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RESEARCH

# Youth Culture in Red Hook, Brooklyn

## Using Ethnographic Research to Enhance Youth Program Planning

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## Introduction

With the help of the Independence Community Foundation, the Red Hook Community Justice Center, a community court that aims to improve public safety in a low-income Brooklyn neighborhood, sought to tackle the problem of the positive perceptions of youth crime among young people residing in public housing. The Red Hook Houses—the largest public housing development in Brooklyn—are home to a sizeable population of disconnected youth. Many of these young people—predominantly male, poor, and black and Latino—are involved in the neighborhood’s drug trade. The Justice Center wanted to design a program that would provide young popular opinion leaders with the analytical skills and marketing techniques to create and disseminate a youth-designed and -driven community education campaign to challenge the positive perceptions of youth crime.

As it was initially conceived, the first step of this program—drawn from public health safe-sex models—involved using ethnographic research methods to identify young popular opinion leaders in the community so they could be recruited for program participation. As an experienced youth ethnographer and youth program designer, I was hired to oversee the process. After some consideration, my colleagues and I decided to expand the first step to include a larger investigation into Red Hook youth culture. The results have had a dramatic impact on the way we approached program design, content, and recruitment. The final result was a new program, Youth ECHO, that opened its doors in March, 2008.

Designing any new program is a lengthy process, a series of sequential decisions each of which impacts the ultimate product. As social services, public health, and other community-based programming is looking more and more to evidence-based models, program designers are working harder than ever to make those decisions deliberately and conscientiously. Unfortunately, in the world of youth programming the following scene is still all too common: a group of adults sitting around a conference table discussing what programmatic elements might be the most appealing and beneficial to youth. Unlike professionals who work with adults, those who work with youth often approach their jobs with an uncomplicated sense of authority; after all, each *was* once a teenager. The result can be a set of program components that engages only a subset of youth—those who are the most amenable to participating in leadership training programs, internship opportunities, or mentoring programs. Despite the lengths to which many of these programs go to recruit more hard-to-reach youth, many ultimately fail to do so. Consequently, those teenagers who are the most vulnerable—those who have either dropped out of school or are dangerously close, those involved with the juvenile and criminal justice system, those with limited job prospects—fall through the proverbial cracks.

The program design approach described in this report proceeds differently. We drew on the practices of ethnographic research to get closer to understanding how youth themselves feel about their social lives, their cultural milieu, their community, and their futures. By using their words, their stories and their experiences, those of us involved in building Youth ECHO acquired a unique view of youth culture and youth programming needs in Red Hook and in so doing simultaneously jump-started the necessary process of building bridges with potential program participants.

## Methodology

Traditional ethnographic methods rely on fieldwork, most centrally participant observation. Here we encountered our first hurdle. When the Youth ECHO research started, the weather had turned cold and, consequently, youth were either in after-school programs, spending time in their apartments, or hanging out in the hallways of the local public housing development. There was little youth congregation in the community's public spaces. Moreover, time constraints meant that research needed to be completed in the amount of time usually accorded to the first step of ethnography: relationship-building. Without this necessary step, entree into social networks is very difficult. With young people, particularly those who are firmly rooted in a "no-snitching" culture, collaborative participant observation is virtually impossible (not to say potentially dangerous) without first gaining their trust.

As a result, we decided to conduct one-on-one individual interviews with young people using a semi-structured interview method. While structured interviews consist of a set list of questions, semi-structured interviews are typically arranged thematically and allow for unscripted questions. Such a format is essential for researchers to get at the complex meaning systems young people use to organize their behavior, to understand themselves and others, and to make sense out of the world in which they live.<sup>1</sup>

In order to access as wide a swath of Red Hook's teenagers as possible, I trained Ericka Tapia and Shaina Harrison—Justice Center staff and residents of the Red Hook Houses—to conduct interviews outside of the Justice Center and in venues to which I might not have had easy access. The fact that my colleagues were cultural insiders meant that they were able to establish a substantially different kind of rapport with youth. Interviews often were conducted with youth they knew (from their buildings, through working at summer camps in the neighborhood, or who hung out outside) and in the context of their home environments. Tapia and Harrison were able to involve a substantial number of youth in these interviews who would have been unreachable via traditional recruitment methods. Meanwhile, the project's senior research associate, Rachel Swaner, and I had the benefit of being cultural outsiders, which gave us the opportunity to ask types of questions that might have seemed ridiculous coming from Red Hook residents. The resulting data was rich, both on the macro and micro level.

## General Findings

Altogether, staff conducted a total of 23 open-ended interviews with young people between the ages of 13 and 18 who are either Red Hook residents or who have spent a considerable amount of time in the neighborhood. Of these, 70% were female and 30% male. Nineteen were Red Hook residents (14 lived in the Houses). The remaining four lived in Brooklyn, and two lived in different public housing developments (one in the Cypress Hill Houses in East New York and the other in Crown Heights' Albany Houses). All except four reported regularly attending

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<sup>1</sup> James Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Group/Thompson Learning, 1979), 5. Spradley lays out a variety of kinds of questions that might be included in an ethnographic interview, many of which were included in our interview protocol. These include: grand tour and mini-grand tour questions, which aim to get a description of the participant's life on a detailed level and in context; example questions; experience questions; native-language questions; and contrast questions.

school (of these, one has graduated and works full time, one is temporarily out of school, one suffers from chronic health problems, and the last has a consistent truancy problem). Of those then enrolled in school, four were in middle school, 17 in high school, and two in college.

Thirty-eight percent of the 19 Red Hook youth considered themselves typical for their age, while 62% thought they were atypical. Patrice, Emmanuel, Mike, Jadon, Terence, Jessica, and James all felt that they are more or less typical in the ways they spend their time.<sup>2</sup> Only three young people—Destiny, Hope, and Steven—immediately said they felt they were atypical. Destiny, 15, suffers from a chronic and visible illness that she feels sets her apart significantly from her peers. Fifteen-year-old Hope explained that her difficult home life—which involves parental drug use and periodic episodes of domestic violence—makes her feel different from friends. And Steven, 13, whose family emigrated from Trinidad ten years ago and lives outside the Houses feels atypical because he’s quiet, mature, and doesn’t hang out with friends a lot. The remaining teens, Malukah, Alisha, Audrey, Mayra, Wakara, Precious, Stephanie, and Clarissa, all initially said they thought they were typical but when pressed to elaborate on how, amended their initial affirmative reply.

There was extensive variation in types of behavior considered “normal.” Youth identified the following as being behaviors typical of their age group: going to school; being goofy; playing sports; talking on the phone and being online; hanging out with friends; going to movies; helping with family chores; engaging in oral sex, drinking, smoking, cutting school, “messing with” older guys; and gossiping. Many young people had initial difficulty identifying behaviors that were typical of their age-group, particularly those who were in their late teens. These older youth, demonstrating the differentiation between self and peer groups that happens during late teen years, expressed an inability to make such a clear-cut distinction. As 17-year-old Tamecia explained, “I don’t know what’s typical. I could tell you about me. [...] But I can’t speak for all those other people.” Those who thought of themselves as atypical, however, uniformly identified one of the following as making them atypical: being interested in and excited about school; being more mature; and having adult responsibilities and concerns (ranging from caring for younger siblings to getting an abortion).

While the young people identified their own “typical” behaviors in the myriad ways listed above, they all also uniformly identified a coherent set of things “other kids”—not them or their immediate friends—do. These include smoking weed, fighting a lot, starting trouble, drinking, being loud and hanging out with grown men. A quarter of our interviewees reported regularly drinking and smoking weed (regularly being defined as as seldom as every weekend to as frequently as every day), though none reported actively looking for fights or trying to start trouble. In fact, most described their choices of friends as being oppositionally related to these behaviors.

## **Peer Networks and Social Patterns**

Youth made sharp distinctions between “people I’m been with” or “associates” and people they “chill with,” or friends. While many of them have extended peer networks of up to 30-40 youth (as in the case of one young man, Terence, affiliated with the Bloods), only one suggested their

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<sup>2</sup> All names and identifying information have been changed.

direct peer group was larger than 10 people, and more than half reported having five or fewer friends. Fourteen-year-old Malikah, for instance, said she had only one friend, whom she qualified as “not a best friend, just somebody that’s cool” despite being part of a larger social network of 10 people with whom she associates regularly. Another girl, 15-year-old Stephanie, said that she has a similar divide between friends and associates. Almost all of her associates regularly commit crimes, she said, “but friends—no. I don’t hang out with people who steal or drink or smoke.” Mike, a 16-year-old boy, explained: “I think people chill with people they trust, and like, there are not a lot of people they trust, so they just stick with them.”

The qualities associated with these friends, rather than associates, are again almost identical among participants. Good friends, they reported, are honest about the impact of their behaviors and are loyal, dependable, trustworthy, nice, independent, positive, goal-oriented, share similar ethnic and racial backgrounds, and help each other with school. Fifteen-year-old Wakara drew a direct parallel between peer influence and behavior: “I like to be surrounded by people like that because that’s how I want to be. That’s how—I think that a lot of people that you hang out with—they affect how you act so I feel like being around positive people. It’s better for me because it makes me positive in what I do.”

The primary places young people made their friends were in school (often elementary school) or around the neighborhood, having “grown up together.” A few reported meeting their closest friends through other friends and all the boys interviewed said they made a lot of their friends through sports. Watching neighborhood basketball games is a popular summer diversion for many young people, as 15-year-old Mayra explains: “We’ll watch the game and then go back—after the games go back where we usually sit by the handball court and just talk and just joke around. And then from there we usually just hang out like teens. Just go crazy—have fun. Like, some of us, we just play around, you know? Just play around—mess with other people—chase them around in the park.” Stephanie agrees. She and her friends have jobs at the Beacon during the summer. “We wake up at nine and go to work and just chill with the kids at work. And then come home and then go to Coffey Park and play in the sprinklers and stuff.”

As Stephanie and Mayra indicate, many youth have distinct locations where they usually congregate. Mayra and her friends like the handball courts. Stephanie and her friends tend to hang out at the Beacon for most of the day. Malikah and her friends prefer the bleachers near “Paradise,” one of the blocks in Red Hook East with a basketball court. All interviewees identified Coffey Park as a place where neighborhood youth go to socialize with each other. Many teens also reported leaving the neighborhood with family on the weekends, either to visit relatives that live elsewhere or to travel around the city with friends. These young people report hanging out at in Brooklyn locale’s like other public housing projects (most commonly Gowanus and Farragut Houses), on Smith Street, in downtown Brooklyn, in Park Slope, at youth clubs, like the Elks on Fulton Street and in Manhattan on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. Most young people meet up with friends to go shopping, to the movies, and get food. Some, like Emmanuel, Malikah, Mike, Jadon, Hope, and Clarissa, report regularly getting high and going to house parties or clubbing. Another few, like James, Terence, Wakara and Stephanie consistently play sports, do homework, and help their families with chores and watching brothers and sisters on the weekends.

## Youth and Their Perspectives on Red Hook

All interviewees discussed the dramatic shift in Red Hook's reputation starting in the mid-1990s. "It's calmed down a lot," Terence, 18, reported. "Like, I remember when I first moved here [in the early 1990s] you'd hear gunshots like every other night. I don't even hear gunshots no more or if you do it's like once, twice a year. Like, I mean, you'll still hear fights, arguing, shit like that, but it used to be killings and shit here like you don't see it no more." Several other young people also described the neighborhood as having "calmed down a lot." Now, most young people say they feel safe in the neighborhood. As Destiny explained, "...I feel safe. Maybe it's 'cause I don't be outside much and I have my family protecting me." Some young women, like Stephanie, Wakara, and Precious, described feeling uncomfortable walking around at night, past large groups of older men who make sexually suggestive comments to them.

Youth feelings about the neighborhood are complex and, often, contradictory. They express a strong sense of affiliation and talk about defending, or "repping," the neighborhood when "pressed" by youth from other neighborhoods. A few of the young people described loving the sense of community they feel. "I love it personally," Audrey said, "[...] it's like a project that's one big family, except—versus growing up in a suburb or like Carroll Gardens—are like all just friends. Like you know everybody. You can knock on any door if you need something. I love it." Young people consistently describe the neighborhood as being like one big family where they know everybody. For some, this lends a feeling of safety, protection, and being supported.

Others expressed frustration that "Red Hook ain't about nothing" any more; that is, it's no longer known among other projects for being dangerous. Among youth from other projects, Red Hook has gained a reputation of being soft. Precious, 14, explained, "Red Hook don't have no trouble with nobody—with no other project, so it's like people think, 'Oh, Red Hook is soft,' or whatever, because they like not starting no trouble with nobody else." Sixteen-year-old Patrice said, "They try to put up a front like they tough, but some of them ain't. Some of them that was is in jail now." Emmanuel, 18, explained, "They fighting each other.... It ain't like—it ain't nobody else. Like, it ain't pussy. Don't get me wrong, but it has calmed down. Like since that sweep shit...nobody be shooting and that no more." The sweeps to which Emmanuel refers are the 2006 wide-spread arrests and convictions of many of the highest players in Red Hook's drug trade. There was unanimous agreement that following the sweep, Red Hook took on a quieter, less dangerous quality. Further, Emmanuel's and Terence's comments suggest the extent to which, for some young men in the community, a certain amount of their sense of masculinity and pride is based on Red Hook not being perceived as "soft" in other neighborhoods.

If Red Hook seems "soft" to youth from other projects, among the teens' peers from neighborhoods like Carroll Gardens or Park Slope, Red Hook maintains its reputation as dangerous. In addition, Precious, Destiny and Audrey reported that their peers perceive the neighborhood as loud, dirty, and lonely. Audrey in particular felt this is a mischaracterization of Red Hook's qualities and its residents. "It's not all that you hear. It's, like, hard growing up in the projects sometimes. Like, some people are—some people's parents are on welfare. Some kids do have to drop out of high school to get a job. I mean, it's harder than you might think to make—we're not a bad projects and what you hear is over-exaggerated stuff. Like, we are

loving. We'll take you in and, like, we'll find help for you if you need it. We'll find shelter—we'll provide shelter.”

If some youth want to “rep” the neighborhood by acting tough and starting trouble, then, an equal number of young people (specifically young women) expressed a desire to make Red Hook known for “good” things. Wakara talked extensively about wanting to present herself as a “young woman” because it was her responsibility to represent the neighborhood in a good light. Similarly, Precious explained: “I don’t want to be going some place and then tell somebody I’m from Red Hook and they automatically think, oh, I’m a bad person ‘cause I live in Red Hook. So I’d rather be known for being good.”

Some of the emphasis on “repping” the neighborhood in a positive way grows out of the fact that all the young people felt that adults see them as criminals, out of control, and disrespectful. Audrey explained, “most of them think we’re Neanderthals.” Interviewees agreed that some young people do “act grown” and disrespectfully in parks and on public transportation, but feel unfairly lumped in with those kids. “They see one thing happen,” Terence suggested, “they automatically think every other teenager is alike and that’s not true.” Furthermore, some young people blame Red Hook’s adults for being hypocritical. “They only point to the negatives,” said Mayra. “[They] say, ‘Oh, we need to do this.’ But they need to go out there and try to stop it. They don’t try nothing. They just be nosey too and worry about other peoples’ kids and not even worrying about their selves.” Thirteen-year-old James’ statement about his neighbors echoes this sense: “I think that if it’s they kids, like, they gonna protect them. If it’s not, nobody else, like, they not gonna care for them or do nothing for them. If they getting beat up they just gonna leave them there. They not gonna help them.”

### **Red Hook, Fashion, and the Culture of Rumors**

Many young people expressed interest in leaving Red Hook either because they are so familiar with the neighborhood—as Mike says, “You gotta leave to have fun”—or because they are uncomfortable with the experiences they associate with living in the projects. None reported wanting to come back to “help the neighborhood.” Their descriptions of Red Hook gesture toward a sense of claustrophobia, and both their positive and negative feelings reflect the kinds of emotional conflict typically associated with small towns. Youth feel Red Hook is “boring,” isolated, with not much going on. “I hate being in the same spot all the time,” explained Terence. “Like, I used to be there growing up, but then, you know, once you get that money in your pocket you be like, ‘I’m out.’”

Audrey expressed a desire to get away: “I want to move to either Connecticut or California,” she said, “possibly New York if it’s not like that crowded and like sad, like the city, you know? Probably like the suburbs or the country.” Despite her love for Red Hook, the sense of family and value of knowing everybody that made her and other young people feel safe and supported also, according to some interviewees, results in rumors and a lot of “he say she say drama.” Explained Stephanie: “[T]here’s too much haters out in Red Hook. Every time you got something somebody wants to take it. So much people killing each other or it’s just—it’s not a fun place to live.” Precious compared Red Hook to a school:

'Cause most of them lived here since they was little, so it's like everybody in Red Hook is family. They really say that, 'cause everybody know everybody in Red Hook except me, 'cause I just moved over here.... So it's like it's always rumors flying around about somebody. It's crazy. It really is. Like you can't—it's like you can do stuff in Red Hook, but you can't really like do nothing because of the rumors, 'cause everybody think this about you, everybody think that about you.... [P]eople I hang out with, they don't even like—won't even talk about it. We just leave it alone or don't even care for it.

Many of the rumors trigger fights between young people. Patrice explained,

My whole thing is a girl in Red Hook don't want to see you doing better than them. They don't want you to not like them. Like, if they feel any kind of threat towards you they don't like you. If—if you just out here they don't like you.... I got into a fight because a girl said to me, 'Oh, you think you all that.'

Emmanuel, Jadon, Mike, and James all described fights occurring because they were threatened or had to defend themselves. Wakara, describing the fights among boys, explained, "...[I]t's about stupid stuff. This one said something about me, this one said something about me, and it's stupid little things and I think that people instigate because people want to see a show and they want to see a fight."

Fashion emerged as a central issue among Red Hook youth, both girls and boys. These young people describe name-brands as being important. Coveted labels include Prada sneakers, Vans, Coach, Nike Jordans, Timberland boots. Fashion trends at the forefront, according to teens, are skateboarding clothes, punk/rock, and shottas (a style currently associated with Jamaican "gangstas" that features tight clothing for boys and girls). Many teens have Sidekick phones, iPods or Zune music players. Basically, as 16-year-old Jadon explained, young people "just get whatever new."

Some young people suggested that they're judged less by the brands they wear than by the relative style quotient of their overall look—something that holds true for boys and girls. Mike described it this way: "People hate on us 'cause of the way we dress. They look at us funny and all that, but it ain't nothing. They hating." Precious, who lived in East New York until a few years ago, says she sees a big difference between the importance of fashion in her old neighborhood and in Red Hook. In Red Hook, she says:

'Cause it's like you dress bummy or whatever. People just look at you different like you—you dirty. Like, nobody cares about you. It—it doesn't matter how—how you are. What you are as a person. It doesn't matter how you act if you like—if you—if you don't dress the way they dress or look the way they look, they just—they just put you out.

All young people expressed a strong desire not to be perceived as "bummy," suggesting a strong correlation between material goods and being seen as successful.

## Youth Teams

Fashion is a large component of the youth teams, or crews. Different from the more traditional gangs, like the Bloods, Crips, and Latin Kings (which also exist in the neighborhood), these teams are typically small groups (3-15 members) of friends between the ages of 13 and 18. There are all-boy teams, like 100, Violators, GMG (Green Money Gang), and Soldiers. There are all-girl teams, like Trendsetters, TBB (The Baddest Bitches), and TDD (Top Dime Divas). ATM (Addicted to Money) and Dynasty are among the mixed-gender teams. As the names suggest, these teams are largely geared around the acquisition of money and status. Malikah, the only female member of ATM, explained that physical indicators of success are requirements for membership. “I don’t really know because I didn’t make it up,” she said, “but I think if you not about money then you can’t mess with them. Like, if you a bum, you can’t mess with them. If you don’t have money, you can’t mess with them. If you not pretty or handsome, you can’t mess with them.”

According to all the young people interviewed, while these crews are concerned with projecting an image of material success, they aren’t engaging in criminal activity beyond occasional fights, smoking weed and public drinking. They are essentially formalized social networks. Mayra clarified, saying, “They don’t do things like they used to. Like Violators, they name. You’d think they dangerous, but they don’t do what they used to, ‘cause they saw that they’re getting older and they need to calm down.” While they don’t participate in criminal activity, they do have a strong rivalry with one another that can lead to altercations. “It’s a team thing to say whose crew is better,” she continued. “We don’t do that, but we don’t have no problem—like real, real beef. We just play around like, ‘Yeah. We better. Y’all droppin’. Y’all comin’ to us. We better.’” Some of the youth interviewed described these teams as being comprised of the popular teens in the neighborhood.

While there are the more well-known, formalized teams, members are not uniformly considered the “popular” kids by everyone. Some young people, like Stephanie and James, purposely don’t want to be involved in these groups. James, for instance, was approached by an older friend last year to join Violators but decided not to because those teams “are for punks that don’t know how to fight.” His rejection of the team was acceptable, however, because James and the Violators member have been friends since kindergarten. “He didn’t do anything,” James said, “because we been friends since we were little.” Other young people, like Patrice, Jessica, Jadon, Terence, and Wakara opt to give existing groups of friends a name. While on one level these might resemble competing teams, they don’t engage in the rivalry or membership-games that Mayra references. “We, well me and my friends, we had a couple of other girls, we had a name for ourselves,” Wakara explained. “We—Christine’s mom passed away when she was younger and her mother always loved sapphires, so we called ourselves the ‘Sapphires.’ And it was like, that was one day. The first day that we named ourselves we cried. We sat down and cried because of her mom.” This is a good example of the kinds of social supports that these groups can offer members.

Most young people identified fashion and material wealth as a dominant sensibility among Red Hook youth. However, only about three of the young people who participated in interviews expressed solidarity with this position. Indeed, several youth listed the emphasis on fashion and

judgment as one of their primary motivators for leaving the neighborhood. “There’s girls out here that’s drug dealers,” Patrice explained, “so I be—like, you become one of those or you’re gonna be fighting or you’re gonna be...like so into fashion, like, ‘Oh, I got to wear this ‘cause I don’t want this friend to say this.’ So I leave so I don’t have to deal with this.” While many Red Hook teens express an interest in fashion and dressing well, it’s clear that it also plays a large role in negative social dynamics.

The prevalence of rumors is another complicating force in teens’ lives, one that results in few young people confiding in their friends. It explains the importance and prominence of “trust” and “loyalty” among the prized qualities in friends. According to Malikah, a lot of young people are not “not putting their business out there. ‘Cause a lot of people are nosey and a lot of people spread rumors and stuff.” Several of the girls, including Malikah, Nicole, Destiny, Jessica, and Audrey, said that their mothers were their best friends. Some tie this strong relationship explicitly to concerns over rumors. “[M]y mother’s my best friend,” Audrey said. “She is—but I could talk to her about anything and then she comes home and tells me about work. I tell her about school. Most of the things I don’t even tell my friends. I just tell her.”

In contrast, seven of the 23 young people interviewed expressed having difficult relationships with their families. “It’s like tense even with my father ‘cause it’s like, ‘Who’s gonna speak?’” Malikah said. “When we around each other—we don’t say one word around each other.” Several of the young women suggested this strain was the result of prior incidents of domestic violence. Hope said, “I live with my mother and my father, but neither me or my mother wants him there, but shit happens and he’s still there.” Mayra’s complicated family life is the result of her father being incarcerated and, as a result, having to move in with relatives. At one point there were 12 people living in her three-bedroom apartment. As a result of this chaotic home life, she feels a certain difficulty with feeling rooted and being able to trust her home environment. Nicole, who became pregnant at the age of 14 and decided to have an abortion without her mother’s knowledge, has had a strained relationship since she moved here from Jamaica. “Me and her weren’t that close. I didn’t spend the first years of my life with her. I came back down here when I was thirteen, so we were kind of—we were kind of bumpy and we were always arguing and had attitudes with each other.” Following her abortion Nicole struggled to reconnect with her mother:

[P]eople do deserve second chances, because everybody makes a mistake and if you’re not gonna give—give that person another chance, how you gonna—how are you gonna see that they could be a better person? So, her not trusting me is making me feel like I don’t care, ‘cause I try my best to prove to her that I’m a changed person. And she’s not trying to see that, so I just don’t care no more.

Nicole’s reaction to her strained relationship with her mother—the intense need for approval coupled with a subsequent self-undermining when that approval is withheld—is typical for many of the young people we interviewed. Often, it surfaces with young people who are trying to “get on the right track” or “do right” after a series of academic or behavioral set-backs.

## Youth, Perceptions of Crime and Experiences with the Criminal Justice System

More than half of the Red Hook youth interviewed have had a family member incarcerated (and often more than one). Most frequently, this person has been either their father or their uncle. Several have lost brothers, uncles, or godfathers to gang or drug-related violence. Young people have complex responses to these realities. Some felt these experiences engendered their need to excel and do “positive” rather than “negative” things. Others described feeling “sad” or “down.” Fourteen-year-old Jessica, for instance, explained that she “used to cry a lot” after her godfather was killed “over gang violence” and used journaling to help get through the experience. Others, like Stephanie, whose father has been incarcerated almost all her life, worry that they will be judged for the actions of their family members: “Like, that’s bad for me. You’re putting a reputation on me.”

Three of the young people who participated in the interview process had themselves been arrested. Jadon, for marijuana possession; Terence, for possession of a knife; and Hope, for unspecified reasons—and the charges against all three were dropped. Youth report a complicated relationship with police. Across the board, male and female interviewees explain feeling surveilled by police when they’re not doing anything wrong and, conversely, not having police arrive in a timely fashion when they’re needed. Destiny warned, “Watch out for cops, ‘cause they’re, like, everywhere. It’s unbelievable.... For some reason people who live in Red Hook attract a lot of attention. They automatically assume that you’re a problem.” Terence, who is a high school graduate, has a full-time job, and coaches several basketball teams, describes the way he feels young men of color are treated: “We used to be able to be in the buildings and cops would just walk past us. Now, if there’s more than two people in the building they want to talk to us—throw us against the wall and search us.” Few young people considered public drinking and smoking marijuana to be serious infractions. Similarly, many were unclear about whether or not fighting or graffiti were considered crimes.

When asked what they thought of when they heard the word “crime,” all the young people referred to violent crime: gunshots, guns, shooting, killing, stabbing, dying, and murder. All said these kinds of things don’t happen in Red Hook. The majority of young people identified robbery as the most common crime committed by youth, with smoking and selling weed as the second most common. Teens associate robbery with deprivation and with laziness. “People see what they want,” Terence explained. “If they can’t get it themselves with their money they find a way to get it.” The primary crimes they thought Red Hook youth committed were inconsistent with their sense of general youth crime. Answers varied from marijuana selling and smoking to hopping the train, from fighting to stealing. Precious, who was the victim of a teen relationship abuse incident, suggested that Red Hook youth avoid committing many crimes in the neighborhood precisely because of the feeling of extended family: “[I]f you do something to somebody in Red Hook, it’s a big possibility that they know your parents. So, it’s like you don’t want to get in trouble by your parents. You don’t want them to find out, so they’d rather not do it in Red Hook.” When pressed for reasons why they think Red Hook youth commit crimes in general, youth answers identified four basic ideas: 1) there’s nothing else to do; 2) the desire to be perceived as cool; 3) they need the money; 4) peer pressure.

In terms of local programming for youth, interviewees identified four in particular: the Beacon's after-school program (run by Good Shepherd Services), the Rec Center (run by the Parks Department), PS15's after-school program, and the Miccio Center (run by the Police Athletic League). "Football, basketball—sports," explained Emmanuel. "That's the only thing you can do in Red Hook without getting into no trouble." If boys aren't into sports, "basically you're lost. Like, unless you don't go sit there, you go on the corner and sell drugs—go and start trouble unless there's something else to do." Precious, agreed, saying she believes that many boys end up joining gangs "cause they have nothing better to do." Young people commit crimes, Mayra suggested, because "I guess they need the money. I don't know. Nobody trying to give it to them. Like I said, parents don't care, so they go find it the easy way—make it the other way. Nowadays a lot of kids don't depend on their parents, so they depend on themselves."

### **Peer Pressure, Notoriety, and Popularity**

Peer pressure was a huge topic among the interviewees. Several young people qualified the term "peer pressure," saying that instead of being pressured into certain behaviors or postures to seem cooler, young people do things to win respect and not be perceived as a "punk" or as "corny." Malikah said, "Like I know what I'm doing but sometimes I don't make the right decisions. Like in my mind I'm like this is right but I'll do the opposite of what my mind is telling me... 'cause I feel like if I don't do it they'll be like 'Oh, you mad corny.'" As Patrice put it, kids will do something "if they got a friend in their ear. But if they by themselves, they won't do it."

Several young people related anecdotes about using peer pressure to bring about so-called "positive" behaviors. As Wakara explains, one of her friends at school was the leader of the school's primary gang,

G-Nation, ... and it was crazy because it was like we were watching our friend get into all of this. So we always, we sat her down and talked to her, like 'What are you doing? You have, you're in school, you're failing school. You get suspended more than like three times a week. How is that possible? Like you always in trouble. It's not cool, it's not working out.' You know, and she's back on track now. I see her doing her work. She sits with me in class now and she does her work, she does everything. When she starts of a little bit I pull her back in.

Interviewees' responses suggest that no young person is permanently fixed in either a "cool" or "uncool" social location, or a "good" or "bad" one. Rather than a friend group being all bad or all good, young peoples' stories suggest that they often find themselves in situations where they "wild out" and are either accidental bystanders or, at the very least, complicit non-participants in delinquent and criminal behavior.

Teasing out the various things young people associate with being "cool," "popular," and having status is difficult. Not one young person used these terms without having them first introduced by the interviewer. There seems to be a sharp divide between what young people think *other* young people think is cool and what they do. That is, youth often used terms like "supposedly cool" to describe sets of behaviors but seldom identified those things as they things *they* considered to be cool. The things they believed other youth think are cool include: being

fashionable, using drugs, stealing, fighting, drinking, and being involved in one of the various teams in the neighborhood. However, almost every young person, after having listed these things, qualified the response in some way. Stephanie admits that stealing might possibly be perceived as cool by other people “but not to me.” Audrey explains of younger kids, “They probably think [the older kids] are stealing, which I know they’re not, but the younger crowd thinks it is, so like they steal. And once the older crowd says ‘Um, kids that’s not right,’ then they want to take it back and like you can’t take it back if you already stole it.”

Rather than a prescribed set of behaviors, then, notoriety appears to be the dominant thing that makes people popular. Those behaviors that create visibility are directly tied to perceptions of popularity or coolness. Talking back to teachers, not doing work, being funny or loud, being out at night a lot, or talking to popular people are all things young people identified as potentially making someone popular. As James explained, “If you talk to, like, somebody who popular, like, you will get popular for talking to them. I don’t know how that works.” Both James and Nicole, for instance, talked about how their own talking back to teachers and getting into trouble during the previous school year made them popular. While both have stopped that behavior, they each expressed a belief that having a reputation made them visible to their peers and, as a result, they continue to be popular despite no longer engaging in disruptive behavior. Nicole explained, “People know me because last year I used to be in trouble....” When asked if causing problems made one popular, she said, “no, it don’t make you popular but it make people know you.” The operative concept, then, appears to be being known rather than being cool.

## **Conclusions**

Young people in Red Hook respond to social networks tightly organized around name and notoriety. Even those who were not part of a well-known or competitive crew have adopted the trappings for their own already-established friend groups. Young people desire a group of friends that makes them feel included, accepted, and simultaneously helps them gain social visibility. While those young people involved in fighting, drinking, and doing drugs are the most visible, this visibility appears to be one of the primary things that gives them social cache.

The interview process revealed that there is not a clearly defined group of young people in Red Hook determining the social trends for the entire community. Instead, there are subgroups of 10-40 youth who function relatively autonomously. Every young person interviewed broke down their social groups into immediate friends—connected by trust, loyalty, and shared interests—and extended social networks—of 10 or more “associates.” Many youth report using peer pressure with their closest friends to encourage positive, not only negative, behavioral change. However, the importance of feeling trusted and connected to other youth is underscored by the fact that young people are universally concerned that they are perceived by adults as out of control and disrespectful.

Across the board, the young people we interviewed felt the need for programming that reflected their experiences and provided a sense of connection to and community among other young people and adults. Because the Red Hook youth social milieu is so heavily characterized by mistrust, creating a program structure that provides safety and structure seems vital for young people to feel confident about taking a positive message outside their immediate, trusted friend

network. Young people are, however, eager for a chance to take on responsibility and play an active role in creating such an environment. As a result, beginning the program design process by listening to and learning from youth goes beyond simply “involving stakeholders” and “getting buy-in;” it indicates to young people that they are central to the endeavor you’re undertaking, that they are the specialists about their lives and needs. More than just being served by the program, they are clearly indicated as being essential partners in its creation.