IN THIS ISSUE

Research on the frontline: Pushing the boundaries of what psychology can do

This article describes a community engaged research program.

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This article describes a community engaged research program, how it came about and how it connects to social relevance and justice.

In the wake of a shooting in Pittsburgh's Hilltop South neighborhoods in December 2015 three children were seriously injured as they stood before a convenience store on the main street. The oldest, a 15-year-old Black youth, had been a participant in the UrbanKind Institute/PlaceLab Youth Photovoice Research Project on urban youth's experience of the public life of their neighborhood the summer before.

Jamil Bey, the director of The UrbanKind Institute, called me with news of the drive-by shooting of one of "our" boys, and we decided to explore the complex and intractable structure and the origin and development of public violence that has frayed the fabric of the Hilltop South's community life for decades. As we set out to research the community and interview longtime residents about the history of violence in their neighborhood, Bey had one condition: "Lift up the good." He urged me to see and document the forms of resilience and hope that characterize

this urban African American community. His call set a new course for my students and me, and we began to investigate the neighborhood's history of violence and collaborate with community members as fully integrated members of my PlaceLab research group. I enlisted my undergraduate students to help conduct and transcribe qualitative interviews with Hilltop South neighbors from Beltzhoover, which Bey organized. My PlaceLab graduate students gathered the research literature on the effects of community violence on children and youth, and we set out to work with the qualitative data we collected.

A review of the psychological literature about the consequences of living with public violence reveals the larger structural and systemic impact that violence has on African American children. Black youth growing up in low-income, urban areas are exposed to many risk factors specific to their neighborhoods that make them susceptible to trauma and loss across the course of their lives (Alegría et al., 2013; Johnson, 2010; J. Rich, 2009; Jocelyn R. Smith & Patton, 2016). Violence is one of the predominant traumatic events that affect Black children and their communities (Centers for Disease & Prevention, 2011, 2012). The social and systemic determinants of violence, such as residential segregation, racism and discrimination, educational disparities, high unemployment rates, poverty, and overcrowding increase the propensity for crime and violence in America's inner cities (Eitle, D'Alessio, & Stolzenberg, 2006; Stewart & Simons, 2010). Black children witness more shootings and other forms of public violence in their communities (Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001; Paxton, Robinson, Shah, & Schoeny, 2004), and are at a greater risk for traumatic exposure, violent injury, and premature death than children who grow up in more affluent areas (Buka et al., 2001; J. Rich, Corbin, Bloom, Evans, & Wilson, 2009; J. R. Smith, 2015). The likelihood that Black youth will have someone close murdered is 7.8 times that of Whites (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005), and this risk is highest for young Black males. Exposure to violence is strongly associated with post-traumatic stress symptoms in youth (Alegría et al., 2013; Breslau & Storr, 2004; Paxton et al., 2004; J. A. Rich & Grey, 2005; Roberts, Gilman, Breslau, Breslau, &

Koenen, 2011), and the life-time prevalence of PTSD in the U.S. population was highest among African Americans in general (Roberts et al., 2011).

In the following year, my undergraduate student class conducted a needs assessment with local programs that serve youth and children, and PlaceLab spun off a clinically-oriented group of faculty, graduate students, and community members, the Community Trauma and Resilience Collaborative (CTRC), which developed a culturally sensitive trauma training for adults who work with children in afterschool programs (The CTRC training is now housed and administered by one of our community partners who focuses on Black mental health). We also conducted a second photovoice project with neighborhood children as a psycho-educational intervention inspired by liberation psychotherapy (Gupta, Simms, & Dougherty, 2019).

Shortly after the first round of interviews, I received a call from a participant who was an ex-gang member and had been deeply involved in the violent gang culture of the early 1990s. He and many of his friends from that time are working now with youth and former inmates on healing the aftermath of violence and building up their community. He asked me if I could help one of his friends and fellow ex-gang members who has been incarcerated as a juvenile lifer without parole since 1996. I felt completely out of my depth; I did not know anyone who was incarcerated and knew nothing about the law; what could I, as a developmental psychologist and community researcher, do for someone in prison? I told him that I needed to think about this for a few days, and took the time to talk to my research group and we researched what was happening on the legal front to teens who got caught up in the "war on drugs" and the gang violence of the late 20th century.

African American youth offenders were frequently labeled "super predators" and locked away in high security prisons for life without the chance of parole. Until less than a decade ago, the United States of America was the only nation in the world that incarcerated youth for life and without the chance to ever get out of prison. At

the end of 2016, 2,310 juvenile offenders were serving life sentences without the chance of parole. Some of them, like Henry Montgomery, had been incarcerated as a juvenile lifer without parole (JLWOP) for more than half a century despite an outstanding prison record. In two rulings, *Miller vs. Alabama* (2012) and *Montgomery vs. Louisiana* (2016), the U.S. Supreme Court determined that a mandatory life sentence without parole for juvenile offenders is unconstitutional, and that this applies retroactively to all persons incarcerated at this time.

Following the 2012 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Miller v. Alabama*, states and the federal government are required to consider the unique circumstances of each juvenile defendant in determining an individualized sentence. *Montgomery v. Louisiana,* a 2016 decision, ensures that the decision applies retroactively. For juveniles, a mandatory life sentence without the possibility of parole, is unconstitutional. (Rovner, 2016, p. 1)

In a 2014 report to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, The ACLU presented a chilling report about the racial disparities in the imposition of life without parole (LWOP) sentences on youth, which reveals a clear bias against African American youth offenders:

There are stark racial disparities in the imposition of life without parole sentences for juvenile offenders in the United States. Nationally, about 77 percent of juvenile offenders serving LWOP are Black and Latino, while Black youth are serving these sentences at a rate 10 times higher than white youth. In California—the state with the highest number of prisoners serving LWOP for crimes committed as children)—Black youth are serving the sentence at a rate that is 18 times higher than the rate for white youth, and Latino youth are sentenced to life without parole five times more than white youth. In Michigan (the state with the second- highest number of such prisoners), while youth of color comprise only 29 percent of Michigan's children, they are 73 percent of the state's child offenders serving life without parole. As of 2009, in 14 of the 37 states with people serving LWOP for crimes

committed as juveniles, the proportion of African-Americans serving that sentence exceeded 65 percent (Turner & Dakwar, 2014, p. 4).

Miller vs. Alabama and *Montgomery vs. Louisiana* provide JLWOPs with a path that potentially leads out of lifelong incarceration. Keith, the Beltzhoover ex-gang member, was incarcerated illegally at 17; he now had a right to a fair court hearing where his sentence would be commuted to one with the possibility to be paroled. He, and many of the other JLWOPs, are victims of historical circumstances and a time when unemployment, crack, organized gangs, and a proliferation of guns hit Black neighborhoods all across the U.S.; they are victims of an increasingly draconian and punitive prison system that denies juvenile offenders the opportunities for reform and restitution; they are victims of systemic racism in the court system, which imposes harsher sentences on African American offenders; and finally, they are victims of the cycle of poverty and violence, which keeps the school to prison pipeline alive.

The U.S. Supreme Court based its decisions on evidence provided by briefs from psychologists about research in adolescent psychology and developmental neuroscience. Other psychologists had contributed to righting the decades-long wrong committed against African American youth. Perhaps there was a path for my PlaceLab graduate students and me to support Keith's case, and after intense discussion, we offered to help him and his friends, if we could find a way to integrate the JLWOP project into our ongoing work on the history of public violence in Beltzhoover. PlaceLab spun off a separate project group, PlaceLab Justice, dedicated to finding a path to support Keith and other JLWOPS with psychological research and advocacy. PlaceLab Justice has been working with Keith, his legal counsel, his family and friends, and various criminal justice reform organizations since 2016.

In response to our agreement to help with research and advocacy, five men stepped forward to be interviewed about the history of gang violence in

Beltzhoover. All of them grew up in Beltzhoover and St. Clair Village (a close by public housing complex) and had been either fellow gang members, rival gang members, or friends of Keith. Together with the previous seven "violence and resilience" interviews, these stories tell the devastating tale of a middle-class African American neighborhood decimated by the closing of steel mills in the mid-1980s, the crack epidemic, and the gang wars of the 1990s. Families became stressed and slid into poverty; children got caught up in gang culture; police "task force" officers roamed the neighborhood and frisked adults and children; hundreds of funerals of young men marked the passage of months and years. A once pastoral suburb of Pittsburgh became one of the hotspots for violence and death in the city.

In consultation with Keith's lawyer and taking our strength as qualitative researchers and the material we had already gathered into account, PlaceLab Justice embarked on creating a film documentary about the context of the life of teen gang members and specifically Keith's life as a youth, which would function as a mitigation video to be shown at the court hearing in which Keith would be resentenced. We based the documentary on the interviews with Hilltop community members, the psychological literature that the Supreme Court cited in *Miller vs. Alabama*,and a written interview with Keith, in which he answered the same open-ended questions as the other participants. We visited Keith many times in the high-security prison where he is incarcerated and kept in touch by letters and emails. We frequently involved the community members from the Hilltop Men's Group in our discussions and brought them to the table in our work with Keith's legal counsel. We also assisted them with other support (program evaluation, basic computer literacy training, psychological referrals for crisis intervention, letters of recommendation), and we tried to leverage our knowledge and power as members of an academic institution to underscore the group's legitimacy and pave the way for their projects with local funders. In 2017 filmmaker and rap artist Christian Nowlin, one of the founders of the Hilltop Men's Group and longtime Beltzhoover resident, joined our PLJ team, and we finally had a professional

expert and an artistic framework for making our film.

Christian became an integral member of our research team and led the filming and production process. Together we crafted a storyline, which braided three strands of data together: the updated psychological research material used in the Supreme Court briefs, the history of Beltzhoover from our qualitative research interviews, and Keith's story through newspaper clips, court documents, prison documents, and his own written narrative. We conducted in-person interviews with neuroscientists and experts in the juvenile justice system ("the doctors," as Christian labeled them), and Christian took the lead in filming and editing the voluminous material we produced, which we polished and refined in our weekly PLJ meetings. We kept close ties to Keith's legal counsel, who kept us informed about what was happening to JLWOPS on the legal front in Pennsylvania and Keith's resentencing hearing in particular. He vetted the final version of the documentary, since the goal was to show the film to the judge in order to provide the context of Keith's life. The sentencing hearing had to follow the guidelines of the U.S. Supreme Court, which ordered in *Miller vs. Alabama* that "states and the federal government are required to consider the unique circumstances of each juvenile defendant in determining an individualized sentence" (Rovner, 2016, p. 1). Our documentary presented an in-depth, 18-minute argument for the mitigating circumstances, which should be considered in the resentencing and lead to a reduction of the time Keith had to serve.

We completed the documentary in the spring of 2019, and the resentencing hearing was scheduled for the end of May 2019. A week before the hearing, word came down that the prosecutor vehemently lobbied against inclusion of our mitigation video on the grounds that she was not able to cross-examine the experts. The judge disallowed the film. However, Keith's counsel adopted the narrative structure and evidence of our documentary and was able to provide similar mitigating material through a series of testimonies from expert witnesses, prison employees, community members, and Keith himself. Keith was resentenced

from life without parole to 35 years to life, which meant that he would come up for parole in about a decade. This was a harsher sentence than what we had hoped for, especially since we also were in contact with two other JLWOPs who had been recently released after decades of confinement. (One of them had served 49 years for being an accomplice in a murder/bank robbery when he was 17!). Since May 2019 we are helping Keith, his family, and his legal counsel navigate through the complicated parole and commutation process. We are reworking our documentary for a wider audience because Keith's story is exemplary for many other stories of youth who grew up in distressed communities and were socialized into violent gang culture. Like him, many have been incarcerated for decades and have tried to build an adult life behind bars that has meaning and purpose and is of service to others.

Community Engaged Research in Psychology (CERP) follows the NIH guidelines for community engaged research in the health sciences, which defined community engagement in research as a process of inclusive participation that supports mutual respect of values, strategies, and actions for authentic partnership of people affiliated with or self-identified by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of the community of focus (Michener et al., 2012, p. 2). Mitchener et al. (p. 4–5) point out the best practices that have evolved over time, which are also the practices that PlaceLab and PlaceLab Justice developed through clinical and research projects in the past five years:

- learning first about a community in terms of its history, culture, economic and social conditions, political and power structures, norms and values, demographic trends, and experience with research;

- sharing power and showing respect;

- including partners in all phases of research and planning; and

- compensating community partners fairly.

Our field of knowledge in psychology, our clinical practices, and our research can become tools for collaboration, empowerment, awareness, and relevance to people's daily lives. In return, community participation in research opens new fields of inquiry for psychology. It challenges us to stretch our knowledge and skills, be more creative, and make psychology relevant to our time.

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