. She puts education first. She stays on her two oldest kids and reads for 20 minutes a day with her four-year-old. Her 14-year-old is at the girlfriend stage. She has no child support from either dad. The second dad is in jail, order of protection for three years. The oldest is a junkie. Her mom is her backbone. Aspirer 4 has insecurities because of her body image and is trying to lose 30 pounds.

Aspirer 5

She considered her childhood to be ok. She was one of twenty-six children had by her dad, five of them being from the same mother as herself. The rest of her biological siblings came from four other marriages her father was in. Her mother went to ICC for nursing school, while her father went to trade school for construction. At the age of four, her and her mom moved back to Peoria from Chilla Vista, California. She said they had limited resources but they made a way.

She went to Tyng Primary School for kindergarten through fourth grade. She had good grades and amazing teachers. These teachers would not let you fail. She then moved to Blaine Sumner School in Peoria from fifth to seventh grade. She had many issues here. The school was described to be very ghetto. She felt that she was struggling more socially during this time period so she kept more to herself. She stated that she was on the bigger side. The schools didn't know how to handle bullies and fighting. Between 2002 and 2003, she began cutting classes because she did not want to be in school. She did not even want to see a teacher during this time in her life, but ended up working with one. She allowed a past teacher of hers to tutor her, since still missing a lot of school. She was able to get by, not with good grades, but passing.

In 2008, she began high school at Manual Academy. During this time, she was living with her mom and dad. Her parents had their issues. There was infidelity on her dad's part and she felt that she was put in the middle of it. She began hanging out with friends more and skipping classes to avoid having to be at home. The arguments at home were so bad by the time she entered high school; they became physical. Her mom destroyed her father's property. Her mom often used the kids as pawns to get back at their dad. During high school, she wanted to be with her dad more; although he was supposed to stay in Peoria, he moved to Champaign. She knew she would not really get to see him, and when he came back, she never wanted to be home.

At the beginning of freshman year through mid-sophomore year, she felt that it was worse than Blaine Sumner. At Manual, the overall attitude of the teachers was if you were weak minded enough to allow other students to distract you, then you didn't even need to be there. She did not finish her high school education, claiming to have failed completely.

From there, she began having children back to back. The first four children she had were accidental, her mother tried putting her on birth control, but it did not work out for her. On birth control, she experienced horrible cramping, significant weight gain and constant sickness. Because the weight gain was so significant, 220lbs, she experienced thyroid problems and a drop in her blood pressure. Her doctor determined that these symptoms were in fact resulting from the hormones in the birth control and that it was not an effective method for her.

She had her first daughter at the age of fifteen. She then had a son at seventeen. After that she had a child at the age of nineteen, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-six, twenty-seven and twenty-eight. Her last two children were planned, and she says she wouldn't trade them for the world. The first six children were all with different dads, but the last two are from the same father who wanted children. All of her children are in school except for the last two who are still babies. The older three are currently attending Calvin Coolidge Middle School, while the younger three are at Whittier Primary School. The younger two children attend day care at her current partner's family owned care center.

The father of her first child was a gang banger. He promised her money, clothing, and love. He said that nobody would hurt her, but she knew he was full of BS after one day he put her in danger. He and another one of his friends asked her to carry a book bag into Manual High School when she was six months pregnant. She only wanted to go into the school to eat, but an officer pulled her aside to pat her down and used a metal detector. The officer found a gun inside the book bag. Her boyfriend told her not to tell on them, but her fingerprints were not on the weapon, his friends were. The judge said he'd make an example out of her for hanging out with them. She got into lots of trouble; she had to do days in JVC for possession of a firearm/armed weapon.

The father of her second child was a pretty boy. She thought he would have never been into her. He knew her sister and he never did drugs. They began having sex right away. When he found out she was pregnant with her son, he said he wanted nothing to do with her. She had the baby anyway. After she had the baby, she stayed in a lot with all of her responsibilities. Her mom wanted her to go back to school but she had to do an alternative program. Her mom babysat for her while she went to the Urban League to get her GED. She was unable to focus though. The teacher just sat behind the desk and told them to read the book. This child she considers to be her biggest problem. He is currently seeing two different therapists.

For her third child, she doesn't even remember having him, she has repressed those memories. The father of her third child lived three doors down and helped her with the two kids she was raising. He was twenty-one or twenty-two at the time and she was nineteen. He worked at CAT; he fed her and made sure she was straight. Then he got in an accident and was hurt really bad. She tried to help him heal but she was

almost due. CAT gave him a huge settlement check. When he received his check, his uncle claimed that he owed him money. When he refused to pay him money, his uncle put antifreeze in his drink at the hospital. She doesn't remember anything after this, but she had the baby. He was a different person after that and was put in a mental home in Springfield. After, he came back to Peoria, he was having memory issues, and tried to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge. He now lives with his family who takes advantage of him. To this day he has his ups and downs, and her third child's dad's mental state breaks his heart.

The fourth child's dad came out of the blue. They worked at the Civic Center together. He said that he would help her with her kids and sweet talked her. He helped her out with transportation and helped her get back into school. He was around a lot until he met his birth mother. He decided to take it upon himself to help her out, and when this started, they saw each other less. At this point she was "completely freakin fertile" and they had sex once or twice. He felt like she was trying to trap him. Her and her mother decided that she would get an abortion, but the father said no, so she had the baby. She had him while she was in prison in Dwight, IL. She had to do anger management programs. She felt as if she was having babies for no reason, she became celibate. She went back to try and get her GED and her dad got her a house and paid her bills. She didn't need anyone and got really comfortable.

She began feeling lonely when she was working as an assistant manager at Ruby Tuesdays. She met her fifth child's father there. He was a dishwasher and caught her attention through laughter. He turned out to be extremely abusive though and they fought like bulls. She had never been hit by her mom and dad, so she blacked out when he abused her. One incident, he was hitting her when she was calling 9-1-1. She ran out to her car, and when he tried getting to the other side to get in, she ran him over. Witnesses told the police what happened, and they released her. She had a total of three surgeries, sixty-nine stitches, and hip issues. After that ordeal, she found out she was pregnant. She told the father and he signed the birth certificate and pays child support. The daughter knows of her father and has talked to him on the phone, but even with her health issue of severe asthma, he has never come to visit her. He tells his family that she is not his. Now, she will tell stories about being with him in the past, but it is her imagination. They have not talked in years.

She met the father of her sixth child at the food pantry. He was helping his grandmother who was the sweetest, kindest white lady, and he was Mexican. The lady's daughter was a prostitute and was the mother of her sixth child's father. She abandoned him. They bonded and began dating. They became sexually active and decided to have a baby; he was born on his father's birthday. The father had mental issues and struggled with alcohol. He was disruptive and didn't know how to handle his liquor, so she ended it. He is a co-parent for her sixth child, and he is a great father. The Aspirer's mother walked into the room and disclosed that Aspirer 5 had a few issues with DCFS because her daughter (at the behest of the friend's mother)

called DCFS in an effort to run away from home. Aspirer 5's mother intervened and adopted the daughter.

She met her current partner and the father of her seventh and eighth children on Facebook. They interacted by direct-message on Facebook for a few weeks. He did a background check on her and all of the kids. She didn't want anything to be hidden, so she answered all of his questions and told him everything. They did not rush into anything; she was ready but he was slow. There were no issues in the relationship, but he wanted to wait and see where things took them. He was in school at the time for HVAC. They talked every day but not in person because of school. They eventually spent more time together, but there were trust issues at first. He was focused, respectful and patient. He waited for sexual benefits until they moved in together. At this point, he was ready to co-parent and help with her kids. He graduated school and found them a home. He said he'd be there for the kids, not to replace their parents, but to be there.

Growing up in Peoria, living on Wiswall was homey. There was little crime at the time except for one man who stayed on the other side and was about thirty years old. Aspirer 5 was twelve years old and he abused her for a month, but then her father beat this man until he was unrecognizable and then called the cops. This man used to walk her to school every day which she thought was weird. He was put into prison and was released two years ago, but he did it again and was thrown right back into prison. That girl lived a block or two over from her and they were in every class together in high school. She found this girl to be manipulative. They ended up skipping a lot of classes. A guy once manipulated her into doing something terrible, and then this girl talked her old partner into doing it. If she could go back, she'd take it back. Till this day, she is living with those decisions. She had another friend as well who she believed would have been a more positive influence. She wishes she had spent more time hanging around this friend than the others. A separate friend of hers suffered from an opioid addiction. This friend of hers had it rougher than she did. She had no idea that this friend did drugs until she was found unresponsive. This friend died from her addiction.

In her youth, she had a particular friend who she found herself getting into a lot of trouble with. At the age of sixteen or seventeen in 2009, she and her friend were sentenced to prison for joy-riding. She served a little under a year and was released in 2010. After being released, she applied for ICCs Bridge Program. In 2015, she completed the eight-week CNA program. A roadblock in this process was her background, a lady who liked her for who she was looked past her background. Throughout her time working, this roadblock continued to present itself. She is temporarily out of work because her staffing company in Peoria Heights cannot give her any assignments due to her record. In order to return to work, a healthcare waiver must be signed and she is required to obtain the police report.

She has been working with her current company since 2015. She lived on Wiswall Street until she was 21, when her parents divorced and her father failed to pay his taxes. She and her previous partner found a new apartment to move into, but was kicked out because of her background. She then moved into a house with help from her mother until she got back on her feet. She said her mom has always been her #1 supporter regardless of the situation, and her dad has been #2. When she began having all of her kids, her mother never judged her. She forgave her mother from all of the manipulation when she was in high school once her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. During this time, she wanted her mother to be surrounded by nurses and asked for hospital visits.

When she moved into the house her mother helped her obtain, she had just met her current partner and he helped her a lot. Though she is out of work currently, her current partner works at Keystone and pays the bills. She utilizes WIC, Cash Assistance and other social services. Her daughter has severe asthma that causes hospitalization. Her life goal is to become an RN. It "pains me to know my background is holding me back. It's not the kids holding me back.

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