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## Understanding the Relationship Between Hyper-Violence and Educational Disparity: Listening to the Voices of Latina Youth From Oakland

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UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *HYP*ER-VIOLENCE AND  
EDUCATIONAL DISPARITY:  
LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF LATINA YOUTH FROM OAKLAND

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Mexican American Studies

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Yanira I. Madrigal-Garcia

August 2011

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## ABSTRACT

### UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *HYPER*-VIOLENCE AND EDUCATIONAL DISPARITY: LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF LATINA YOUTH FROM OAKLAND

by Yanira I. Madrigal-Garcia

The *hyper*-violence that exists in Oakland, California, has persistently made national headlines. When examining the violence that exists in low-income urban cities, however, studies usually overemphasize the male experience. The studies that center on female experiences usually focus on extreme cases, e.g. gang-involved or incarcerated girls. This study foregrounds the experiences of Latina high school girls from Oakland who are “in the middle,” neither gang-involved nor academic high-achievers.

The purpose of this study was to investigate: 1) how the participants make sense of and understand the violence that is present in their communities; 2) how violence impacts their everyday lives and decision making; and, lastly, 3) how violence affects their educational experiences and aspirations. Through qualitative, semi-structured interviews, the author spoke directly with the participants to develop a deeper understanding of the far reaches of violence. The author also used an ethnographic lens to incorporate her experiences and observations of growing up low-income in Oakland.

This study concluded that the *hyper*-violence that exists in Oakland impacts the girls directly. They live in fear and are driven to live by a *code of conduct* to prevent victimization. While the girls live in fear, they have accepted violence as a normal aspect of their lives. Ultimately, the narratives of the girls provide implicit connections between the fear they face daily and the fear of not being prepared to attend college. This study demonstrates the importance of re-evaluating how we all make sense of the *hyper*-violence that is present in low-income urban communities.

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## **CHAPTER 1: Introducing Violence**

Similar to other low-income urban communities, Oakland, California has made national headlines with what some might consider unbelievable stories of violence. On New Year's Day of 2009, Oscar Grant was shot in the back while he was handcuffed and faced-down on a transit platform by BART police officer Johannes Mehserle. This incident was recorded on cell-phone video by witnesses, uploaded to YouTube, viewed by many, and instantly became a national headline.

It did not take long before the violence in Oakland made national headlines once again. In March 21, 2009 Lovelle Mixon, an Oakland resident shot and killed four police officers to prevent his arrest. He shot two officers during a routine traffic stop and two hours later, when the SWAT team tried to apprehend him, he shot and killed two additional officers. This horrible sequence of violence has been referred as one of the deadliest attacks on law enforcement in California's history.

These stories have made national headlines, but it is important to recognize that these are not the only acts of violence that have taken place in Oakland. There are countless rapes, drive-by shootings, robberies, and random acts of violence that do not make it to the headlines because many are not even reported to the authorities. Even the name "Oakland," has come to represent a number of maladies and images of violence. An indicator of the brutal violence that exists in this city is the staggering homicide rate. Between 2000 and 2010, there have been 1,174 people murdered within the confines of neighborhoods that are predominantly low-income, Black,<sup>1</sup> and Latina/o<sup>2</sup>. It is clear

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term Black and African-American interchangeably in this study.

there are underlying factors that allow violence to exist nearly unchecked. An overwhelming majority of the violent crimes in Oakland are centered in city sectors that are predominately Black and Latino and have high rates of poverty, unemployment, drugs, and prostitution. Similar to Oakland, there are other cities across the U.S. that have become notoriously violent, including most recently, Richmond, California,<sup>3</sup> and Chicago, Illinois.<sup>4</sup> Although I will develop an ethnographic qualitative study that focuses primarily on Oakland, it is my intent to pinpoint factors that potentially drive violence to exist nearly unchecked in a number of low-income urban communities that are predominately Black and Latina/o across the U.S.

Violence is a broad term that can encompass verbal/physical assault, gang wars, discriminatory acts, and homicide. Specifically, violence represents engaging in aggressive behavior and experiencing physical or emotional pain. Ultimately, it has far-reaching consequences that can injure, or kill people across gender and racial-ethnic lines. The schools in low-income neighborhoods experience first-hand the brunt of violence that is ever present and manifests itself as fights, racial tension, and an overarching feeling of fear and uncertainty. Growing up in East Oakland, I witnessed how my peers and I had a difficult time in school as a result of the violence that was ever-present. My high school was “the spot” to settle racial antagonism, gang rivalries,

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<sup>2</sup> The term Latina/o in this study is inclusive of people that have ties to Latin-American countries and are residing in the U.S. Additionally, the term Latina/o does not differentiate based on immigration status.

<sup>3</sup> On October 27, 2009, a fifteen year-old girl was sexually attacked by multiple parties in an alley of Richmond High School during a homecoming dance. Although there is an ongoing investigation, it is speculated that there were about twenty individuals who witnessed the brutal assault and seven that participated in the sexual assault of this girl.

<sup>4</sup> On September 24, 2009, a 16 year-old boy was killed in a melee that included more than a dozen youth. The fight began with fists, then the youth began to pick up 2x4's that were in a vacant lot and used them as weapons. Derrion Albert was struck in the head with the 2x4's and died soon thereafter.

consume drugs, and in general, fear what might happen. In this study, I interviewed high school Latina girls from Oakland to examine the ways in which they understand and conceptualize violence. My research goal was to determine whether violence has had an impact on their educational motivation and commitment.

### **The Normalization of *Hyper-Violence***

The prevalent violence in Oakland is overwhelming, and many times deadly. Growing up in Oakland, I witnessed violence on a daily basis. In the third grade, I recall the week-long visits from local news station camera crews covering the shooting that happened steps away from the school. In high school, racial tensions ran high among students and manifested in bloody melees that placed a number of my friends in hospital beds. In my neighborhood and school, violence could happen at any time so it was necessary to always be on guard to prevent victimization. Recalling my own experience helped me realize that the term “violence” does not accurately portray the daily challenges that low-income Oakland residents face. For this reason, I developed a new concept entitled *hyper-violence*. I provide a detailed breakdown of *hyper-violence* in Chapter 2, but in short, this concept refers to Oakland’s continuous acts of violence that have remained disproportionately high for the past twenty years and that sacrifice the lives of children, young adults, and even entire families. The *hyper-violence* present in Oakland drove me to live by a strict “code of conduct,” to not wear certain colors, to avoid walking through certain streets, and to not to venture out of my house at night. Even so, *hyper-violence* has impacted my family. My uncle and brother-in-law are

among two of the 1,174 homicides that have taken place in Oakland over the past ten years.

My uncle, my father's youngest brother, whom I considered an older brother, was shot and killed on March 16, 2003, in his East Oakland apartment. To this day, we do not know who pulled the trigger that night or why he or she did it. By the end of 2003, the violence in Oakland claimed the lives of 114 people. My uncle lived with my family and helped my parents. His death was a devastating blow to my family. At the time, it was my second year in college and it was impossible for me to focus on my academics. On February 6, 2005, my brother-in-law dropped off some friends in East Oakland and then was gunned down while driving on Foothill Blvd. Although he was taken to the hospital, he was pronounced dead shortly after. In 2005, the violence in Oakland claimed the lives of 94 people. My sister and brother-in-law were going to celebrate their first-year anniversary, the purchase of their first home, and the birth of their first child. Instead my sister was forced into single parenthood.

During this difficult time, I knew my sister needed my support, so I e-mailed my professors to let them know the tragedy my family was experiencing and that I was uncertain whether I would return that semester. One of my professors replied and explained it was hard for her to believe what I was saying. She asked for "proof," the birth certificate of my niece and or the death certificate of my brother-in-law. This professor truly believed that what my family was going through seemed to be out of a movie. It was unclear why this professor would feel this way but today I realize that she was not able to understand my experience and reality. For individuals that do not share

this experience, violent shootings might seem impossible or a foreign concept. The reality is that in low-income communities of Oakland, homicides, gang violence, and drugs have become embedded in the social landscape. Violence in low-income urban neighborhoods and schools has become normal even though murder, drug dealing, and drive-by shootings, are abnormal, dangerous, and unhealthy behaviors.

An article in the *Oakland Tribune* dated March 2011 by Scott Johnson examines the death of John Jones, a 56-year-old father and husband, in front of his West Oakland house. Johnson explains:

For many, especially in Oakland, this family's saga is uncomfortably familiar, the reaction to it rote and numb—a family besieged by chronic levels of stress and trauma that peak over and over again.

Johnson's analysis labels the constant and ongoing homicides in Oakland as a shared family saga that has become "uncomfortably familiar." Additionally, he describes the social landscape as rote—or treating violence as habitual, routine, fixed—and numb—meaning deprived of sensation and feeling. He concludes this piece by explaining that residents of Oakland's marginalized communities, "have lived around violence for so long they can't imagine a world without it." From Johnson's description it appears low-income residents of Oakland are living in a "state of crisis" because violence has become normal and ingrained in these communities. In this study, I refer to this "state of crisis" as the normalization of violence wherein the community and individual residents—in many ways unknowingly—have come to accept unruly acts of violence as a normal part of the city. In this study, the narratives of the girls enable me to examine the parameters of the normalization of violence in marginalized communities of

Oakland (such as East Oakland, West Oakland or the flat parts of Oakland). Moreover, this study allowed me to make a direct connection between the marginality of low-income communities in Oakland and the socially acceptable socialization processes that vilify and criminalize low-income people of color in mainstream society.

### **Outsiders' Understanding of Violence in Low-Income Communities**

It might seem correct for “outsiders,”<sup>5</sup> individuals who do not reside in low-income-urban neighborhoods, to blame the “insiders” for the disparities that exist in their own communities.<sup>6</sup> Blaming individuals for the maladies they face in their communities is a practice that has been justified with deficit theories and other ideologies. In the same light, blaming has gone hand-in-hand with racist perceptions and xenophobic attitudes that have a long history within the U.S. In his book, *Black Youth Rising*, Shawn Ginwright points to the social disintegration theory that has been widely used by various scholars to explain, “youth crime, delinquency, and violence as either individual pathological behavior or cultural adaptations that stems from social disorganization in communities” (Ginwright, 2008, 15). Social disintegration theory blames the insiders for the violence, crime, and disorganization that exists in these communities, which in turn allows outsiders to believe that violence results from individual pathological behavior. This makes it easy for outsiders to normalize the violence that exists in low-income urban communities because it is perceived as something that is part of the community and

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<sup>5</sup> I will use the term “outsider” to refer to non-residents of low-income neighborhoods as well as “insider” for residents of communities such as East and West Oakland.

<sup>6</sup> These communities face high rates of poverty, homicides, prostitution, illegal gang activities, and participation in the drug trade.

people. The influence of theories such as social disintegration is one of many modes of socialization that drives outsiders to make assertions about insiders. This influence might seem unclear because we might be unaware of obvious modes of socialization, such as personal upbringing, environmental factors, and educational background. The socializing influence of the media on individuals and groups of people has become a highly researched topic, particularly because the media is now considered a mode of socialization that can influence individuals to believe myopic portrayals of racial-ethnic groups.

### **The Media's Influence**

The media can be defined as any means of communication that reach and influence a wide range of people, including newspapers, television, radio, and films. The media not only reflects dominant ideologies, but also shapes them. Purposely or not, films and television shows have made violence, gangs, and drugs associated with Latinas/os and African Americans. Hollywood films such as *Boyz in the Hood*, directed by John Singleton (1991), and *American Me*, directed by Edward James Olmos (1992), create a clear connection between Black and Latino men and the prevalent violence in low-income urban communities. While both films were authored by men of color, the dilemma they faced was whether to challenge racial stereotypes in their films by providing critical dialogue of the social issues the African American and Latina/o communities face, or to simply capitalize on the stereotypes that portray Black and Latino men as gang members, criminals, and drug addicts. In both films, the counterstories that

Singleton and Olmos develop allowed the audience to learn the challenges the protagonists (men of color) faced at a young age. As the plot unfolds, we see how those challenges influence the decisions the protagonists made as adults. While there were some members of the audience that sympathized with the characters, there were others that took the negative portrayals at face value and used these views to justify the disproportionate levels of violence that exist in low-income urban communities.

Similarly, local news shows often take a passive role when reporting violent crimes that take place in low-income neighborhoods of Oakland. There are countless acts of violence that do not make it to the news and when they do, it takes the anchor a sentence or two to explain what happened. This limited airtime makes these incidents non-important. It is hard to be critical or delve into these issues when the only message that comes from these short segments is, “this is normal for this community and it will not change.” This is partly why it comes as no surprise for outsiders and insiders to see in the news or read in the newspaper about the ongoing homicides that take place in Oakland.

A TV show that has become incredibly popular entitled “Gang Wars,” aired a two-part “documentary” about the gangs that exist in Oakland. This documentary gives first-hand accounts of individuals who are involved in gangs, community leaders working to end violence, and also individuals who have lost loved ones to violence. The narrator posits that Oakland is in the middle of a gang war, and the fight over turf, drugs, and money motivates the killings. Furthermore, the filming techniques, such as the re-enactments of shootings, the stylization of interviews, and even the short images of a

police helicopter patrolling the city give the impression that Oakland is in the midst of a full-on gang war. In this documentary, the narrator concludes that the violence in Oakland never stops because it has become a cycle of death. This show only manages to provide a sensationalist analysis that attributes violence to a gang war that is fought over drugs and money. Moreover, this show depicts gangs as a natural aspect of low-income communities and denies institutional accountability for the structural inequalities that create gangs. Gangs in Oakland are a big problem but are only one of the many aspects that make up the *hyper*-violence that exists in the city. In my analysis I refer to *hyper*-violence and its subsequent normalization as living in a “state of crisis.” This is not to say that all community members engage in deviant behavior and are to blame for the violence. Instead, I argue that the *hyper*-violence in Oakland encompasses a number of social issues that include poverty and the prevalence of illegal drugs that affects community members directly.

The media is an important mode of socialization that can impact how outsiders and even insiders understand the existing violence in low-income communities that are predominantly Latina/o and African American; this connection will be further examined and discussed in the following chapters.

### **Gendered Analysis of Violence**

An overwhelming number of studies that examine the factors resulting in violent crimes or gang violence in low-income urban communities usually focus on male experiences (Rios, 2011; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Venkatesh, 2008). Latino and Black

men that reside in low-income urban neighborhoods indeed have a unique experience that can be incredibly violent and deadly. In his book, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*, Victor Rios provides a critical analysis of Latino and African American young men that reside in Oakland. He posits that these young men are caught in a powerful punitive culture that criminalizes and continually punishes them. His study provides a clear analysis of how young men are caught in a system made up of police, probation officers, school officials, and even parents that attempt to teach young men through punishment and incarceration. Studies that focus solely on young men's experiences, such as *Punished*, are helpful in understanding the different levels of complexity linked to the violence that exists in low-income urban communities. An overwhelming number of studies that examine and theorize on the experiences of low-income Black and Latina/o youth, however, tend to focus on male experiences, and young women of color have become an after thought. While there might be various analyses that can explain why studies about girls are an afterthought, I believe it is important to draw attention to the societal hierarchies that regulate what is considered legitimate scholarly works. Traditionally, the voices of women, and more so women of color, have been relegated and silenced in academia. This study foregrounds the voices of girls whose experiences are not normally represented.

There are a limited number of studies that examine the experiences of low-income Latina youth that reside in urban environments. In her book, *Girls in Trouble with the Law*, Laura Schaffner refers to this as the, "lack of research on girls' experience" (Schaffner, 2006, 1). Indeed there is a lack of research on girls' experience, but more so

there is a lack of research on the experiences of low-income girls of color. In her study, Schaffner explains that by listening to the experiences of young women that are “going through” the court system, we can begin to understand the degree of violence these girls experience on a daily basis (Schaffner, 2006). Among her findings, Schaffner explains that all young women are at risk of being harmed in childhood. Girls that are poor, however, also face the additional burden of poverty (Schaffner, 2006). Schaffner believes that, as an Anglo woman, it is difficult and complicated to speak for girls of color because even though she shares the experience of being incarcerated as a young woman, she admits that it is difficult to fully understand the challenges and disparities young women of color face. In her book, *Homegirls: in the Public Sphere*, Marie “Keta” Miranda provides a narrative of Latina girls that are gang members from Oakland. Miranda’s study provides a unique analysis that challenges simplistic portrayals of Latina gang members. In Miranda’s ethnographic study, the girls construct their own narratives of self-identity.

I believe Schaffner and Miranda’s studies are great contributions to academia, primarily because they are giving voice to low-income girls of color that are “going through” the court system and self-identify as gang members, because the voices of these girls have traditionally been silenced. Nonetheless, it is imperative to begin to look at the big group of girls in the middle and move away from just highlighting the experiences of extreme low-income youth, such as those who are involved in gangs and in the court system.

## **Latina Girls “In The Middle”**

Overwhelmingly, studies that focus on Latina/o youth usually fall into two categories: 1) youth who are gang-involved, gang-affiliated, or incarcerated, and, 2) high-achieving youth who are breaking the odds academically. To go beyond previous studies, it is my intent to center this study on Latina youth who are “in the middle,” meaning youth that are not exclusively high-achieving, low-achieving, gang-involved, or incarcerated. Average students those in the middle, are the ones that make up this study. It is my intent to determine, how the violence that exists in low-income neighborhoods and schools impacts the everyday lives and decision-making of Latina youth in the middle, by looking at different aspects of their lives such as school, family, and recreation activities. This focus allows me to examine how members of a low-income community, particularly Latina youth, understand and make sense of the violence that is present in their neighborhoods and schools. Additionally, this study enables me to determine how Latina youth conceptualize violence, and how the violence that is prevalent in these communities affects their educational aspirations and commitment. Examining this connection allows me to tease out whether Latina youth have normalized and internalized the violence that is ever present in their lives. I have developed the following research questions to guide this study:

1. How are Latina girls “in the middle” making sense of and understanding the violence that is present in their neighborhoods and schools. In what ways are Latina girls conceptualizing violence?

2. How does the violence that exists in low-income neighborhoods and schools impact the everyday lives and decision-making of Latina girls “in the middle?”
3. How does the violence that is prevalent in low-income communities affect the educational experiences and aspirations of young Latina girls?

Ultimately, this study examines the underlying racial-ethnic, socio-economic hierarchies, and the ideologies that are embedded in the American social structure that have normalized the disproportionate rates of violence in low-income neighborhoods and schools through an individualization process that blames community members and drives them to internalize the violence that exists in these communities.

## CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

In this study my goal is to understand how low-income Latina girls in the middle<sup>7</sup> make sense of the violence that is prevalent in their neighborhoods and schools as well as examine in what ways violence impacts the educational motivation and commitment of these girls. To truly understand why Latina girls face violence on a daily basis, first it is necessary to review research that examines the long-standing racial-ethnic and socio-economic hierarchies that were created and institutionalized to ensure white privilege as well as racial-ethnic inequality. The various issues that are present in Oakland did not develop overnight. In his analysis, Ginwright (2010) demonstrates that an economic shift took place in Oakland as a result of globalization wherein companies moved out of Oakland in search of a cheaper source of labor. Even so, many outsiders continue to utilize an “individual level analysis”<sup>8</sup> to blame low-income community members for the disparities they face. This speaks to the continual subordination of people of color and their relegation to marginal places in society. Before I delve into the literature review, I will provide a detailed break-down of the *hyper*-violence that exists in the low-income communities of Oakland.

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<sup>7</sup> Latina youth who are “in the middle” refers to youth that are not exclusively high-achieving, low-achieving, gang-involved, or incarcerated.

<sup>8</sup> I reference the individual level analysis used in Immanuel Wallerstein’s “modern world-system.” Modern world-system is a multidisciplinary, macro-scale approach to understand world history and societal change. This approach uses and identifies the different levels of explanation (individual, city level, nation state, and global) used to understand history as well as current issues e.g. poverty, violence. The level of explanation that is used by politicians, local leaders, and even members of the Oakland community to explain issues like violence can vary based on their own background, upbringing, and prejudices (aspects that many times are unspoken). The individual level analysis often uses a reductionist approach that becomes easily justified by stereotypes or prejudices, e.g., “Oakland is violent because the communities are filled with criminals and gang members.” In this study it is my attempt to use a global level analysis that incorporates a multidisciplinary and historical look of Oakland to examine the factors that have resulted in a *hyper*-violent environment.

### ***Hyper-Violence Construct***

Unlike wealthy neighborhoods that are predominately white, low-income urban neighborhoods that are made up primarily of Black and Latina/o people are faced with, what I describe as *hyper-violence*. This construct refers to the strategy community members have developed and engage in for survival. Moreover, it has become a mechanism for negotiating the streets of Oakland on a daily basis. *Hyper-violence* is directly linked to poverty because the lack of employment, recreational, and other options for its residents creates a difficult environment. The tough street image that was born has made “Oakland” equivalent to violence and crime. The following are brief descriptions that provide a clearer understanding of the different aspects of *hyper-violence*.

Poverty is the central aspect of the *hyper-violence* in Oakland. These communities have decaying apartment buildings and houses, where the cars are minutes away from breaking down and where a large number of families stand in line once a week in their local churches to receive a loaf of bread or food donated by grocery stores. This unforgiving poverty comes from the lack of jobs in the city that has driven many insiders to become part of a growing drug illegal industry.

The negative stigma that is attached to the name “Oakland” encompasses theft, crime, and death. There is a perception that nobody can be trusted because all residents are considered criminals. This construct is characterized by countless homicides (some that are reported, others that are not) that have sacrificed the lives of children, youth, adults, and even entire families. It describes incidents of violence that are unbelievable

and excessive, such as the quadruple homicide that took the lives of four Oakland police officers. Members of these communities experience *hyper*-violence on a daily basis, they know first hand that tensions run high and can result in aggressive behavior, anger, and fear. An important contributor to *hyper*-violence that allows it to exist unchecked is that both insiders of this community and outsiders perceive violence as habitual and a normal aspect of low-income communities in Oakland.

Ultimately, the goal of developing this construct is to provide a more in-depth look at the overwhelming disparities low-income residents of Oakland face. This construct problematizes the longstanding trends of violence that have remained disproportionately high for the past twenty years and the limited attempts to curb these disparities that have allowed it to exist nearly with impunity. Moreover, with this construct I hope to examine the connection between the prevalence of violence in Oakland and the larger issue of racial-ethnic and social inequity that continues to affect low-income people of color.

### **Making Connections**

It was a challenge to find contemporary works that helped me make sense of what I consider to be pivotal connections to understand how the *hyper*- violence that exists in Oakland embodies the wretched outcome of racism and social inequality that affects low-income marginalized Latina youth. Mexican-American people were incorporated into the U.S. differently than African-Americans. The reverberations of this mode of incorporation have had an impact on what continues to be the perceived role of Mexican-

American and other Latinos in the U.S. today. One of the founders of Chicana/o Studies, Mario Barrera provides a fundamental analysis that incorporates an economic based theory that provides a basis for relegation and racial-ethnic inequity. Through a detailed examination of Barrera's argument, it is my goal to bring forth: 1) the historical components that demonstrate the economic relegation of Mexican-Americans; and, 2) examine how this has affected the way Chicana/o children have been racialized and treated unequally in schools.

### **Barrera's Theory of Racial Inequality**

In a historical analysis entitled *Race and Class in the Southwest*, Mario Barrera develops the theory of racial inequality by looking at the race and class dynamics between Chicanos and Anglo-Americans from the Mexican-American War (1848) until the 1970's. In this analysis he posits that the social and economic position of Chicana/o people generally is meant to remain static because their low-wage work greatly benefits American businesses. Barrera attempts to bridge the disconnection between history and theoretical social science in American scholarship. He explains:

Studies which attribute occupational stratification to educational deficiencies among racial minorities are seriously misleading in that they do not take into account the historical conditions under which the pattern of segregated and inferior schooling for minorities was established (Barrera, 1979, 3).

This approach allows him to analyze persistent patterns, changes over time, and similarities between different ethnic groups. Throughout his analysis, Barrera focuses on the economic foundations of inequality and how that has affected Chicanos historically in the Southwest. By providing an analysis of the Southwestern economic history and

incorporating a class dimension, he develops a new and improved structural “theory of racial inequality” to examine what he considers a relegation to a subordinate position in society (Barrera, 1979).

### *Mexican American War and Land Displacement*

Barrera begins his analysis by examining key developments during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that he explains affected the social and economic status of Chicanas/os during that time. The first was the Mexican-American War, the second was the displacement of Chicanos from land and property in the Southwest, and lastly the emergence of a labor system where Chicanas/os as well as other minorities made up the subordinate segment of what he describes as the colonial labor force (Barrera, 1979). Overwhelmingly, historians attributed the Mexican-American War to “manifest destiny,” an American belief that the United States was destined to expand across the North American continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Barrera challenges these dominant explanations and explains that “manifest destiny” was used as a tool to expand the U.S. territory to benefit, “certain political and economic interests.” (Barrera, 1979, 13). The course of events that followed the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and marked the end of the Mexican-American War provide a clear indication of the ulterior motives that led to the dispute in the first place. One of the articles of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo stipulated that Mexican people residing in the newly annexed territory would become U.S. citizens that held rights like any other American. This did not matter, however, because Anglo capitalists and land speculators through legal and illegal means

dispossessed Mexican landowners (Barrera, 1979, 43).<sup>9</sup> Even though this new annexed minority was composed of citizens they were highly vulnerable because their interests were not represented in the electorate (Barrera, 1979). The dispossession of land resulted in a, “depleted economic base for Chicanos that put them in an even less favorable position to exercise influence over the political process” (Barrera, 1979, 33).

### *Colonial Labor System*

In his analysis, Barrera makes a direct connection between the land dispossessions of Mexican-Americans and the emergence of a colonial labor system in the Southwest that was made up in large part by Chicano labor (Barrera, 1979, 39).<sup>10</sup> He explains that Mexican-American people that lost their land did not have a choice but to become part of a racially stratified labor force in the Southwest (Barrera, 1979). He describes the labor force as the colonial labor system that is made up of three primary components: labor repression, the dual wage system, and occupational stratification (Barrera, 1979, 43).<sup>11</sup> Occupational stratification is the most significant out of the three primary components because it labels labor intensive occupations as jobs that only racial-ethnic groups such as Mexican-Americans and African Americans should perform. In addition to the three primary components, Barrera also includes two theoretical components that refer to the

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<sup>9</sup> For further discussion on land disposition please refer to Almaguer (1994) and Montejano (1987).

<sup>10</sup> In his analysis, Barrera explains, “A colonial labor system exists where the labor force is segmented along ethnic and/or racial lines, and one or more of the segments is systematically maintained in a subordinate position.”

<sup>11</sup> “Labor repression” is the first component of the colonial labor force refers to a type of debt peonage. The second, “dual wage system,” refers to the system where racial-ethnic groups would receive one wage and non-racial ethnic groups would receive another. The third and most significant component is “occupational stratification” a “practice of classifying certain kinds of jobs as suited for minorities and others as suited for nonminorities.”

economic advantages of the colonial labor system. The first is having a “reserve labor pool” or a labor force that is cheap and available to work when there is a surplus in jobs. The second is “minorities as buffers” meaning workers that can be the “shock absorbers” during a down turn in the economy (Barrera, 1979, 48). Barrera argues that the course of events that led to the implementation of the colonial labor system is directly connected to capitalism because keeping labor cost at a minimum is in the best interests of employers (Barrera, 1979). The interests of U.S. employers change depending on the needs of the economy. During the Great Depression, the massive deportations of Mexican-Americans who were U.S. citizens was an attempt to diminish the surplus of labor. During periods of economic stability, U.S. employers supported governmental policies that recruited Mexican workers so they could work in the U.S.

### *Barrera Connecting History and Theoretical Social Science*

Barrera utilizes Weber’s and Marx’s analysis of the state to posit that the state is an institution in society that reserves a monopoly for itself, and historically its goal has been to ensure the domination of one class over other classes (Barrera, 1979, 157). He explains that in a pluralistic society the state should be a neutral arbitrator; however, in a capitalist society there is an interest in keeping wages low, in essence Barrera argues that the U.S. government is not a neutral arbitrator (Barrera, 1979, 160). Barrera’s analysis of federal immigration policies, including labor regulation, demonstrates that the conquest of the Southwest territory and the subsequent implementation of the colonial labor system had a vested capitalist interest (Barrera, 1979, 167-68). Barrera explains that the state

has, “favored the interests of members of the dominant class at the expense of Chicanos/Mexicanos” (Barrera, 1979, 171).

### *Theory of Racial Inequality*

Barrera’s theory of racial inequality incorporates internal colonialism<sup>12</sup> to describe the, “historical relationships of subordination” that still exists in the United States and results in racial inequality. Barrera argues that “race prejudice” has become intertwined with an American social heritage wherein, “both exploiters and exploited for the most part are born heirs to it” (Barrera, 1979, 201). Barrera explains that individuals might not even realize their own prejudices. The fundamental motivation and purpose for racial prejudice, however, has been to keep a certain ethnic group as an exploitable labor force. When Barrera’s study was first published, there was a, “new round of hysteria around the issue of undocumented workers, a broad-based backlash against minority demands, and a possible reemergence of marginality” (Barrera, 1979, 218). Today, the U.S. economy is experiencing a difficult economic downturn that has been compared to the Great Depression. Coincidentally, a growing number of Latina/o communities have seen an increase in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids that are publicized in the news.

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<sup>12</sup> In Barrera’s analysis, internal colonialism represents a relationship of ethnic-racial subordination that serves the interests of a dominant wealthy class and where there is no clear geographic distinction between “metropolis” and “colony” (Barrera, 1979).

### *Racialization of Chicana/o Youth in Schools*

Gilbert Gonzalez provides a complimentary piece to Barrera's analysis, by developing a study that examines how the American public school system has treated Mexicans-Americans differently from other American students. In this study entitled *Chicano Education in the Era of Segregation*, Gonzalez describes various national education policies that have led to this unequal treatment: mass compulsory education, intelligence testing, tracking, curriculum differentiation, vocational education, Americanization, and segregation. Gonzalez explains that the status of Mexican people within the larger economic class structure influenced the educational experience of Mexican-American children (Gonzalez, 1990). He says that, "while Mexicans integrated into the economy and as their numbers increased, school boards established a de jure segregationist policy that was to last until mid-century" (Gonzalez, 1990, 21). Gonzalez suggests that segregation was not really shaped by local or regional pressures, but instead, the education of Mexican children has always been an integral part of national educational theory and practice. He makes it clear that segregation reflected and recreated the social divisions within the larger society that were formed by residential segregation, labor and wage rate differences, political inequality, socioeconomic disparities, and racial oppression (Gonzalez, 1990, 21).

### **Contemporary Challenges: Colonial Labor System**

An in-depth analysis of Barrera's theory of racial inequality allows us to examine the economic foundations of inequality that generally relegates Chicanas/os to low-sector

labor. Furthermore, Barrera (1979) argues that the “dominant capitalists” had more deeply-vested interests that used race as a tool to keep a subordinate labor force. Gonzales’ piece (1990) provides an example of how through segregation Chicana/o children were tracked into labor-intensive and low-sector positions. Much has happened since Barrera’s study was published in the 1970’s that has changed foundational aspects of our capitalist economy. Primarily, the outsourcing of low-sector jobs has been detrimental for Latina/o and African-American people who historically have filled these positions. While there are some aspects that have changed, there are others that have not. Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s discussion on racial formation is an avid example of the different ways in which race and racism continue to keep people of color in a subordinate position.

### **Racial Formation Theory**

In their analysis entitled *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant posit that, “race continues to shape both identities and institutions in significant ways” (Omi & Winant, 1994, vii). They explain that it is nearly impossible to effectively analyze issues that involve race because it is usually misunderstood and highly complex. Despite the complexities of race and racism through their racial formation theory they demonstrate that: 1) the U.S. continues to be an incredibly color conscious society, and, 2) that race/racism has evolved into an integral part of American culture and society that in many ways has become institutionalized.

Throughout their analysis, Omi and Winant refer to the political shift of the 1980's to show that this country continues to be an incredibly color-conscious society. This political shift instituted right wing, "regressive social policies in the U.S" that directly countered the affirmative action and racial justice policies of the 1960's and 70's, which were implemented to counteract the effects of racism and discrimination that affected racial-ethnic people for centuries (Omi & Winant, 1994, viii). Terms such as "reverse discrimination," represented the sentiment of many Anglo middle class Americans at the time. It seemed that affirmative action and racial justice policies came to represent unfair preferential treatment given only to racial-ethnic groups. The right wing fueled this political shift by strategically using the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement, such as supporting a "color-blind society."

To demonstrate how race has been an influential factor that impacts one's political rights, one's location in the labor market, and identity, Omi and Winant developed the racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 1994, 1). Racial formation theory is the, "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (Omi & Winant, 1994, 55). It emphasizes the flexibility of race and describes how historically it has taken various forms. In essence, racial formation refers to everyday encounters through which we categorize, judge, and make assumptions about racial/ethnic groups even unconsciously. The everyday encounters that Omi and Winant refer to can include the different prejudices and biases that children learn from their parents in the household. Similarly, environmental factors also affect the ways we categorize, judge, and make assumptions about racial/ethnic groups, such as

residing in a place that lacks diversity. Racial formation theory examines the idea that, “our ability to interpret racial meaning depends on preconceived notions of a racialized social structure” (Omi & Winant, 1994, 59).

Lastly, Omi and Winant make a strong connection between racial formation theory and the concept of hegemony, primarily because hegemony operates through social, cultural, ideological, and economic influences that are exercised by the dominant Anglo-American group. Hegemony is a hierarchy of power and a system of privilege that overwhelmingly benefits upper-middle and upper class Anglo Americans. This systemic hierarchy of privilege was challenged by the movements and policies that were inspired by the Civil Right’s Movement because it aimed to benefit low-income racial-ethnic groups. Even though poverty rates and unemployment rates continued to be disproportionately higher among people of color, the upper-middle and upper class Anglo American people that benefited from this hegemony believed that affirmative action was no more than, “preferential treatment with respect to jobs and educational opportunities” (Omi & Winant, 1994, 113). Inherently, racial formation theory provides a framework that challenges simplistic portrayals of race. Omi and Winant’s analysis demonstrates that race continues to be a central aspect that impacts who we are and how we perceive others but, more importantly that racist ideologies that have been institutionalized continue to affect marginalized communities of color. Specifically, their analysis provides a direct connection to the racial disparities that exist in Oakland daily. Similarly, Yosso (2006) and Rios (2011) bring forth the idea of “racial micro-

aggressions”<sup>13</sup> to demonstrate one of the various ways race continues to: 1) be inherent in the American social structure, and, 2) impact people of color. In his study, Rios details that in Oakland, youth of color experience racial micro-aggressions on an everyday basis. He argues that it is common for young men of color to be stopped by police because they match the description of a criminal and also because many police officers regard young men of color as inherently deviant (Rios, 2011).

### **Prevalent *Hyper-Violence* in Oakland**

To connect all of the pieces that I have shared thus far as well as examine how this relates to the violence that is prevalent in Oakland, I will examine Shawn A. Ginwright’s ethnography entitled, *Black Youth Rising: Activism & Healing in Urban America*. This ethnographic piece examines a collective trauma among Oakland African American youth that arises from the presence of violence and poverty in their neighborhoods. Even though Ginwright only focuses on African American youth, his study provides a comprehensive discussion of the challenges Oakland youth in general face that make it difficult for them to focus entirely in school and achieving academically. Moreover, Ginwright examines the collective trauma to posit, “decades of unmitigated violence, has shaped both constraints and opportunities for activism among black youth” (Ginwright, 2010, 13). He explains that if black youth are conscious of the root causes of the problems they face, they can act in profound ways to resist and

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<sup>13</sup> Yosso (2006) explains that overt forms of racism are no longer acceptable. “Racial micro-aggressions” refer to subtle racism that can encompass verbal, behavioral, or environmental forms of racism toward people of color that can be both intentional and unintentional.

transform the issues they view as unjust (Ginwright, 2010, 8). Youth in Oakland, however, face daily crisis management so it is not easy to look beyond the present (Ginwright, 2010, 11). There are numerous studies that examine the issues that low-income African American and Latina/o communities face, such as unemployment, educational disparities, and low educational attainment but, “few have explored the collective healing process” (Ginwright, 2010, 12). By focusing on the efforts of Leadership Excellence a non-profit organization, Ginwright writes about how youth not only resist but also transform the issues that exist in their community to develop a genuine healing process.

An important aspect of this piece is that Ginwright provides a historical analysis of Oakland that attributes the violence, poverty, and a “downturn in the community,” to the economic shift that occurred after companies moved out of Oakland during the 70’s and 80’s (Ginwright, 2010, 43). Ginwright makes a strong connection between the economic shift, from economic abundance during the 1960’s, to the expansion of a powerful illegal drug industry in the 1980’s and eventual high levels of unemployment (10-20%) during the 1990’s. He also makes a direct connection between the illegal drug industry and the prevalent and disproportionate violence that exists in Oakland today. Ginwright’s discussion sets the stage for my own analysis that links what I believe is a complacent attitude toward *hyper*-violence in low-income sectors of Oakland and the educational disparities, such as the high drop out rate that exists across Oakland schools.

### *Ginwright's Urban Trifecta*

In his analysis, Ginwright develops the “urban trifecta” construct that he describes as a historical framework and is made up of three factors: 1) the exodus of blue-collar jobs, 2) the influx and spread of crack cocaine, and, 3) the increase of violence, to examine Oakland’s transformation into a *hyper-violent*, poor urban community. The “urban trifecta” demonstrates the disconnection between the urban communities from the past to those today. It is evident that the shift in Oakland has been economic, but more importantly Ginwright explains that the feelings of care and love that exist in this community have vanished. In the 1960’s-70’s there was a concentration of jobs in Oakland that allowed families to make a decent living. At the end of the 70’s Oakland experienced a suburbanization of jobs, meaning jobs were moved from urban centers to suburban communities. In his study, Rios details that since the 1980’s (similar to Detroit) the residents of Oakland have experienced massive job losses due to de-industrialization (Rios, 2011, 27). What was known as a formal economy that included blue-collar jobs became either an illegal economy of selling drugs, or an informal economy of selling bootleg items. Ginwright points to the increase in Oakland’s poverty rate, to demonstrate how the exodus of jobs affected the local economy overall, but more importantly, how it affected individual families because they were not able to provide a living to feed their children.

During the 1970’s, Felix Mitchell, an Oakland native, became a powerful drug lord who developed a highly-organized criminal organization that held a monopoly on drugs. His drug monopoly forced all residents in the San Francisco Bay Area interested

in obtaining illegal drugs to make the purchase in Oakland. His monopoly came to an end when Mitchell was imprisoned in 1982 and his absence completely destabilized the drug market. Felix Mitchell's monopoly controlled the price, distribution, and sales of drugs. The price of heroin decreased significantly due to the increase in competition among street hustlers and gangs. The destabilization of the illegal drug market in Oakland resulted in stronger gang rivalries and higher rates of violence. The sale, consumption, and distribution of drugs are ongoing issues that affect residents of low-income communities in Oakland. In 1995, there were 16,000 crack/cocaine seizures that were reported and that same year there were 135,000 emergency room cases of people using crack or cocaine (Ginwright, 2010, 43-44). The third factor of Ginwright's "urban trifecta" that is interrelated with the exodus of blue-collar jobs, as well as the influx and spread of crack/cocaine, is the increase in violent crimes. The fatal shootings of Oscar Grant and the four Oakland police officers that have been discussed extensively here are difficult reminders of the violence that seems to be ever-present in Oakland. These are two examples of many that highlight how acts of violence, such as homicides, have reached epidemic numbers.

Scholars that use social disintegration theory, develop analyses that are widely used to blame low-income, African American, and Latina/o youth for the violence and crime that exists in urban communities. As Ginwright describes, however, the factors that make up the "urban trifecta" are beyond what individuals and specifically youth can control. Furthermore, Ginwright explains that it is necessary to acknowledge how the

social toxins that are connected to the violence that exists in Oakland are aspects that affect youth daily and can steer them away from school and into the streets.

### **Psychological Impact of Violence on Youth**

In his study Ginwright's main goal is to examine how violence can create opportunities for activism among black youth. While he explains that violence can shape certain constraints for low-income inner city youth, he does not describe these constraints. There are numerous psychological-based studies that examine the different ways in which the violence that exists in communities and schools can affect youth. In their study, Li-yu Song, Mark I. Singer, and Trina M. Anglin (1998), conclude that exposure to violence is linked to a number of mental-health and behavioral conditional such as, "depression, stress, fear, worries, aggression, anxiety, low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress and self destructive behaviors" (532). Additionally, they explain that there is a growing number of homicides that are committed by youth ages 14 to 17. Song et al. (1998) reference homicide statistics nationwide from 1985 to 1994 to demonstrate there is a 172% increase of youth-committed homicides. In addition, they explain that more than 45% of students from large cities reported having witnessed someone being shot at or shot within the past year (Song et al., 1998, 532). Similarly, in their study, Mary Schwab-Stone, Chuansheng Chen, Ellen Greenberger, David Silver, Judith Lichtman, and Charlene Voyce (1999), examine how the homicide rate for teenagers between 15 and 19 years increased 220% from 1970 to 1991, but more importantly, homicide has become one of the two leading causes of death for that age group.

The *hyper*-violence that is disproportionately present in low-income neighborhoods is also directly connected to the schools located in these neighborhoods. In their study, Christopher C. Henrich, Kostas Fanti, Mary Schwab-Stone, Stephanie M. Jones, and Vladislav Ruchkin (2004), examine how violence drives students to internalize and externalize problems that lead to feeling unsafe in school. Among their findings, Henrich et al. (2004) conclude, students that did not witness violence were twice as likely to meet the state's goal of performance on achievement testing. Henrich et al. (2004) challenge the funding methods that depend on student achievement and performance on state testing such as the No Child Left Behind legislation that also punishes teachers if a certain level of achievement is not attained. Instead, the researchers argue that violence is a bigger social issue, one that schools, let alone teachers cannot control or address (Henrich et al., 2004).

In their study, Natasha K. Bowen and Gary L. Bowen (1999), argue that exposure to violence affects students' grades in an indirect way. Students that have poor attendance due to violence in school or in their neighborhood can end up with lower grades in the long run. The researchers propose that it is up to community governing bodies to provide adequate funding to schools for crime and violence prevention. They also propose that school boards lobby to implement policies to make school safety a priority (Bowen & Bowen, 1999). These studies all provide a clear connection between the presence of violence and the psychological implications and symptoms that youth develop such as stress, depression, and low self esteem. Even though Bowen and Bowen explain that violence affects student grades in an indirect way, this study examined the

direct connections between violence and its effect on the educational motivation and commitment of low-income high school Latinas in the middle.

### **Criminalization of Marginalized Youth of Color**

Similar to Ginwright, Victor Rios centers his study, entitled *Punished: Policing the lives of Black and Latino Boys*, in Oakland. In this study, Rios worked directly with Black and Latino youth using observation and interviews methods, to provide an understanding of the processes by which marginalized boys are criminalized and as a result become enmeshed in punishment (Rios, 2011). Rios (2011) argues that a system of punitive social control has a strong grip on the minds and trajectories of the boys in his study. Furthermore, he explains that the state has become entrenched in the everyday lives of low-income Black and Latino youth because it is believed that, by punishing and controlling deviant behavior, social order can be maintained. Rios explains that the, “punitive criminal justice policies” that were developed and implemented during the 1960’s in Oakland have not only criminalized youth of color in Oakland but, also in other parts of the U.S. that have followed this punitive criminal justice model. He describes the institutionalization of this criminalization as the Youth Control Complex, a “ubiquitous system of punishment developed from corroboration between socializing agencies and punitive institutions” (Rios, 2011, 39). Rios (2011) explains that the Youth Control Complex is the combined effect of a web of institutions, schools, families, business, residents, media, community centers, and a criminal justice system that punishes, stigmatizes, monitors, and criminalizes youth in an attempt to control them. This system

of punitive control that criminalizes young men of color is directly connected to the *hyper-violence* prevalent in Oakland because young men of color are usually presumed to be responsible for the violence that is ever-present in Oakland.

### **Reproduction of Racial Prejudice in the Media**

These negative images of violence and crime are reproduced continuously in the media. Essentially, the media sensationalizes what is going on in Oakland and also normalizes it. To analyze the ongoing trends of violence in Oakland and the process of normalizing this violence, I will examine some aspects of the media that vilify African-American and Latina/o people. Overwhelmingly, African-American and Latina/o people are perceived and portrayed as those responsible for the violence prevalent in low-income, urban neighborhoods.

As discussed in the introduction, different aspects of the media, such as television shows that reproduce negative stereotypes of people of color, have become modes of socialization that influence the perception of various individuals. In films and television shows, Latinos are perceived as gang members (*cholos*), drug addicts, and criminals. Similarly, Latinas are also depicted as gang members and teen moms. In the film, *Mi Vida Loca*, directed by Allison Anders (1993), young Latina girls are portrayed as violent gang members whose lives revolved around gangs and conflict. These characterizations of Latinas/os are problematic because the disproportionate negative portrayals in films and television shows create and validate the negative perceptions of this community.

The negative socialization of Chicanas/os and Latinas/os has overarching effects. The negative and simplistic images portrayed in film and television shows influence how mainstream dominant America perceives Latina/o people and as a result can impact how they are treated. In an attempt to address the *hyper*-violence that exists in low-income neighborhoods, reporters have taken narrow and inadequate approaches to understand what is going on. These approaches only manage to reproduce negative, simplistic, and false images of African-Americans and Latinas/os. When these negative portrayals are taken at face value, then the violence in these communities is perceived as a product of the community and its members.

#### *Normalization of Violent Headlines in The Media*

In the evening news and in newspaper articles, violent and criminal headlines seem to be synonymous with low-income, urban neighborhoods and schools. In the introduction to this piece, I mentioned two incidences that made national headlines. The following is a brief discussion of articles that provide reactions and commentaries to both violent acts. After providing a short review of the articles, I will provide an analysis that examines the overarching themes, commentary, and frameworks to demonstrate that violence is perceived as a normal part of the Oakland community.

#### *Oscar Grant Shooting*

In an online article with the *Guardian* dated January 2009, Bobbie Johnson examines the Oscar Grant shooting and its connection to the, “racial tension that exists

between Anglo police officers and minority community members in Oakland.” He explains that the killing of Grant, a black man by a white police officer, has increased racial tensions in the city. He touches on the longstanding issue of racial profiling that was never fully recognized until after the Rodney King beating. In addition to racial profiling, Johnson brings forth poverty, crime, and unemployment that make Oakland different from its prosperous neighbors, San Francisco and San Jose. He explains that while San Francisco and San Jose are among America’s richest cities, Oakland was ranked as the fifth most dangerous city in the U.S.

#### *Fatal Shooting of Four Oakland Police Officers*

In an online *San Francisco Chronicle* article dated March 2009, Jaxon Van Derbeken, Demian Bulwa, and Carolyn Jones, link the fatal shooting of four Oakland police officers to earlier violent events that include the death of various community members. The authors make it clear: shooting and murder is something that happens time and time again in Oakland. In a second article also dated March 2009, Bulwa and Van Derbeken provide the account of Lovelle Mixon’s (the individual that killed the four Oakland police officers) family. Mixon’s family offers their condolences to the families of the four officers, and an apology for Mixon’s actions. Some of the members of the family explain that they do not understand what might have, “triggered Mixon’s burst of violence.” In the article, Mixon’s 24-year-old sister urges, “I don’t want people to think he’s a monster. He’s just not.” Similarly, his 30-year-old uncle explained that his

nephew was depressed. Mixon could not find work because he had a felony record for armed robbery and he feared returning to prison.

### *Analyzing Two Violent Headlines in Oakland*

In these articles, the authors are going beyond informing the public of these violent events. While on some instances the authors use their commentary to challenge issues that can result in violence, they also unknowingly use it to blame the community members for the disparities that exist in low-income inner cities. In his article, Johnson brings forth issues of racial tension, racial profiling, poverty, crime, and unemployment that exist in Oakland. While he mentions some of the disparities residents in Oakland face, he does not mention that Oscar Grant was handcuffed and face down on the platform when he was shot. By not accurately portraying what happened, Johnson overlooks Mehserle's irresponsible decision to use a taser to subdue Grant, even though Grant was already handcuffed and face down on the platform. The unspoken issue in this incident that many community groups brought forth is racial inequality because they explained that a life of an African American or other person of color is not valued.

In their piece, Van Derbeken et al. mention that the fatal shooting of four Oakland police officers by Lovelle Mixon is linked to a high and ongoing homicide rate in Oakland. This was a tragic incident that sacrificed the lives of five individuals including the gunman. In a second article, Bulwa and Van Derbeken speak with Lovelle Mixon's family to provide his family's perspective. Mixon's family members explained that it was unclear what triggered Mixon's burst of violence. Even though, Mixon's family

members bring forth these concerns, the authors do not explore them. Mixon's burst of violence, provides a snapshot of the state of mind many members of low-income communities share that can drive individuals to take drastic decisions. Furthermore, this incident provides an example of the *hyper*-violence that exists in Oakland, and speaks to the *hyper*-violent atmosphere that can easily ignite someone to become angry or fearful.

It is clear from these articles that the authors bring forth important issues such as poverty, unemployment, racism, and gangs that have become social disparities that affect low-income inner city residents. These details provide an analysis that begins to challenge the disparities that exist in these communities. The overall conclusion of these articles, however, is that acts of violence are normal in Oakland. While the authors mention that high homicide, crime, and violence take place on an everyday basis, the authors do not question why this is so. Moreover, the authors are not challenging the factors that have resulted in the *hyper*-violence that exists in these communities. In essence, different aspects of the media have normalized the violence that exists in marginalized neighborhoods and schools by blaming the community itself.

### **Schools Support Racist Ideologies**

While one aspect of this study is to examine how the girls make sense of the *hyper*-violence that exists in their communities, particularly to determine if they have normalized violence. The second equally important aspect of this study is to take a look at the impact of violence in the educational commitment and focus of the girls. In the past, as well as in contemporary education literature, deficient labels have been used to

describe Latina/o and African American students. Deficient labels that have been and continue to be used include, “dropouts,” “low-achievers,” “not college bound,” and not motivated.” In their article, Lindsey Perez Huber, Robin N. Johnson, and Rita Kohli (2006), challenge these labels by developing a comprehensive framework that explains how schools support racist ideologies that have been institutionalized in education.

In their analysis, the researchers posit that children of all racial-ethnic groups are taught in an institution that consistently ranks whites above people of color (Perez Huber et al., 2006, 184). When racial-ethnic children, such as, Latinas/os, Chicanas/os, and African Americans, begin to consciously or unconsciously accept the racial hierarchy that is embedded in the school system, this can lead to the internalization of beliefs and values that result in negative self or racial group perceptions (Perez Huber et al., 2006, 184). Perez Huber et al. (2006) explain that in addition to individual psychological processes, factors in school may also contribute to internalized racism. In their analysis the researchers problematize teachers, teacher training, class-room curriculum, and the resources available to schools because they all contribute to students’ acceptance of inequality. The researchers explain, teachers usually mean well and want students to learn. They, however, “are unconsciously perpetuating social norms of white supremacy” (Perez Huber et al., 2006, 190). The majority of teachers are Anglo-American, “90 percent of all public school teachers are white and more than 40 percent of schools do not even employ one Teacher of Color” (Perez Huber et al., 2006, 190). By focusing on the overrepresentation of Anglo-American teachers in schools and the training of teachers that falls short of addressing the issues and concerns of students of

color, the authors begin to unveil the institutionalization of racism that exists within the school system.

Secondly, Perez Huber et al. (2006) analyze the California standards for U.S. history and find that these standards portray African Americans, Native Americans, Latinas/os, and Asians as insignificant and inferior, “with only minor to no contributions to the advancement of the country” (194). This polarized curriculum provides the impression that minority groups are not a part of the making of U.S. history. Their last point focuses on school resources. The researchers argue this contributes directly to students’ acceptance of inequality. In the field, the researchers came upon a poster authored by two female students of color that clearly demonstrated their awareness of the educational inequality that exists between affluent schools that are predominately Anglo and impoverished schools that are predominantly African American and Latina/o (Perez Huber et al., 2006). The image on one side of the poster included white students seated in large desks by themselves with graded papers that read “A” or “B” and also a bookshelf filled with books against the wall. The other side of the poster included an overcrowded classroom with Black and Latina/o students that shared desks, the graded papers that laid in the desks read “D” or “F” and the bookshelf included very few textbooks (Perez Huber et al., 2006). Huber et al. (2006) argue that students do not perceiving these inequalities as bigger social issues, instead they internalize these inequalities and blame themselves for their academic underachievement. This piece not only demonstrates that teacher biases, polarized curriculum, and funding inequalities are some of the many examples that demonstrate the institutionalization of white supremacy

in American schools, but more importantly it shows that low-income, youth of color, internalize these issues and blame themselves for their inability to achieve academically.

### **Schooling Challenges in Oakland**

In 2005, the Harvard University Civil Rights Project and the Urban Institute Education Policy Center in Washington DC conducted research that concluded, “fewer than half the freshmen who enter Oakland public high schools--just 48 out of 100--stick long enough to graduate” (Asimov, 2005). This study came under fire by Oakland school district officials, primarily because it is difficult to keep track of students that transfer out to other districts. Even so, the graduation rates and dropout rates made headlines again at the end of 2010, when statewide results placed Oakland as the worst district in Alameda County with a 40% dropout rate (Harrington, 2010). In their analysis, Perez Huber et al. (2006) provide a detailed breakdown that challenges accusatory labels such as “dropout” and “low-achievers” that only manage to blame students for not achieving academically. As described so far, the different components of the *hyper-violence* that exists in Oakland impacts all aspects of the community, including schools and low-income youth of color. It is unclear to what degree violence impacts the educational motivation and commitment of low-income youth. However, in this study, the narratives of the girls allow me to examine a direct connection between the two.

## Critical Race Theory (CRT)

In their article, Perez Huber et al. (2006) utilize a critical race theory (CRT) framework to highlight the prominent role and impact race and racism have in the American educational system. Critical race theory and research that uses this framework depart from the premise that race and racism are endemic and permanent in U.S. society. Similarly, in her book, *Critical Race Counterstories along the Chicana/ Chicano Educational Pipeline*, Tara Yosso addresses historical and contemporary realities of race, racism and White privilege in the educational pipeline by using a critical race theory framework (Yosso, 2006). Yosso explains:

Critical race theory originated in schools of law in the late 1980's with a group of scholars seeking to examine and challenge race and racism in the United States legal system and society. (2006, 6)

Education scholar, Daniel Solórzano, identified five elements of critical race theory that Yosso (2006, 6) describes in detail and are included here:

1. **“The Intercentricity of Race and Racism.** CRT starts from the premise that race and racism are endemic and permanent in U.S. society. Discussions of race within CRT begin with an examination of how race has been socially constructed in U.S. history and how the system of racism functions to oppress People of Color while privileging Whites. A CRT in education centralizes race and racism, while also focusing on racism's intersections with other forms of subordination, based on gender, class, sexuality, language, culture, immigration status, phenotype, accent, and surname.
2. **The Challenge to Dominant Ideology.** Critical race scholars argue that traditional claims of race neutrality and objectivity act as a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society. A CRT in education challenges claims that the educational system offers objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. A critical race praxis (practice informed by CRT) questions approaches to schooling that pretend to be neutral or standardize while

implicitly privileging White, U.S. born, monolingual, English-speaking students.

3. **The Commitment to Social Justice.** CRT is dedicated to advancing a social justice agenda in schools and society. Acknowledging schools as political places and teaching as a political act, CRT views education as a tool to eliminate all forms of subordination and empower oppressed groups—to transform society.
4. **The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge.** CRT finds the experiential knowledge of People of Color legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination. Critical race research in education views this knowledge as a strength and draws explicitly on the lived experiences of Students of Color by analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination. Critical race research in education views this knowledge as a strength and draws explicitly on the lived experiences of Students of Color by analyzing “data,” including oral traditions, *corridos*, poetry, films, *actos*, and humor. CRT scholars may also teach or present research findings in unconventional and creative ways, through storytelling, chronicles, scenarios, narratives, and parables.
5. **The Interdisciplinary Perspective.** CRT analyzes racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia from a historical and interdisciplinary perspective...A CRT in education works between and beyond disciplinary boundaries, drawing on multiple methods to listen to and learn from those knowledges otherwise silenced by popular discourse and academic research.

Overall, critical race theory scholars challenge dominant perspectives that are used to justify the oppression of people of color. This is achieved by using an analysis that incorporates race/racism and engages in research that focuses on the lived experiences of people of color with the goal of addressing their needs. Critical race theory will guide this study to challenge dominant ideologies that support inequality for low-income Oakland residents. Moreover the goal of using a critical race theory framework is to make an intervention that problematizes the *hyper*-violence that exists in Oakland and

that seriously affects the educational motivation, commitment, and focus of low-income youth.

### *Critical Race Theory Counterstories*

Yosso (2006) uses a critical race “counterstorytelling method” to recount the experiences and perspectives of racially and socially marginalized people. For Yosso, “counterstories reflect on the lived experiences of People of Color to raise critical consciousness about social and racial injustice” (Yosso, 2006, 10). Counterstories are intriguing and inspired the approach that is used in this study. Similar to the counterstories, this study centers on the narratives of the girls to provide a discussion that incorporates making sense of the *hyper*-violence that is present in low-income communities of Oakland and ultimately connect it to the broader issue of social inequity.

### **Conclusion**

This study utilizes interdisciplinary works to provide a comprehensive look at the factors that have led to the *hyper*-violence that exists in Oakland’s low-income communities. The study is grounded in Barrera’s (1979) theory of racial inequality and Omi and Winant’s (1994) racial formation theory. Gonzales (1990) provides an example of Barrera’s theory by referencing the educational experience of Chicana/o children in the era of segregation. In his piece, Ginwright (2010) provides the adequate tools to implement Barrera’s theory of racial inequality as well as Omi and Winant’s racial formation theory to examine Oakland’s violent reality. Furthermore, Ginwright’s

analysis provides a clear connection between the shifts in the U.S. economy that resulted in massive losses of low-sector jobs (that were traditionally filled by Latina/o and African American people), as well as high rates of unemployment, poverty, and violence that are all prevalent in Oakland.

Unfortunately, the disparities that exist in low-income communities of Oakland are perceived by outsiders and even insiders to be the result of “deficient groups” that make up low-income communities. The negative stereotypes of people of color that are reproduced in the media, particularly in films, continue to be utilized to justify the social disparities that exist between affluent Anglo-American communities and impoverished communities of color. These negative stereotypes allow outsiders and even insiders to believe that the members that make up low-income, *hyper-violent* communities are essentially deviant. Rios (2011) argues that a powerful punitive culture that punishes Latino and Black young men has developed in Oakland. He describes this culture as the Youth Control Complex and explains that an institutionalization of this culture drives police officers, teachers, and even parents to believe that if low-income, young men of color are punished then their so-called deviance will end.

Perez Huber et al. (2006) connects all of the works discussed throughout the literature review, while at the same time provides a discussion that relates back to issues in education specific to youth of color. Perez Huber et al. connect to Barrera and Gonzalez by providing examples of how white privilege has been and continues to be institutionalized in schools. Perez Huber et al. also connects to Omi and Winant’s analysis because it problematizes issues of race and racism by examining the different

factors that influence youth of color to internalizing racism and underachievement. Lastly, Perez Huber et al. and Yosso (2006) provide a discussion about critical race theory that offers a framework that can be used to adequately answer the research questions set forth in this study. This study uses a critical race theory framework by providing a counter-narrative that centers knowledge on Latina girls “in the middle.” Ultimately, this study provides an intervention that problematizes the social disparities present in Oakland’s low-income communities as well as fuels support systems that help low-income youth of color in Oakland reach their educational goals.

### CHAPTER 3: Methodology

As previously stated, the present study provides a deeper understanding of the *hyper-violence* that exists in the low-income, urban community of Oakland, California, by speaking directly with low-income Latina high school students in the middle.<sup>14</sup> In this study, the narratives allowed me to examine how the girls understand and make sense of the violence that exists in their communities. Additionally, their stories provide a clear picture of the different ways violence impacts their everyday lives and decision making. The methods of this study were developed to answer the following questions.

1. How are Latina girls “in the middle” making sense of and understanding the violence that is present in their neighborhoods and schools. In what ways are Latina girls conceptualizing violence?
2. How does the violence that exists in low-income neighborhoods and schools impact the everyday lives and decision-making of Latina girls “in the middle?”
3. How does the violence that is prevalent in low-income communities affect the educational experiences and aspirations of young Latina girls?

These research questions were developed to challenge the *hyper-violence* that readily impacts the low-income communities in Oakland that are predominately Latina/o and Black. The violence that exists in these communities has far reaching effects that can

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<sup>14</sup> As noted in a previous footnote, Latina youth who are “in the middle” refers to youth that are not exclusively high-achieving, low-achieving, gang-involved, or incarcerated.

impact youth for the rest of their lives, not to mention the immediate effects violence can have in the educational commitment and focus of low-income youth.

### **Methodological Approach**

This study utilizes a critical race grounded theory methodological approach.

Maria Malagon, Lindsay Perez Huber, and Veronica N. Velez (2009) develop a research note that responds to a collective frustration with traditional qualitative research methods that do not fully understand or document the complex experiences of people of color.

Malagon et al. (2009) explain:

By working to situate grounded theory within a critical race framework, we strengthen the interdisciplinary, methodological toolbox for qualitative critical race research, which seeks to build theory from the lived experiences of the researchers' informants and research collaborators (254).

The goal of a critical race grounded theory methodological approach is to better understand the lived experiences of people of color. The researchers describe this methodology as a flexible approach to develop theories that are grounded in data rather than deducing testable hypotheses from existing theories (Malagon et al., 2009).

Additionally, a critical race-grounded methodology uses an interdisciplinary lens to challenge white supremacy that influences research and society to, "understand the experiences, conditions, and outcomes of People of Color" (Malagon et al., 2009, 264).

Critical race grounded theory enables this study to use what Dolores Delgado Bernal identifies as "cultural intuition," a Chicana feminist concept described as a personal quality that provides the ability of giving meaning to data. "Cultural intuition" is made up of four major sources: "one's personal experience, the existing literature, one's

professional experience, and the analytical research process itself” (Delgado Bernal, 1998, 563). In this study, my cultural intuition comes from my personal background and from working with low-income youth in an East Bay high school for the last five years. An important aspect of my personal experience is that I grew up as a low-income resident of Oakland. I experienced first-hand the violence that is prevalent in Oakland’s low-income neighborhoods and schools. This experience has equipped me with a deeper understanding of the risks and limitations youth abide by on a daily basis. In addition, my experience working as a case manager in an East Bay high school provides me with an insider’s perspective of the obstacles and barriers underrepresented students face that inhibits year-to-year matriculation, and eventual high school graduation. Moreover, my training in Ethnic Studies and Mexican American studies drives me to use an interdisciplinary focus that challenges dominant Eurocentric epistemic hierarchies and helps me center knowledge and research on the experiences of people of color. In this ethnographic qualitative study, my complex positionality allows me to draw from my personal background, professional experiences, and educational training to provide an in-depth analysis of how Latina high school girls make sense of the violence that exists in their communities. My cultural intuition (as a researcher, graduate student, Chicana from a low-income background, and an underrepresented student) will allow me to examine qualitative data and provide a unique and critical analysis.

The research methods in this study are primarily qualitative, but they have a critical race theory twist that allows me to demonstrate that the Latina girls in this study are much more than just data. The narratives of the girls that I collected provide

insightful and personal information that not only depicts the prevalence of violence in the neighborhoods and schools of the girls, but also links violence and its effects to what become the educational aspirations of Latina high school girls.

### **Ethnography**

I am approaching this study with an ethnographic lens primarily to incorporate an analysis of my own lived experiences and observations. During the interviews with the girls I shared stories of what I faced growing up in Oakland. Sharing personal experiences can be particularly painful when they include fear, resentment, and death. It was my hope that by sharing my experiences growing-up in Oakland I could support the girls by taking away part of the burden of sharing what it means to live in a violent environment.

#### *“Insider”*

Similar to the participants of this study, I grew up in a low-income neighborhood of Oakland and I attended Oakland public schools. For most of my life, I lived in East Oakland the largest and deadliest portion of the city’s land area.<sup>15</sup> From an early age, I learned to take the bus and get around in the city. This is a strategy that all children learn because walking can be dangerous, particularly in the evening. I have held on to that social capital and today I am able to get around the city with ease. Additionally, I am

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<sup>15</sup> In the Gang Wars episode that focused on Oakland, the narrator refers to a neighborhood in East Oakland (located between Seminary Avenue and 109<sup>th</sup> Avenue along International Blvd) as the “killing zone” because an overwhelming number of homicides take place in this forty block radius.

familiar with services available to the community, such as neighborhood clinics, non-profits, and churches. My knowledge of the city, community services, and dangers of certain neighborhoods comes from taking residence in different parts of Oakland. My family moved continually because theft, burglaries, and racial tensions made my parents fearful and weary. The neighborhood where my family has lived for over ten years is notorious for “side shows,” but my parents stay because their mortgage payment is affordable.<sup>16</sup> Growing up in East Oakland, I have experienced first hand the various issues that low-income youth face, particularly the far-reaching consequences of violence. This shared experience gives me an insider’s understanding of the risks young women face in their neighborhoods and schools.

### *“Outsider”*

In many ways, I am also an outsider. First, the majority of the girls that participated in this study do not share my dual frame of reference as an immigrant woman. There are three immigrant girls in this study, one was born in Mexico and the other two were born in El Salvador. In my case, my father is from El Salvador, and my mother and I were born in Mexico. I immigrated to the U.S. with my family the summer before my seventh birthday. My unique experience makes me different from the girls in this study, because 2/3 of the participants are U.S. born. Secondly, I am a high school and college graduate. Yosso explains that, “fifty-six percent of Chicana/o students do not

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<sup>16</sup> Side shows are considered spontaneous demonstration of vehicle stunts that take place in public streets and street intersections. Members of the community consider side shows as a practice that has become part of the Oakland “street” culture.

graduate high school and only 7% graduate from college” (Yosso, 2006, 2). This fact makes Chicanas/os and Latinas/os that are college graduates a select few. The educational pipeline Yosso develops details that only two out of one hundred Chicana/o students graduate with a professional degree. Currently, I am a graduate student that engages in research, which I am sure has altered my perspective and understanding of the issues that exist in the low-income communities of Oakland. Likewise, my educational attainment has an effect in the way the girls perceive me—maybe they do not consider me to be part of the Oakland community. As a high school student, I remember feeling that violence was a normal aspect of life. This is no longer the case; now I am a researcher that theorizes about the violence that exists in Oakland that has become normalized and unchallenged.

My complex positionality as an insider and an outsider of this community did not have a negative impact on the conversations that I engaged in with the girls. On the contrary, by recalling my own experience growing up in Oakland, I was able to develop questions and use follow-up questions that helped the girls provide a clear picture of what it means to live in a violent environment. Similarly, the knowledge that I have gained in Ethnic Studies and in Chicana/o studies has helped me develop an interdisciplinary and critical eye to make sense of the disparities that exist in low-income communities.

### *Informal Ethnographer*

My informal research role began as a case manager in an East Bay high school five years ago. I was hired by a non-profit agency that is based in Oakland—that

provides services to a number of communities in the East Bay—to work with a college preparatory program for low-income, underrepresented students.<sup>17</sup> The demographics of the school where I work are different from the schools the participants in this study attend. Unlike the high schools in Oakland, the school where I work has a large number of white students. The student population is 37% white, 12% multi-ethnic, 12.6% Latina/o, 29.1% Black, and 8% Asian. In his analysis, Rios (2011) explains that the number of residents in Oakland that are White (36%), Black (30%) and Latina/o (26%) are somewhat equal. While this is so, he argues that the youth of color are heavily segregated from White youth, “over 70% of Black children and over 50% of Latino children live in neighborhoods which are segregated from Whites” (Rios, 2011, 27). Furthermore, he explains that in the flatlands, “White youths are a rare population because the majority of Oakland’s Whites are middle class and live in the hills or foothills” (Rios, 2011, 27). In the school where I work, student dropout rate consists of 14.2%, significantly less than Oakland’s 40% dropout rate.

The cruel reality of the East Bay school where I work is that more than half of the Latina/o and Black student population obtain at least one D or F grade every quarter, this is not the case for White and Asian students. The achievement gap that exists in this school can be masked by the low dropout rate that consists of 14.2%. My observations, during the time I have worked in this school helped me see that the dropout rate is deceiving. On a number of occasions, I witnessed school officials make the decision to

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<sup>17</sup> The two main goals of this program are that each student fulfills their graduation requirements in a timely manner and also at the time of graduation have the option to continue on to a four year university. This is achieved by reducing outside barriers that interfere with personal wellness and academic focus.

send Black and Latina/o students that were struggling in school to an alternative school. The alternative school has an overrepresentation of African American (65%) and Latina/o (34%) students that dropout on average at 19% African American and 53% Latina/o. These figures demonstrate that even though there is big gap in the official dropout rate between this East Bay school and Oakland schools, this might not be the entire picture. Moreover, these figures demonstrate that not only in Oakland low-income communities are marginalized youth struggling academically.

The case management work that I perform with students in this East Bay school allowed me to witness the various obstacles Black and Latina/o students face. Marginalized youth face issues of violence on a daily basis in addition to poverty, lacking social capital, and facing racism in the classroom. The students in the program are all low-income, and overwhelmingly are first in their family to attend high school and consider college. In this East Bay high school, marginalized youth (particularly Latino boys) are harassed by gangs, dragged into fights, and verbally attacked. In their neighborhoods youth are confronted with gang violence and homicides that are on the rise, which in turn affects the decisions they make on a daily basis.

### **Setting: Community Based Organizations**

The non-profit Oakland agency that I have worked for over the last five years has a number of free programs that serve over 1,200 children, youth, and their families. Through building partnerships, this agency works at school sites to improve the quality of education in neighborhoods to help transform each school into a “community school.”

The different high school programs work independently from one another. This means that each high school program has a different director and counselors that work with enrolled students. While some programs focus on providing after-school tutoring in the school sites, other programs offer leadership development activities. The strong networks that this agency has developed in various schools in Oakland provided the perfect opportunity to obtain Latina high school girls interested in participating in this study.

Similarly, a center for teens that I will refer to with a pseudonym, the East Oakland teen center offers a place where children and youth feel safe to achieve academically, learn life skills, and build self-esteem. This center offers an after-school tutoring program, an enrichment component that include sports, and lastly a health component to support youth become vibrant adults. Unlike the Oakland non-profit agency, the East Oakland teen center does not operate in schools. The youth usually attend the teen center after school to get help with homework, play sports, or work on gardening. Similar to the Oakland non-profit organization, I worked in the East Oakland teen center as summer counselor, as an undergraduate college student. The close relationships that staff members in the teen center have developed with several Latina high school girls allowed me to obtain participants for this study.

Both organizations serve a diverse population of students, African-American, Latina/o, and Asian Pacific Islander. Similarly, they are both located in East Oakland, in neighborhoods that have become notorious with drug dealing, gang rivalries, crime, and homicide. Those leading these organizations understand that violence is an overarching

issue that affects Oakland youth daily. This in turn impacts the types of services the Oakland non-profit agency and the teen center provide, because both organizations are working to make sure youth reach their educational and personal goals, despite the challenges that exist in these neighborhoods.

### *Recruitment*

The relationships that I have developed with staff members in the Oakland non-profit agency and the East Oakland teen center helped me obtain participants who attend Oakland high schools. The recruitment plan for the Oakland non-profit organization was to first obtain approval from the Executive Director (ED). Once I obtained permission from the ED, I got in touch with one of the high school program directors. She was crucial in helping me obtain participants because she was the first point of contact with some of the participants. She identified eligible participants and approached girls to see if they would be willing to participate in this study. Similarly, the recruitment plan for the teen center was to first obtain proper approval from the Executive Director (ED). The teen center does not have yearlong program directors that are familiar with the students. For this reason, I asked the ED if he could identify eligible participants.

Following this recruitment process allowed me to obtain five participants. The biggest challenge to obtaining more participants using this method was that many of the potential participants shared with the program director and the ED from the teen center that they did not feel comfortable sitting down with a stranger to talk about how they understand violence. To obtain more participants, I asked all five girls who agreed to

participate if they could ask their friends if they would be interested in participating in this study. I was fortunate that four out of the five girls obtained one friend each that were willing to participate. All four additional girls were really interested in being part of this study.

The participants provided a telephone phone number—to the person who recruited them (the director of the Oakland agency, the ED of the East Oakland teen center, or the four girls who recruited additional participants)—that I could use to contact them. I called each girl to schedule a good interview time and I made sure a parent would be present during that time to obtain parental consent.

## **Participants**

The nine Latina girls who make up this study are not representative of all Latina girls in the U.S., California, or even Oakland. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, there are three girls that are immigrants one from Mexico and two from El Salvador. The rest of the girls were born in the U.S. The parents of five of the girls who were born in the U.S. immigrated from Mexico. The last girl born in the U.S. has one parent who immigrated from Mexico and the other from El Salvador. Five of the nine girls live with both of their biological parents. Three of the girls live with their biological mother and a stepfather. One of the girls lives with her biological mother and no father. Each girl in this study provides a unique experience and perspective, but something that all nine girls share is that they all reside in a *hyper*-violent community. The following are brief biographies on each one of the girls that details more background information on each

one of the girls as well as further context to their specific experiences, the biographies are arranged alphabetically.

Before I delve into each biography it is important to briefly examine the importance of confidentiality. Assuring confidentiality to participants, particularly minors, is important. In this study, the narratives of the girls detail sensitive information that includes witnessing criminal activity in their neighborhoods and schools. They go as far as sharing that their family members are gang-involved and use drugs. They even denounce certain individuals for being perpetrators. In Oakland there is “a no snitching code” that a large number of residents abide by. The narratives of the girls could be interpreted as “snitching.” For this reason I use pseudonyms in place of the girls’ names to assure confidentiality.

Carolina was born in the East Bay. She has lived in Oakland all of her life. Carolina identifies as Mexican. Carolina speaks English and Spanish. In school, Carolina pays attention in class and does her homework. She does not like to miss school because when she returns she feels lost in her classes. She is a junior in an Oakland high school and she has received grades that include A’s, B’s, C’s, and D’s since the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. She has to make up some credits to graduate. Carolina wants to go to college and finish her education so she can start her life. Carolina is involved in a number of extra-curricular programs in her school and in her community.

Karina was born in Mexico. Her family immigrated to Oakland when she was a young child. Karina identifies as Latina. She attends class and pays attention, but can become easily distracted. Karina is a true community activist and is involved in a plethora of programs in her school and in her community. She is a sophomore in an Oakland high school, since 9<sup>th</sup> grade she has received grades that include A’s, B’s, C’s, and D’s. She is missing some graduation credits, but she feels she has enough time to make them up. Karina wants to go to college and then continue onto graduate school to study psychology.

Leticia was born in the Bay Area. She does not recall when she moved to Oakland because she was really young. Leticia identifies as Latina. She speaks

English and Spanish. She is a junior in an Oakland high school and has received A's, B's, and C's since 9<sup>th</sup> grade. She always goes to class, pays attention, and does her homework. Leticia has an internship where she tutors children. She is looking forward to attending college to become a psychiatrist.

Lorena was born in the Bay Area. Similar to Leticia, Lorena moved to Oakland when she really young. Lorena identifies as Latina. She speaks English and Spanish. She is a junior in an Oakland high school and since 9<sup>th</sup> grade, she has maintained around a 2.5 grade point average. Lorena goes to class, but does not always pay attention, or finish her homework. In her neighborhood, she used to have an internship in a children's program, but has not been attending recently. She wants to go to college, because she knows doing so will allow her to have a good career.

Maria was born in Southern California. She did not live there for long because her family moved to Oakland. She identifies as Hispanic/Latina and speaks English and Spanish. She is a senior in an Oakland high school and has received A's, B's, and C's since 9<sup>th</sup> grade. She usually goes to class, pays attention, and does her homework. However, she does not really like asking for help from her teachers; she prefers to ask her friends. In her community, she belongs to a number of youth programs. Maria is looking forward to graduating high school and soon attending a four-year university.

Rosario was born in El Salvador. She immigrated to the U.S. three years ago and has lived in Oakland since. Rosario is taking English Language Learner classes, but she feels more comfortable speaking Spanish. She is a junior in an Oakland high school and has obtained B's, C's, and D's since 9<sup>th</sup> grade. She almost always goes to class and pays attention, but only sometimes takes notes, or does her homework. Rosario's first priority is to graduate high school. After high school, she plans to work and go to college.

Sofia was born in the East Bay. She identifies as Latina. Sofia speaks Spanish and English. She is a junior and attends a charter high school in Oakland. Sofia usually attends class, pays attention, and does her homework. Since 9<sup>th</sup> grade she has received A's, B's, and C's. She is part of various school and community programs. After high school she hopes to attend a four year university, and when she finishes, she wants to continue onto law school.

Susana is an immigrant from El Salvador. She immigrated six years ago and ever since has lived in Oakland. She identifies as Latina and can speak English and Spanish, but prefers to speak Spanish. She is a junior in an Oakland high school and has maintained around a 2.0 grade point average since 9<sup>th</sup> grade. She sometimes goes to class, pays attention, and does her homework. She wants to graduate high school and then attend community college.

Tatiana was born in the Bay Area. She identifies as a Mexican-American and Chicana. She speaks English and Spanish. Tatiana has lived in Oakland for four years. Tatiana is a sophomore in an Oakland high school and has received A's, B's, and C's since 9<sup>th</sup> grade. She always goes to class, pays attention, and does her homework. Tatiana hopes to graduate high school, go to college to become a nurse or doctor.

It was my goal to develop a study that challenges the dominant narratives that exists about Latina/o youth. I was certain that a study that focused specifically on Latina girls in the middle would challenge not one, but various dominant narratives that tend to focus on male experiences that are either high achievers or gang-involved. Their narratives demonstrate that they live in the crossroads and are faced with making life-changing decisions almost on a daily basis. Even though the girls face *hyper*-violence in their neighborhoods and schools, this does not determine if they miss school because they believe education is the gateway to a successful life.

### **Data Collection**

I collected data for this study during a four-week period. I collected the narratives of all nine girls through semi-structured in-person interviews. During the interviews, it was my goal to make the girls feel comfortable; for this reason, I did not engage in note-taking or other activities. To make sure that I could refer back to the interviews, I audio-recorded each narrative. The interviews allowed me to obtain information about the ways in which violence impacts their daily lives and decision-making. Additionally, through an analysis of their narratives, I was able to outline the various methods in which the girls

are conceptualizing and making sense of the violence that is present in their neighborhoods and schools.

All nine interviews in this study followed the same interview protocol. The interviews were broken down into four sections. The first section was composed of general background questions that allowed me to get a better sense of who the girls are. The questions that composed the second section asked about how the violence that exists in their neighborhoods and schools impact their decision-making. During the interviews, I prefaced the second set of questions by explaining that I, as well as each one of the girls, know about what is happening in Oakland. I explained that homicides, shootings, and gang violence are common and that this has been going on for a long time. I then asked for their help to figure out why this is happening. Lastly, I invited all girls to talk about how violence affects them. The questions in the second section were geared toward understanding what the girls experience on a daily basis: what do they see on their way to school, in school, and on their way home? The underlying goal of this section was to figure out what the girls consider as normal aspects of their lives.

The third section focused specifically on the ways that violence affects the educational commitment and focus of the girls. The questions asked the girls about their study habits, their grades, and the relationships they have with teachers. Additionally, this section asked the girls about their plans for the future. Even though all of the girls in this study had high aspirations to graduate high school and attend college, they were also scared about college because, they explained, it would be too difficult for them. The questions in the last section asked the girls how they made sense of what is happening in

their communities. It was my goal that these questions would allow the girls to share how they conceptualize the factors that result in *hyper*-violence in their communities.

During the interviews I followed the protocol, but I also went beyond the protocol with follow-up questions when needed to obtain the full extent of the girls' narratives. The narratives were incredibly personal and sometimes painful. Their unique experiences provide a detailed account of how violence impacts them, their families, and their entire communities.

### **Data Analysis**

At the end of interviews I asked each girl if I could keep in touch. I explained that I might call or text message them if I had a question about what they said in their interviews. All nine participants allowed me to stay in touch. The first step to analyze the data was to transcribe all nine interviews. Once I finished transcribing, I read all interviews more than once. The goal of the third read was to code the interview transcripts for recurring themes that were clearly present in all transcripts. In their narratives, all of the girls share how common it is to hear shootings, losing peers from school to violence, and even the prevalence of racial-ethnic tensions in their schools. I used a color-coding method to code the different themes that the girls brought forth in their narratives. In chapter 4 of the present study, I detail the findings of this study. I constructed the findings in chapter 4 by taking each question and answering it one by one. For each question, I provide an outline of the girls' narratives using quotes that

provide a response to the research questions. Lastly, I provide my own analysis that I feel is central to understanding the depth of what the girls are saying.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited to a small sample of nine participants, specifically low-income, Oakland residents, Latina high school girls. The Latina/o people in the U.S. today represent an incredibly diverse people that encompass different: ethnicities, languages, socio-economic status, and educational attainment. As I explained earlier in this chapter, two-thirds of the participants feel their ancestry is Mexican. While I use the term Latina/o to refer to the girls, the sample used in this study does not offer a representative sample of the Latina/o community that exists in Oakland, California, or the U.S.

As mentioned in the introduction, Oakland is not the only city in the country that has disproportionate levels of homicide and violent crimes. This fact could allow this study to have national reach. The limited funds and time to complete this study, however, did not allow for a larger sample size, or to consider taking samples from other cities. Lastly, there are various factors that can affect the educational motivation and commitment of Latina high school girls. This study, however, specifically analyzes the connections between the educational aspirations of Latina girls and the violence that is prevalent in low-income communities of Oakland.

This study provides an in-depth look at the far-reaching consequences of violence and its effects on low-income Latina girls. The findings in this study should not be used

to generalize Latina/o students in the U.S. Instead, special attention should be given to recurring themes brought up by the participants that can begin to decipher how violence can affect educational motivation and commitment. Ultimately, this study uses critical race theory to center on the experiences of low-income Latina girls with the goal of problematizing the larger issue of social inequality that continues to be prevalent in the U.S.

## CHAPTER 4: Data Analysis

This study focuses on Latina high school girls in the middle, not only to learn how they understand and make sense of the violence that is prevalent in their neighborhoods and schools, but also to determine how this impacts their education motivation and focus. As discussed in the introduction, this study provides a counter-narrative that challenges the current perceptions that relegate Latina/o youth to two opposing labels: gang members and high achievers. The Latina/o youth in Oakland are usually relegated to one of those roles and that is gang member. As discussed in Chapter 2, the media and other socialization processes promote negative stereotypes of low-income people of color. The negative socialization of people of color, along with the continual acts of violence that take place in the city have made even the name “Oakland” symbolize a number of atrocities. As a result, low-income, Black and Latina/o people including youth become criminalized and judged for the countless acts of violence that take place in their neighborhoods and schools.

This study brings forth the voices of Latina girls from Oakland who are neither high achieving nor gang-involved. Contrary to mainstream views, low-income Latina/o and Black youth from Oakland are not all gang members or criminals. Even though the girls who make up this study are not gang-involved, the *hyper-violent* environment that exists in their neighborhoods and schools affects them on a number of levels. In this chapter I use quotes from the interviews with the girls to demonstrate that violence has become an embedded and unspoken aspect of the social landscape in the low-income communities of Oakland. Moreover, the narratives of the girls provide implicit

connections between the fear they experience everyday due to the violence that claims the lives of friends, family, and other community members and a strong fear of not being prepared to attend college. Altogether, this chapter will provide answers to the research questions that have guided and driven this study thus far.

1. How are Latina girls “in the middle” making sense and understanding the violence that is present in their neighborhoods and schools? In what ways are Latina girls conceptualizing violence?
2. How does the violence that exists in low-income neighborhoods and schools impact the everyday lives and decision-making of Latina girls “in the middle?”
3. How does the violence that is prevalent in low-income communities affect the educational experiences and aspirations of young Latina girls?

This chapter was organized into three sections. The first section will provide an analysis of how the girls understand the violence that exists in their neighborhoods and schools. In their narratives, the girls provide detailed descriptions of the types of violence they face. While this section recounts the girls experiences, it also examines to what degree the girls have normalized the violence that has become a part of their life. The second section will detail the different ways violence impacts the decisions the girls make. This section examines the creative responses the girls have developed to not only survive, but also continue pursuing their goals of graduating high school and going to

college. Lastly, the third section will focus on how the girls' schooling experiences are violent but more importantly, examine how the girls feel about continuing their education.

### **Research Question No. 1**

On a warm Sunday morning I finished parking my car a few houses away from Carolina's house. Her father and another gentleman were standing outside; they both said hello. Carolina was waiting for me on the porch to show me in to her house. As I walked in, her mom greeted me and soon left us at the dining table to chat. During the interview Carolina spoke in a clear and powerful manner. She shared with me that she agreed to participate in this study because she feels it is important for others to know what she goes through on a daily basis. As she began the interview, she shared something, she explained, she will never forget:

When they shot the four police guys, it was right there. I was at the store with my mom and we heard some gunshots and we were like, oh God.

Carolina was referring to the tragic deaths of the four Oakland police officers and Lovelle Mixon, the gunman. She listened to the gunshots and heard the commotion when the SWAT team moved in on Mixon. Carolina was visibly anxious remembering this incident but as soon as she finished explaining what she remembered, she said:

We are already used to gunshots 'cause we hear them everyday and the ambulance and the police everyday, so we are already used to it.

Her anxiety quickly dissipated as she explained that listening to gunshots, ambulance, and police sirens was something that happens daily. Similar to Carolina, all of the girls in

this study classified gun violence, specifically shootings, as the most common type of violence they are exposed to and that affects their neighborhoods and schools.

This section examines the different types of violence they face. The girls focus extensively on shootings because many of the girls have lost close friends, or know of peers from school who have been killed this way. Additionally, the girls bring forth fights in school, racial-ethnic tensions that exist in their neighborhoods and schools, what they perceive as gendered violence, and also mention briefly how drug use can be a type of violence. Secondly, the girls make sense of the *hyper*-violence that exists in their communities by explaining what they feel are the causes of the violence. They mention that many times the members of the community are to blame because they are the ones committing the crimes. They also briefly mention that the Oakland police officers are at fault because they criminalize the community. Similarly, they mention issues with the economy, such as city funding, and also question how the mayor of Oakland decides how to prioritize funding. Essentially, they believe their communities are not a priority to the city, so the outcome is *hyper*-violence. The last component of this section focuses on how processes of individualization and internalization have driven these girls to normalize the *hyper*-violence that is prevalent in their communities.

## **Different Types of Violence**

### *Gun Violence: Shootings*

In his article dated March 2011, Scott Johnson details that in 2010 there were 110 homicides in the City of Oakland. He explains, “The Oakland police department reports

that 90 percent of those deaths were from guns.” Carolina knows very well that acts of violence, like shootings, can happen at any time. In her narrative she explained:

My family, we have been through a lot of violence due to my brother’s accident. All his ex-friends they came like a month after he was let out of jail, they threw stuff at our house windows, they broke our car windows, and they shot our house.

Carolina’s brother and his friend were involved in a car accident that resulted in his friend passing away. Even though what happened was an accident and the friend was the one driving the car, Carolina’s brother has been blamed by his friends as the one responsible for the tragedy. Essentially, the friends are punishing Carolina’s brother for what happened to their friend. Carolina’s family continues to live in a worried state because the friends have gone as far as shooting at their house. At the same time, when Carolina brought up the four Oakland police officers, she says that everybody in her community is already used to the gunshots. Even though Carolina is used to hearing gunshots, she knows that outsiders do not feel the same way she explains:

They say, “Oakland is bad,” or that in Oakland “they just kill people.” Some of them can’t come over here or they don’t want to ‘cause they are scared, ‘cause they think they are going to die. Even when they come here for the first time, they are like, “do you hear that?” and then I say, “oh just go to sleep. It’s nothing.”

When friends or family visit Carolina for the first time and they hear gunshots, they immediately become uncomfortable and scared because they feel their life is at risk. Carolina dismisses the gunshots as unimportant because she hears them all of the time.

Tatiana lives roughly two miles west from Carolina. Similar to Carolina’s neighborhood, the street where Tatiana lives has a number of abandoned homes with boarded-up windows. It was a Thursday afternoon and I was parking my car close to

Tatiana's house. I walked up the stairs and knocked. Tatiana came to the door and asked me to come in. She walked us to her room and also asked her mom to tell her brother and cousins to keep it down. Similar to Carolina, Tatiana seemed like a determined young woman that knows what she wants. As we got on with the interview and I asked her in which ways has violence affected her, directly or indirectly? She answered:

Last year in February, he [her uncle] was walking here [in front of the house] with his homeys and some Norteños passed by and shot him.<sup>18</sup> He fell on the side and his leg was messed up. He is ok now, but this happened again in my aunt's birthday in January this year, they passed by her house and started shooting again.

Tatiana explains that her uncle is gang-involved with one of the Sureño gangs in Oakland.<sup>19</sup> With a weary tone, Tatiana explained that she does not want to be around her uncle or even for him to be around her house anymore, because she knows that his presence can result in another drive-by shooting. This excerpt shows that drive-by shootings are common in her neighborhood because she lives in a place that is considered to be Sureño territory. Her uncle is not the only one in her family that has become gang-involved. With visible resentment Tatiana explained that her aunt, also a sophomore in high school is gang affiliated.

She [her aunt] doesn't care about school; she cuts class and thinks she is a big time Sureña girl. It's not cool because I go to school with her and people look at me like, "you're a Sureña too." But I don't do that stuff. I try to keep cool with everybody, I do not want problems.

Tatiana feels angry that her uncle is influencing her aunt in a negative way. She finds it absurd that her uncle continues to be involved in gangs because she feels that, as a twenty

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<sup>18</sup> Norteños (Spanish for Northerners) are a group of Latino gangs in northern California that are affiliated with the Nuestra Familia gang.

<sup>19</sup> Sureños (Spanish for Southerners) are a group of Latino street gangs with origins in the oldest barrios [which mean neighborhoods/communities that were overwhelmingly Mexican] in southern California.

year old, he is too old to be a gang member. Additionally, Tatiana believes her uncle has no reason to be gang-involved because he did not grow up in Oakland. In this sense Tatiana is detailing her own perception of how and what a gang member looks like. She believes gang members are usually in their teens and are raised in the Oakland community because she believes joining a gang is needed for survival.

Tatiana is not sure if her aunt and uncle think about the consequences of what they are doing. She worries because her aunt and uncle share a house with a sister that has small children. Tatiana fears that a stray bullet might hurt her baby cousins. Tatiana believes that violence has become a never-ending story, because gang members only think about “retaliation.”<sup>20</sup>

Leticia lives a few blocks east from Carolina, but they do not attend the same school. Similar to the neighborhoods of most of the participants in this study, the street where Leticia resides was littered with trash along the curb. After I parked in front of her house I walked to the front door and knocked. Leticia, a shy young woman opened the door and asked me to come in. We passed the living room, where three young boys were playing a video game, and then we walked into the kitchen. It seemed her parents, aunts, and older siblings finished eating breakfast. They were really interested in my research and asked a number of questions. Leticia asked them to excuse us because we needed to start the interview. We left the kitchen and walked to an in-law unit located in the back of the house. There, we sat down and started the interview.

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<sup>20</sup> Retaliation has become an important piece that fuels *hyper*-violence in Oakland because revenge has become the acceptable response to any attack. Retaliation is problematic, particularly when it is unclear who was behind the initial attack; it can even lead gang members to take a hit on the wrong individual or group.

Leticia and Lorena are friends and attend the same school. Lorena lives roughly two miles east of Leticia. The asphalt that paved the street that took me to Lorena house was in great need of repair. It was getting dark as I was parking in front of her house. Her house seemed to be under construction. I walked right in because the gate was unlocked. After I knocked, Lorena opened the door and welcomed me in. She was a soft-spoken young woman. Her mom was in the kitchen making dinner when I walked in and greeted me with enthusiasm. We sat in the living room and started the interview, but it did not take long before the sound of passing sirens overpowered our conversation. This happened on three separate occasions throughout the interview. Similar to Carolina and Tatiana, Leticia and Lorena also brought forth gun violence and shootings as a dire problem in their community.

In their narratives, Leticia and Lorena explained that random shootings happen in front of their school all of the time, and many of these shootings result in school lockdowns. They both explained that shootings make them worry because they never know if a stray bullet will hit them. In her narrative, Lorena explained that across the street and in front of her school, there are apartment buildings. She believes the people that live there are really problematic because they are always arguing and getting into fights. The shootings that take place in front of Leticia and Lorena's school provide a snapshot of what happens in low-income communities of Oakland. It seems the members of the community, in this case the residents of the apartment buildings, do not hold back to engage in confrontations that can escalate into shootings, even though they are steps

away from a school. This unyielding behavior is indicative of the *hyper*-violence and tensions that exist in this neighborhood.

Maria attends school with Tatiana and Carolina. Maria lives a few blocks north of where Tatiana lives. In the early afternoon on a Friday, I parked in front of her house and walked to the front door. When I walked through the gate into her front yard, a car was speeding past to avoid the speed-bump. Maria opened the door and asked me to come in. Her mom came from the kitchen to the living room and cordially greeted me. After her mom returned to the kitchen, we started the interview. Maria is the oldest of all the girls that make up this study. During the interview, she mentioned her acceptance into a four-year university. Similar to the girls already mentioned, Maria brought forth shootings as an issue that greatly affect her community. In her narrative, Maria explains how common it is to speak with neighbors about, “the random, did you hear that somebody got shot around the corner because of this or that?” Similar to all of the girls in this study, Maria hears gunshots all of the time, particularly around her house. She explained that when she hears shots, she wonders what happened, whether somebody is showing off a gun or if they are actually trying to harm somebody. In the following narration, Maria explains how one of these random shootings affected her directly because her friend was shot and killed in front of his house:

Just a year ago my friend died in his birthday party. It was a drive by [shooting] and they shot him in the head. He was from my school and he was on his way to graduate and go to a California State school. He was going to have a job and everything but they shot him in his birthday.

What Maria experienced is something that all nine girls in this study have experienced.

While some of the girls only described their relationships with a friend they lost to

violence as, “somebody they knew from school,” other girls like Maria describe these losses as painful reminders of the *hyper*-violence that exists because they have close relationships.

Listening to the narratives of the girls that detail painful experiences of loss and exposure to violence was difficult. The shootings that happen, sometimes steps away from the houses of the girls, are terrifying. Hearing gunshots time and time again makes the girls worry, realizing that at any moment, they, or a family member, can be shot dead. Some of the girls mentioned that they do not like to be home alone because they fear something might happen and nobody will be there to help them. The fear the girls experience on a daily basis is a theme that will be discussed in-depth in the second section of this chapter. For now, the following section will detail the girls experiences losing a friend to violence as well as examine the different ways the girls make sense of the disproportionate number of youth that are losing their lives to violence.

#### *Losing Friends and Peers to Violence: Unspoken Communal Feeling of Hurt and Loss*

It was difficult for Maria to talk about how losing her friend made her feel; she began to tear up when she explained, “after he passed, I felt like not really doing anything. It was sad you know.” Maria explained she did not have the desire to go to school or do anything because she felt there was no point. Her friend was friendly and was also on his way to college. What happened to him made her feel anger because she believes, “it is dumb to kill innocent people for no reason.” The following is Maria’s account of what happened that night when her friend was shot.

The reason my friend got shot, it was not intentional, like they were not trying to kill him. The person that shot him, he was actually trying to get into the party [his birthday party] and because he was not able to get in he got mad. The person got into his car and started shooting everywhere. That was the only person that died the birthday boy...Other people got injured but they didn't die. It was crazy.

In her narrative Maria makes it clear, her friend was shot over something she believes is insignificant. The gunman was angry because he was not allowed into the party and his anger drove him to shoot at the entire party. What happened to Maria's friend speaks to the *hyper-violence* that exists in the city because even a small rejection can harvest an unlimited amount of indignation and anger. The rejection of not being allowed to enter the party drove the gunman to lose control and shoot the party. While Maria described what happened to her friend as dumb and unreasonable, the normalization of the violence that exists in Oakland's low-income communities makes this a common response. When Maria finished explaining what happened to her friend, it seemed she took herself back to that painful experience and for a moment did not say a word.

In their narrative, Tatiana and Carolina also mentioned what happened to Maria's friend because they also knew him from school. They both shared what they remember.

In her narrative Tatiana explained,

A year ago, this boy...he was a senior and he passed away. He got shot on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party. He was friends with everybody and he made it clear, he didn't want no gangs at his party. There was a drive by [shooting] and they shot him and his cousin.

Similarly in her narrative Carolina explained,

I didn't know the boy but the day before he died he presented in my class and I saw him and I thought he was cute but I was paying attention to their senior presentation...Sunday we were at church and I got a text message saying that so and so's cousin had died and I was like oh from my school?...I saw a picture [in

Facebook] and then I was like oh that's him, I saw him on Friday, how can that be.

Even though Tatiana and Carolina were not close to Maria's friend, they explain that his death was difficult for the entire school.

It was sad because I know his cousin and I could feel his tension, 'cause I know how it feels to lose somebody. But losing somebody through violence, that's sad, 'cause they still have their life to live. The next day when they had his picture up in school, the whole school was crying and looking at it. I felt sad and I started crying too. But I didn't even know him.

Carolina is alluding to an *unspoken communal feeling of hurt and loss* that happens across low-income neighborhoods in Oakland time and time again when a person is sacrificed to the *hyper-violence* that exist in the streets. The *unspoken communal feeling of hurt and loss* is composed of internalizing and individualizing the violence<sup>21</sup> that is present in low income communities of Oakland. The community members themselves come to internalize and blame themselves for the violence that is present in their communities. They do so by accepting and affirming stereotypes that are reproduced in the media, such as, "black and Latinas/os are criminals and gang members." The *unspoken communal feeling of hurt and loss* drives community members who have experienced loss to remember their own unprocessed feelings of fear, anger, and grief. Carolina could not explain why she cried like the rest of her peers in school when the picture of Maria's friend was put up. Carolina did not expect to cry because she was not close to Maria's friend; but she did cry because, like a large number of low-income youth in Oakland, she is struggling to process feelings of loss that are rooted in the *hyper-*

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<sup>21</sup> Individualizing and internalizing violence are terms that are presented here briefly. Their meaning and significance will be analyzed further at the end of this section.

violence that has become a part of her life. Tatiana also alludes to this *unspoken communal feeling of hurt and loss* by explaining:

I think it's really sad and crazy that people can do that. He was really successful. It was crazy when that happened. I just seen him today and tomorrow would have been his party and he got shot and then I found out in my space...I thought it was a joke but the whole school was tagged up. It said F\*\*\* all these people, they were basically talking about the Sureños and the BB's,<sup>22</sup> they think one of them did it because they said that he was a Norteño, but he was nothing.

Similar to Carolina, Tatiana is also alluding to the *unspoken communal feeling of hurt and loss* because she explains, "...the whole school was tagged up." Tatiana is pointing to the anger and helplessness that many of her peers felt in her school because Maria's friend was not gang-involved. They felt that his shooting was an injustice.

Similar to Maria, Tatiana also uses the term "crazy" to describe how difficult it is for them to come to terms with this tragedy. On the one hand, the girls explain that acts of violence such as shootings have become a normal aspect of their community. Yet at the same time, it is difficult to come to terms with a tragedy that impacts them directly like the death of Maria's friend. This double bind that the girls are faced with is evident through Tatiana's inability to understand why somebody would shoot him. It is difficult for Tatiana to understand because as she puts it, "he was really successful." Essentially, Tatiana is suggesting that individuals that are doing the right thing to graduate high school and go to college should not become victims of violence. In their narratives, the girls demonstrate that this environment drives them to suffer and feel pain when their peers are sacrificed to violence. Even though the girls hope the tragedies such as this one

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<sup>22</sup> Tatiana mentions BB's but is referring to the Border Brothers street gang. This gang has become widely recognized in Oakland for the relentless violence its members engage in. This gang identifies with black and silver colors.

end, they know that this is not possible because they believe the violence that exists in their communities has no end. As a result, the girls have learned to go about their daily lives despite the pain they feel when they lose a loved one. Some of the girls have also developed a strong exterior that allows them to conceal painful memories. The girls understand that if they dwell on painful and hurtful memories, they will be miserable and will not be able to move forward with their lives.

The story of what happened to Maria's friend was something that I thought about for many hours. This was on my mind one cloudy morning, as I parked my car in front of Sofia's house. I walked to Sofia's door and noticed her house had a security gate that enclosed her porch. The gate was partially open so I was able to walk into the porch and knock the door. Sofia came to the door and welcomed me in. Her father came out for a minute to greet me and then returned to his bedroom. We sat down in the living room to start the interview. Her narrative allowed me to see that Sofia was an incredibly caring and bright girl. In her narrative, Sofia shared her own experience losing a close friend.

My friend they killed him, I think I was a freshman going to sophomore year. It happened a week before sophomore year. He was shot and killed like a block away from his house. I remember one time I was on the bus with my brother and two guys were going to shoot him, they had a gun, I just started crying.

This was one of Sofia's close friends, who she knew since middle school. This was a difficult time for Sofia because weeks before her friend was killed, she was riding the bus home; her friend was on the bus, too. She noticed that two boys approached him and one of the boys took out a gun from under his cap and held it against her friend's head. Sofia's voice became agitated when she explained that she was not able to do anything for him. She felt helpless, so she started to cry. It was fortunate that nothing happened

that time, however, it did not take long before he was shot and killed a block away from his house. When she found out what happened, Sofia was in a state of shock and disbelief. She explained that it took her a long time to be able to process this loss.

When I asked Leticia if violence has affected her directly or indirectly, she responded:

My friend got shot last year that affected me; he was a friend from school. They shot him in front of his house. It just happened.

Similar to Maria, Leticia also began to tear up when she told me what happened to her friend. Beyond that, Leticia did not share anything further about what happened to her friend. It seemed that it was very painful to talk about what happened to him.

The girls were genuinely hurt as they described how their friends or peers lost their lives. It was difficult to know that every time I sat down with one of the participants to interview them, they would share painful experiences. Losing a close friend or peer from school became a recurring theme in all nine interviews. These were my thoughts as I sent a text message to Rosario to set up a good time to meet. She gave me her address and said her mom had the day off from work so I could come over any time. Rosario lives roughly four miles west of Tatiana. Driving towards her house I noticed a large number of apartment buildings, but as I made a left turn towards her house I immediately noticed her block was only comprised of single-family homes with up-kept lawns and nice paint jobs. I parked in front of her house and walked to the front door. Rosario, a friendly and humble young woman came to the door and invited me in. Her mom greeted me as she was looking at some paper-work in the dining room table. We sat in the living room and started the interview.

Susana and Rosario are close friends. Susana lives roughly a mile-and-a-half west of Rosario. It is incredible how the neighborhoods can change from one block to the next in Oakland. Even though these two girls live relatively close, Susana's neighborhood is completely different to Rosario's. Many of the houses in Susana's block were gated and some were abandoned with boarded up windows. I stood in front of Susana's house and waited for somebody to open the gate. I could not walk in because there was a padlock in the gate. Her uncle came out and took the lock off the gate and allowed me to pass. As I walked into her house, Susana was sitting down in the couch watching television and using her telephone. She invited me to her room so we could begin the interview. During her interview, Susana's demeanor gave me the impression that she did not feel violence was a big deal in her community. Her answers seemed to be shorter compared to those of the other girls. Even so, her bold character and her desire to graduate high school became clear throughout her narrative.

After we finished the interview, I left thinking that I did something wrong because Susana did not seem engaged in the interview. I grappled with this idea for days. I realized that every girl's experience is different, but I continued to think about how to improve my interviewing strategies. This was on my mind as I made my way to Karina's house located two miles south of Susana's house. Karina's house was located close to a neighborhood known for abandoned factory buildings. I parked, walked to her front door, and knocked. Karina came to the door and seemed excited about the interview. Her aunt and uncle were home at the time eating dinner. Karina and I sat in her living

room and started the interview. The love she has for her community, as well as her desire to make positive change and succeed, became clear throughout her narrative.

All three girls, Rosario, Karina, and Susana attend the same school. In their narratives the three of them shared that a boy from their school was shot during the 2010-2011 school year close to their school. Rosario was in the school when this happened, and she explained:

Well, they killed him close to the school when parents were coming out of the back to school night. I felt scared because I never thought something like that would happen close to the school, there were so many parents. I felt bad.

Rosario did not really know the boy, but truly felt bad for his family because she understood how horrible it would be to lose a loved one.

In their narratives, all nine girls mentioned that they knew somebody from school or a close friend that lost their life to violence. All of the girls were visibly hurt when they shared these stories. Maria and Leticia began to tear up when they revealed that their close friends lost their life. Carolina and Tatiana alluded to an *unspoken communal feeling of hurt and loss* that takes a hold of the entire community, particularly when an innocent person is sacrificed to the *hyper-violence* that exists in the city. While, there are various ways the participants in this study are exposed to violence (such as fights in school and racial tensions). The death of a close friend or peer from school, however, becomes a harsh reality check that reminds these girls how vulnerable their lives are. The death of Maria's friend was difficult for individuals like Tatiana to understand because, similar to him, she does not want to have problems with anybody. Instead, she wants to graduate high school and go to college.

### *Fights*

In their narratives, the girls explained that the most common acts of violence that take place in their schools are fights. At some point in their narrative, each girl mentioned that in their school it is common for fights break out. Maria believes that sometimes fights get started over insignificant and minor issues like bumping into somebody. Maria worries that fights can break out any time because she says, “like, a fight goes off and I might be in the middle and I can get hurt.”

Even though all nine girls in this study do not identify as gang members, they believe they are still in danger of being caught up in the middle of physical altercations where they can get hurt. The girls are afraid that they might not have a choice but to fight and defend themselves.

Tatiana shared that a boy stood up to a group of Norteños in her school because they were bullying and stealing from freshmen boys. Unfortunately, for doing so, that boy was jumped.

The Wall, that’s [the place] where the Norteños hang out. They say they are Norteños but I really don’t think they are but, whatever. They were starting to pocket check people and this guy told them “don’t be doing that go on with that.” They told him don’t worry about us. [He answered,] “What you mean leave those little kids alone, they’re trying to get their education, pick on somebody else.” They asked him “what do you bang,” and he said I don’t bang anything. [So they answered] “Let’s just chuck him.”

It seems the boy from her school spoke up because it was unfair that the Norteño gang members were taking advantage of his peers. The Norteños probably did not expect a

non-gang member to stand up to them, so they jumped him under the assumption that he sympathized with an opposing gang.

Carolina agrees with Maria and Tatiana, because she believes that many of the fights that take place in her school are related to gang issues or tensions. The tensions that Carolina refers to are not only tensions between gangs, but also the tensions she knows exist between individuals or groups in her school and neighborhood. The tensions in her school are manifested as physical fights, arguments between students, and even issues between teachers and students. Similarly, in her neighborhood she says:

There are a lot of fights, sometimes the neighbors will be fighting or something but, it's usually the black people that they fight.

In the first part of her thought, Carolina does not specify race and only speaks generally about the fights in her neighborhood. In the second part, however, she becomes specific and explains that it is usually the “black people that fight.” Through this comment it is clear that Carolina is making a distinction between the two prominent ethnic groups (Latina/o and African American) that reside in her neighborhood. It does not seem Carolina is blaming African Americans for the violence that exists in the city, but on many levels she is disassociating herself from neighbors that fight and argue. In this sense, Carolina has developed a perception that says Black people argue and fight while Latina/o people do not.

Sofia is the only girl from this study that attends a charter school that is made up of roughly 200 students. During her freshman year, Sofia was enrolled in the same school Maria, Tatiana, and Carolina attended, but the out-of-control fights convinced her to change schools as a sophomore. Sofia remembers that during her freshman year,

“there was a day when there was a fight in every [school] building,” meaning there were roughly around seven fights that day. The fights in school made her worry because she was scared for her friends, particularly guy friends that were forced to fight. Sofia explained that the fights became more intense as she got older. In middle school, she remembers that some of the fights would even spill onto the street. Sofia explained:

There would be fights in the streets, like in the middle of the street with a lot of people. My brother was in one of them and he told me to go to the other side of the street.

As Sofia was describing what she experienced as a middle school student, she paused on more than one occasion because she explained that she was not sure how to describe what happened. The fights were something she wanted to get away from, so she opted to transfer into a small school.

In her narrative, Rosario echoes what the rest of the girls mention about fights. Rosario explains that, “there are fights in my school, too many fights that are related to gangs.” She knows that in her school, the Sureño gang is the one that has control. Rosario learned this the hard way when a Sureña confronted Rosario to ask if she was a Norteña because she had a red phone.<sup>23</sup> Rosario explained that the girls that accompanied the Sureña were ready to fight, but fortunately she was let go with a warning. Rosario explained what happened in a soft voice allowing me to see she felt wronged for what happened, particularly because the girls threatened her.

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<sup>23</sup> The Sureño gang identifies with the color blue. They wear this color to demonstrate that they are members of the Sureño gang. The Norteño gang identifies with the color red. Similarly, they wear it to demonstrate they are members of the Norteño gang.

In her narrative, Karina shared her frustration with the Latino students in her school because, she explained, “they are kinda ghetto and it seems like they are in gangs.” It was clear, Karina felt ashamed when she shared this thought because she referred to Latinos as ghetto. So she immediately justified her comment, she explained that freshman year she had a number of Latino friends, but this changed because she could see that Latinos were always getting into trouble, joining gangs, and fighting. Karina now hangs out with only Asian peers because she believes her new set of friends help her with her classes, homework, and also allow her to stay focused in school. Similar to Carolina, Karina has developed her own perception about the Latina/o students from her school and has come to disassociate herself from them because she does not want to join gangs or get into fights.

The girls explained that fights in their schools, and to a lesser degree in their neighborhoods, can happen any time. Additionally, the girls are critical of the lack of control that exists in these schools that allow the fights to get out of hand. Because they can get dragged in, the nine girls worry that a fight can break out around them. For Sofia, the out-of-control fights were a determining factor behind her decision to switch schools as a sophomore. More importantly, the stories the girls share that involve fights allude to something deeper that affects the relationships between the members of these communities. In their narratives, Carolina and Karina alluded to the racial-ethnic tensions that exist in Oakland’s low-income neighborhoods and schools. The next section provides examples of the racial tensions the girls experience in their everyday lives and the ways in which this affects them.

### *Racial-Ethnic Tensions*

When Maria shared what happened to her friend, she explained, “there was a lot of tension when my friend died.” While there was tension when Maria’s friend died, she says that tension is an ongoing issue that exists in her school. She detailed a number of instances when there were tensions between ethnicities, such as Asian American, Mexican American, African American, and Samoan American. She explained:

One time an Asian boy came up to a girl and they just started fighting. We’re like what’s going on. It was in the morning and the girl was like, “What’s going on?” She started going off on him and all the Asians and all the Mexicans were like what, what. So that was one time, or sometimes you just hear, “Oh did you hear that one black guy was beefing with that Samoan guy?”

It is unclear why the Asian boy fought the Latina girl, but this incident turned into a bigger issue between all of the Asian and “Mexican” students in her school. In instances like this one, sometimes rumors are what fuel the tensions between ethnicities. In her interview, Maria gave me the impression she feels compelled to stand up to defend and protect her Latina/o peers. Maria’s stance speaks to an unspoken solidarity that compels youth of color to take protective roles against individuals from other racial-ethnic groups that target or harm one of their own.

Overwhelmingly, all nine girls mentioned the tensions that exist between “Mexican” and “Black” students in their school. The narratives of the girls provide a number of examples that demonstrate ongoing tensions and other issues that exist between these two racial-ethnic groups in low-income communities of Oakland. Lorena shared that a week before her interview there was a big fight in her school she explained,

“It was a bunch of Latinos and Black people. It happened during the last class and they didn’t let anyone go out. The school was in lock down.”

Lorena was not able to explain the reasons behind what happened. Instead, she explained that Mexican and Black students fight with each other all of the time. In her narrative, Carolina provided a short analysis of what she feels fuels dissent between Latina/o and Black students.

I think sometimes it is between the Mexicans and the Blacks but then sometimes we are cool at the same time, but I don’t know. I feel sometimes any small thing that happens can start a feud or something.

Carolina explained that the issues that exist between Blacks and Latinos are not always present because, she says, “sometimes we are cool,” which means that there are interracial friendships that exist. Carolina also explains, however, that at any time the tensions that are present can turn any little problem into a big issue or a “feud.” Carolina goes on and explains that in her neighborhood:

Sometimes I talk to the people here, but I don’t feel comfortable talking to everybody ‘cause I just want to be alone sometimes. I feel like I don’t try to, I’m not intending to but I talk more to Latinos. I’m cool with Black people but, sometimes I feel that they are just going to be angry all the time. I have experienced people that fight with them or that they [African Americans] are always starting trouble or something.

These two excerpts demonstrate that Carolina has friendships with Black friends in school. She explains, however, that those friendships or alliances can be easily blurred over a small issue that comes up. In her neighborhood, things are a little different. Carolina does not refer to any friendships or alliances that exist, because she only “sometimes” talks to her neighbors. She explained that she does not feel comfortable talking with all neighbors. While Carolina makes a general statement in the beginning of

the excerpt, the next few sentences provide an idea of the two groups she is referring to. She says, “I don’t try to, I’m not intending to, but I talk more to Latinos.” Carolina has closer relationships to her Latino neighbors because she believes that even if she made the effort to develop friendships with her African American neighbors they will refuse, because she explained, “they are just going to be angry all the time.” Carolina speculates that her African American neighbors do not value friendships with Latinas/os, because she has witnessed African American neighbors start conflict or fights with Latina/o neighbors. Unfortunately, the tensions that exist in her neighborhood have kept Carolina from developing and nurturing multi-ethnic relationships.

Rosario and Susana have a slightly different experience from the rest of the girls, because they were born in El Salvador and recently immigrated to the U.S. Specifically, Rosario feels that she is targeted as a Latina.

For being Latina sometimes they tell me stuff usually the people that don’t know about other countries. They call me Mexican and they start telling us a lot of stuff about Mexicans, like Mexicans are this they are that. I try not to listen to this and my friends don’t either but, it does affect me that they keep on telling us this.

When Rosario explained that she feels targeted, her tone changed, becoming louder and angrier. It seemed her tone carried resentment towards African Americans, explaining that they are the ones that usually make the generalizing comments.

Tatiana echoes Carolina and Rosario’s self-defined tensions that exist between the African American and Latina/o communities, not only in the schools they attend but also in their neighborhoods. Tatiana explained,

If you are Mexican then you are more likely to be targeted. Specially guys because of a certain color they wear, ‘cause they are Mexican, or because they can get jacked because they are small (there are really small guys in the Fruitvale

area).<sup>24</sup> I think it's always an African American guy that it's trying to rob somebody.

Tatiana explains that she feels Latinas/os particularly “guys” are targeted because sometimes they are confused as gang members and other times because they might seem vulnerable. In the last sentence, Tatiana demonstrates her own prejudice against “African American guys,” because she believes they always steal or take advantage of others. Tatiana has come to justify her prejudice against African American men because her brother was recently victimized by a Black man who took her brother’s backpack and his money. When Tatiana explained what happened to her brother, she seemed annoyed because she was unable to understand why this person took her brother’s backpack. Tatiana was convinced this person was not going to do anything with the backpack and only took it because her brother did not have more money. The negative preconceived notions that four of the girls in this study have about African Americans and one girl has about Latinas/os demonstrate the impact of socialization processes that support stereotypic images of people of color. Certain aspects of the media, such as films, television shows and the news have become socialization processes that reproduce negative and stereotypical images of people of color. As a result, some negative stereotypes of racial-ethnic groups have become embedded in the American social structure; this makes it almost impossible to perceive people of color apart from these simplistic and stereotypical images.

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<sup>24</sup> Tatiana mentions “there are really small guys in the Fruitvale area.” The Fruitvale area is a neighborhood located in East Oakland. It is recognized as the community that has a large number of Latina/o residents. The small guys she is referring to are “day laborers.” Day laborers are composed of a wide range of (immigrant or U.S. born) Latino men that seek out jobs by standing in the Fruitvale area to offer their labor.

### *Gendered Violence*

The most prominent examples of gendered violence that the girls brought forth in their narratives are the brutal attacks their boyfriends, brothers, and guy friends have experienced. Seven out of the nine girls believe that, “guys are always targets.” Sofia shared a number of experiences that demonstrate Latino young men are disproportionately targeted in her school and in her neighborhood. Unlike girls, she believes that Latino young men have to fight willingly and even unwillingly to survive. I asked Sofia if she ever worried about getting hurt when fights broke out in school, she answered:

I was scared for my brothers and other guy friends, not so much for me. ‘Cause I don’t know how do I can explain it, like, I guess people just think I’m too nice. For guys it doesn’t matter if they are nice they can still be targets.

Sofia mentioned that the violence that exists in her community makes her worry because a stray bullet can hit her or a member of her family. While this is so, she believes that young men are overwhelmingly the ones that become victimized when it comes to physical attacks. Similar to Sofia, Tatiana also worries about her boyfriend’s safety. She explained:

I don’t feel fear to me because I don’t have problems with anybody but, I worry about my boyfriend because they might target him or something. He doesn’t have to do with anything like that.

Tatiana is not too worried about becoming victimized, because she does not have problems that could provoke an attack. She believes that not looking for problems with her peers in school or individuals from her neighborhood will keep her safe, but this is

not the case for her boyfriend. Even though her boyfriend is not gang-involved, she knows that he is still at risk of being targeted and victimized. The girls did not specify why it is common for young men to be disproportionately targeted. I posit, however, that this is inextricably connected to the gang culture that has developed in the schools and low-income Oakland communities that perceive young men as either threats or possible recruits (Sanchez-Jankowski 1991).

When I asked Carolina if she has ever felt uneasy or worried about something going on in her neighborhood, she explained that sometimes she has to walk to get to where she needs to go. Every time she does, however, it makes her feel uncomfortable because men driving their cars honk to get her attention and make her feel harassed. She explained:

I just walk and every time I'm walking, a lot of cars start honking at me and that makes me feel weird because it feels like pedophiles are watching me. Like, it has only been one time, it was like two weeks ago when a car actually stopped and told me, "Oh I'll give you a ride get in," and I just mugged<sup>25</sup> him and he was like, "Oh that's f\*\*\*\*\* up" and I just kept walking. Then another guy, he was black, asked "Can I walk with you?" I said no and I kept walking.

Carolina used an apprehensive tone to explain her disapproval and fear when this happens. She believes the men who honk at her are "pedophiles" because she knows it is wrong that men assume she welcomes these unwanted sexual advances. When she shared that a man in a car stopped to offer her a ride, she sought support from somebody to tell her what happened was not right. Carolina explained, she becomes nervous and worried when this happens. She makes sure, however, not to show her fear and instead

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<sup>25</sup> Carolina mentions that she "mugged" somebody. Similar to all of the girls in this study, Carolina uses the term "mug" to represent a hostile and antagonistic look.

drives these men away by giving them dirty looks. Carolina understands the risk she takes when she walks by herself because she knows that a man can easily force her into a car and kidnap her. The dirty looks she gives men in the street and her assertive responses that reject these unwanted advances have become the methods she uses to stay safe every time this happens.

The young women in this study witnessed first-hand the different types of violence that impacts them and their communities. Carolina was the only one who mentioned that she experiences unwanted sexual advances. In the conversations subsequent to the interviews, five more girls described similar concerns. Unwanted sexual advances drive the girls to feel uncomfortable and fearful to walk down the street, particularly because they know that they might be at risk of being kidnapped or even raped.

While the girls fear unwanted sexual advances, they also explained they are able witness violence without becoming victims of physical attacks. This is not the case for their brothers, boyfriends, and guy friends. Seven girls mentioned that they felt anxiety and fear for the young men they care for because they know that at any moment they can become victimized. The attacks that young men in their schools and neighborhoods experience are linked to the growing gang rivalries that exist in the city as well as gang techniques to recruit new members. Tatiana explained that many times in her community, young men join gangs because it is needed for survival.

### *Drug Use*

When I asked Maria if she has ever felt uneasy or worried about something going on in her neighborhood, she answered that, “there are people on crack wandering around and talking by themselves.” Maria’s calm tone as she explained that some of her neighbors walk around her neighborhood under the influence of crack gives the impression that this happens on a regular basis. Maria’s comment provides further context to Ginwright’s analysis of the “urban trifecta.” Ginwright makes a direct connection between the rise in unemployment and the spread of crack/cocaine in Oakland’s low income communities. Like in her neighborhood, Maria describes drug use and drinking in the bathrooms and “cutties” of her school as something normal that peers engage in.<sup>26</sup>

Tatiana has a more personal take on drugs and drug use because she knows that her uncle uses an excessive amount of marijuana. When Tatiana was discussing her uncle’s situation, she seemed upset because she wants her uncle to begin to take his responsibilities seriously. She explained:

He gets money but instead of saving money, he smokes all his money up and then he comes to my mom to ask her for money. Like, he could do so much better if he didn’t smoke weed. He has a daughter and like we can’t see her because the child support people say that he can’t see her because he smokes. So he has to be clean when he sees her, but he doesn’t do anything to stop smoking.

Tatiana’s uncle smokes marijuana so much that he no longer has the right to see his daughter unless he can prove that he has been sober. While the girls only mentioned the

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<sup>26</sup> Maria defines “cutties” as places in school that are isolated and hidden, e.g. bushes.

consumption aspect of drugs, they do not make a connection between the violence they face and the drugs that have become prevalent in low-income neighborhoods.

Ginwright makes a direct connection between a powerful “illegal drug industry” and the prevalent violence that exists in Oakland’s low-income communities. Similar to Ginwright, city officials, police officers, and journalists have publicly made connections between the prevalent drug industry and the violence that plagues the city. However, there have been no longstanding city policies that attempt to curb the connection that exists between drugs and violence. As a result, Maria finds it normal to see people under the influence of crack wandering her neighborhood.

### **Making Sense of Violence**

The girls share a number of stories that demonstrate the different ways they, their families, and friends experience *hyper-violence*. However, at some point in their narratives, all nine girls made statements such as, “nothing serious has happened in my neighborhood,” or, “I feel bad but it’s like normal.” Even though the girls recalled various instances of violence, many of the girls did not frame violence as a problem that overtly affects them, their families, their neighborhoods, or schools. While some of the girls mentioned, “my neighborhood is quiet,” they also mentioned that they can hear shootings on a daily basis. When I delved deeper to understand how the girls define “neighborhood,” they explained that their neighborhood is confined to the block they live in. Despite the shootings, fights, racial tensions, and drugs, the girls believe they can go to school everyday and go about their daily lives. It is difficult for the girls to witness

how their peers from school and sometimes their close friends have been sacrificed to violence. However, the girls feel powerless because they believe violence and death are normal aspects of life and this will never change.

### *Placing Blame on Members of the Community*

In their narratives, the girls not only examine the types of violence they face, but also brought forth what they believe are the root causes of the violence that exist in their communities and schools. Overwhelmingly, the girls explained that the members of their communities are responsible because they are the ones committing the acts of violence. This analysis makes sense from their vantage point, particularly because they often witness acts of violence. When I asked Lorena what causes the violence in Oakland, she answered, “I guess the people that live here [because] people be treating each other bad.” Additionally, she believes that the members of her community do not care about one another because they shoot without remorse. “The people don’t even care if they hurt somebody else; they just shoot. That’s what I think; that they don’t care if they hurt somebody else.”

In her narrative, Leticia also blames the members of the community because she believes the individuals that engage in acts of violence only do so because they want and need attention. Similarly, Maria believes that the members of her community are to blame, because they commit acts of violence and do not care if their actions hurt others. Maria attempts to distance herself from the members of her community that are doing wrong. “They steal, gangbang, and don’t care for what is right or wrong.”

There are instances when she incorporates herself as part of the community and explains, “we are ghetto and live in the ghetto.” The term “ghetto” can encompass numerous meanings, but in this case Maria uses this term to mean, to be loud and not be able to behave properly. Six of the nine girls share what seem to be conflicting ideas, a type of cognitive dissonance. While the girls feel uncomfortable because they do not want to be part of a community that harms others, they feel love for their community and feel proud to be from Oakland. The girls successfully grapple with these conflicting views because they have the ability to take a position that allows them to fulfill their desires at that given moment.

While Carolina believes that members of her community are to blame for the violence that exists in her community, she also provides a complex analysis of the various factors that impact the decisions individual community members make that make it difficult for them to do the right thing. Carolina explains:

I think people are stressed with their life so they just take it out on anybody. If they have nothing else to do, they have no life, so then they will just join a gang thinking they are being protected. But then you have to prove that you are part of the gang so you have to commit violence. I think people just start violence so they can prove to themselves that they are cool or raw or I don't know.

Carolina posits that some members of her community are stressed with their life. This stress can drive them to be short-tempered, or feel powerless, and can even drive them to take their frustration out on others. She also explains that there are residents in Oakland that do not have a life. Carolina is not referring to a social life. Instead, she is referring to having a job, a family, and a stable home situation. It is not uncommon for low-income individuals in Oakland to not have a job, a family, or a stable home situation.

Carolina believes that these life challenges can drive individuals to find refuge in a gang, because they assume a gang is the only means to have money, protection, and brotherly or sisterly understanding. Joining a gang, however, comes at a price, because many times there are initiation requirements that demand young men and women fight, steal, or sometimes even kill. Lastly, once in a gang, individuals believe they have to “prove” to themselves or to the gang that they are fearless and cruel, because these are the characteristics that are respected on the street. Carolina shares an elaborate analysis of the tough decisions young people face in Oakland because she witnesses the different paths that her friends and peers take. While she blames the community members for the violence that is present, her in-depth analysis demonstrates that she understands the complexity that is attached to the decisions low-income residents in Oakland make.

While the girls are blaming members of their community for the acts of violence that take place in Oakland, seven girls explained they are certain the root causes of violence are more complicated. The girls know first hand that violence can result in high levels of stress, anger, and fear. This can drive individuals to make the wrong decision. The girls explained this style of life is frustrating, particularly because they believe members of the community are not able to make change. Ultimately, the narratives of the girls thus far demonstrate that the members of their communities perceived violence as a common occurrence that will not change.

### *Oakland Police*

While Maria believes that members of the community are to blame for the violence that is prevalent in Oakland, she knows that community members are not the only ones to blame. Maria believes that Oakland is filled with, “corrupt police officers” that do not help her community because they are only there to harm. Maria explained that, “police are always on people,” referring to the way police officers criminalize Black and Latina/o people, particularly youth. Maria recalls instances when innocent individuals were shot and killed by Oakland police officers. Maria knows the members of her community feel resentment against police officers because, instead of feeling protected, the community feels attacked. Maria understands why youth her age challenge authority, particularly police officers. She believes this is an attempt to challenge those that criminalize them. In her narrative, Maria attempts to understand why police officers treat members of her community with such brutality, she explained:

I don't think that the police from Oakland are really from Oakland; they just see the bad things about Oakland and they don't see the good things.

Maria brings forth an important point, because, if police officers are not emotionally invested in the Oakland, then it is less likely they will promote positive and long-lasting change in the community. Additionally, if Oakland police officers reside in Oakland, this might encourage them to take a different approach toward the issues that are prevalent in the low-income communities of Oakland.

### *Economic Issues*

The economy is the last major focus the girls believe is connected to the violence that is prevalent in Oakland. In their narratives, the girls did not specify “the economy,” but they brought forth economic issues: unemployment, poverty, and, city funding. When I asked Sofia to explain why violence is prevalent in her community, she explained:

My history teacher says that when jobs go down, violence goes up, so I guess because people don't have money.

Sofia was able to draw from what she learned in her history class to make a connection between a job shortage and high incidences of violence. As a follow-up question, I asked Sofia if she agreed with her teachers. She answered, “I think there is always going to be violence but I guess when people don't have money, violence is obviously going to go up.”

Sofia is critically analyzing what she learned in her history class by incorporating her own reality of what she sees and experiences as a resident of a low-income community. Sofia believes that it is almost impossible for violence to disappear because it has become intertwined with various aspects of the community. Sofia's response is indicative of her own internalization and normalization of violence because she is not able to imagine a life in Oakland without violence. Additionally, Sofia's experience as a member of a low-income community of Oakland allows her to conclude, if individuals do not have a steady income, then the violence present in her community will increase.

Similar to Sofia, Susana also links economic issues with the violence that exists in her community. In her narrative, Susana believes money—that signifies poverty and

unemployment—is something that fuels violence. She explained, “Sometimes they fight for money and they break in to houses to get money.”

Using a sympathetic tone, Susana conveyed the dire economic need that exists in her community. Additionally, Susana’s tone suggests the members of her community fight over money and break into houses because there are a limited employment options for the members of her community. Maria provides a similar analysis to Sofia and Susana by explaining the differences she sees between San Jose, California and Oakland. Maria explained that she knows the city well because she has family that resides in San Jose whom she visits regularly. While, the City of San Jose has a growing gang issue, Maria believes that the neighborhoods are cleaner, and residents in San Jose are able to take advantage of multiple resources available to the community. In her narrative, Maria managed to reconcile the differences she knows exist between Oakland and San Jose by bringing forth the societal inequalities that exist. She explained:

It shouldn’t be like this but it just comes with the territory. It is the government or the mayor of the city. Some cities have a big budget, they [also] have programs, and this city [Oakland] they keep cutting the money.

While Maria believes and accepts that some cities have more resources compared to others, she provides an additional piece that makes her analysis much more complex. Maria blames the government and city leaders because she believes they have the power to help the community by supporting policies that can make positive change. However, the government, including city officials, pretend to help but in reality choose not to help.

She uses the example of gang injunctions to support her analysis.<sup>27</sup> She explained, “like the gang injunctions, they [the city leaders] feel are helping us but they are really hurting everybody.”

Maria believes that city leaders are implementing policies, such as the gang injunctions, that are not taking a comprehensive look at what the Oakland community needs. In their narratives, Maria and Tatiana both discuss gang injunctions. They explain that the implementation of gang injunctions requires a great amount of monetary resources. For this reason, they believe gang injunctions should be labeled “irresponsible spending.” The monetary resources that are used to implement gang injunctions, they believe, are taken away from schools.

These conversations make clear that the girls have a critical understanding of the issues that result in disproportionate rates of crime and violence, which are prevalent in their communities. From their point of view, it makes sense for the girls to blame the members of their communities for the violence that exists because they witness it first-hand. While all nine girls were adamant about blaming the members of their communities for the violence that exists there, the reasons that led the girls to this conclusion suggest there are bigger social factors that can influence and trigger such acts of violence. In the narratives, the girls bring forth different examples that demonstrate their conflicting views (such as blaming members of their communities for the violence that exists while also pointing to high rates of unemployment and issues linked to drugs). The conflicting views that the girls in this study hold demonstrate their ability to

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<sup>27</sup> Gang injunctions are court-issued restraining orders that prohibit gang members from participating in certain activities.

compartmentalize the numerous levels of complexity that are linked to *hyper*-violence. On the one hand, the girls castigate their peers and members of their community because they engage in violence. The girls, however, are also aware of their marginality, and for this they blame the Oakland police, the mayor, and even the government for the subordinate position of their communities. The conflicting views the girls use to describe *hyper*-violence (that can also be described as their ability to compartmentalize) allows the girls to draw from their lived experiences to develop simple and complex arguments to make sense of their lives and the issues they face.

### **Individualizing and Internalizing Violence**

Most of the girls in this study have lived in Oakland for most of their lives. They do not know a life other than the one they have lived in Oakland. Most of the girls believe that the violence in their communities is caused by its residents. They justify this belief by witnessing members of their community (including family members) initiate fights or involve themselves in gangs. As the girls and I delved deeper in conversation, their narratives brought forth issues of racial profiling, the prominent illegal drug industry, unemployment, and poverty that made their analyses much more complex. While the girls were able to connect *hyper*-violence to larger social issues, six of the nine girls ended their interviews supporting an “individual level analysis.”<sup>28</sup> Using an

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<sup>28</sup> As covered in a previous footnote, I reference the individual level analysis used in Immanuel Wallerstein’s “modern world-system.” Modern world-system is a multidisciplinary, macro-scale approach to understand world history and societal change. This approach uses and identifies the different levels of explanation (individual, city level, nation state, and global) used to understand history as well as current issues e.g. poverty, violence. The level of explanation that is used by politicians, local leaders, and even members of the Oakland community to explain issues like violence can vary based on their own

individual level analysis drives the girls to internalize violence because they witness members of their communities engaging in violence, and as part of this community, they feel guilty and responsible for what happens. Some of the girls explained, “They are making us look bad.” On the one hand, the girls are separating themselves from the violence by claiming, “It’s the people that live here that are involved in gangs and drugs; they should be punished.” On the other hand, the girls feel guilty because, even though they are not committing crimes, members of their community are at fault so they believe they are considered responsible for what is going on.

### **Normalizing Violence**

In his article dated March 2011, Scott Johnson explains that community members in Oakland understand violence as something habitual, routine, and static. So far the narratives of the girls in this study demonstrate that they have normalized the violence that exists in their communities. Sofia explained:

There will always be violence. I can’t think of a world without violence. It’s not realistic that violence will disappear, it might happen slowly and eventually but not now.

Carolina echoed Sofia’s position: “Violence here is so big I don’t think there is anything that can actually work.” Even though Carolina and Sofia hope that the *hyper*-violence that exists in their communities comes to an end, they feel skeptical that the attempted

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background, upbringing, and prejudices (aspects that many times are unspoken). The individual level analysis often uses a reductionist approach that becomes easily justified by stereotypes or prejudices, e.g., “Oakland is violent because the communities are filled with criminals and gang members.” In this study it is my attempt to use a global level analysis that incorporates a multidisciplinary and historical look of Oakland to examine the factors that have resulted in a *hyper*-violent environment.

eradication of violence will be successful. Similar to Carolina and Sofia, all of the girls in this study have normalized violence. They are not only unable to perceive a life in its absence, but more importantly, they believe they have to abandon their community to get away from it. Despite the violence that exists in their communities, the girls love their neighborhoods and schools. They feel torn because the only way to escape the violence is to move away. Tatiana is torn because, on the one hand, she explained:

Once I got to know Oakland, I love Oakland and I don't want to move. Well maybe when I'm older I'm going to want to move. But Oakland will always be my home.

Towards the end of her interview, however, I asked Tatiana how she continued with her everyday life, knowing that there was violence around her all of the time. She answered:

I just say that I am going to get out of here one day. Go to school, graduate, go to college, and hopefully I can just get out of here. 'Cause honestly if I would have an opportunity to move I probably would. Maybe not now because I want to finish high school, but after I would probably want to move. If I would ever have a family I wouldn't want to raise it here in Oakland, just because of all the violence that goes on here. I wouldn't want my kids to go through it, just for them to be safe.

Tatiana does not want her future family or children to go through what she has gone through in Oakland. In this sense, she perceives graduating from high school and going to college as a way to get out. While all girls voiced similar points of view, it seemed as if they felt guilty for wanting to move away. Seven of the nine girls that I interviewed shared they loved Oakland because it is a great place to live. The violence, however, drives them to want to move away. When Sofia's interview was coming to an end, it

seemed like she wanted to share something, yet she struggled to find the words. I asked if there was anything else she wanted to share, after a short pause she explained:

I've had a lot of violent experiences. I've seen a black dude get shot. He was just laying there bleeding. I think that he probably died. It was on 80th and International. I was in the car with my mom and there were probably like three people around him. I guess he was dead by then. Like, there was blood on the ground. It happened like a month or two ago.

When I asked how this made her feel, it seemed the question caught her off guard. In a subsequent conversation, she explained that other than her interview with me, she has never shared her thoughts and experiences that relate to violence. After a pause, Sofia answered my question, she explained:

I wasn't scared, I was kinda worried but at the same time I was like...I don't know...I felt bad but I thought about his family until later.

Even though Sofia was not able to clearly articulate how she felt when she witnessed a person dying, it was clear this did not shock or disturb her. Sofia explained she felt bad for the victim and his family because she knows it must be devastating to lose a family member. However, as Scott Johnson explains, violence in Oakland has become normal; the acceptance of violent incidences drives residents such as Sofia, to become numb to violence and death. For this reason, Sofia explains that she was not scared when she witnessed this incident.

While the girls explained they love their communities, they are also certain the *hyper-violence* that exists in Oakland will not go away. This speaks to their normalization of the violence that plagues their communities. Additionally, the girls feel guilty because they perceive obtaining an education as a way to get away from Oakland and the ever-present violence. Overall, Sofia's experience demonstrates that members of

the Oakland community have come to perceive violence and death as so normal that she was not afraid when she looked upon a man bleeding to death.

### **Concluding Research Question 1**

All nine narratives of the girls in this study provided various examples of the different types of violence faced on a daily basis. The most prominent type of violence that the girls mentioned is gun violence. Not only can the girls hear gun shots when they are home day and night, but they can also hear them when they are in school. All nine girls had a friend or peer from school that was shot and killed. Sharing this experience was particularly difficult for Maria and Leticia, because remembering the loss of their close friends was painful. The loss of a close friend or family member can be magnified in a *hyper-violent* environment because, as Carolina and Tatiana suggest, there is an *unspoken communal feeling of hurt and loss* that happens every time an individual is sacrificed to violence. In essence, the *unspoken communal feeling of hurt and loss* drives community members to relive feelings of fear, loss, and grief every time a life is sacrificed. In an attempt to process these feelings, the girls came to individualize and internalize violence by blaming the members of the community and themselves for the violence they face. At the same time, the girls were driven to quickly overcome the disproportionate levels of grief and loss they faced as a survival strategy for coming to terms with their loss, and to not fall into despair.

Other types of violence that affects them are verbal and physical confrontations, gang bullying, and gendered violence. The girls explained that verbal confrontations and

fights in their schools can happen at any time over insignificant issues. Even though the girls try to avoid problems, they fear being caught in the middle of a spontaneous verbal or physical altercation. Additionally, the girls brought forth the racial-ethnic tensions that exist in their neighborhoods and schools. Racial-ethnic tensions, the girls explained, are fueled by racist or stereotypical comments that can evolve into verbal altercations or physical fights between members of different ethnic groups. In her narrative, Rosario detailed her frustration with the generalizing comments some of her African American peers make about all Latinas/os. Generalizing comments or stereotypical remarks can be hurtful and can drive a teenager to fight. In her narrative, Maria explains that a possible response to racial-ethnic tensions can be for ethnic groups to rally together when they feel attacked. Maria describes this as “standing up for your own.”

Essentially, the racial-ethnic tensions that exist in their communities can frame their perceptions about certain racial-ethnic groups. In her narrative, Carolina explained that she has close relationships with Latina/o neighbors. She feels bad because this is not the case with her African Americans neighbors. Even though Carolina tries to build those relationships, she believes her efforts are futile; she sees African Americans behave in aggressive ways towards all Latinas/os.

In her narrative, Karina explained she no longer has Latina/o friends. Karina made a conscious decision to not associate with Latina/o peers, primarily because she witnesses a large number of Latina/o peers engage in problematic activities such as fights, tagging, and not attending class. Karina explained her goal is to one day attend college. She is doing everything in her power to reach that goal, which includes staying

away from peers she considers to be troublemakers. While Carolina perceives African American neighbors as aggressive, Karina perceives Latina/o peers as trouble makers and not college bound.

As discussed in the introduction, Black and Latino young men experience disproportionate levels of physical violence compared to young women. In their narratives, the girls explain their guy friends, brothers, and other male relatives are more at risk of being attacked in their schools and neighborhoods. The girls believe they can prevent victimization by staying away from gangs and problems. This, they feel, is not the case for young men, because they are usually forced to fight to defend themselves. On another note relevant to gender violence, Carolina was the only girl that brought forth the issue of sexual harassment during her interview. However, during post-interview talks, the rest of the girls were able to relate to Carolina's concerns. As a whole, the girls fear unwanted sexual advances, particularly because they know they are at risk of rape. Similar to Carolina, they have developed strategies to deal with sexual harassment, such as being unfriendly and assertive to fend off unwanted sexual advances.

Lastly, the girls brought forth drug use as an issue that is related to violence. In their narratives, the girls explain that friends in school, family members, and also neighbors consume illegal drugs. The narratives of the girls provide a number of examples that demonstrate the prevalence of illegal drugs in their communities and schools. What the girls describe as easy access to drugs provides a snapshot of the prominent illegal drug industry that exists in low-income communities of Oakland, impacting a large number of residents.

Some of the girls believe members of their communities make a conscious effort to engage in violent behaviors. Other girls believe members of their communities do not consider the consequences when engaging in acts violence. The girls believe the members of their communities are responsible for the violence that exists. When asked for clarification, however, the girls brought forth a number of social issues they believe also influence the high percentages of violence. Through their narratives, the girls demonstrated their ability to compartmentalize the numerous aspects linked to this issue. Using this strategy enables the girls to prevent feeling helpless and overburdened with the various issues linked to the *hyper*-violence that exists in Oakland.

The last component of this section examines the individualization, internalization, and normalization processes that are pivotal to this study. All three processes are invisible aspects that fuel the *hyper*-violence that exists in low-income communities of Oakland. The process of individualizing blames members of the community for the *hyper*-violence that exists. Individualization allows outsiders to justify the disproportionate levels of violence and allows it to exist nearly with impunity. While individuals from these communities do engage in acts of violence, individualization masks other relevant and important aspects of this issue, such as high rates of unemployment and poverty.

Secondly, the process of internalization drives the girls that make up this study as well as other insiders to feel guilty and responsible for the violence that exists in their communities. Lastly, the process of normalization also fuels *hyper*-violence because it drives insiders and outsiders to perceive violence as normal and a natural aspect of low-

income communities in Oakland. In their narratives the girls explained they are not able to perceive a life without violence; furthermore, the girls believe violence will never end. Outsiders, such as certain reporters, do not problematize the *hyper-violence* that exists in Oakland, and instead portray it as a normal aspect of the community. *Hyper-violence* is a complex issue that has a number of factors that support its existence in the low-income communities of Oakland. A careful analysis of each one of these processes will demonstrate that they are pivotal and prevent the dismantling of *hyper-violence*.

### **Research Question No. 2**

So far the first section covers the different ways in which the girls understand, describe and make sense of violence. Ultimately, this study examines how violence affects the educational commitment and motivation of low-income Latina girls from Oakland. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to first focus on the degree of impact violence has on the everyday lives and decision making of Latina girls in the middle. In their narratives, the girls shared various experiences that demonstrate how violence impacts them daily, sometimes in overt and direct ways, while other times in subtle and indirect ways. The girls are well aware of the *hyper-violence* that exists in their neighborhoods and schools, so they exercise precaution and their decisions become premeditated to make sure they steer clear of danger.

In this section, my goal is to discuss the various themes the girls brought forth in their narratives that demonstrate the ways violence impacts their everyday lives, as well as their decision-making. The first and most prominent theme that all nine girls shared in

their narratives was living in fear. The girls fear shootings, fights in school, and gang bullying, which are only some of the many aspects that are present in low-income communities and schools. The fear and anxiety the girls feel daily drives them to be on a constant state of alert, meaning the girls are constantly looking over their shoulder to avoid victimization. Secondly, this section examines the creative responses the girls have developed to stay safe. The creative responses are outlined in what I describe as a *code of conduct* that the girls abide by. The most drastic creative response that all nine girls shared—that is also part of the *code of conduct*—is the fear that drives the girls to stay indoors and not go out of their house. The girls understand that their communities are violent, so they prefer to stay home instead of going out with friends. They know their homes are safer than the streets. Lastly, I examine Carolina’s reasons for deciding to attend a school in Oakland that is located outside of her neighborhood. The creative responses the girls discussed in their narratives that make up the *code of conduct* will be discussed in detail here. Through their discussion, it becomes clear the girls believe that abiding by the *code of conduct* will pay off later when they are able to graduate high school and attend college.

### **Living in Fear**

The first section outlines the different types of violence the girls are exposed to. In their narratives the girls describe the aspects that make up each type of violence but more importantly the girls shared the intense fear they experience daily as a result of living in a *hyper-violent* environment. In her narrative, Carolina explained that she is

afraid when she hears shootings in her neighborhood because she knows that it can easily get out of hand and many innocent people can be hurt. In her narrative, Carolina explained that her brother's former friends burglarized her home, vandalized her father's car, and went as far as shooting at her house. Tatiana shared similar fears because she lives in a street known for gang activity. Tatiana's fears have intensified because her sixteen-year-old aunt has been influenced by her twenty-year-old uncle to become gang-involved. Tatiana lives in fear because she believes that her family's gang involvement will fuel additional drive by shootings that target her house and the house where her uncle lives.

Additionally, all nine girls fear the fights that break out in their schools because they can easily become caught up or even driven to fight. The girls also fear the relentless violence their male friends, brothers, and other male relatives experience, such as harassment, gang bullying, and physical attacks. Lastly, the girls fear they can become victims of sexual assault because in their neighborhoods, it is common for men to harass young ladies. The sexual harassment and unwanted sexual advances the girls describe make them think twice before venturing to the street alone. Even though these types of violence have already been examined it was necessary to review them to highlight how these experiences have driven Latina girls to live in fear.

In her narrative, Karina spoke extensively about feeling scared to live in her neighborhood. Karina explained she is particularly scared to walk alone at night because some months ago, she witnessed the brutal beating of a young man that would sometimes take the same bus route. That night, Karina and the young man both got off in the same

stop. She immediately noticed a group of young men running towards him. They began to punch and kick him relentlessly. Karina was unsure whether to get involved because she was afraid of also being attacked. She wanted to help, but her intense fear drove her to run home. When she explained what happened to the young man, Karina closed her eyes and seemed incredibly concerned at the thought of becoming victimized. When she opened her eyes, she proclaimed: “violence has affected me directly.” She was not sure when it happened, but she explained her father was jumped by a group of African American men and was sent to the hospital. In the hospital, her family learned her father received severe blows to the face and had also fractured his ribs. Karina said “his eyes were red for a while after that happened.” Similar to all of the girls in this study, Karina takes precautions to make sure this does not happen to her.

In their narratives, the girls made it clear: they live in fear of what can happen to them and their families. However, this fear does not prevent them from going about their lives. The girls understand that overcoming the challenges they face in their communities will allow them to one day reach their educational and career goals. For this reason, the girls have developed a number of creative responses that I describe as a *code of conduct*, allowing them to steer clear of danger and prevent their own victimization.

#### *Creative Responses: Code of Conduct*

The *code of conduct* might be considered restrictive because it limits what the girls can do. The girls, however, perceive it as engaging in creative responses to counter the violence that exists in their communities. These are their efforts to stay safe. Six out

of the nine girls outlined different aspects of the *code of conduct*. In her narrative, Carolina explained that she does not go to East 14th Street unless she absolutely has to.<sup>29</sup> Carolina does not like to walk around or be close to East 14th Street because this strip is notorious for prostitution, drug sales, and gang activity. Avoiding certain streets or locations is the first aspect of the *code of conduct* the girls abide by, because they believe doing so will keep them away from violence and criminal activity. Secondly, Carolina makes an effort to always mind her business, she explained. “I try not to stare at people ‘cause then they are going to be like, what are you looking at.” Similar to other girls, Carolina is careful not to look at individuals in the bus, school, or around her neighborhood because even a simple look can be a serious offense that can result in a verbal or physical altercation. In her narrative, Sofia explained, “I don’t mug people.” She believes giving mean looks to certain individuals is asking for trouble.

The third aspect of the *code of conduct* is to stay away from individuals whom are gang members. Carolina and Sofia believe that if they develop friendships with individuals that belong to gangs, not only will they be perceived as gang members, but also this could drive gang members to intimidate or target them. Additionally, Carolina explained wearing black, blue, and red clothing can be dangerous because this can also be considered posing as a gang member. Sofia explained that wearing gang colors is not an issue for her because she wears a uniform for school; however, she makes sure not to wear Catholic rosaries because this accessory has been deemed gang related.

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<sup>29</sup> East 14<sup>th</sup> Street can be described as Oakland’s central boulevard that runs east from Downtown Oakland through the city limits and into San Leandro, a neighboring city. This street was renamed in 1996 and is now called International Boulevard; however, many continue to refer to this boulevard as East 14<sup>th</sup> Street.

The fourth aspect of the *code of conduct* is taking preventative measures to avoid burglaries and theft. Maria explained that individuals should always operate with the assumption that at any moment burglaries and theft can happen. She believes that it is necessary to take preventative measures, such as locking and securing cars and homes. Similarly, in her narrative Tatiana explained she does not wear gold chains. “I have gold chains, but I don’t even wear them anymore ‘cause I don’t want them to be taken away.” Tatiana shared her outrage that thieves do not hold back and can even steal from children. She explained what happened to her brother:

It happened to my brother. He was walking to school...some black guy came up to him and was like, “Let me check your pockets.” My brother was scared and he didn’t know what to do. The good thing is that he just got five dollars from my mom in the morning. The guy took that and his backpack with his school work. My brother was crying and his heart was pumping.

In their narratives, Leticia and Lorena suggest that individuals and families that are newcomers to Oakland do not know what to expect. Leticia explained that her family moved to Oakland when she was really young, remembering that her house was burglarized a number of times. It took some time for her family to take the correct precautionary measures to make sure it would not happen again. Similar to Leticia, Lorena’s family moved to Oakland when she was a young girl. During her interview, she mentioned her house has been burglarized, “lots of times.” One of Lorena’s precautionary methods became clear after we were done with her interview and she walked me out to my car. As soon as we said goodbye, she placed a padlock with a chain on her gate in order to keep out unwanted visitors.

The last component of the *code of conduct* is to always be on the look out for danger by always being on guard. Lorena explained, “I am careful, I see where I’m at, and what’s happening.” In this sense, the girls have become incredibly alert of where they are, who is around, and also what is happening. This is an important component of the *code of conduct* because this helps the girls assess dangerous situations to make the best decision to stay safe.

The girls do not perceive the creative responses that make up the *code of conduct* as restrictive. Instead, they believe that abiding by the *code of conduct* is using common sense, something that everybody in their community knows about and utilizes to stay safe. Many of the strategies the girls have developed to stay safe come from their own experiences, and what they hear happens to individuals in their communities. All of the girls shared their frustration because they believe there are times when they are not able to avoid conflict. Overall, the girls in this study try to keep a low profile because this is the best way to stay away from problems.

#### *Stay Indoors: Not Going Out of Their House*

All nine girls explained they make a conscious effort to stay indoors and not go out of their house, because they know that being in the street puts them at risk of becoming victimized. While this creative response is part of the *code of conduct*, it is necessary to set this response apart from those already presented, because it demonstrates the far reach of the *hyper-violence* prevalent in Oakland.

Sofia explained that her dad does not give her permission to go out of her house by herself. Sofia does not feel that her father's request is unreasonable, because she knows the risk she assumes when she is in the street by herself. The rest of the girls have permission from their parents to go out with their friends. They all, however, prefer to stay home. The girls believe that being in the street means they are putting themselves at risk to get shot, attacked or harassed. Tatiana explained that she does not like to be in the street because she believes that is asking for trouble. Even though Tatiana does not make a direct connection between the support she has from her mom and her certainty to stay off the street, she is able to suggest it in the following passage:

My mom is supportive and tells me right from wrong. She doesn't have that problem with me always being in the street because I am always home or I go to my boyfriend's house with his family. I don't have that problem of always being in the street like a crazy girl.

The support Tatiana has from her mother is a deterring factor that helps Tatiana stay off the streets. Not only does Tatiana have her mother's support, but she also has her guidance that keeps her away from making the wrong choices. In the last sentence of the excerpt, Tatiana says that she stays away from the streets. She is also suggesting, however, that even though she is not in the street, there are a number of girls who are. Through this excerpt, Tatiana is suggesting that the lack of support from parents can drive young women to become involved in the street life.

All nine girls provide the impression they are comfortable with abiding by the *code of conduct*, including staying indoors. The majority of the girls have lived in low-income communities of Oakland for most of their lives. The creative responses that the girls outlined are practices and behaviors they have used for a long time. Even though

the violence that exists in their communities affects the girls daily, they have learned to take a number of precautionary measures to stay safe.

### *Choosing to Attend a High School Outside of Neighborhood*

During the interviews, four of the girls shared the name of the school they attend. The name, however, did not seem to coincide with the school that was located close to their homes. It was intriguing to figure out why these four girls made the decision to attend a school that is located twice the distance from their neighborhood school. In her narrative, Carolina answered my question with a brief chuckle and explained:

I feel this school is really ghetto. Like, there are a lot of bad people there. Like, the education there is supposedly not that good. Or the people there are bad and I'm scared to go there.

Carolina reached this conclusion from stories she has learned from friends and family members that have gone to that school. The horror stories include race riots and out-of-control fights. This excerpt emphasizes the bad reputation this school has and the “bad people” that attend. Carolina, however, does not take into consideration that these are the same individuals that make up her neighborhood. Additionally, she is not considering the high levels of violence that are prevalent in the school that she currently attends.

The third sentence of this excerpt describes the inadequacy of the school to challenge students academically. This statement demonstrates Carolina does not want to settle for unchallenging classes. She is searching for an education that will enable her to continue on to college. While Carolina emphasized the dangers of her neighborhood school, this is the common perception of all Oakland schools. The focal point of this

excerpt is Carolina's self initiative to go to a school outside of her neighborhood because she is searching for a school that can prepare her to continue her education.

### **Concluding Research Question 2**

As described in the first section, Latina girls in the middle that attend Oakland schools are exposed to *hyper*-violence on a daily basis. This ongoing exposure impacts the girls on a number of levels. As discussed in this section, the girls live in fear because they witness shootings, verbal confrontations, fights, gang bullying, and gendered violence. Even though the girls live in fear, this has not kept them from developing creative responses—that together make up the *code of conduct*—to prevent and avoid victimization. The girls stay away from certain streets, they are mindful of how they look at others, they take preventative measures to avoid burglaries, and lastly they are always aware of their surroundings. The ultimate creative response the girls engage in is to stay indoors and avoid going out of their house. The girls equate being in the street with looking for trouble, thus they prefer to stay indoors. The creative responses that were outlined as the *code of conduct* can be perceived as restrictive, but the girls do not see it that way. The girls believe the creative responses they use keep them safe and allow them to continue on their path towards successful high school graduation and college acceptance.

Lastly, this section focuses on Carolina's reasoning behind making the choice to attend a school outside of her neighborhood. Carolina explains the school in her neighborhood is dangerous. The primary reason Carolina does not attend her

neighborhood school, however, is not because of its bad reputation, or the dangers she describes. Carolina's main concern is that the school in her neighborhood does not have the academic component she believes she needs to reach her educational goals. In this sense, Carolina's decision to attend a school outside of her neighborhood demonstrates she gives priority to her education.

### **Research Question No. 3**

The first section examines a number of the girls' experiences that demonstrate the types of violence they are exposed to, and also detail how the girls make sense of the *hyper-violence* that exists in their communities. Additionally, the first section develops an analysis of the broader socialization processes that drive the girls to internalize, individualize, and normalize violence. The second section discusses the different ways violence directly impacts the girls, their families, and friends. The fear the girls experience on a daily basis drives them to take premeditated decisions and be on a constant state of alert to avoid victimization. Even so, the girls do not resent the *code of conduct* because abiding by it not only keeps them safe, but also it is something they have learned to do at an early age. The narratives portray strong young women that are agents in their lives and strongly desire to graduate high school to continue onto college. The last focus of this chapter will examine the ways in which the *hyper-violence* that exists in Oakland's low-income communities affects the girls' schooling experiences, educational commitment, and aspirations.

Throughout this chapter the narratives of the girls describe the violence that prevails in their schools. The girls described an intense fear when they are in school, because at any moment they can be attacked or dragged into a fight. Similarly, all of the girls mentioned that gang members are the ones who initiate conflict, continually intimidating, harassing, and attacking. When racial tension are at an all time high in school, the girls feel afraid because they know that they can be targeted because they are Latina. One of the questions that I asked the girls was whether the violence in their schools has ever kept them from attending school. All nine girls explained that violence does not keep them from going to school because their goal is to graduate high school and continue their education; for this reason they attend school despite the violence that exists.

This section will first examine how the girls are disassociating themselves from the violence in their schools as a creative response to ensure that violence does not affect their academic performance. While the girls explain that violence does not affect them in school, the narratives of five of the girls seem contradictory because they detail how violence can disrupt their classes. The third aspect of this section examines the strong desire each one of the girls has to graduate high school, and continue onto college. The girls explain that their motivation comes from being the first in their family to have the opportunity to make it to college. The last aspect of this section centers on the implicit connections between the fears the girls experience on a daily basis—as a result of the *hyper*-violence they witness—and the strong fears the girls have about going to college. Even though all nine girls want to go to college, they are afraid they will not succeed. At

this point, it is uncertain whether the girls' fears will prevent them from pursuing and finishing a college education. This discussion, however, brings forth the implicit connection between the fear associated with *hyper*-violence and the fear of applying to and attending college.

### **“Violence Doesn’t Affect Me”**

When I asked the girls if violence has ever kept them from attending school, most of the girls echoed Leticia's response: “When I'm in school, I ignore everything else.” Maria was the only one that mentioned that she did not attend school for some time after her friend was shot and killed. While the girls provide detailed accounts of the acts of violence they witness on a regular basis, when asked whether violence impacts their academic performance, six of the girls explained violence does not affect their focus in school. Leticia explained that violence does not affect her in school because she is not involved in gangs, drugs, or violent activities. Similarly, Sofia explained she completes her school work despite the violence that happens around her. Sofia goes to school everyday because she knows this is what she has to do to graduate high school and go to college. When I asked Tatiana, if violence has kept her from attending school, she answered: “No, I go to school for my education, for me.” Her answer carried an assertive tone that suggests Tatiana takes a protective role of her educational goals. Additionally, Tatiana disassociates herself from the violence that exists in her community by explaining she has nothing to do with violence. Her narrative, however, provides

examples that show violence also impacts individuals that are excelling academically, such as Maria's friend.

Six of the girls are confident that they do not have anything to do with violence, therefore it does not affect them in school. The girls perceive their academic goals and schooling experience as completely separate from the daily violence they face. This disassociation speaks to the tunnel vision the girls have developed that allows them to ignore the violence that is prevalent in their communities and focus exclusively on achieving their academic goals. This does not mean that the girls are in denial of what is going on, but rather they have refined another creative response to manage the violence they face, while at the same time, work to achieve their educational goals.

### **Violence Affects Learning**

While the girls disassociate their performance in school with the violence that is prevalent in their communities, four of the girls indicate that the violence that breaks out in their schools affects their classes and their learning. In her narrative, Carolina explained that some of her teachers do not teach like they usually do when the school is dealing with a crisis. She explained:

Some teachers stop teaching to talk about what's happening. Others try to get through what they were talking about but, then you can still hear things outside and some people come late due to the fight. This really interrupts the class.

Carolina is referring to instances when there are fights that are out of control and involve a number of students. The fights can happen at any time, even when students are going from one class to the next, causing some students to arrive late to their class. Leticia and

Lorena explained that school lockdowns are common in their school.<sup>30</sup> The lockdowns take place as a result of shootings that happen in front of the school. This affects learning because sometimes it takes a long time for the police to get the situation under control. When this happens, students have to stay in one class for a number of hours, preventing them from going to the rest of their classes.

Even though Tatiana strongly believes that violence does not affect her academic performance, towards the end of her interview, she provides a different perspective, examining why a large number of her peers do not attend school on a daily basis. She explained:

I think our school loses a lot of money for people that cut or don't come to school because we get paid for students to go to school. If people wouldn't be too worried about what's going on outside of school they would probably do better with their academics. 'Cause our test scores are really low and stuff like that.

In this excerpt, Tatiana is attempting to make sense of the subpar attendance in her school. Tatiana knows that many of her peers do not make it to school regularly, claiming that has a negative effect on the funding her school receives. Tatiana does not specify why her peers are, "worried about what's going on outside of school," but she is alluding to the fear that comes from living in a *hyper-violent* environment. Essentially, she suggests fear drives her peers to be academically disengaged in school. For this reason she believes that the academic disengagement that exists in her school results in school wide low test scores.

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<sup>30</sup> The principal of a school has the power to lockdown the school if there is reasonable suspicion of a threat to the school such as a shooting, community disaster, or weather emergency. The procedure consists of teachers locking their classrooms, keeping students inside, and not allowing any student to leave the safety of the classroom.

## **Goals and Aspirations to Graduate High School and Attend College**

In the narratives, each girl detailed a strong desire to graduate high school and to one day attend college. Five of the girls know for sure they want to continue on to college after they graduate high school. Four of the girls were not sure if they will take time off first after they graduate from high school. All of the participants in this study look forward to attending college at some point in their life, because doing so will allow them to obtain a “good career” and become successful. Additionally, the girls hope that obtaining a career that will allow them to bring positive change to their communities. The goals and aspirations the girls describe are indicative of their “aspiration capital,” their desire to work together for the betterment of their community, and create change (Yosso, 2006, 40-41). It is their aspiration capital that drives the girls to go to school daily to work towards achieving academically.

As the oldest participant in this study, Maria alludes to her aspiration capital by explaining how she feels now that she is getting ready to graduate from high school.

I'm excited for graduating 'cause not a lot of my family members have been able to graduate or friends. Some actually want to go to college but they don't have the grades or don't have the money. I'm also scared because I don't know how it is going to be.

Maria is excited to know that she is the first in her family that will graduate high school and go to college, because she will pave the way for her younger family members that look to her to set the example. However, Maria is also afraid because, as the first to go to college, she is not sure what to expect as a college student. Nevertheless, these doubts became secondary when she explained that in twenty-five years she hopes to have a career that can provide her with financial stability. Ultimately, Maria hopes to show her

family and friends that she was able to succeed academically, even though she grew up in an impoverished Oakland community.

In their narrative, the girls explain they have the support from parents and some teachers that encourage them to graduate high school and go to college. Sofia is the only girl in this study that attends a charter school. In this close-knit school, she explains that the counselors regularly talk to students about college. Besides her counselor from school, Sofia explained her parents are also big supporters because they encourage her to continue onto college. As a junior in high school, she knows for sure that she will attend a university. After college, she wants to continue her education and attend law school to become a lawyer. Unlike Sofia, Karina does not feel she has the support from her school counselor. Even though she does not have the support from her counselor, Karina is a member of community organizations and programs that provide her with information about college. Similar to Maria and Sofia, Karina desires to, “get into college to be somebody and make good money.” Ultimately, Karina wants to go beyond college into graduate school to become a psychologist and help families.

Similar to Maria, Tatiana explains that her entire family believes she is the pride and joy of the family, since she is the only one with good grades.

My goal is to graduate high school, be the first person in my family to be somebody because I will be the first one to graduate. I want to go to college and be a nurse or maybe a doctor. I don't want to have kids at an early age. In 25 years I want to be married have a husband with a kid or something; but before all that I want to have a job, a nice house, and a car.

The girls spoke with great pride when they explained that they are the first in their family to be on a path towards high school graduation and college acceptance. Tatiana is

looking forward to a college education because she believes this will allow her to have a successful life that can provide her with a good job, a nice house, and a car.

Leticia is also working, “to get good grades to be able to graduate from high school and go to college.” Like Tatiana, Leticia hopes to continue her education onto medical school to become a psychiatrist. Lorena explained that her teachers and her counselor have supported her and given her information about college. Lorena knows that going to college will allow her to be successful. Carolina agrees with Lorena because her counselor has taken the time to provide her with a great deal of information about college.

They [the counselors] will tell you, “you need to make up your credits so you can go to college,” and, “this is a so and so college.” Like they always go through the a-g requirements I feel like I know them by heart now.

Similar to the other girls, Carolina will take a summer class to make up missing credits and to ensure that she is eligible to apply to college. Rosario explained she is incredibly worried because she might not have enough credits to graduate. However, she is doing everything in her power to make up the credits she is missing.

While all nine girls shared their plans to graduate high school and attend college, the narratives of four of the girls seemed to contradict these plans. One of the girls explained she is a big procrastinator and leaves her assignments to the last minute. She admits this is something she has to work on because she knows this will keep her from making it to college. Similarly, two girls explained that peer pressure makes it difficult to attend class. While they explain their class attendance has improved this school year, they have to make up credits they did not complete as a result of not attending class in

previous years. Lastly, one of the girls believes she does not push herself in her classes. She knows there are times when she does not engage in class. Her disinterest made it clear; she is disengaged from her classes and the material she is supposed to learn.

The issues the girls bring forth—such as poor time management skills, feeling pressured to skip class and being unable to relate to the curriculum—relate to Perez Huber et al. (2006). Perez Huber et al. examine the institutionalization of inequality in the schooling system that prevents students from learning to become reliable, responsible, and driven individuals. In their interviews, the girls seemed disappointed and unable to comprehend why they did not make the right decision to prioritize their education. The girls were blaming themselves for not being able to manage their time, ignore peer pressure from friends to skip class, and find a connection to the curriculum. Perez Huber et al. remind us that there are institutionalized forces that affect youth of color and drive them to internalize educational struggles. With the help of parents and some teachers, the girls have been able to overcome some of these frustrations and not lose sight of their educational goals. It is necessary, however, to challenge institutionalized aspects of the schooling system that drive students of color to become turned off by school.

### **Fears About Applying and Attending College**

While the girls hope to graduate high school and go to college, each girl expressed fear of applying and attending college. In her narrative, Lorena explained that she wants to go to college to obtain a good career, but she is, “worried that college might be hard.” Leticia also mentioned that she is afraid to go to college, because she will be

alone and will have to do everything on her own. Similarly, Karina fears to start her life after high school because she does not know what to expect. It seems the girls believe that the life of a college student is incredibly different to the life they live in Oakland. Karina believes she will not know what to expect as a college student because nobody in her family has ever gone to college. Additionally, many of the girls are family oriented. They fear to be alone and not have the support of their families when they are in college. The most pronounced fear the girls discussed, however, is that college will be too difficult.

Sofia's biggest worry is that the colleges she applies to will not admit her. When I asked why colleges would not admit her, she answered:

'Cause I don't have that much, how do I explain it... 'Cause probably my SAT scores aren't going to be that good. 'Cause I already took a fake one and it was like a five something. They said that was high for my school but still it wasn't high enough and there is a lot of competition.

In this excerpt, Sofia explains that acceptance into a four-year university is highly competitive. Her soft tone as she described her fear made it seem she felt unworthy and also unprepared to attend a four-year university. While her Pre-SAT score was one of the highest in her school, Sofia does not believe that it is good enough to get accepted. The fears that the girls shared about applying to and attending college demonstrated the insecurities they feel as the first in their family to go through the college application process. The girls also fear they are not well equipped for the academic rigor of college because their schools have not provided what they need to prepare for a four-year university.

### **Concluding Research Question 3**

When the girls were asked if violence affects their academic performance, they explained that violence does not in any way affect their performance in school. In her narrative, Tatiana is clearly disassociating herself from *hyper*-violence. Tatiana knows that she is not involved in violence, therefore it does not affect her. Her response seems contradictory to other aspects of her narrative, particularly when she explains that violence affects her in a direct and overt way. This contradiction is reconciled by perceiving disassociation as a creative response or strategy that enables the girls to focus in school, by ignoring the violence that is prevalent in their communities. While the girls disassociate themselves from the *hyper*-violence that exists in their communities, other aspects of their narratives demonstrate that violence does affect the learning that takes place in the classroom. In school, large scale fights impact learning because some teachers take time out of their lesson plan to discuss the crisis the school is dealing with. Even though violence is prevalent in the schools in which the girls attend, the girls have made a conscious decision to make sure violence does not impact their academic performance. The girls have made this decision because they all have a strong desire to graduate high school and go to college.

As discussed in the second section, the nine girls that make up this study experience intense fear as a result of the violence in their communities. The girls explain they live on a constant state of alert to avoid victimization. In this section, the girls describe their insecurities and fears about applying and attending college. The insecurities about being the first in their family to attend a university, as well as the fears

of not being prepared to become a student at a university, are inexorably connected to what it means to be a low-income student of color in Oakland. Unknowingly, the girls have internalized the fear that comes from living in a *hyper-violence* environment. What has become an internalized fear can result in the intensification of certain insecurities and uncertainties.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of the complexities of the prevalent *hyper-violence* that exists in the low-income communities of Oakland. It also examined how those complexities can directly and indirectly impact the nine girls that make up this study. The overview, key findings, and implications will all be presented in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations**

As we examine the complexities of the *hyper*-violence in low-income communities of Oakland, we can begin to understand the far reaches of violence and see how it directly impacts the youth residing in these communities. There is much to learn from the stories the girls share in this study. The goals of this chapter are the following: 1) provide an overview of the key findings and implications of Chapter 4; 2) provide a brief discussion about the theoretical backdrop of this study; 3) examine the importance of focusing on Latina girls in the middle; 4) briefly review the *hyper*-violence construct; 5) revisit the *unspoken communal feeling of hurt and loss*; 6) examine the importance of problematizing violence; and, lastly 7) highlight the importance of school and community programs that are working toward providing support for low-income youth of color who are faced with violence.

### **Overview of Chapter 4**

In the first section of Chapter 4, the narratives of the nine Latina girls depict the prevalence of violence in their neighborhoods and the schools they attend. The different types of violence affect the girls directly because they live in fear and are driven to be on a constant state of alert to make sure they do not become victimized. To make sense of violence the girls overwhelmingly blame the members of their communities. When asked for clarification, however, the girls attributed violence to broader social issues. Throughout their interviews, the girls used a compartmentalizing strategy to make sense of *hyper*-violence by taking a different level of analysis, depending on the question that

was asked. This strategy enabled the girls to avoid feeling overwhelmed or helpless. The girls made the decision of when to focus on the structural inequalities and disparities they know exist between wealthy and poor communities.

When the girls use an individual level analysis to examine the complexities of *hyper-violence*, they engage in processes of individualization, internalization, and normalization. The process of individualizing blames members of the community for the *hyper-violence* that exists. The girls initially explained that the violence in Oakland is caused by members of their own community. Similarly, individualization allows outsiders to justify the disproportionate levels of violence in low-income communities by blaming the members of the community. Individualization masks the numerous factors that result in violence and prevents a deeper analysis.

Individualizing drives the girls to internalize violence because they witness members of their communities engage in violence. As part of this community, they feel guilty and responsible for what happens. Internalization prevents the girls from looking beyond their own guilt to answer why *hyper-violence* is prevalent in low-income communities and not in wealthy communities.

Lastly, the process of normalization refers to the understanding and acceptance that violence is something habitual, routine, and static. In their narrative, the girls describe violence as a normal aspect of their communities, something that will never change. Even though the girls feel torn because they love their community, they believe they have to move out to truly get away from the violence that will never go away.

These processes prevent insiders and outsiders from taking a historical approach to examine the reasons why the city of Oakland has become a place that has disproportionate homicide and crime rates. *Hyper-violence* is not perceived as an outgrowth of the economic shift that took place during the 1970's that led to high rates of unemployment and poverty. Instead, an individual level analysis is used to blame the members of low-income communities for the disparities they face.

The second section of Chapter 4 examined the far reach of violence that influences the daily lives and decision-making of the girls in this study. The girls explained that the violence and "tension in the air" drives them to live in fear because, at any moment, they can become victimized. Even though the girls live in fear and feel uncertainty, they have become active agents that engage in preventative measures to avoid victimization. In their narratives, the girls described a number of creative responses they abide by that make up the *code of conduct*. The most extreme aspect of the *code of conduct* that demonstrates the far reach of violence is the strong effort the girls make to stay indoors and not go out of their house. The girls know that being in the street places them at risk of victimization, for this reason they prefer to stay indoors and not go out of their house.

Lastly, the second section discussed the decision four of the girls took to enroll in a high school outside of their neighborhood. Carolina was the one who explained her decision in detail. She believes the school located in her neighborhood is dangerous and has higher rates of violence. Carolina brought forth violence as the main reason to attend another school. Through her narrative, however, it was clear that Carolina was looking

for a good quality education, something she believes that the school in her neighborhood would not be able to provide. It is clear Carolina made a strong effort to stay away from a school she perceives as violent, but more importantly, she was searching for a school that would allow her to prepare academically, because she hopes to continue onto college.

The third section of Chapter 4 examined the connection between the violence in Oakland's low-income communities, the educational performance, and the schooling experiences of the girls. The narratives of the girls demonstrate the tensions they experience (such as gang bullying and losing friends to violence); these tensions push them to become disengaged in school. When asked if violence impacts their educational performance and commitment, however, the girls overwhelmingly answered that it does not. The girls believe violence does not affect their educational focus so long as they do not engage in violent behavior. This disassociation from violence is contradictory to other aspects of their narratives where the girls explain violence impacts them in a direct way. Using disassociation is another creative response the girls engage in that prevents their involvement in violence and allows them to focus in school. Overall, the girls work hard towards being able to graduate high school and go to college. Their motivation comes from being the first in their family to have the opportunity to continue their education and also because they hope to make a difference in their community.

Lastly, Chapter 4 examined an overarching fear the girls shared about applying to and attending college. The girls worry they are the first in their family to consider attending college because they are not sure what to expect. Similarly, the girls worry

they might not be admitted into college because they believe college admittance is highly competitive. Specifically, Sofia fears she will not be admitted into a four year university because her SAT scores are not competitive. In addition, seven of the girls fear they will not be prepared to be successful in college. The girls do not make a connection between the fears they have about college and the fears they experience on a daily basis as a result of violence. It is clear, however, those fears share a direct connection, particularly because the girls are aware of the challenges and conditions in their neighborhoods, and schools that do not allow them to fully prepare for college.

Studies in psychology have made direct connections between the disproportionate rates of violence and high incidences of mental-health and behavioral conditions. In the present study, the narratives of the girls provide implicit connections between the fear they experience everyday due to the violence that claims the lives of friends and family, and a strong fear of not being prepared to attend college. Moreover, these fears show their awareness of the conditions and challenges they face in their neighborhoods and schools that do not allow them to efficiently prepare for college. At this point, it is unclear whether these fears will prevent the girls from applying and successfully completing a college education. The discussion set forth in this study, however, begins to examine the unspoken connection between the effects of *hyper*-violence and the educational challenges low-income Latinas from Oakland face.

## **Theoretical Connections**

As discussed in Chapter 2, Barrera (1979) uses an interdisciplinary and historical analysis to examine the social and economic subordination of Mexican-American people since the annexation of the Southwest territory. In his analysis, Barrera argues that the social and economic position of Chicana/o people as part of the laboring class generally is meant to remain static, because their low-wage work greatly benefits American businesses. This perception has relegated (and continues to relegate) Latina/o people to subordinate positions in society. Gonzalez (1990) supports Barrera's analysis by explaining that historically, schools have supported this relegation through segregation and tracking. In his analysis, Barrera refers to historical racism as the social and economic relegation that forces Latina/o people to comply with the demands of a capitalist economy.

Similar to Barrera, this study develops an interdisciplinary analysis to examine the factors that have resulted in the *hyper*-violence that exists in Oakland's low-income communities. Ginwright (2010) argues that Oakland experienced an economic shift that took place during the 1970's that resulted in high rates of unemployment and poverty. He describes violence as an outgrowth of unemployment and poverty. Additionally, Omi and Winant's (1994) racial formation theory problematizes the institutionalization of racism in American society. It is this institutionalized racism that drives outsiders, and even insiders, to blame the members of low-income communities for the disparities they face. In this sense, *hyper*-violence embodies the outcome of racism and inequality that directly affects low-income marginalized youth.

While the two theoretical lenses used in this study were Omi and Winant's racial formation theory, and Barrera's theory of racial inequality, this study also used a critical race theoretical framework. Using critical race theory enabled this study to use an interdisciplinary analysis to challenge dominant perspectives that are used to justify the oppression of people of color. Specifically, a critical race theory framework allowed this study to challenge the historical racism that influences the conditions that result in social and economic subordination. Furthermore, critical race theory centers on the lived experiences of people of color. This study provided a critical race theory focus by centering on Latina girls in the middle, with the goal of problematizing the *hyper*-violence that exists in Oakland and impacts their everyday lives and decision-making.

### **Studying Latina Girls “In The Middle”**

As discussed in the introduction, this study foregrounds the voices of girls whose experiences are not normally represented. The voices of women, and more so women of color have been relegated and silenced in academia as a result of gender and race hierarchies that undervalue their experiences. While there are a limited number of studies that examine the experiences of Latina youth, they tend to focus on high-achieving or low-achieving, gang-involved, and incarcerated youth. Those studies are important, providing an understanding of the specific experiences of Latina/o youth. The overwhelming emphasis on these extreme groups, however, can support simplistic images that relegate Latina/o youth as either “good” or “bad.” This study challenged

simplistic portrayals of Latina youth by focusing on average Latina girls that are not high achieving, low achieving, gang-involved, or part of the court system.

In Chapter 4, I detail that Latina/o youth from Oakland are usually perceived as gang members. There are various socialization processes that include aspects of the media, such as films and television shows that promote negative stereotypes about low-income people of color. Even though the girls in this study are not gang members, their stories demonstrate that violence affects them on a daily basis. This finding challenges the perceptions that all youth in Oakland are gang members, but more importantly, that only gang-involved youth are affected by violence. Understanding the deep impact *hyper-violence* has on the everyday lives and decision making of all low-income residents of Oakland, including youth, can begin to prioritize efforts that works against this issue.

### ***Hyper-Violence***

Through their stories the girls make it clear, they are not able to envision the eradication of *hyper-violence* because it readily affects them and all of their loved ones. There are verbal altercations, fights, and gendered violence the girls witness and sometimes experience. Sadly, there are instances when acts of violence result from minor and insignificant issues, such as bumping into somebody. All nine girls explained that tensions run high in their communities, particularly because members of their community are ready to defend or attack at any moment's notice. The girls fear this

tension because they are certain it turns minor conflicts into major problems that impact a great number of people.

Over the last ten years, the unforgiving violence in low-income communities of Oakland has sacrificed the lives of 1,174 people. Despite a soaring homicide rate, there have been no consistent city-wide efforts to create change. The lack of consistent effort from local government to curb violence suggests that this issue is perceived as a normal aspect of this community. The goal of the *hyper-violence* construct is to highlight the need to change the unequal expectations of safety and community well-being that exist between wealthy and poor communities.

### **Unspoken Communal Feeling of Hurt and Loss**

In their narratives the girls bring forth a number of examples that make it clear: they are hurting, scared, overwhelmed, and looking to escape. It was painful for Maria to discuss what happened to her close friend who was shot and killed during his birthday party. Maria believes her friend did not deserve to die, because he worked hard to be on track to graduate high school and also to get accepted to a university. Carolina did not believe the death of Maria's friend would impact her. This changed when his picture went up in her school. She felt grief like the rest of her peers; they were all struggling to process feelings of loss that are rooted in the relentless violence that exists. Tatiana was not able to understand why somebody would shoot Maria's friend, because he was a good student. This was difficult for Tatiana, because being a good student is also one of the strategies she uses to stay safe from the *hyper-violence* that exists in her community.

All nine girls in this study know a friend or a peer from school that has been sacrificed to violence. This shared sense of loss that exists among countless members of low-income communities in Oakland is usually unspoken because many feel powerless and unable to change what is happening. There are instances, however, when street-side memorials become designated mourning places for members of the community to demonstrate their solidarity to families whom experience a loss. This is what Carolyn Jones and Henry Lee, with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, describe happened after the killing of a three-year-old Oakland boy during a drive by shooting August 8, 2011.<sup>31</sup> The location of this shooting became a memorial for the three-year-old victim, with the goals of supporting his family and demonstrating the suffering and uncertainty the entire community experienced after such a tragic loss.

### **Problematizing Violence**

For outsiders as well as insiders, acts of violence that take place in Oakland's low-income communities have become normal and socially acceptable. Similarly, the girls in this study describe violence as an integral part of their communities, something that will never cease to exist. One of the main goals of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the prevalence of violence, as well as begin to problematize its normalization. The experiences of the young women in this study show us that we should not continue to individualize this problem by only blaming the members of the community. Instead, it is necessary to look beyond an individual level

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<sup>31</sup> Carlos "Carlitos" Nava, the three-year-old victim, was an innocent bystander that was killed during a gang related shooting that happened on the intersection of 64<sup>th</sup> and International Blvd in Oakland.

analysis; this is the only way to truly address the growing problem of violence in low-income urban neighborhoods and schools. Additionally, it is imperative to challenge stereotypic portrayals of low-income youth of color that criminalize them. Rios (2011) reminds us that treating youth in a punitive way as a result of their criminalization is not a solution to the violence that exists in these communities.

### **Community Agencies and School Programs**

In their narratives, all nine girls shared their involvement in community agencies and or school programs. This involvement is vital because it allows them to stay busy, active, and involved. Eight of the girls will be the first in their family to graduate high school and consider a college education. This means their parents are not able to guide them through high school, or the college application process. The girls, however, have actively sought out school programs and community agencies that offer mentoring opportunities that have guided them this far.

It is unfortunate that the community agencies and school programs that are available to low-income youth are rapidly disappearing during this difficult downturn in the economy. Aside from academic support that the girls receive from these programs and community agencies, there is emotional support (e.g. counseling and mentoring), and social support (e.g. advocacy and referral) that the girls and their families benefit from. Essentially, the goal of school programs and community agencies is to minimize the outside barriers which low-income youth of color face, so they can truly focus in their schooling. It is vital to invest in community agencies and school programs that offer an

outlet for low-income youth in the middle, because this youth group has great potential to succeed academically, but unfortunately, also runs the risk of becoming involved in the street life.

### **What is Next?**

This study focused on the experiences of low-income Latinas in the middle who reside and attend Oakland public schools. There are a number of lessons linked to the experiences the girls shared. These lessons are helpful to begin to problematize the *hyper-violence* that exists in Oakland. This study has sparked additional inquiries that I would like to investigate further, such as listening to the experiences of Latino boys in the middle; or develop a multi-ethnic study that provides a comparative analysis to examine the similarities and differences between the different low-income ethnic groups who reside in Oakland. These emphases could provide further insight to gender specific struggles, as well as the racial tensions the girls said exist in their neighborhoods and schools.

The ongoing homicides that happen in Oakland are constant reminders of the *hyper-violence* that is prevalent in these communities. Throughout their narratives, the girls are clear: there is no end in sight to the *hyper-violence* that so readily affects each one of them and their loved ones. The girls demonstrate they are active agents in their lives, by engaging in creative responses to prevent victimization. Through direct and indirect ways, violence impacts who they are, what they do, and what they want. The girls in this study believe that to reach success, they have to continue their education.

This study, however, also demonstrates that Latina youth from Oakland are faced with innumerable hurdles linked to the *hyper*-violence that is prevalent in their communities, as they attempt to reach their educational goals.

Educators and community leaders should continue to work towards offering equal opportunity for all students. It is necessary, however, for educators and community leaders to not mask their own prejudices that support the inequality of low-income students of color. If the goal is to have a population of college students that mirrors the demographics of California, it is necessary to support low-income youth of color to graduate high school and attend college. This study drives us to re-evaluate how we make sense of the violence that exists in low-income communities, such as Oakland. Essentially, *hyper*-violence is a visible and painful example of the larger issue of social inequality that continues to relegate large numbers of African-American and Latina/o people to live on the margins.

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