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# African-American Males' Perception of Factors Involved in Their Resilience and Academic Success

Johnnie Thomas

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**DePaul University**

**School of Education**

**AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES' PERCEPTION OF FACTORS  
INVOLVED IN THEIR RESILIENCE AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

**A Dissertation in Educational Leadership**

**By**

**Johnnie Thomas**

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**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of**


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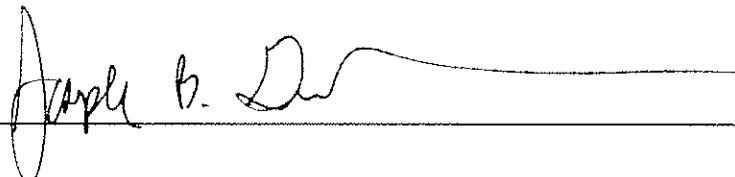
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THEIR RESILIENCE AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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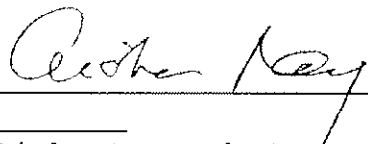
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## ABSTRACT

Understanding the factors that contribute to the educational success and failure of African-American males continues to be a topic of current research. Frequently, educational performance outcome data, report African-American males as low performers. Some African-American males are able to overcome family issues, community violence and school dysfunction, and achieve academic success. They are resilient. Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) define resiliency as “the process of, capacity to, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (426). In this study, the internal and external factors motivating the academic success of five African-American males who grew up in Chicago, Illinois’ most violent communities were examined. The dual purpose of this phenomenological study was, to first, understand the lived experiences of five resilient African-American males who were successful in their educational pursuits and second, to uncover the central meaning of resilience and those factors, both internal and external, that contributed to their success. The researcher was able to identify four key themes. These themes reveal the perceptions of the participants around resilience and the factors they attribute to their personal resilience and academic success.

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## Preface

The June 3, 2008 edition of the *Chicago Tribune* reported, “Boy, family adjust to life after shooting.” The article, written by Lolly Bowean, displayed a picture of three African American boys, ages four, six, and seven. In this startling picture, the oldest boy (age 7) shows his little brother (age 4) and cousin (age 6) a wound on his chest where he was shot while playing in his neighborhood. His mother states, “My baby has a bullet lodged in his rib cage...Aint no telling what type of damage this is causing mentally” (Bowean, 2008, p. 1). The article inspired me to begin reflecting about the conditions in which many African Americans live in America and the amazing level of perseverance required to survive in their communities. Commonly accepted as the only Super Power<sup>1</sup>, it seems odd that the United States has neighborhoods where children who play outdoors are at risk for becoming victims of violent assaults. Areas riddled with gun violence, drug trade, and many forms of violence are isolated to these poverty stricken areas and challenge even the most benign activities of daily life (Kozol, 2005). Children, who live outside of these danger zones experience their childhood without facing any immediate risks of danger. The children who know this reality wake up every day and fight to live, play, and learn without becoming a victim.

Index crime statistics are kept by the Chicago Police Department and represent the most serious crimes committed in the city of Chicago (Chicago Police Department, 2009). Index crimes are divided into two categories, crimes against property (property crime index), which include burglary, theft, motor vehicle theft violent index crimes and

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Lyman Miller (2006), Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, defines a superpower as "a country that has the capacity to project dominating power and influence anywhere in the world, and sometimes, in more than one region of the globe at a time, and so may plausibly attain the status of global hegemon."

crimes directly against an individual, which include homicide, criminal sexual assault, robbery and aggravated assault/battery. Violent crimes against an individual occur frequently in neighborhoods where people of color reside. In 2008, Chicago recorded 35,764 violent crime incidents. 20,514 or 57.4% of these violent crime incidents occurred in eight of 25 areas of the city. Within these communities, a common thread exists in that they are predominately inhabited by people of color (Chicago Police Department, 2009). Table 1.1 below displays the 10 Chicago Police Districts where inhabitants are predominately African American. Table 1.2 lists the neighborhoods found in each predominately Chicago Police District.

Table 1.1

*Violent Crimes In Predominately African American Police Districts (Chicago Police Department 2008)*

Predominately African-American Districts		Violent Crime Index				
District Number	District Name	Murder	Sexual Assault	Robbery	Aggravated Assault	Aggravated Battery
	Minimum*	2	24	227	58	86
	Maximum*	46	108	1500	526	1130
2	Wentworth	21	41	501	169	363
3	Grand Crossing	41	103	1132	430	741
4	South Chicago	44	100	1126	485	751
5	Calumet	28	103	776	449	678
6	Gresham	40	91	1500	461	898
7	Englewood	46	108	1276	526	1130
11	Harrison	46	101	1174	424	966
15	Austin	30	91	756	247	465
22	Morgan Park	17	53	560	246	321

*\*For all 25 Chicago Police Districts*

Table 1.2

*Neighborhoods Within Predominately African-American Chicago Police Districts*

District Number	District Name	Neighborhood/Community Area(s)
2	Wentworth	Grand Blvd, Washington Park
3	Grand Crossing	Woodlawn, South shore, Greater Grand Crossing
4	South Chicago	Hegewisch, South Deering, Eastside, Burnside, Avalon Park, South shore
5	Calumet	Roseland, Pullman, West Pullman, Riverdale
6	Gresham	Auburn Gresham, Chatham, Greater Grand Crossing, Roseland
7	Englewood	Greater Grand Crossing, Englewood, West Englewood
11	Harrison	Humboldt Park, East Garfield Park, West Garfield Park, North Lawndale, Austin
15	Austin	Austin
22	Morgan Park	Beverly, Auburn Gresham, Washington Heights, Morgan Park, Mt Greenwood, Roseland

Despite the obstacles that children who live in neighborhoods with high violent crime indexes encounter, there are individuals who manage to succeed academically (Noguera, 2003, 2008; Noguera & Wing, 2006). Those with the right supports are more likely to achieve academic success (Hall, 2007). Stories like that of Signithia Fordham's, told in her manuscript "*Blacked Out*," provide examples of African American youth able to achieve amidst the ills of the urban ghetto. As a young student, Dr. Fordham believed that America was a land of opportunity for all and utilized education as a social equalizer. Fordham (1996) shared,

Viewing schools and schooling as the American symbol of upward mobility had structured my school behavior and academic effort when I was a child. It was this meritocratic perception of schools and schooling that compelled me to deny the humiliation of the many racially denigrating experiences I had endured as a young black girl in southern United States. (p.15)

The desire to develop an in-depth knowledge of what enables students like Dr. Fordham to transcend the inadequacies of her community and “make it” while others fail, served to motivate this research.

Understanding those factors, which contribute to the success of African American students who overcome unfavorable odds, may improve the efforts of those seeking to educate students who live and attend school in similar circumstances. Resiliency, believed to contribute to the success of those like Dr. Fordham, is defined by Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) as, “the process of, capacity to or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (p.426 ). Consistent with this definition, individuals who live and go to school in neighborhoods with high violent crime indexes and are able to achieve academically, are resilient. Resiliency studies have been primarily quantitative in nature and typically have focused on maladaptive subjects (Luthar, 2003; Werner & Smith, 1992). This qualitative investigation of resiliency will seek to investigate the meaning of resiliency and to understand the perceptions of successful<sup>2</sup> African-American males regarding those internal and external factors that fostered their resilience and motivated academic achievement.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this research, “Successful African American male students” will be those who are attending or have graduated from a four year college or university.

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It is my sincere hope that this work has impacts the educational future of minority students in some way. I would like to take the time to thank my children Maya, Samantha, Johnnie Jr, Kiah, Aliah, and Chenelle. All of you had brought a touch of inspiration into my life. The unconditional love I get from the six of you keeps me focused and motivated to be the best father on earth. Please promise me you will keep laughing and doing your best to get straight "A's" in school and most importantly that you will love each other long after my time on this earth ends. I thank God for giving me the opportunity to watch each of you grow and also giving me the responsibility of protecting, molding, and nurturing each of you into awe inspiring adults.

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strong African-American men who impact/improve our community by your very existence. Keep rising to the top!



## Chapter 1: Introduction

Many children in urban America are challenged by limited resources within their homes, neighborhood, and local community. Child rearing in these environments can present challenges that complicate educational access and progress. Families who live in these communities must navigate an environment that can resemble a battlefield, daily. In addition, other issues challenge a child's ability to focus on education, including those associated with single-parent households, absent fathers, foster care, and poverty. Education may offer an escape from these conditions, but prioritizing academic success can be nearly impossible when one has to be primarily concerned with their safety and survival. Data on academic outcomes continue to speak volumes as students from urban schools maintain higher dropout rates and low college attendance rates (Fox, Gilbertson, KewalRamani, & Provasnik, 2007; United States Census Bureau, 2002). Yet, amidst identical circumstances there are students who not only manage to survive but also excel academically. Although the literature is clear about the factors that contribute to or predict failure for African American males (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar, 2003), few studies have qualitatively explored those internal and external factors that promote the opposite.

When African American youth, who live in areas with high levels of crime, leave their homes to go to school, their success often depends upon their ability to overcome countless challenges. Despite living in an economically-depressed, high crime environment, many African American males graduate from high school and attend colleges and universities. The purpose of this research is to explore the lived experiences of African American men who were able to achieve academic success despite such

negative circumstances and identify those factors, both internal and external, that they perceive to have contributed to their success. Work of this nature may contribute to a better understanding of what resiliency is as well as how one might teach or develop those factors that promote resiliency. Research findings of this nature can be incorporated into the design of educational or community based programs aiming to support resiliency.

### **The Educational Status of African American Males**

African American males continue to struggle academically (Hall, 2006; Noguera, 2008). African American males lead the nation in retention, suspensions, and expulsions and African American male students are less likely to enroll in a degree-granting institution after high school;

The largest difference between male and female enrollment was for Black students. In 1976, some 54% of Black undergraduate enrollment was female. Over time, Black females continue to enroll in degree-granting institutions in larger numbers than Black males, and in 2004, females accounted for 64% of the total Black enrollment. (Fox et al., 2007, p. 109)

Low college enrollment, high suspensions, expulsions, and retention illustrate the overwhelming odds overcome by those African American males who are able to successfully earn college degrees. There is much to gain from understanding the influences present in the educational and social experiences of these students.

The literature is clear about the factors contributing to the failure and social deviance of African American males (Ferguson, 2007; Kunjufu, 1989). Few qualitative studies have been conducted to understand what supports their success. Despite living in an economically depressed, high crime environment, many African American males are

able to achieve academically. There is a need to understand why some African American males are able to accomplish this while others are not. Educators, related service providers, legislators, and parents who understand resilience, can then seek to support the development of similar successes in future generations.

Educational initiatives and legislation have taken many steps to address the achievement gap for people of color; however, the black-white test score gap continues to persist (Ferguson, 2007). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) aimed to increase accountability in education in order to narrow the racial achievement gap (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 (1001) [NCLB], 2002). According to NCLB, “The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (p. 3). Despite the good intentions of the law, a significant achievement gap persists (Noguera, 2008). The effectiveness of new legislation and initiatives remains questionable as long as African American males maintain higher dropout rates, expulsion rates, and retention rates (Fox et al., 2007), all of which have significant implications for adult life.

Under NCLB, schools that fail to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), will have to provide students with additional services and face a potential loss of federal funding (NCLB, 2002). Failing schools must prepare a state-approved school improvement plan (NCLB). Failure for five consecutive years may lead to the state’s reconstitution of the school and the replacement of administration and /or teachers (NCLB). The NCLB act has raised awareness of the achievement gap issue but has

neglected to address the unique needs of students being served in urban schools. This researcher contends that urban schools and professionals need support to address the needs of the whole child effectively. Noguera and Wing (2006) insisted, “The racial achievement gap is widely recognized as an educational challenge confronting school districts throughout the United States” (p. 6). This challenge has to be met. Schools and teachers better equipped with information on how to facilitate success through more comprehensive instructional programming may yield more positive outcomes. Progress may be enhanced by programs that address voids within student home and family life.

### **Limited Resources at Home**

The educational progress of African American youth may be improved or worsened by conditions within their home and the family. Growing up in a single parent home is an additional obstacle for many African American children (Molock, Matlin, Barksdale, Puri, & Lyles, 2008). According to the U.S. Census (2002), 52% of all African American families are one-parent families. Wallace and Fisher (2007) stated, “The presence of only one family care giver (single parent households) has also been associated with youth substance abuse use and that the family unit as it is constructed lacks the ability to effectively discipline and monitor their child’s behavior” (p. 442).

Factors for “at risk” behaviors rise in the single-parent homes making it difficult to have positive outcomes and the absence of a parent is believed to contribute to violent behavior among African American youth (Noguera, 2008; Wallace & Fisher, 2007). In their work, Werner and Smith (1992) found a low rating of family stability to be the single most powerful predictor of delinquency in male adolescents. The presence and participation of both parents is beneficial to the child’s development as parents are

understood to be a child's first provider of socialization and racial identity (Hall, 2006; McAdoo, 1997; Noguera, 2008). It is no wonder then those students who do not have stable parental supports have poor educational outcomes.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau (2006) reported that 162,722 African American children live in foster care (U.S. Dept of HHS AFCARS Report, 2006). According to the Children's Defense Fund (2008), African American children comprise 15% of those  $\leq 18$  years of age in the United States, yet African-American children comprise 32% of those in foster care. Like those who suffer due to the absence of a parent, those in foster care are doubly affected. According to Shea, Weinberg, & Zetlin (2006), "...several studies reported that compared to non-foster youth, children in foster care have higher rates of absenteeism, disciplinary referrals, significant below grade level academic performance, higher rates of grade retention, and disproportionate rates of special education placement" (p. 268). For foster children, the chance to learn about their culture/background and build a positive self perception is even more limited and fewer opportunities to acquire the coping skills needed to manage stressors in their neighborhoods exist (Beardslee, 1989). In addition to the challenges that home life can add to academic goals, school funding formulas lead to drastic inequities in school experiences.

### **Funding Matters**

In the United States, the quality of a person's life and education can be dictated by the communal demographics and socioeconomic resources in their neighborhood (Kozol, 1991, 2005; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Payne, 1996). According to Odden and Piccus (2004),

In too many instances districts with higher property wealth per pupil and/or higher household income were able to raise and spend more money per pupil even at lower tax rates than districts with lower per pupil property tax bases and/or households with lower income. These fiscal disparities translate into differences in class size, teacher salaries, program offerings, and quality of buildings with the wealthier districts having the advantage in each category. (p. 26)

Although students who live and attend school in urban environments tend to be needier academically, socially, and emotionally, they often attend schools with fewer resources (Kozol, 2005). As a result, their schools can compound weaknesses through their inability to provide access to quality instructional programming and qualified professionals (Kozol). In addition to having low quality schools, many of these low-income neighborhoods have high crime rates, drugs, and other social evils that are likely to diminish quality of life. The communities where African American youth grow up often lack successful African American professionals who might present better role models for children and contribute to a stronger local tax base a source primarily relied upon for funding.

Communities with lower tax revenues suffer slow economic development of the neighborhood and inadequate funding from local tax dollars that might be devoted to supporting schools (Odden & Picus, 2004). Kozol (2005) elaborated on educational funding disparities,

This nation can afford to give clean places and green spaces... to virtually every child in our public schools. That we refuse to do so, and continue to insist that our refusal can be justified by explanations such as insufficiency of funds and

periodic “fiscal crises” and the like, depends upon a claim to penury to which a nation with our economic superfluity is not entitled. (p. 62).

As a nation, we must invest in quality educational experiences for all of our children.

Instead of investment in the equalization of school funding, dollars are often spent supporting penal systems instead of schools, “...America responds by putting money in prison construction and staffing versus funding programs that teach culture, self-esteem, and long-term success. Yet research has consistently shown the punitive responses like prisons do not work” (Kunjufu, 1989, p. 48). Unfortunately, these same ineffective measures are often copied in schools; “So when schools institute similarly punitive measures, like security guards and metal detectors, they are putting money—badly needed for instructional programs and teachers’ salaries—into band-aid methods that do not address real problems” (Kunjufu, p. 48). These investments might be better spent supporting programs that equip educators, who teach in districts serving African American students, to improve competence, both academic and cultural. Schools and professionals have to consider the needs of the whole child in their development of school curriculum and culture in a manner that compliments the strengths and inadequacies of their homes and neighborhoods (Delpit, 2006; Hale, 1986; Hall, 2006, 2007; Nogeura, 2003, 2008; Nogeura & Wing, 2006; Wilson, 1987).

The Chicago Police Department tracks the most serious crimes committed in the city (Chicago Police Department [CPD], 2009). Crimes are divided into two indexes, crimes against property (burglary, theft, motor vehicle theft and arson) and violent crimes (homicide, criminal sexual assault, robbery and aggravated assault/battery). In 2008, Chicago recorded 35,764 violent crimes (CPD). Of these, 20,514 (57%) occurred in the

eight Chicago Police Districts primarily inhabited by people of color (CPD, 2009).

Violent crimes committed by or in front of children have been proven to have a damaging effect on their emotional well-being (Noguera, 2003) and self-concept (Wallace & Fisher, 2007). In 2008, 1,972 people 20 years of age and younger were killed with firearms in the U.S.A., and African Americans accounted for 1,123, or 57% of these deaths.

Researchers have proven a strong relationship between poverty and violence (Payne, 1996). Those who live in poverty also lack viable work opportunities, poor mentorship, and are stereotyped by the mainstream media (Hall, 2006; Kozol, 1991). According to Hall, “Mentoring sessions have found us examining racist stereotypes in popular culture, discussing how news stories and crime statistics inaccurately represent males of color, how these representations play on our self-concepts, and what can be done about it” (Hall, p. 41). The over-reporting of negative stories about African Americans undermines their spirit and determination (Hall; Noguera, 2008).

This researcher contends that a better understanding around fostering resiliency can contribute to the efficacy of instructional programs and educational personnel as they become better able to consider the impact of limited resources within homes and families and develop program components to address them. When students are unable to succeed in school, the consequences are lasting;

The strongest predictors of incarceration are locational and behavioral. Behaviors that help in predicting incarceration are: expulsion from school, unwed fatherhood, age of first intercourse (younger is worse), income from crime during adolescence, drug use, and dropping out before completing high school. Race, test



scores, attitudes, family background, and local unemployment rates help in predicting these behaviors (Ferguson, 2007, p. 32).

In order to strengthen schools, families, and other agencies that prepare children for adulthood, responding to the economic disparities that remain among young adults has to become a priority (Ferguson). Improving education may be the best resort to remedy the poor outcomes experienced by some African American students, and this researcher contends that an investigation of those who are academically successful can contribute to this effort.

### **Limited Access to Quality Schools and Professionals**

Educational reform will be instrumental in improving outcomes for minorities. Delpit (2006) believed educators must change their view and look outside traditional instructional practices to properly educate children. Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, and Lafavor (2008) stated,

Schools function as a vitally important context for child development, while at the same time a classroom or school also can be viewed as a system that may be threaten by adversities. A school that functions well in a context of adversity also can be said to manifest resilience. (p. 2)

Caring professionals within schools and communities may be instrumental in solving the social problems that plague urban communities and schools. Rauner (2000) defined caring as a practice versus a sentiment:

It is commonplace to think of care as synonymous with comfort, concern or kindness. But this definition must be extended in order to be meaningful. In practice, care is more discriminating, a product of skill and judgment as well as

emotion. Care can be described as an endlessly cycling process comprised of three interrelated components: attentiveness, responsiveness, and competence, all of which are necessary and none alone sufficient for caring (p. 20).

Professionals care by being competent (Rauner); however, teachers who work in urban schools are not always highly competent.

In 1986 a study of Texas teachers demonstrated inadequacies of teachers in urban schools (Ferguson, 2007). Ferguson explained,

In 1986 the State of Texas tested all of its teachers...Black teachers had lower scores than white teachers...and black teachers were more likely than white teachers to teach in districts with many black students...Moreover, white teachers who taught in districts with higher concentrations of black students tended to have lower scores than other white teachers. (p. 104).

The quality of professionals in urban schools may be adding to the poor outcomes for African American male youth.

Because of the myriad challenges facing these students, the curriculum and instruction may fail to engage them. Morrell (2002) asserted, "Raising critical consciousness in people who have been oppressed is the first step in helping them obtain critical literacy" (p. 74). For some children, the classroom is the only link to another world. Their teachers may need to assist children in exploring their world and making informed decisions about it. Morrell recommended,

Critical teachers and teacher educators can use classroom-based research to prove that there are ways to meet the challenges the new century offers and turn them into opportunities to connect to the worlds of students, to promote academic

achievement, and prepare students for critical citizenship in a multicultural democracy. (p. 76)

The classroom has to become a center where children are taught to care for each other (Rauner, 2000) and construct their own ways of learning. “New Century” teachers must be able to construct classrooms that foster learning in all students, not only those of the mainstream.

Educational professionals who model an ethic of caring toward their students, and are able to relate with students culturally will create a better learning experience for African American students (Holzman, 2008; Rauner, 2000). Noddings (2005) asserted,

Although one may be able to state exactly what students should be able to do when it comes to adding fractions, one cannot make such specific statements about happiness, worthy home membership, use of leisure, or ethical character.

These great aims are meant to guide our instructional decisions. They are meant to broaden our thinking—to remind us to ask *why* we have chosen certain curriculums, pedagogical methods, classroom arrangements, and learning objectives. They remind us, too, that students are whole persons—not mere collections of attributes, some to be addressed in one place and others to be addressed elsewhere. (p. 10)

Teachers have to find a way to look at their environments and advocate for policy change (Moses & Cobb, 2001). As advocates for change, teachers accept responsibility for working with the whole child (Noguera, 2003). Such teachers help to build some of the protective factors that make students resilient (Myers & Taylor, 1998).

### **Limited Positive Role Models**

Access to role models who demonstrate the benefits of education are sometimes limited. In the absence of upright examples in their homes and communities, students commonly define their ambitions, identity, and disposition toward academia according to examples found in the media (Kunjufu, 1989; Ferguson, 2007). African American children may internalize messages from educational professionals, the community, and the media, which influence the importance of education and the development of a sense of confidence in the academic arena (Fordham, 1996; Noguera, 1996). Consequently, images or information that values education and hard work may be limited by the type of programming children access; “If watching rap videos and listening to rap music promote cynicism about societal fairness, and about the prospects of people who work hard experiencing success, then it might also detract from academic engagement and performance” (Ferguson, 2007, p. 66). Left to their own devices and lacking professionals who are able to care for them, African American youth face dangerous outcomes.

### **Problem Statement**

African American males continue to fail at alarming rates in school (Ferguson, 2007). These failures lead to outcomes that perpetuate poverty and all of the ills associated with living in urban ghettos (i.e., incarceration, high unemployment rates, violence, absent parenting, etc.) (Ferguson). Instead of being focused on solutions, too often time is spent documenting negative qualities and outcomes for African American males, and ultimately, these children suffer the greatest accountability for their lack of academic success. The federal government, state departments of education, school

districts, schools, principals, teachers, and students avoid taking the blame for their poor performance (Hall, 2006). Hall asserted,

As a social phenomenon, the Blame Game is nothing new. Our society has engaged in it for quite some time. The objective of the game is to remove oneself from all personal accountability. Whatever the failures or setbacks one encounters are the burden must be shifted away from the individual and placed onto someone else. (p. 23)

The educational community should abandon the blame game and invest in research that properly uncovers what promotes academic achievement.

Neither those who work inside or outside of schools should distance themselves from what has become the educational plight of African American male students. Blaming others offers no real hope or solutions that will improve outcomes for African American children. This researcher contends that a key to solving this problem will be learning from success and using these data to develop educational programs and staff. Family participation, community involvement, and school programs are all vital in educating our children (Edmonds, 1979; Holzman, 2008; Sullivan, 2002; Wallace & Fisher, 2007; Willie, 1987). For children who come to school with deficits in these areas, it is necessary to develop educational programs that compensate for these deficits and facilitate successful teaching and learning.

### **Purpose Statement**

Some African American males are able to overcome family issues, community violence and school dysfunction, and achieve academic success. They are resilient. Masten, Best, and Garmerzy (1990) defined resiliency as “the process of, capacity to, or

outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (p. 426). Qualitative data that seeks a deeper understanding of the internal and external factors motivating academic success in African American males will provide information to support instructional programs and practice that foster resilience.

African American males continue to post the most negative outcomes in educational related data (i.e. achievement, attendance, drop-out rates, etc.). There is a need to understand why some African American males from neighborhoods with high violent crime indexes are able to succeed academically while others are not. The dual purpose of this phenomenological study was, first, to understand the lived experiences of five resilient African American males who were successful in their educational pursuits and second, to discover the central meaning of resilience and those factors, both internal and external, contributing to their success. The findings of this research may contribute to a better understanding of resilience and how to incorporate resilience into instructional program practice to improve outcomes for African American male students in the future.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions served to guide the study:

1. What is the essence of resiliency for the participants?
2. What is the shared meaning of resiliency for the participants?
3. What are the participants’ experiences (structural) with resiliency and in which context or setting (textural) influenced how the participants experienced resiliency?
4. What are significant statements and themes around resiliency?
5. What were the internal and external factors contributing to resiliency?

6. What are the implications for instructional programs intended to serve students who live in neighborhoods with high violent crime indexes for building/supporting resilience?
7. What are the implications for professionals who work with students who live in neighborhoods with high violent crime indexes for building/supporting resilience?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Resiliency

Merriam-Webster (2009) defines resilience as, “An ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change” (Merriam-Webster, 2009). Scholarly research has yielded multiple definitions of resilience. Zimmerman and Arkunkumar (1994) stated, “The development of the resiliency concept has resulted in multiple meanings, ambiguous terminology, and what may appear to be inconsistencies. It is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that is context-specific and involves developmental change” (p. 4). Masten et al. (2008) discussed resilience, “Resilience refers to positive adaptation of a system during or following significant disturbances” (p. 76). Rutter (1991) offered, “Resilience is a term used to describe relative resistance to psychosocial risk experiences” (p. 120). These definitions agree that a person who is able to recover from exposure to hardship and progress normally or in the same manner as those who have not, are said to exhibit resilience.

Resilient individuals are able to recover from traumatic events and escape the potential effects of risks (Brooks, 1994; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Masten et al., 2008; Ostaszewski & Zimmerman, 2006; Rutter, 1999). Two factors are typically present in identifying resilience: first, exposure to some form of trauma and second, factors that assist one in evading expected outcomes. Fergus and Zimmerman explained, “A key requirement of resilience is the presence of both risks and promotive factors that either help bring about a positive outcome or reduce or avoid a negative outcome. Resiliency theory is focused on strengths rather than deficits.” (p. 399). Zimmerman and Arunkumar (1994) concurred, “The term ‘resiliency’ generally refers to



those factors and processes that interrupt the trajectory from risk to problem behaviors or psychopathology and thereby result in adaptive outcomes even in the presence of adversity” (p. 4). Definitions of resilience have contributed to the development of models.

There are three models of resilience: compensatory, protective, and challenge (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar & Zigler, 1991). These three models describe the ways in which promotive factors foster or support resilience (Fergus & Zimmerman). Internal promotive factors are seen as assets; external promotive factors are considered resources (Fergus & Zimmerman). Within the compensatory model, promotive factors counter against or compensate for risks. For example a child may be exposed to circumstances that will likely yield certain outcomes; however, a promotive factor can act as a moderator and disrupt the likely outcome. Fergus and Zimmerman gave an explanation, “Youth living in poverty, for example, are more likely to commit violent behavior than are youth not living in poverty, but adult monitoring of behavior may help compensate for the negative effects of poverty” (p. 401).

In the protective factor model, factors are considered protective when they are able to decrease or protect from the negative effects of risks (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). As in Fergus and Zimmerman’s example involving youth and violence, adult monitoring would be considered a protective factor if violent behaviors decreased with adult monitoring. Garmezy (1985, as cited by Luthar & Zigler, 1991) identified three categories of protective factors: “1) dispositional attributes of the child, 2) family cohesion and warmth, and 3) the availability and use of external support systems by parents and children” (p. 14).

The challenge model purports that moderate exposure to a risk can be beneficial and results in the development of resistance to adversity. As Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) expounded, “The idea is that adolescents exposed to moderate levels of risk are confronted with enough of the risk factor to learn how to overcome it but are not exposed to so much of it that overcoming it is impossible” (p. 403). Research in resiliency is primarily centered around these models and primarily involves quantitative methods (Fergus & Zimmerman). Scholars have provided multiple definitions and models of resiliency, and the phenomenon has the potential to differ among groups (Fergus & Zimmerman).

### **Resiliency Research**

Existing Resiliency research has utilized two major approaches, variable-focused and person-focused (Luthar, 2003). Luthar explained, “Variable-focused approaches examine the links among competence, adversity, and a host of potential protective factors indexed by variable that describe differences among individual children and the nature of their relationships and interactions with the world in which they live” (pp. 9-10). Luthar continued,

Person-focused strategies focus on identifying people who meet definitional criteria for resilience, whose lives and attributes are then studied by investigators particularly in comparison to maladaptive individuals who have similar levels of risk for adversity but who display markedly different outcomes. (p. 11).

While previous studies have contributed to definitions and frameworks of resilience, more in-depth studies on resilience are needed. According to Luthar,

...this early work yielded useful insight for policy intervention. But a deeper understanding is needed of the processes that produce resiliency under different conditions for different children in order to guide the efficacy and efficiency of policies and programs designed to shift the odds from good developmental outcomes in more favorable directions (p. 21).

The earlier studies on resiliency serve to support future work that will provide the deeper analysis that Luthar proposed is needed.

Garmezy (1993), Rutter (1985), and Werner and Smith (1992) sought to understand resiliency by examining the impact of stress on competence. Zimmerman and Arunkumar's (1994) study consisted of a sample of 200 disadvantaged children who had lower Intelligence Quotients (IQ) and low Socioeconomic Status (SES). Their observations that some of these children "beat the odds" led to resiliency theory (Zimmerman & Arunkumar). The research identified the protective factors that enabled resilience and uncovered three domains of influence: the individual, the family, and the environment (Brooks, 1994). To date, most research in resilience has focused on psychopathology (Fergus & Zimmerman 2005).

In 1999 Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, and Maton (1999) tested the longitudinal protective effects of sociopolitical control on the link between helplessness and mental health. Zimmerman et al. asserted that "Sociopolitical control was defined as the beliefs about one's capabilities and efficacy in social and political systems. Two mental health outcomes were examined—psychological symptoms and self-esteem" (p. 733). The study population consisted of 172 African American adolescent males who were interviewed twice over a six-month period. Maton et al. found that high levels of

sociopolitical control limited their feelings of helplessness and may have protected the adolescents from the negative consequences of those feelings (Zimmerman et al.).

Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) stated, “Resiliency theory, though it is concerned with risk exposure among adolescents, is focused on strengths rather than deficit and it focuses on understanding healthy development in spite of risk exposure” (p. 399). Fergus and Zimmerman asserted that *promotive factors* help children avoid the negative effects of risk. These promotive factors can be broken down into *assets* and *resources*. Examples of asset promotive factors are coping skills, cognitive ability, and self-advocacy. Examples of resource promotive factors are family support, mentoring, community support, and strong educational systems.

Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) conceptualized a framework for resiliency in adolescent children. Fergus and Zimmerman asserted that resiliency can be broken down into three models compensatory, challenge, and protective. The compensatory model is evident when a promotive factor operates against risk (Fergus & Zimmerman). A compensatory model involves a direct effect of a promotive factor on an outcome. An example is when a low-income student is more likely to fail than a higher-income student (Kozol, 1991); but if teachers and administrators monitoring academic performance along with the school environment, this may help a student compensate for the negative effects of poverty.

The challenge model of resilience posits a circular association between a risk factor and an outcome (Gramezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984). Adolescents exposed to high levels of risk are overwhelmed and have negative outcome but students with moderate levels of risk learn how to navigate the risk by using coping skills and have a

positive outcome (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). In addition, students with low levels of risk run the potential of having the risk not being high enough to impact how they function, which gives them little chance to practice coping skills (Fergus & Zimmerman). A family with little to no conflict amongst the group may not provide an opportunity for the child to work on conflict, which could help to enhance interpersonal skills. But a family with extremely high levels of conflict may be too much for the child to handle, thus leaving the child feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, and defeated.

The third model of resiliency and the one that is the foundation of this research is the protective factor model. Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) explained that assets or resources lessen the impact of risk, and *protective factors* can moderate harmful effects. Protective factors describe the aspects that are related to healthy psychological and physical development. These protective factors, which are critical in the development of resiliency, are attributed to three influences: (a) individual characteristics, (b) supportive relationships with at least one parent or relative, and (c) access to community resources and support (Garmezy, 1991; Hall, 2006, 2007; Holzman, 2008; Masten et al., 1999; Myers & Taylor, 1998; Poindexter, 2000; Wallace & Fisher, 2007).

Masten et al. (1999) argued that the mere presence of protective factors does not necessarily lead to resilience, and the influence of protective factors may at times be weaker than life stressors. Research on resilient children and adolescents has identified the internal and external rudiments of positive outcomes for at risk youth (Griffin & Allen, 2006). Additional research is necessary to understand protective factors in general and especially those that are relevant to ethnic minority populations.

Ostaszewski and Zimmerman (2006) tested the compensatory and protective models of resiliency research. They examined the effects of cumulative risk and promotive factors on the polydrug use including alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana among a sample of urban adolescents. The research sample comprised 850 ninth-grade students, 80% of whom were African American. Their findings supported the compensatory model of resiliency in which promotive factors compensated for the effect(s) of risks (Ostaszewski & Zimmerman). Further, their work supported prevention programming and had implications for effective components for implementation (Ostaszewski & Zimmerman).

### **Resiliency and African Americans**

Resilience, defined by Masten et al. (1990) as, “the process of, capacity to or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances,” was demonstrated by African American families during slavery. Africans were taken from their native country to America where they were forced to live and work under conditions of physical, psychological, and emotional cruelty. “African slaves in America lost functions, social power, and authority over their own destiny and self governance. Slavery forcibly altered traditional marital roles, the traditional family structure, and the value of its children” (Marbley, 2006, p. 9). Following the abolition of slavery, African Americans continued to be targets of hatred and racism. Heinous “Jim Crow” laws were passed to insult the dignity of African Americans and limit their economic mobility, academic advancement, and unity. Still, African American people continued through the Civil Rights movement to obtain the rights and freedoms they were entitled to as humans.

Despite the obstacles, African Americans have made progress and have contributed meaningfully to the United States.

### **The African American Family**

Resiliency in African American children and families is a multifaceted phenomenon. Noguera (2003) asserted that African American families are disproportionately affected by factors that place them at risk for dysfunctional development, including poverty, unemployment, teen pregnancy, violence, and substance abuse. However, people from these communities have not let their environment stop them from aspiring to enter the mainstream (Fordham, 1996; Hill, 1972). Several themes have emerged from studies of the African American family, which support their resiliency. Hill described five characteristics that contribute to the resiliency seen in the African American family: adaptable family roles, kinship bonds, work ethic, religiosity, and achievement orientation. These characteristics have contributed to the survival or resilience of the African American family (Hill; McAdoo, 1997; Wallace & Fisher, 2007).

Extended family supports are believed to contribute to the resilience observed in African American families. Extended family relationships lead to *fictive kinships*, “people within a given society to whom one is not related by birth but with whom one shares essential reciprocal social and economic relationships” (Fordham, 1996, p. 71). Wallace and Fisher (2007) defined extended families as “a close network of relationships within and between families who may or may not be related” (p. 443). Extended families have played a vital role in the African American family for generations (Wallace & Fisher; Fordham). Extended African American families share resources and experiences.

Taylor (1996) found that kinship support also influenced family organization and parental involvement in their children's school activities; this involvement was related to self reliance, academic performance, problem behaviors, and psychological distress in adolescents. Wilson (1990) reported a strong relationship between extended family support and the needs of the parents, which served to reduce adult stress levels. Stress within the family usually impacts the type and level of support families are able to offer children, which may be a protective/promotive factor for those children who prove to be highly resilient.

Religious organizations have also been found to support resilience in the African American family. The church is central to the African American community (Nelsen & Nelsen, 1975). Billingsley (1968) described the church as one of several sources of achievement in African American families. A few studies have examined the role of religion in the resiliency of African American families and children (Brega & Coleman, 1999; Brody, Stoneman, & Flor 1996). Brega and Colman found that African American children who reported strong ties with their church were less likely to internalize negative stereotypes about themselves.

The church not only supports families spiritually but has an impact on the emotional well-being of the family and the individual (Molock et al., 2008). Molock et al. proposed, "The church may provide an ideal context in which to develop interventions for depression and suicide in the African American community because of its broad acceptance and strong history of helping all its members" (p. 330). Qualitative research that explores these relationships with resilient African Americans may confirm/disprove



the effect of these relationships and prove to focus efforts around supporting families in a manner that fosters resilience.

### **African-American Males**

Many of the outcomes associated with the condition of the African American family are tied to the role of males in their homes and communities.

Black males in American society are in trouble. With respect to health, education, employment, income, and overall well-being, all of the most reliable data consistently indicate that Black males constitute a segment of the population that is distinguished by hardships, disadvantages, and vulnerability. (Littles, Bowers, & Gilmer 2007, as cited by Noguera, 2008, p. xi)

Educational attainment is a reliable predictor of indicators associated with quality living. The United States Census Bureau's American Community Survey reported significantly lower poverty rates for those citizens over 25 years of age who held a bachelor's degree or higher. In 2006, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported the unemployment rate of people 25 and older who held at least a bachelor's degree was 3.2% (KewalRamani et al., 2007).

The NCES also reported a consistent decrease in the percentage of African American males in degree-granting institutions, from 45.7% in 1976 to 35.7% in 2004 (KewalRamani et al., 2007, p. 108). The United States Census Bureau's report on "Educational Attainment by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Sex: 1960 to 2007" showed that as late as 2007, only 18% of African American males who enroll in college are able to graduate. The importance of studies that utilize college enrollment and/or completion as a means to define academic success for African American males becomes crucial.

According to key educational indicators, the educational system is failing African American males. Garnezy (1991), a pioneer in resiliency theory and research, reported, In 1986, the Children's Defense Fund reported: America's Black children were twice as likely as White children to a. die in the first year, b. be born prematurely, c. suffer low birth weight, d. have mothers who received late or no prenatal care, and e. have an employed parent. They were three times as likely to have their mothers die in childbirth, be in foster care, or die of known child abuse. They were four times as likely to live with neither parent and be supervised by a child welfare agency and to be murdered before one year of age or as a teenager. They were twelve times as likely to live with a parent who never married. (p. 416)

Kunjufu (1989) reported, "Forty-seven percent of the prison population is Black males, while only 3.5% of Black males are college students" (p. 54). In the United States, students who drop out of high school are at high risk for not obtaining the skills necessary to access a meaningful quality of life such as employment, housing, and healthcare.

Today's society requires the completion of high school or equivalency (GED) to access postsecondary education and graduating from college has now become the minimum requirement for many good paying jobs. Students who lack educational credentials are more likely to be unemployed. Young adults with limited education and skills are more likely to live in poverty, to depend on welfare, and to become involved in criminal activity. According to Matsen et al. (2008), "Research findings implicate schools in many of the processes that promote positive development and prevent problems in the general population. In addition, the school context affords opportunities to facilitate resilience among children at risk for poor outcomes..." (p. 76). However, in

order for schools to develop resilience in students, the factors that instill resilience must be studied and defined. In addition, researchers need to understand what nurtures these factors in young men, particularly those who belong to populations in which success is difficult to achieve.

Few schools are designed to meet the needs of all students. Hall (2006) contended, “Academic failure and misidentification for males of color is a consequence of three overarching factors” (p. 18): (a) curriculum; (b) negative treatment in schools and classrooms; and (c) the lack of personal accountability. Hall maintained that these three factors prevent schools from aiding males of color in reaching their potential. Hall proposed that teachers participate in “The Act of Removal...a process whereby classrooms become less dominated by adult authority and more youth-centered and focused. The objective is to construct learning environments that foster youth empowerment, free expression, self-discipline, and self-respect” (p. 25). A solution to the plight of African American males will be reached by improving the capacity of schools and professionals to instill resilience.

### **Current Study**

Garmezy (1991) suggested that a surprising lack of attention from researchers and clinicians has been paid to the investigation of additional protective variables even as empirical investigation into resilience has increased. Luthar and Zigler (1991) indicated that although urban youth are at risk of multiple psychosocial problems, few empirical studies have investigated resiliency within this group. Garmezy expressed a similar concern, implying that researchers have ignored investigations of resilience in disadvantaged youth. The impact of protective factors must be examined empirically.

They must identify the factors that explain resiliency and/or the processes that explain the relationship between protective factors and successful navigation of negative environments (Noguera, 2003; Spencer, 1987; Wallace & Fisher, 2007). In order to understand resilience and those factors believed to be protective in current research, a qualitative research design that goes directly to those who have lived experience would assist in validating existing research and uncovering those strategies that have worked specifically for African American males.

The research on other resilient children and families is quite extensive (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmezy & Rutter, 1996; Luthar, 2003; Werner & Smith, 1992). Research on Holocaust survivors has shown that not only individuals but also families have the ability to be resilient. Moskowitz (1983) conducted a qualitative study of Holocaust survivors, both individuals and families. Moskowitz explained,

Despite the severest deprivation in early childhood, these people are neither living a greedy, me-first style of life, nor are they seeking to gain at the expense of others. None express the idea that the world owes them a living for all they have suffered. On the contrary; most of their lives are marked by an active compassion for others. (p. 233)

Werner and Smith (1992) studied 505 low-income families, children, and adults on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. The participants in this mixed-method study were living well below the poverty line. The research examined the effects of extreme poverty on the participants' coping skills and sense of family.

The life stories of resilient youngsters now grown into adulthood teach us that competence, confidence and caring can flourish, even under adverse circumstances, if children encounter persons who provide them with the secure basis for the development of trust, autonomy and initiative (Werner & Smith, p. 209).

Both studies show that resilience is the ability to adjust to risk and defy expected outcomes. Resilience is therefore applicable to African American families and children.

Rutter (1987, as cited by Garmezy, 1991) claimed that "...the identification and study of protective factors is a relatively new development. Once identified, the research task has only begun, for what is ultimately needed is the search for the mechanisms that actuate protection" (p. 428). The present study continued this work. According to Miller & McIntosh (1999),

There is a need to examine the development of resiliency among members of racial minorities; need to expand the concept of resiliency to include protective factors unique to African American adolescents, specifically racial socialization and racial identity... Limited attention has been given to the factors that promote educational achievement among urban adolescents, even though the literature is replete with deficit-based discussions on the factors contributing to educational failure. (p. 161)

Resilience theory suggests that environmental stress can cause behavioral and psychological problems; however, resilience has a buffering effect (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Sayfer, 1994). A study that directs qualitative attention to African American males who have achieved academic success can

add to the body of research and assist in the development of a meaningful plan of action for educators, social workers, and parents.

### **Purpose Statement**

African American males continue to post negative outcomes in educational related data (i.e., achievement, attendance, drop-out rates, etc.). There is a need to understand why some African American males from neighborhoods with high violent crime indexes are able to succeed academically while others are not. The dual purpose of this phenomenological study is first, to understand the lived experiences of five resilient African-American males who were successful in their educational pursuits and second, to discover the central meaning of resilience and those factors, both internal and external, that have contributed to their success. The findings of this research contribute to a better understanding of resilience and how to incorporate resilience into instructional program practice in order to improve outcomes for African American male students in the future.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were developed to guide the study.

1. What is the essence of resiliency in education?
2. What is the shared meaning of resiliency academically?
3. What is the structural and textural description of academic resiliency?
4. What are significant statements and themes around academic resiliency?
5. What were the internal and external factors contributing to academic resiliency?
6. What are the implications for instructional programs intended to serve students who

live in neighborhoods with high violent crime indexes for building/supporting academic resilience?

7. What are the implications for professionals who work with students who live in neighborhoods with high violent crime indexes for building/supporting academic resilience?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Social Constructivism**

In order to answer the research questions the researcher conducted a series of interviews with five African American Males. The researcher expected that each individual would bring a unique perspective and experience to the interview/study. Each was valid and contributed to the formation of themes, meanings, and descriptions. Direct quotes and themes were analyzed from participants and provided evidence of each participant's perspective. As in social constructivism, where "...individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop meanings of their experiences" (Creswell, 2007, p. 20), the researcher honored each contribution in the analysis and respected that each participant's perspective was constructed according to his lived experience. The researcher aimed to identify central meanings and themes that are common among participants. The interview was comprised of open-ended questions to facilitate true individuality in the responses to each question. The researcher then used the input of participants collectively in constructing meaning as well as consideration for the researcher's lived experience as an African American male who lived in a neighborhood characterized by high crime. This practice is congruent with the phenomenological approach to qualitative research.

### **The Phenomenological Approach to Qualitative Research**

Phenomenology originated as a philosophy in the work of Edward Husserl (1931) and has developed as an approach to qualitative research (Moustakas 1994). McCaslin & Scott (2003) defined phenomenology stating, "Phenomenology is described as the study of the shared meaning of experience of a phenomenon for several individuals" (p. 449).



Creswell (2007) discussed the phenomenological approach to qualitative research as, “...a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (pp. 57-58). A Phenomenologist maintains a focus on the commonality found among participants and their experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell). Likewise, this researcher sought to learn from the lived experiences of five African American males who grew up and attended school in neighborhoods characterized by high violent crime indexes. This work studied the commonalities of each in relationship to the phenomenon of academic resilience. In addition to forming an understanding around what and how they experienced this phenomenon, the researcher sought to identify those internal and external factors to which participants attribute their resilience and determine implications for the development of instructional programs, practice, and personnel. Creswell reviewed the four philosophical assumptions of phenomenology: a search for knowledge and understanding as originally conceptualized in Greek philosophy, the suspension of any preconceived conclusions until based on exact information gathered through this search, and lastly the respect and validity for a subject’s consciousness to both shape and define their reality according to their lived experience (Creswell, 2007).

Thus, the researcher sought the wisdom of five African American males who have lived this experience in order to understand the phenomena that led to their resiliency. This study was designed and conducted in a manner that suspends judgments and respects each participant’s unique experience and contribution in answering the questions of this research. The researcher accepted the perceptions and interactions reported around

each participant's lived experience of the phenomenon as real, understanding their perception is their reality and therefore respectively true for each participant.

### **Definitions**

*Resilience* is defined by Masten et al. (1990) as, "the process of, capacity to or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances"

*Academic Success/Resilience* is defined as attending or graduating from a four year college or university.

*Violent Crime Indexes* are defined by the Chicago Police Department as those including murder, criminal sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and aggravated battery.

*Internal and External Factors* are defined as those elements that participants refer to as intrinsic and extrinsic elements in their resilience and academic success.

*Participants* were: male, be African American, who have attended grammar school (K-8) in a neighborhood characterized by high violent crime indexes (see Table 1.2), and are currently attending/graduated from a four year college or university.

### **Data Collection**

The study was advertised on several four year college and university campuses. The researcher obtained permission to post flyers on campuses. Interested participants were asked to examine participation criteria and contact the researcher via email or cell phone. The researcher used a snowballing sampling technique to assist in recruiting appropriate interview participants in order to obtain a clearer picture of factors in the students' ability to be educationally resilient. Snowball sampling included the use of informants to help identify potential participants. Informants included, but were not

limited to, professors, directors, deans, college presidents, and board members or trustees of institutions of higher education.

A preliminary meeting was arranged for any considered participant to provide an explanation of the research project, verify criteria/credentials for participation, and address any questions or concerns of the potential participant. At this meeting, a follow up meeting was arranged at a mutually agreeable location that allowed the researcher to engage the participant for 1-2 hours (depending on the flow of the interview). Participants were asked to identify two additional participants to interview, with informed consent, to validate participant data. These interviews took place over the phone for approximately 30 minutes and were limited to a maximum of two per participant. Interviews were recorded and the researcher also took manual notes.

Before beginning the interview process, all participants were fully informed about the study, and the researcher read a statement of the participants' rights and their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty. Understanding was confirmed by the researcher presenting brief questions reviewing the information and requiring the participant to respond in order to verify comprehension. Participation was voluntary in the study. The students participating in the study signed informed consents.

Participant criteria were as follows: male gender, African American ethnicity, graduated from high school or GED, living/lived in a neighborhood characterized by high violent crime indexes, and is attending/has attended a four year college or university. Each participant was asked two broad, general questions and the interview was modified as needed with follow-up questions aimed at achieving the objectives of this phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994, as cited by Creswell, 2007, p. 61).

- First, what have you experienced in terms of academic resilience as an African American male from a neighborhood with high crime and violence?
- Second, what contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of resiliency?

Follow up questions were asked (Appendix C) and interviews were recorded and conducted in a location chosen by mutual agreement between interviewer and participant.

The following measures were taken to ensure that confidentiality was maintained:

1. The records and data collected will be stored in a locked safe within my home.
2. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect his identity.
3. The data was coded with each student's pseudonym and stored either electronically in a password protected capacity or locked in a safe at my home.

In order to prevent errors in data collection, the researcher made field notes and audio copies to cross-reference for accuracy before beginning data analysis.

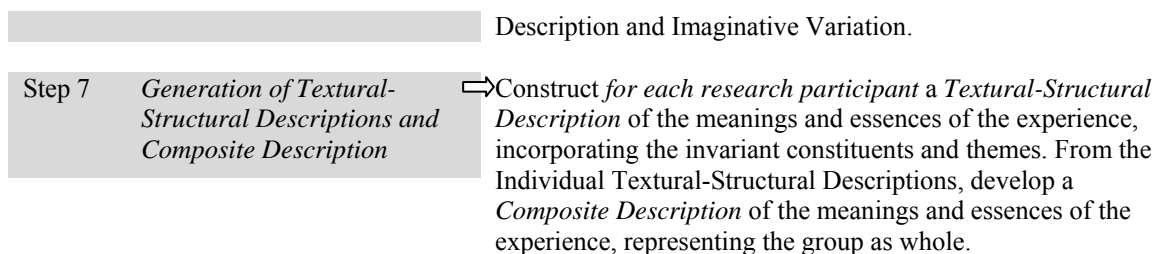
### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis followed the modified van Kaam method for phenomenological data analysis, as proposed by Moustakas (1994). The researcher sorted and analyzed the interview data to uncover common themes emerging from the interview (Lofland, Snow Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). Data was transcribed so that it could be categorized thematically. NVivo8® computer software for qualitative analysis was used in conjunction with the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas) to aid in the storage, organization, and representation of the qualitative data for the analysis. The data was

analyzed in order to reveal major themes pertaining to the research questions. The data was reduced into themes through a process of coding and finally represented in figures, tables, and discussion (Creswell, 2003, 2005). In addition, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcribed interviews, to add to and amend their statements, a process termed *member checking*, which served to increase the validity of the study by allowing participants the opportunity to confirm that the information was realistic and complete (Creswell).

The seven steps of the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis (Moustakas, 1994), were utilized for the analysis of data in this study (Figure 1).

Step 1	<i>Listing and Preliminary Grouping</i>	⇨ List every expression relevant to the experience (Horizontalization).
Step 2	<i>Reduction and Elimination</i>	⇨ To determine the Invariant Constituents: Test each expression for two requirements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?</li> <li>• Is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of the experience. Expressions not meeting the above requirements are eliminated. Overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions are also eliminated or presented in more exact descriptive terms. The horizons that remain are the invariant constituents of the experience.</li> </ul>
Step 3	<i>Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents</i>	⇨ Cluster the invariant constituents of the experience that are related into a thematic label. The clustered and labeled constituents are the core themes of the experience.
Step 4	<i>Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application</i>	⇨ Validation: Check the invariant constituents and their accompanying theme against the complete record of the research participant. (a) Are they [themes] expressed explicitly in the complete transcription? (b) Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed? (c) If they are not explicit or compatible, they are not relevant to the co-researcher's [participant's] experience and should be deleted.
Step 5	<i>Generation of Individual Textural Description</i>	⇨ Using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes, construct for each participant an <i>Individual Textural Description</i> of the experience. Include verbatim examples from the transcribed interview.
Step 6	<i>Generation of Individual Structural Description</i>	⇨ Construct for each participant an <i>Individual Structural Description</i> of the experience based on the Individual Textural



*Figure 1.* Seven steps of modified van Kaam process for phenomenological analysis.

Adapted from Moustakas (1994, p. 121).

All data sources were analyzed to highlight significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how each participant experienced the phenomenon. The researcher utilized each type/level of analysis consistent with phenomenological research. These included:

*Horizontalization:* This involved a thorough review of each interview transcript to identify “significant statements” that contributed to the understanding of the academic resilience phenomenon.

*Clusters of Meaning:* “Clusters of meaning” were developed once significant statements are organized according to identified themes.

*Textural Description:* The participants’ experiences were then summarized according to the information found in significant statements and themes.

*Structural Description:* The participants’ experiences were then summarized according to the information found in significant statements and themes and examined according to how the setting or context of their experience contributed to their depiction of the essence.

*Essence*: The structural and textural descriptions were compiled to form a complete narrative on the essence or the commonality and underlying structure of each experience.

Moustakas (1994) recommended structured data analysis strategies for phenomenological studies that were incorporated into the data analysis of this research including: a description of personal experiences; list of significant statements; development of meaning units and themes; textural description of participant experiences; structural description of the participant experiences, and the essence of resilience (culminating the textural and structural descriptions). The researcher wrote a description of what the participants in the study experienced by being academically resilient (textural description) and then described how or in what type of setting academic resilience was experienced (structural descriptions). The final step was to write a composite description of resiliency incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions. The described analysis allowed the researcher to draw conclusions about how and why some African American males are academically resilient.

### **Limitations**

The researcher anticipated the following as limitations for the study:

1. Rapport may have impacted the level of openness.
2. Sample size was small for phenomenological study.
3. The sample was restricted to the experiences of males.
4. Generational differences in ages could impact data analysis.
5. Influence of researcher's lived experience on interpretation of data.
6. Findings may not be generalizable to practical settings for implications.

7. Researcher's presence may have caused bias responses.
8. Participants may not have been equally articulate and reflective/perceptive.

Because this was a small sample, the research findings may not easily generalize to other African American male students from different environments, such as suburban or rural areas. Further studies of youth in other environments may confirm or contradict these findings.

### **Dissemination of Research**

The research findings were written and incorporated into this final dissertation. Copies, papers, and presentations were developed consistent with scholarly and ethical requirements and expectations. The researcher will make study information available to the academic community through traditional publishing venues following the approval of the completed dissertation. Participants will be notified when study is completed and dissertation is approved in order to access copies of the work at their discretion through traditional publishing venues.



## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research was to explore the phenomena of resilience in African American Men from neighborhoods with high violent crime indexes. The phenomenological study was two-fold; first, to gain insight into the lived experiences of successful and resilient African-American males and second, to discover the perceived meaning of resilience as well as the factors contributing to their success. The study focus was on the exploration of the sensitivities and lived experiences that enable African American Men from high violent crime neighborhoods to succeed academically despite negative life circumstances and experiences. The participants were selected because of their academic and job related success and previous lived experiences in high violent crime index areas.

This study was conducted using the modified van Kaam method proposed by Moustakas (1994), with a semi-structured interview format (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The data included five interviews with academically successful African American Men (i.e., college graduates) raised in high crime index neighborhoods about their perceptions, experiences, and challenges to achieving academic success. Chapter 4 documents the phenomenological method in terms of implementation of the processes for data collection and data analysis using the van Kaam method as modified by Moustakas.

Chapter 4 begins with the data collection process. The data collection procedure is followed by a review of the data coding and analysis procedure, which includes a presentation of the invariant constituents and thematic categories relevant to the research topic. Individual textural-structural descriptions and the following structural composite

descriptions address the perceptions of participants about the subsequent themes revealed in analysis. The chapter concludes with a summary.

### **Data Collection Process**

Data collection followed the process outlined in chapter 3. Five African American Males who were raised in high crime index neighborhoods in Chicago, Illinois and demonstrated academic success in terms of receiving a post-secondary degree, who fulfilled the eligibility requirements as outlined in chapter 3, were contacted and recruited for participation in this study via telephone, email, or face-to-face interactions. This sample size aligns with recommendations of Patton (2002) and Polkinghorne (2005).

Each participant in the study was given an informed consent form that indicated the purpose of the study as well as the expected length of time for participation commitment and that the interview would be audio taped. All participants signed the informed consent form prior to beginning the interview. Each interview took approximately one hour to complete.

Individual identification numbers were used in order to distinguish between participant data resulting from the semi-structured interview questions. Upon completion of the interviews, the responses were transcribed into Microsoft® Word format. The transcribed interviews were then reviewed and compared to the recorded interviews to ensure accuracy. Each participant received a copy of the interview transcript to ensure that the participant felt the transcription was an accurate account of the participant's thoughts and perceptions. This process, termed *member checking*, increased the validity of the study by allowing participants the opportunity to confirm that the information was realistic and complete (Creswell, 2005). The data collected from each participant was

placed in a secured and locked filing cabinet and will be retained for a period of five years after which the data will be destroyed.

### **Elements of Academic Success: Occupation/Degree Information**

Five African American men from various occupations and various levels of educational attainment participated in the phenomenological study. The occupation and degree data are provided to demonstrate the level of academic success attained. The participants' occupations and degree attainment included lawyer (JD), construction management (Bachelors), High School Math Teacher (Bachelors), Masters (MBA), and corporate director (Bachelors).

### **Research Questions**

The phenomenological research study explored the resiliency and the potential factors affecting the resiliency of participants. The research study focused on the insights and lived experiences of five African American men who have demonstrated academic success despite growing up in high crime index neighborhoods in the Chicago area. To accomplish this goal, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the essence of resiliency?
2. What is the shared meaning of resiliency?
3. What are the participants' experiences (structural) with resiliency and in which context or setting (textural) influenced how the participants experienced resiliency?
4. What are significant statements and themes around resiliency?
5. What were the internal and external factors contributing to resiliency?

6. What are the implications for instructional programs intended to serve students who live in neighborhoods with high violent crime indexes for building/supporting resilience?
7. What are the implications for professionals who work with students who live in neighborhoods with high violent crime indexes for building/supporting resilience?

### **Data Coding and Analysis**

A phenomenological analysis was conducted with data from transcribed interviews with five participants. The goal of the study was to identify the perceived meaning of resilience and the factors that affected resilience and contributed to the success of participants. In order to identify the experiences and essences of these African American men, the seven step modified van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994) was employed.

The modified van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994) is a tested and reliable method for extracting key words and phrases (invariant constituents) and themes from textual data provided from interviews in a phenomenological study. NVivo8® computer software was used in conjunction with the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas) to aid in the storage, organization, and representation of the qualitative data. The seven step van Kaam process of phenomenological analysis, as described by Moustakas, included listing and preliminary grouping, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing of the invariant constituents, final identification of the invariant constituents and themes,

generation of individual textural descriptions, construction of individual structural descriptions, and the production of textural-structural descriptions. As a final step, the analysis used composite descriptions to represent the group as a whole.

The first four steps of the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994) were used to reveal the invariant constituents and thematic categories in the data. The invariant constituents represent the experiences and perceptions of the participants with respect to the factors they perceived as contributing as well as limiting to their personal academic achievement and career success. This analysis process was assisted by the use of the NVivo qualitative software program to code the transcribed text of the interviews, note the location and frequency of each relevant occurrence (invariant constituents) within the transcribed texts, group the invariant constituents into categories, and generate frequency percentages for the invariant constituents as represented by the participants. This process generated key invariant constituents, which were separated into thematic categories under four major headings (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Thematic Categories and Invariant Constituent Distribution for Interviews*

Thematic Categories	# invariant constituents
<i>Personal Characteristics</i>	
Perceptions of Self	6
Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses as a student	6
Extra-Curricular Involvement	4
Perceived Importance of Success	5
<i>Personal Experience: Family and Environment</i>	
Neighborhood Descriptive	9
Community and Church Involvement	8
Family Weaknesses and Strengths	13
Educational Experiences	9
<i>Factors Affecting Resiliency</i>	
Obstacles	8
Factors cited as affecting Personal Resiliency	20
Family Impact	10
Personal Definition of Resilience	2
<i>Comparative Experiences</i>	
Perception of Being African American in School	6
Experience Compared with other African-American Males	6
Experience Compared with African-American Females	3
Experience Compared with other Racial Groups	2

The first step of the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994) is a subjective process in which the relevance of statements made by participants to the research topic is evaluated. This step included *horizontalization*, the listing and preliminary grouping of relevant expressions made by the study participants. This step of the process was accomplished with the use of NVivo8® qualitative software to code the relevant text

occurrences (invariant constituents) of the interviews, and note the location and frequency of each.

The next step of the data analysis using the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994) included the reduction and elimination of the invariant constituents resulting from the first step. In this process, each invariant constituent was re-evaluated in terms of relevance to the phenomenon under investigation. In addition, each invariant constituent was then evaluated against the other invariant constituents to identify and prevent overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions.

Clustering and thematizing of the invariant constituents into thematic categories served as the third step in the process. In this step, the invariant constituents considered related were grouped together into thematic categories representative of a common theme in the data. The thematic categories that emerged from the analysis are representative of the common experiences of the study participants. Nvivo software aided in the process of grouping the invariant constituents into appropriate categories and also generated frequency percentages for each of the invariant constituents within the thematic categories.

The fourth step of the analysis process, according to Moustakas (1994) was the validation of the invariant constituents and thematic categories. Invariant constituents were valid if they were demonstrated to be either explicitly expressed in the transcription or definable as compatible. Compatible constituents are defined as responses that clearly indicate a reference to an explicit invariant constituent (Moustakas).

Following the validation of the invariant constituents and thematic categories, individual textural descriptions of the participants' experiences were generated and

provided the completion of the fifth step in the modified van Kaam method (Moustaks, 1994). Nvivo also aided in this step through the documentation of the location of textural examples for specific invariant constituents within the interview text for each participant. Following the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas), *Imaginative variation* was employed for each description (sixth step) in order to more clearly express the relevant experiences of the participants. The seventh and final step in the modified van Kaam process (Moustakas) involved the development of composite textural-structural descriptions; the composite textural-structural descriptions served to present the experiences of the group of participants as a whole and therefore represent the conclusions of the data analysis and are used to answer the research questions of the study.

## **Findings**

This section presents how participants responded to the associated interview questions. In responding to the interview questions, the participants revealed their perceptions and experiences growing up in a high crime index neighborhood and the factors that contributed to their personal resilience enabling educational success. The findings are presented by thematic category within the context of personal characteristics of participants (internal factors), personal experiences of family and environment of participants (external factors), specific factors perceived by participants to affect resiliency, and participant perceptions of comparative experiences.

### **Personal Characteristics**

The thematic categories related to personal characteristics of participants shed light on the internal factors that may affect resiliency. The relevant constituents related to



personal characteristics of the five academically successful African American Males interviewed were clustered and thematized according to the modified van Kaam process (Moustakas, 1994) resulting in five thematic categories. These included perception of self, perceived strengths as a student, perceived weaknesses as a student, involvement in extra-curricular activities, and the perceived importance of success.

The first thematic category related to personal characteristics, perception of self, was determined by four key invariant constituents. The key invariant constituents included (a) perceived self as a successful student (100%) and successful person (4 of 5 participants, 80%), (b) role of parent/grandparent in molding participant (100%), (c) maintains further goals and ambitions/ has not settled for current situation despite successes (80%), (d) hard worker/push to better self (3 of 5 participants, 60%), and (e) lived in two different worlds (2 of 5 participants, 40%). All invariant constituents representing the variety of participant responses are presented in Table 2. Invariant constituents receiving a single response are not included in the table, but include soft spoken, keen observer, and family guy/love kids. Resulting from this data, the participants seem to perceive themselves as successful, demonstrate continued ambition and goal setting, believe themselves to be hard workers and noted the duality of their lived experiences between their professional lives emanating from their educational success and the life within the neighborhood.

Table 2

*Perception of Self*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
Perceived self as successful		
Student	5	100%
Person	4	80%
Significance of Parent/Grandparent in molding participant	5	100%
Further goals and ambition	4	80%
Hard worker/push to better self	3	60%
Lived in two different worlds	2	40%

All the participants held the self perception of a successful student and nearly all mentioned the self perception of a successful person. Participant 3 exemplifies these elements stating,

Success to me is advancement in life. It is not so much as having lot of money or cars or vacation homes it's not about that, it's about achieving goals. And for myself I have achieved a lot of goals through my life. I graduated college, I am coming up on my next graduation soon. I have finished so many different types of training like with the construction thing I have been through so many different routes of construction, I make like maybe \$60,000-\$65000 a year within a 8 month period. I am single, I don't have any kids that's such a big success to me

that I have never had kids outside of wedlock. I don't have any kids, I am 32, I am young, I am healthy, I haven't been beaten down by the world too much you know what I am saying. I feel I have got a bright future especially now that I have got my head on straight...So yeah definitely I feel like I am successful. I could be more successful but I am happy where I am at because I learned a lot from where I have been.

Many participants noted that their parents were influential in molding who they became.

Participant 4 stated that "it was always my parents" when asked about who molded the person he became. Participant 5 noted the importance of his mother:

The only one that comes close is my mother, without her even, no wonder she did it, she helped mold me to be who I am, just from the standpoint of seeing her have to go through struggles to make sure she and step-dad as they began to evolve as a marriage and to evolve as in their work environments to achieve some levels of success she kind of molded me to know that that I didn't want to have to, to go through that process of without even having the education that she probably desired to have, it kind of molded me to the direction where I knew I had to eventually complete that aspect, with my wife.

Participant 1 also noted the importance of his parents in molding who he became, but also mentioned the importance of life experiences in molding your person.

It's definitely the parents, definitely the extended family, that's like 200 right there then the neighborhood, the other kids like I said even if I see you doing something that I know I don't want to do, I am going to watch you doing, I am going to watch you get caught or go down or I am going to watch you get away

with it and maybe I will try it the next time. So I mean I feel like every experience you have helps mould you.

Nearly all the participants (80%) also expressed the desire to follow further goals and ambitions. Although the participants perceived themselves as successful, they were not content with remaining where they were; rather they aspired to continue to achieve. This is evident in the goals of the participants. Participants 1 and 3 strove to own or be president of a business or partner a law firm. Participant 3 also wanted to help kids in the community gain an education and spirituality. Participant 4 wanted to teach at the university level. Participant 5 would like to continue his education and become a lawyer.

Three participants described themselves as a hard worker or someone who pushes to better oneself and continue to achieve. Participant 2 stated, "I'm a hard worker, man, and what I mean by that is I'm committed. I'm committed to my job, and I know that's what my bread and butter at this point." Similarly, participant 4 described himself "I am always looking to better myself I guess, you know special education wise. I have never stopped going to school. As a matter of fact I graduated on Sunday."

Finally, within this thematic category, participants 1 and 3 described living in two different worlds as a result of the success they have achieved coming from their childhood neighborhood. As an example, participant 1 expressed,

I mean at the end of the day I am a guy who lives in two very different worlds and sometimes I have a hard time doing that because again I do stay very grounded. Every day when I get off work I am coming back to the 100s, I hang out on the south side with my friends for at least an hour before I go home. But when I get up every morning you know I brush my teeth, I put my clothes on and I am going

downtown to play corporate super lawyer and talk to my coworkers about the new TAG Heuer watch and the new car that came out at the Detroit Auto Show because they live that type of lifestyle whereas I am like yeah you know we make a little bit of money but I am not into that kind of stuff, that's not the type of stuff I spend my money on. I am happy that if I go out with my friends on a Saturday, I can buy the first round of drinks, that's what I spend my money on but I can't really tell my coworkers exactly how much I drink on the weekends so I just play the game and it wears on you sometime, all this pretending wears on you and then you start wondering well am I pretending to be the one [African American, south side] lawyer or am I really the one lawyer who's pretending to be a south side you know sometimes I have to check myself and ask myself so it gets difficult.

The second thematic category related to personal characteristics was perceived strengths and weaknesses as a student. Table 3 illustrates the responses and associated frequencies of the participants. Central to this theme include the academic strengths of elements of being a quick learner/good student (3 of 5 participants, 60%), and perseverance and persistence (40%).

Table 3

*Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses as a Student*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
<b>Perceived Strengths</b>		
Picked up things quickly/good comprehension/good student	3	60%
Perseverance/dedication	2	40%
<b>Perceived Weaknesses</b>		
Poor study skills	2	40%
Motivation	1	20%
Poor reading skills/dislike for reading	1	20%
Behavior problems	1	20%

As a student, participants noted several strengths and weaknesses. Among the common strengths was that the participant was able to pick things up quickly in school, have good comprehension, and perform well as a student. Participant 5 noted, “My strengths at school was that I can pick up one just about anything quickly.” Two participants cited their perseverance and dedication as strengths. Participant 4, for example, stated, “Just the dedication, well just not wanting to give up, you know what I mean. Knowing that I can do it.”

In terms of weaknesses, two participants cited study skills as a weakness as a student. As an example, participant 4 noted,

Coming out of high school boy I kind of think it was difficult point, because I never did develop study skills. It was always again memorizing never conceptual learning. I think that would have been a weakness as far as going to the college, because not understanding concepts made it kind of difficult as far as you know you sit and analyze the course and you need to understand something about system of equation as it relates to graphic functions or graphic things then you know comes different maybe more that's so much made the conceptual learning.

Other weaknesses included motivation, poor reading skills, and behavior problems.

Participant 5 suggested, "My weakness was that sometimes I would not put all my effort into it so. The motivation was lacking sometimes and whenever the motivation lacked."

Participant 3 cited behavior problems that may have resulted from the violence witnessed at home. "As a student, well in grammar school I was real good in math, in reading, pretty much I did good in all my classes. I did fairly well in grammar school and high school but I just had behavioral problems and like I said that might have stemmed from what I heard at home and what I saw."

Involvement in extra-curricular activities of participants serves as a third thematic category related to personal characteristics. All participants (100%) demonstrated some level of involvement in extra-curricular activities, which included sports (primarily football), math club, church activities, and band. Specifically, 80% (4 of 5 participants) were involved in sports, whereas math club (1 of 5, 20%), church activities (1 of 5, 20%), and band (1 of 5, 20%) received only a single mention. As an example, participant 3 noted his enjoyment for athletics,

Elementary, played basketball all through elementary, loved to play football. I didn't really play any real organized football until high school but I enjoyed that too. I ran track when I was in grammar school and high school. Like when I went to college we always played ball at the Rec. so I have always been athletically inclined, I have always enjoyed doing stuff physically.

Participant 3 became involved in the church activities. "Like in grammar school I was part of the choir, I was a usher, I was a junior steward you know they showed me how to count the money and how the church was ran so I learned a lot as a young man" (Participant 3).

The final thematic category related to personal characteristics is the perceived importance of success. Participants expressed why they felt their success was important. Key invariant constituents to this theme include (a) for your family (3 of 5, 40%), and (b) as an example for your kids (3 of 5, 60%). Two other invariant constituents were mentioned, but only received a single mention, so are not included in the table. These invariant constituents included (a) success is important for the community, and (b) although success is important, it is more important to be a good person. Table 4 illustrates the invariant constituents and related frequencies for this thematic category.



Table 4

*Success Perceived as Important*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
Family	3	60%
As an example to own kids	3	60%
Poor reading skills/dislike for reading	1	20%
To the community	1	20%
Success is important, but not more than being a good person	1	20%

Participants expressed the importance of success in terms of being a role model for family members. Participant 1 gave an example of this perception, stating

My success is important a) because I have kids now and oh my God are they expensive but b) people are watching me. An example, when I was coming out of school with a JD and MBA now you are educated brother, you know that in all actuality you probably stand to make more going the business route than law route and for other reasons I did choose to be a lawyer. But a part of it was the old folks in my family, they are just as undereducated black people we know what a lawyer is. So I mean in everybody in my family's mind it's more of a status symbol that I am a lawyer like I am the pride and joy of both sides of my family.

Likewise, participant 2 noted,

My success is important. Yes, it is important. It's important for me, it's important for my kids and it's important for other people in my family, man. I

have a role model, somebody to aspire to be like and I don't want everybody to be just like and I want people to be better than me, not make the same mistakes I made. Gets stuff done early. Get stuff done early and work smart, not necessarily all that hard. You see what I'm saying and get in now, I get a chance because that was just simply good. You know, so, yeah, I think it's important, it's just important to have around for everybody.

Finally, participant 1 suggested the importance of achieving academic success on a community level. He stated, "Success is important but I think being a good human being is more important."

### **Personal Experience: Family and Environment**

The thematic categories related to personal experience of participants in terms of family and environment provided insight into the external factors that may affect resiliency. The relevant constituents related to personal experience of family and environment of the participants were clustered and thematized resulting in four thematic categories. These included childhood neighborhood descriptive, community and church involvement, family weaknesses and strengths, and educational experiences.

The first thematic category related to personal experience of family and environment, childhood neighborhood descriptive, was determined by four key invariant constituents. The key invariant constituents included (a) the presence of gangs, drugs, violence, and/or other criminal activity (100%), (b) the perception of a strong sense of community (100%), (c) no ethnic/racial diversity, all African-American (100%), and (d) low income housing/area nearby but distinct from immediate neighborhood (3 of 5 participants, 60%). All invariant constituents representing the variety of participant

responses are presented in Table 2. Resulting from this data, the participants demonstrate similar childhood experiences in violence and criminal activity within the neighborhood, ethnic and socio-economic makeup of neighborhood, and the perception of a strong sense of community despite the negatives in the neighborhood.

Table 5

*Childhood Neighborhood Descriptive*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
Presence of gangs, drugs, violence, other criminal activity	5	100%
Strong sense of community	5	100%
Ethnically all African-American	5	100%
Low-income housing nearby but distinct from immediate neighborhood	3	60%
Middle to low Middle Class	2	40%
Lots of kids, a positive and negative	2	40%
All African American, below poverty line or low income, with criminal activity	2	40%
Tension between the middle income and low income areas resulting from disparity	1	20%
Typical African American city neighborhood	1	20%

In describing the neighborhood the participants grew up in, all participants cited the presence of criminal activity, drugs, gangs, and other violence. For example, participant 1 noted the violence and criminal activity, and also that this was perceived as normal for similar neighborhoods across the country.

We had gangs, we had drugs, we had the corner stores, we had all the distractions that probably most neighborhoods all across the country like this have...It was just a lot of violence. And I don't really have a frame of reference from before that because I would have been 4-5 years old but I just remember as a young kid when I was getting to the age where I wanted to be outside more, my mother was fighting to keep me inside because of everything that was going on. Like I said I have to imagine this was going on in all the poor neighborhoods all over the country.

Similarly, participant 2 noted these activities, but also noted these activities as common place

Friends, people that you knew being killed or the shootings, fights, turf wars, gang activity, constant gang activity, constant drug deal. But, like I said when you're growing up in it, it just doesn't seem as bad as it really is. So, part of it seem very normal to have to walk down the street, crowded guys or whatever, blocking the street corner, shoot and die.

All the participants also noted a strong sense of community in their neighborhoods. The commonalities run throughout their descriptive. The following quotations from the different participants demonstrate these common elements”

Everybody on my block had lived in their home for upwards of 10-20 however many years so at least on my block we actually had a community and there was a community kind of within all of the mayhem. So that was another thing that was positive about my block and particularly vis-à-vis the neighborhood... You know the fact that as kids we spent the night over each other's houses so the guy down the street, his parents knew me, his parents knew my parents so his parents wouldn't be afraid to confront me if they saw me doing something wrong...it wasn't a perfect situation but there was some element of the community raising every child in the community...I know even from going to the neighborhood schools back then, a lot of my classmates who only lived 5 or 6 blocks from me didn't have that same element. (Participant 1)

Everybody knew us. Everybody was familiar, they were familiar with my family, so we always had a – we always sort of, was associated with the neighborhood...I think I felt safe more than anything, even though I look back and say, it wasn't, I felt safe in town. (Participant 2)

Well back then what was positive was the neighbors they were like a family, it was kind of like everybody knew each other and everybody looked out for each other...But it was pretty much a family...our parents would look out for the kids just like they would look out for their own so it was pretty close-knit. (Participant 3)

So the neighborhood now I mean we all got together and we played basketball, played football. I am assuming it to be more of a community. (Participant 4)

The positive thing about the neighborhood was that everyone knew each other from 3 to 4 block radius you pretty much knew everybody in the block. In particular the kids on that block...the neighbors they treated you like they were your parents so if there was any trouble from you, you got disciplined by them until your mom or your dad came home and they phoned them of what transpired and you got disciplined for a second time. So that was the good thing about the neighborhood, everyone looked out for each other. (Participant 5)

In addition, some participants noted a divide between a lower income area that was near their neighborhood. Participant 1 described,

I mean there was a definite divide between up the hill and down the hill. Was it economic, I don't know, maybe subconsciously it was because again at that critical age of 9-10-11-12 our mothers didn't want us hanging out down the hill because there was this, that and so on going on down the hill, you could go down there and get lost. Again there were five real big apartment buildings down there so your parents can't keep their eye on you etc., etc. So because of that by the time we got to the 13s, 14s, I definitely knew the guys down the hill but definitely we were not as close to them as the guys on the hill and the guys that lived up the hill with me.

The second thematic category developed from the data and related to personal experience of participants of family and environment was community and church involvement. This category consisted of three key invariant constituents, which included (a) low overall family community involvement (4 of 5 participants, 80%), (b) high family church involvement (4 of 5 participants, 80%), and (c) low community church

involvement (2 of 5 participants, 40%). Table 6 illustrates the variety of invariant constituents and frequencies. Interestingly, the data demonstrate a higher level of family church involvement for these participants despite a relatively low community church involvement as well as a low community involvement by the family.

Table 6

*Community and Church Involvement*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
Low overall family community involvement	4	80%
High family church involvement	4	80%
Low community church involvement	2	40%
Personal church involvement N/A	2	40%
Personal church involvement now strong	2	40%
Community church involvement 50/50	1	20%
Negative influence of family on community/neighborhood	1	20%
Family looked down on low income families	1	20%

Participants suggested a low community involvement on the part of their families other than watching out for each other; however, also noted was a high family church involvement despite a low community church involvement. To demonstrate these

elements, participant 3 stated, “Not a major part [in the community], they just were a household on the block and they did look out for other kids.” Participant 2 described the level of family church involvement,

Personal church involvement, always belong to a church, man, growing up. That was another thing. We had, we knew we’re Christians man, we went about the church...you go to church because there is a tradition, that’s what you do...we grew up going to church, man, so we always knew about god, man, always knew about the bible. I think it helped though. It helped to keep us with a heightened sense of right and wrong I think because that’s what really church was all about, we were growing up.

Despite the fact that nearly all participants’ families were involved in church, there was a low community level of church involvement overall, expressed by participant 5, for example, “In the community, in my community in particular there was no involvement. Actually there were really no churches in the real walking distance that I can think of.” However, some of the disparity between family involvement and community church involvement may be due to the divide existing between the immediate neighborhood and the surrounding neighborhood. This was evident in the words of participant 1,

Low, it was very low. I mean higher up the hill, higher you went up the hill, go to church so back to the non-up the hill kids I would say probably 4-5 of us went to church regularly and like 3-4 times a month, every Sunday. Downhill, yeah those were the guys I was hanging out with on Sunday so none of those guys went to church.



The third thematic category, family strengths and weaknesses, was determined by five key invariant constituents. Central to this thematic category were the influential nature of parents (4 of 5 participants, 80%), family weaknesses of criminal activity (2 of 5 participants, 40%) and family strengths of being supportive (4 of 5 participants, 80%), close-knit (3 of 5, 60%), and loving (3 of 5, 60%). Table 7 demonstrates all responses of participants relative to this theme.

Table 7

*Family Strengths and Weaknesses*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
<i>Family Strengths</i>		
Supportive	4	80%
Role of extended family perceived as supportive	4	80%
Close-Knit/Unified	3	60%
Loving	3	60%
Not materialistic/lived below means	1	20%
<i>Influential Family Members</i>		
One or both parents	4	80%
Grandfather	1	20%
Sister	1	20%
Aunt	1	20%
<i>Family Weaknesses</i>		
Criminal Activity	2	40%
Parents too tough/abusive	1	20%
Low communication	1	20%
Few bad apples, but kept away	1	20%

According to participants in the study, the family had an influence on their personal resilience. The strengths given by participants of their families included

providing support, love, and being close-knit. As an example of the invariant constituents, participant 3 noted several of these elements:

They were full of love man, they were good motivators. Like I said my mother's side of the family they didn't have the best education because they were older but they always stressed staying in school, they always motivated me, they always told me the right thing to do and that whole side of the family stayed in church. So they were definitely trying to keep me on the right path and no smoking, no drinking, no frolicking; they tried their best to keep me on the right path and that's the most positive thing I think anybody can get out of a family is somebody that just motivates and supports you whatever you do. If you do slip up a little bit they would be right there for you to pick you back up so they were there for me you know what I am saying, a good foundation on that side.

Participants 4 and 5 both expressed the love and support received from their families.

“The support that they gave us definitely...They really pushed education. They supported us, gave us a lot of love” (Participant 4). “The love that we have for each other. We support each other in everything that we do” (Participant 5).

Participants generally cited the importance of one or both parents as influential members of the family. Participant 5 noted the influence of his mother and the desire to make her proud; “My mother without all that would know it. It is just my desire to want to make sure that she was happy.” Participant 2 noted the importance of his grandfather as well as his mother.

Like I said my grandfather, because my grandfather was really the only role model that I had growing up there. So, like I said he was just a hard worker and

he always pretty school and going to job and working and punching the clock.

Him and I will say secondarily my mom. You could say 1A, 1B because my mom always preached that, even though she didn't leave that person example a lot everything she said really resonated with me because I respect my mom even though because she is one of my best friends even though she had all those problems. I loved her to death.

The biggest weakness of the family seemed to be involvement in criminal activity resulting in a lack of role models. Participant 2 noted this, stating, "In most our family being either, you know on drugs, get in drugs, sometimes criminal activity per se. So, ...you won't set a good example for the kids...we don't have that many role models in our family per se." Participant 1, while noting the presence of such behavior in the family, also noted that his parents kept those family members away.

But growing up as far as my development, I could name some weaknesses; we got the drug addicts, we got adulterers husbands, adulteress wives, we have all of those types of problems but there was nothing going on in the family that I would say was like damaging my development. My mother and father were very careful because they know who did the drug addicts in the family, they know who these in the family are, they know the bad apples in the family and they pretty much, and the whole family pretty much, kept those people away from the rest of the family.

The fourth thematic category related to personal experience was educational experiences. This thematic category was determined by two key invariant constituents. Invariant constituents central to this thematic category included (a) participants at some

point attended a private or special non-neighborhood school (100%), and (b) parents, specifically the mother, stressed education and learning (3 of 5 participants, 60%). Table 8 illustrates all invariant constituents and frequencies among participants. The invariant constituents demonstrate the variety of experiences as well as the larger level similarities in school experiences of participants.

Table 8

*Educational Experiences*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
Attended private or special non-neighborhood school at some point	5	100%
Catholic Schools (Elem. & HS)	2	40%
Gifted School/then HS at early age through a gifted program	1	20%
Special magnet school for fine arts, then Technical High School	1	20%
Neighborhood elementary, but special Public Fine Arts HS that had to test into.	1	20%
Parents (mother) stressed education	3	60%
Wanted to learn	1	20%
Went to school with best friend	1	20%
Attended preschool	1	20%

All participants attended a non-neighborhood school at some point, as demonstrated in Table 8. In addition, many participants noted that their parents, and in many cases, their mothers specifically, stressed education. Participant 1 stated, “I kept my grades up because my mother would have choked the life out of me...And I guess my mother had poured into me at the time that you make more money in the long run, you go to school, blah-blah-blah so I guess I will say the difference was in parenting.” Participant 4 described his mother, “My mother was a big advocate for education so summers were mainly spent behind tutoring me, so I mean it wasn’t like I really had to work hard at school.” Participant 2 also noted, “My mom told me to be competitive...I can do anything else in the world, stay out, whatever like...but I would better not bring a bad report card, because I think my mom, she felt like that was my ticket out.

### **Factors Affecting Personal Resilience**

The thematic categories related to the perceived factors affecting personal resilience of participants provided an understanding of the factors, both internal and external, that participants perceived to directly affect their personal resiliency. The relevant constituents related to the perceived factors affecting personal resiliency of the participants were clustered and thematized resulting in four thematic categories. These included obstacles, personal definition of resilience, family impact on personal resilience, and factors cited as directly affecting personal resiliency/ability to overcome obstacles and avoid negative outcomes.

The first thematic category related to factors affecting personal resilience, obstacles, was determined by two prominent invariant constituents. These key invariant constituents included (a) pressure to be involved with gangs, drugs, violence, and/or other

criminal activity / lure of money from selling and involvement (4 of 5 participants, 80%), and (b) prejudice in the school setting (2 of 5 participants, 40%). All invariant constituents representing the variety of participant responses are presented in Table 9. Resulting from this data, the participants demonstrate similar experiences of the temptations and peer pressure to become involved in violence and criminal activity within the neighborhood, as well as experiences of prejudice associated with the non-neighborhood school communities.

Table 9

*Obstacles to Academic Success*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
Pressure to be involved in gangs, drugs, violence, other criminal activity/lure of money with involvement	4	80%
Perceived no “typical” obstacles	3	60%
Prejudice at school/teachers not helping or treating fairly	2	40%
Involvement in drinking, smoking, and gang activities	1	20%
Health issues	1	20%
Getting into trouble at school	1	20%
Financial obstacles	1	20%
Balancing fitting in with doing the right thing	1	20%

Participants gave examples of the pressure to be involved in the gangs, selling drugs, etc. as well as the lure of the money that accompanies that involvement.

Participant 4 described the difficulty in not being involved,

I mean you choose to be in a gang. You know when kids say well I was forced, I mean that's just, I mean I was out there, you know they made a little pressure on you but...one chooses to be in. Yeah, you have to take a few – take a couple of bucks, and give a couple of fights but it's life, you know making good decisions. I mean for me it wasn't, and it was some pressure.

Participant 2 provided a vivid description of the temptation to get involved in the criminal behaviors such as selling drugs.

I didn't have money. So, one of the obstacles was to try to just resist persons in the street because that you knew that was the way to get money because everybody was doing it, I mean hustle me to sell the drugs. So I saw what people doing in the neighborhood was some, a lot of my friends were doing and they would get money...They didn't have to worry about where the next meal was coming from...have money to get back for school, eat lunch that stuff, money for clothes, high school girls who was trying to have a girl friend...So I was just resisting that temptation for a long time, really just get in the street and hustle, rich.

Another more frequently cited obstacle was prejudice at the school, mostly on the part of the teachers. Participant 3 described the unequal treatment by teachers, but also described his own personal motivation that overcame that obstacle.

So even though we came across all those obstacles I guess with the teachers not wanting to give us if we needed some extra or us not getting treated as fair as everybody else, I was so adamant about being the best that just them being in competition with me kind of kept me motivated.

The second thematic category related to factors affecting personal resilience was personal definition of resilience, which was determined by a total of two invariant constituents. The invariant constituents included (a) determination, persistence, and ambition to keep going/keep it together through obstacles and/or adversity (4 of 5 participants, 80%), and (b) resilience comes from wanting to make others proud (1 of 5 participants, 20%). Resulting from this data, the participants demonstrate similar perceptions of the definition of resilience.

Participants 1, 2, 4, and 5 gave similar definitions of resilience that included elements of determination, persistence, and ambition in the face of adversity. Participant 1 stated, “Resiliency, I mean it’s as simple as when you get knocked out you got to get back up.” Participant 2 stated

I’m going to define it as the ability to keep it together, man. To keep it together and keep it together in the face of all the negative things that are going all around, not that and that, so it penetrate your mind, body, and soul, not to basically – you’re keeping it together in the face of all adversity.

Participant 4 described resilience as “Determination, persistent, being ambitious to keep going when you know we have obstacles.” Finally, participant 5 stated,

I define resiliency as being able to complete a test beyond any circumstance whether it would be in particularly any negative circumstances that may come



your way. For instance if you are in college of resiliency it could be the fact that you may have to take off a year because finances are not there but you continue to put forward because you know this is what you want to achieve.

The third thematic category related to perceived factors affecting personal resilience was family impact, was determined by four key invariant constituents, and is related to the fourth thematic category of factors cited as directly affecting personal resiliency/ability to overcome obstacles and avoid negative outcomes. The key invariant constituents included (a) molded by parents/extended family (100%), (b) parents/extended family helped/influenced participant to stay in school (100%), (c) parents served as the most influential family member (4 of 5, 80%), (d) family instilled the importance of education for a better life (3 of 5 participants, 60%), and (e) parents specifically as a factor in supporting personal resilience(3 of 5, 60%). All invariant constituents representing the variety of participant responses are presented in Table 10. Resulting from this data, the participants demonstrate the impact of family function on personal resilience and academic success.

The fourth thematic category, seemingly an extension of the third, related to specific factors affecting personal resilience and consisted of factors cited as directly affecting personal resiliency/ability to overcome obstacles and avoid negative outcomes. This thematic category revealed four key invariant constituents. These key invariant constituents included (a) parents (3 of 5, 60%), (b) mother specifically (3 of 5, 60%), (c) life changing experience of a shooting (3 of 5, 60%), and (d) choosing not to participate in crime/criminal activity (3 of 5, 60%). All invariant constituents representing the variety of participant responses are presented in Table 11. Resulting from this data, the

participants demonstrate similar perceptions with regard to the factors affecting their personal resilience, which notably included the effects of parents and mothers in particular, mortality experiences of shootings of close friends, and the personal discipline to choose not to participate in the criminal activities.

Table 10

*Family Impact*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
Molded by parents/extended family	5	100%
Help of parents/grandparents in staying in school	5	100%
Family instilled the importance of education for a better life	3	60%
Parents specifically as a factor in supporting personal resilience	3	60%
Family provided love and values/morals	2	40%
Family provided a father/male role model	2	40%
Most Influential family members:		
One or both parents	4	80%
Grandfather	1	20%
Sister	1	20%
Aunt	1	20%

Table 11

*Perceived Factors Affecting Personal Resilience*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
Parents	3	60%
Mother	3	60%
Life changing experience of shooting	3	60%
Choosing not to participate in criminal activity/not wanting jail/not crossing line	3	60%
Motivated to have a better life	2	40%
God	2	40%
Understanding hardship of others (parents) and that can do better with education	2	40%
Taking care of a younger sibling/ensuring his/her safety and resilience	1	20%
Strength of community/caring community	1	20%
Personal pride	1	20%
Patience to do the work	1	20%
Only child	1	20%
Innate desire to achieve and be successful	1	20%
Home provided stability	1	20%

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Saw value in hard work from mom and dad and own experience working	1	20%
Personal discipline and values	1	20%
Girlfriend became pregnant and renewed aspirations	1	20%
Competitive friends/competitive nature	1	20%
Wanting to get out of current situation	1	20%
School was an escape	1	20%

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The perceived significant role of parents, and specifically mothers, in the development of personal resilience was a theme throughout many references by participants. Participant 1 noted several ways that parents aided in the development of resilience, particularly in terms of stressing the importance of education.

That was my parents, man. I mean you want to hold always right that your kids are going to do better than you and my parents obviously poured that into me but also you just sit back and listen to some of the crap they went through... The fact that my mother constantly drew, said hey you go to jail I am not coming to get you, you know she was one of those mothers... I guess I have to chalk it up to my parents, they always stressed education but there were other people in my neighborhood whose parents were stressing education and those kids didn't achieve academic success. So between my parents, between me being an only child and having the patience to do work and me having enough pride to not want to let certain people down I guess that's what you chalk it all up to. (Participant 1)

Participant 3 also noted parental influence in the development of resilience given a focus on education,

I believe that that's something as a child that was embedded in me through my parents. They were real focused on education. Just by me being put into those Catholic facilities for those schools it kind of instilled in me that it was something better that they wanted for me. So just by me one out of my parents and wanting to respect them and wanting to show them that I can do something that was good, you know what I am saying.

Three participants described a life changing event that helped to steer them in the right direction. One vivid example came from participant 3:

This night we were riding, we just got to riding my bike so we came back, I had to work in the morning so I stopped at my car because I left my car in front of my mom's house to get some things. Now as I rode around the block I saw my buddy in the car...so I saw him sitting in the car with a seat belt on and car stereo running, he was on the phone. So I rode past him and I went up the hill and I said wait, I got to say what's up to my buddy because it's like a 10 year buddy you know what I am saying, my buddy like you, if I see you, I couldn't just go past...as I get back to where my car is, I heard 8 shots. So he is the only one out there, it was probably like 10 o'clock at night so I knew he got shot...I looked up, I saw a brother running with his hands in his pocket. So he ran past, I got on my bike turned the corner. As soon as I turned the corner I saw the glass on the street so I pulled up, I saw my buddy leaning over in the car. So pretty much I am talking to him through the busted window trying to see if he's still alive and he's

breathing. So I didn't want to pull him out of the car because I saw a few holes in his body so I just talked to him through the window. I went over to the other side where he was leaning and I talked to him and I watched his eyes until the ambulance got there. We called the police as the ambulance got there, it took them like 15 minutes to get there and that's another thing about the whole thing you know what I am saying they were three blocks away, it took them 15 minutes to get there because they are so used to the violence, they are so used to people getting shot. So they finally get down in there, now the whole time I am talking to him, he looked at me in my eyes and he closed his eyes like he died. And I screamed and hollered and screamed and hollered, he opened his eyes back up again and even looked me right in my eye and stared me in my eye the whole time. So he did this three of four times and by the time the ambulance got there he was still breathing. So they moved us out the way, they took their time opening the door because they didn't want to move him too fast just in case bullets would shift and when they pulled him out of the car, I was looking at him and his head just fell straight back like he had no neck and this was a good friend of mine but that was his last breathe but I watched him take his last breathe and that was really traumatizing to me and that's kind of what led me into just changing my lifestyle.

Whether due to life changing events such as a shooting or for other reasons, some participants noted the choice not to participate, stemming from an internal decision or values. Participant 5 noted, "Well the values impacted me from the standpoint that I knew that I didn't want to be involved in." Participant 4 described, "I don't really think

there are social challenges. This is why I am making good decisions...everybody knows if you don't go to school then what type of future do you have, you choose not to go to school...I chose different.”

### **Comparative Experiences**

The thematic categories related to comparative experiences provided by participants revealed the perceptions of equality/inequality between their own experiences both within a school setting and outside of school and those of other African-American males and females as well as other racial groups. The relevant constituents related to the perceived factors affecting personal resiliency of the participants were clustered and thematized resulting in four thematic categories. These categories included perceptions of being an African-American male in a school setting, experiences compared to other African-American males, experiences compared to African-American females, and experiences compared to other racial groups.

The first thematic category related to comparative experiences, perceptions of being an African-American male in a school setting, was determined by three key invariant constituents. These key invariant constituents included (a) not noticeable because everyone was African-American (3 of 5 participants, 60%), (b) students segregated themselves in the diverse high school setting (2 of 5, 40%), and (c) teachers had different expectations/got used to being treated differently (2 of 5, 40%). All invariant constituents representing the variety of participant responses are presented in Table 12. The data demonstrated the different perspectives resulting from differing experiences, particularly at the high school level.

Table 12

*Perceptions of being an African-American Male in a School Setting*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
Nothing because everyone was African-American	3	60%
Students segregated themselves in HS given the diversity	2	40%
Teachers had different expectations	1	20%
Got used to being treated differently by teachers	1	20%
Scary and lonely	1	20%
Intimidating when got to college and was only Black person in class	1	20%

The perceptions of participants with regard to being an African-American male in a school setting demonstrated elements of segregation and prejudice, while other participants noted no differences due to the fact that everyone in the school was African-American. Of those who noted differences, participant 5 recalled,

In high school we had a mix of Hispanics, Chinese, Whites who were at that time a majority, which is about 47% at that time. Being an African American male there you still saw the segregation in higher school. You never really saw a lot of biracial student activities rather, other than in the classroom, I must say we also had a classroom we all know in conclaves of groups.



Similarly, participant 2 suggested, “So, even though it was diversity, it was more or so people would segregate themselves, what they knew.” Some participants noted that teachers had different expectations for Black students than other racial groups. Participant 3 noted, “They [teachers] wouldn’t reach out to us as much, they wouldn’t try to go the extra mile with us as much...it’s kind of like they had expectations on us that we wouldn’t get it.”

The second thematic category related to comparative experiences, experiences compared to other African-American Males, was determined by two principal invariant constituents. These key invariant constituents included (a) had a typical African American community experience (4 of 5 participants, 80%), and (b) different in that there are many single parent households in African American communities and participant had both parents (4 of 5 participants, 80%). All invariant constituents representing the variety of participant responses are presented in Table 13. The data demonstrated the perception of a “typical” experience while noting the difference of having a two parent household, providing a potential advantage.

Table 13

*Experiences Compared with other African-American Males*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
Typical African-American community	4	80%
Different: had a two-parent household where most had single-parent households	4	80%
Totally opposite experience	1	20%
Some chose to be out there in that environment	1	20%
Most or all did not go to college	1	20%
Different from the kids in the low income building	1	20%

Most participants felt their experiences were typical African American male experiences. Participant 2 expressed how his own experiences were typical of others' experiences in the same neighborhood. "Man, what I saw was very typical. It was normal to whatever degree I think probably half of the people I knew, their parents were selling drugs, they had the same situations" (Participant 2). Participant 3 noted the difficulties experiences, albeit common; "So it's kind of hard, it's hard for a black male especially in black neighborhoods, they are getting ridiculed and picked on by the police as well as their own people."

In addition, nearly all participants realized that they had the advantage of a two-parent household, which was not the norm for many African-Americans in the

neighborhood. Participant 3 stated, “Well most of the ones that never went to college, their families were single parent homes point blank.” Likewise, participant 4 expressed, “I would say my parents were older definitely and I had my mother and father so I guess that might have been different from someone else, I mean everybody did not have mother and father.” Participant 5 noted,

My family was continuous as I indicated a bit earlier my step-dad was involved in our home from the time which I was two and half to three years old. So there was no other time period when I didn't have a male in my home...Well compared to other African American males on the block, very few had, two-family households.

The third thematic category related to comparative experiences, experiences compared with African-American Females, was determined by three total invariant constituents. These key invariant constituents included (a) males more susceptible to gangs, drugs, violence/not many girls involved in gangs/girls had it a little easier, (b) girls had to worry about shootings/fights as much as boys, and females went to jail more. The invariant constituents along with the associated frequencies are given Table 14. The data demonstrated perceptions of differing experiences between male and female African-Americans in the same neighborhood.

Table 14

*Experiences Compared with African-American Females*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
Males more susceptible to gangs, drugs, violence/ not many girls involved in gangs/ girls had it easier	3	60%
Girls had to worry about shootings/fights as much as boys	1	20%
Females went to jail more	1	20%

Although three participants felt females had it a bit easier than males in the community, two other participants felt that females had to worry equally as much, or even went to jail more frequently. Participant 2 stated, “So for males...you’re more susceptible to that, you’re more susceptible to violence, to get beat up, shot at whatever for whatever reasons. You’re more susceptible to gangs [than girls] because not a lot of girls in the gangs where I grew up.” Participant 1 expressed that although he believed girls had it a little easier, it was not easy for them; “So I like to believe it was a lot easier for the girls but as I think through the memory bank, it seemed like they had it pretty rough too.” In terms of how others treated them, participant 3 noted, “They [others] would treat them differently than they would treat the boys, they would be more open to them but the men, no.”

Participant 4 felt the girls were affected similarly by the environment. He stated, “Again, we are just one big community...so the girls had to worry about shootings and

fight as much as the boys.” Participant 5 actually noted the prevalence of African-American females in prison, stating, “African American females tend to go to prison a lot, have a greater number that they used to in the past and that could be result of not having our African American male in the household, assuming that you may have a female with several children to take care of.”

The fourth thematic category related to comparative experiences, experiences compared with other racial groups, was determined by two total invariant constituents. These key invariant constituents included (a) worse for African-Americans, and (b) same or comparative with other racial groups. The invariant constituents along with the associated frequencies are given Table 15. The data demonstrated a split between perceptions of differing experiences and perceptions of comparative experiences between racial groups.

Table 15

*Experiences Compared with Other Racial Groups*

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to offer this experience	% of participants to offer this experience
Worse for African-Americans	3	60%
Same or compares with other racial groups	2	40%

The participants in the study were split in terms of comparison of experiences with other racial groups. Over half of the participants felt the experiences within the African-American community where they grew up were worse than for other racial groups. Participant 1 stated, “No question the racial profile there was worse for us than

probably, especially back then, than probably any other racial group...I have the belief that most other ethnicities will have to have had a better growing up than we did in the mid 90s.” Participant 3 also noticed this racial divide in terms of experiences, “It’s terrible compared to other racial groups because the other racial groups stick together, they try to help each. For instance just in the family, the family structure the parents set stuff up for the kids you know what I am saying like they try to do things outside the box to have a safety net for their kids.”

On the other hand, other participants felt their experiences were comparative to other racial groups. Participant 4 stated, “I don’t feel there is any difference.” Similarly, participant 5 asserted that his own personal experience compared with other races; “Well it does compare to the Caucasian group in the United States because the majority of them have two-family household. Drugs have not affected their communities and they are rated as the minority groups whether it be Hispanic or African American.”

### **Individual Textural-Structural Descriptions**

#### **Structural Description for Participant 1**

Participant 1 is 32 years old and attended the Chicago Public School system kindergarten thru twelfth grade. Participant 1, who grew up in Area 4 which is the south Chicago police district, described a neighborhood in which there was a divide between a low-middle to middle class neighborhood of houses abutting a low income area of apartment buildings. The immediate neighborhood of houses was described as having a strong sense of community, where everyone watches out for each other, especially the children, given a neighborhood in which the children were exposed to violence, gang activities, and drugs. He described himself as a keen observer and aimed at “doing right

by” his parents. Participant 1, a lawyer, expressed the feeling of living in two worlds, his old neighborhood, and the corporate world.

In terms of school, participant 1 was in a gifted program throughout school, and therefore in a class with other kids who wanted to learn. As a smart kid in the neighborhood, he had to balance doing the right thing with fitting in, which served as an obstacle to achievement for him. His mom was dedicated to the importance of education and taught him early on and enrolled him in a daycare/preschool. She drilled into him the importance of education in providing a better life and he credits his achievement and successes to her parenting.

Participant 1 defined resilience as getting back up when you get knocked down. He believed the unsuccessful guys were the ones who could not keep up with the work and once they fell behind, it snowballed. He also noted that they may have been unsuccessful as a result of their home life.

### **Structural Description for Participant 2**

Participant 2 is 34 years old and attended the Chicago Public school kindergarten thru twelfth grade. Participant 2, who grew up in the Austin Chicago police district, described a neighborhood in which kids were part of a community that spent time hanging outside and with family. He describes an environment where drugs and violence are normal, even parents selling drugs. He described himself as a hard worker and committed to his job.

Participant 2 noted financial constraints as an obstacle to achievement. Participant 2 cited a related major obstacle as the need to resist the temptation of money from selling drugs and getting involved in street life because not having any money. Family members

were large volume drug dealers, including the parents; therefore, it was easy to get involved, which he did. Participant 2 had a life changing shooting experience in which a friend who was academically successful and in college was shot in his own backyard. Participant 2 had a second life changing moment when his newly pregnant girlfriend asked him what he was going to do with his life, which opened his eyes to his behaviors and got him to switch gears and return to achieving in school.

Participant 2 credited his mother with stressing education as a means of “a ticket out.” He went to a special magnet fine arts school with kids from all over the city and therefore was in a school environment where kids wanted to learn and had opportunities. He also attended a technical high school that was not a neighborhood school. He defined Resilience as the ability to stay focused, to “keep it together” in the face of negatives/adversity. Participant 2 believed unsuccessful African-American males in his neighborhood failed to succeed because they did not have jobs, the feeling of working legitimately and legally for the money.

### **Structural Description for Participant 3**

Participant 3 is 32 years old and only attended private catholic school kindergarten thru twelfth grade. Participant 3, who grew up in the South Chicago police district, claimed to have seen a good deal of poverty and struggles, living in an all Black, urban neighborhood that abuts the low-income housing. Participant 3 described his immediate neighborhood as a community in which everyone watched out for each other and parents even disciplined each others’ children to keep them in line and safe. A large amount of youth within the neighborhood accompanied a good deal of violence.



Participant 3 described himself as a hard worker who is enthusiastic, dedicated, loyal, and strove to please his parents.

Participant 3 cited as an obstacle the temptations and lure of money made by selling drugs. Participant 3 also noted prejudicial behavior of teachers in school and overcame that obstacle through his competitive nature and competitive friends that kept him motivated. Participant 3 demonstrated behavioral problems at school and therefore, getting in trouble at school served as an obstacle to achievement. His father was abusive and participant 3 started getting involved in drugs and drinking and selling, stopped going to church, and went to jail. He believes he made it through due to his mother's constant love. Participant 3 experienced a life changing shooting experience of a close friend, who died in front of him and believed that by the grace of god he is alive. He changed and is now a minister in addition to business.

Participant 3 claims to have been molded by his father and sister, who showed him dedication, loyalty, and led him on the right path. He stated his parents constantly stressed the importance of education. He attended catholic schools through high school.

In defining resilience, participant 3 described it as something embedded in an individual from the parents. He gave a description of resilience as putting his parent's feelings above his own to keep him focused and them proud. He believed other African-American males were unsuccessful primarily due to making bad decisions and getting involved in street life. Participant 3 believed the unsuccessful males in the community did not do anything different in their lives; they kept doing the same things, which were the results of bad decisions.

**Structural Description for Participant 4**

Participant 4 is 32 years old and attended private catholic schools kindergarten thru twelfth grade. Participant 4, who grew up in the South Chicago Police district, described his neighborhood as a community in which they played sports (basketball, football, etc.) together. The neighborhood was a combination of middle and low-income “section8” families and individuals, with more violence in the low-income/section 8 territory. Participant 4 also noted tension between the two areas due to the disparity. He described himself as a family guy who loves kids and is always looking to better himself; never stopped going to school.

Participant 4 asserted that despite being surrounded by drugs and gangs and the pressures to join, these were not obstacles; rather, it was about making good decisions, and that it is up to the individual. Participant 4 noted prejudicial behavior at school against the African-American students as an obstacle. He had a shooting experience while playing basketball in his neighborhood, in which they were shot at, which was an affirming experience in terms of the direction he was following. Participant 4 also credited his mother for stressing the importance of education as well as his parents supporting and loving him. He attended catholic schools through high school. He described resilience as determination, ambition, and persistence despite obstacles.

**Structural Description for Participant 5**

Participant 5 is 38 years old and attended Chicago Public Schools kindergarten thru twelfth grade. Participant 5, who grew up in the Harrison Chicago Police District, also expressed the perception of a strong sense of community in the neighborhood where everyone knew each other and parents looked out for and disciplining all the kids, not just

their own. Although participant 5 was surrounded by gangs, drugs, and violence in the neighborhood, he claims he was insulated from it through his parents. He described himself as soft spoken.

Participant 5 cited the obstacle of peer pressure to get involved in the negative behaviors. He also noted health problems as an obstacle to academic achievement. Participant 5 attended a neighborhood elementary school and performing arts high school in which he had to test into, which was also more diverse in terms of racial/ethnic makeup. Participant 5 defined resilience as “being able to complete the test” despite any obstacles or problems along the way. He believed other African-American males from the neighborhood were unsuccessful due to their bad decisions and involvement in street life.

### **Structural Composite Descriptions**

This section features the composite structural descriptions generated from the individual structural descriptions and the thematic categories of the previous sections (Moustakas, 1994). These descriptions describe how the participants perceived the essence of their experiences as resilient African American men achieving academic and occupational success and the obstacles and contributing factors to their success. The themes and corresponding experiences provide the overall conclusions of the data analysis and are used to attempt to answer the research questions of the study.

**Theme 1: Academic resilience is perceived to encompass the determination, persistence, and focus of an individual to keep achieving in order to avoid obstacles to succeed**

Participants provided their own definitions of resilience and the majority of the participants described resilience as encompassing elements of determination, persistence, and the ability to keep going through obstacles and/or adversity (80%). In addition, another participant described resilience as stemming from wanting to make people proud, such as parents. Through personal resilience, in terms of such determination and persistence, it was perceived that individuals are able to succeed despite negative experiences, obstacles, and adversity. Obstacles such as pressure to engage in gang/criminal activity and the lure of money from selling drugs or prejudice experienced in the school setting can be overcome with such determination and persistence, defining the individual as resilient.

**Theme 2: Academic resilience is perceived to stem from a sense of the importance of education in the ability to circumvent obstacles and improve life circumstances, likely resulting from parents and extended family who stress education as a means for a better life**

All five participants cited the help or positive effects of parents or grandparent (extended family) in staying in school and molding who they are (100%). Three participants (60%) directly mentioned their mother as positively affecting their ability to overcome obstacles and avoid the negative outcomes of many African-American males in similar environments. The majority of participants (60%) noted the family impact of instilling the importance of education for attaining a better life, while 40% also noted the family provided love, values, and morals. These qualities instilled by the family enabled some participants to choose to not participate in gang/criminal activities (60%). In addition, witnessing the hardships of others, particularly parents, some participants (40%)

stressed gaining an understanding of hardship and that education can provide for a better life.

**Theme 3: Perceived internal factors that may contribute to academic resilience include motivation for better life, values providing the ability to make good decisions, understanding hardships of others and the ability of education to provide for better circumstances, and having specific goals and ambitions**

Several internal factors were perceived by participants as contributing to their personal academic resilience, enabling participants to make good decisions and choose not to participate in criminal activities. Personal qualities, which may likely have been gleaned from family members' values, such as motivation to push to better oneself (60%), perseverance and dedication (40%), values contributing to the ability to make good decisions (60%), having defined goals and ambitions (seen in 100% of participants), and having an understanding of hardship and the benefits of education (40%), were perceived to contribute to personal resilience of participants.

**Theme 4: Perceived external factors that may contribute to academic resilience include parental influence, supportive and loving family, two-parent households providing a male role model, a strong sense of community in neighborhood, family involvement in church, and attending non-neighborhood school**

In addition to internal factors affecting personal resilience, several external factors were revealed from the data to potentially affect personal resilience. Participants noted the contribution of family factors such as parental influence, particularly that of the mother, a supportive and loving family, family involvement in church, and having a two-parent household providing a male role model within the family. External community

factors may also affect individual resilience such as a strong sense of community within the neighborhood and attending non-neighborhood schools, which were elements that were shared among all five participants' lived experiences.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 has presented the results from the interviews of a sample of five African American men from high crime index neighborhoods. The interviews explored the experiences and perceptions of these men in terms of resilience to achieve academic success and factors that may affect that resilience. Chapter 4 presented the research questions, the data collection and analysis process, and the occupation and education levels of the sample. Through the analysis of the data, thematic categories were developed under four headings to represent the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants. The transcribed interview data were analyzed to generate individual textural and structural descriptions of participants describing how each participant viewed his experiences. The textural-structural synthesis provided an overall analysis of the meaning and essence of the data for the participants as a whole. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the research questions related to the findings of the analysis of the data presented in chapter 4. In addition, chapter 5 provides recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the phenomenon of resilience in African American men from neighborhoods that demonstrate a high violent crime index. Through a phenomenological research methodology, five African American men from various occupations and levels of educational attainment, from Bachelor's to Masters and Juris Doctorate were interviewed. Open-ended questions ascertained the views of these men with regard to general resilience and the reasons for their own personal resilience and success. The study provided a direct account of the experiences and factors perceived as related to the success of African American male participants from high violent crime areas and revealed the perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and understandings of these men with regard to the phenomenon under investigation. The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the modified van Kaam method as proposed by Moustakas (1994), and assisted by use of NVivo 8® qualitative analysis software.

The seven step modified van Kaam process of phenomenological analysis (Moustakas, 1994) was used to determine the invariant constituents and subsequent thematic categories, which were representative of the experiences and perceptions of the participants and the obstacles as well as facilitating factors to their personal success. This process was aided by the use of the NVivo 8® qualitative software program to code the text of the interviews, note the location and frequency of each relevant occurrence (invariant constituents) within the transcribed texts, group the invariant constituents into categories, and generate frequency percentages for the invariant constituents as represented by the participants. This process generated key invariant constituents, which

were separated into 16 thematic categories within four main categories of personal characteristics, personal experience, factors affecting resiliency, and comparative experiences. These thematic categories represented the perceptions of the participants with regard to their lived experiences, inclusive of both challenges and facilitating factors, related to achieving their academic and career goals. Findings from the phenomenological analysis revealed four significant themes, which related to the perceptions of participants pertaining resilience, how resilience develops, and internal and external factors that contribute to development of resilience.

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the findings as described in Chapter 4 and the relationship of these findings to previous literature, providing a broader meaning and understanding of the phenomenon. In addition, Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the implications of the results and conclusions of the research. Lastly, the limitations of this study are provided along with recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of Findings and Conclusions**

This section discusses the results with regard to the objectives of the study. The analysis is based on the conceptual framework presented in the literature review. The research questions centered on the participants' experiences and perceptions of resilience and the factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic, that affected their personal resilience. This section provides a review of the four themes that were derived from the participants' interview responses. These themes reveal the perceptions of the participants in terms of resilience and the factors affecting personal resilience and success.



## **Perceptions of Resilience**

During the interview process, participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of resilience, how they would define resilience and their perception of how resilience was developed in their own experience and in general among African American male youth from similar backgrounds. The discussions focused on academic resilience. Accordingly, participants provided their own defining terms related to resilience.

### **Theme 1: Academic resilience is perceived to encompass the determination, persistence, and focus of an individual to keep achieving in order to avoid obstacles to success**

The majority of participants reported determination, persistence, and the ability to continue despite adversity/obstacles to be elements of resilience (80%). Resilience was also described as stemming from wanting to make others, such as parents, proud. In addition to the elements that define resilience, participants noted specific obstacles that needed to be overcome in their own experience. These obstacles included pressure to engage in negative activities and the lure of the financial rewards of such activities as well as experiences of prejudice within the schools. Individual personal resilience was perceived to enable the individual to succeed despite many negative experiences, obstacles, and adversity.

### **Theme 2: Academic resilience is perceived to stem from a sense of the importance of education in the ability to circumvent obstacles and improve life circumstances, likely resulting from parents and extended family who stress education as a means for a better life**

In terms of how resilience is developed, all five participants noted the positive effects of parental and familial involvement, particularly in terms of affecting the ability to not only stay in school, but achieve high performance, and parental/familial influence in molding the individual. Specifically, the role of the mother was cited by three of the participants (60%) in directly affecting their ability to overcome obstacles and resist involvement in negative, criminal activities common to the neighborhood. The impact of the family was felt by most participants to be in the form of providing values and love (40%), as well as instilling the value of education (60%), which was perceived to enable participants to make better decisions. Lastly, having witnessed hardships of others was given as a factor involved in understanding hardship and the value of education in providing a means to a better life circumstance.

### **Factors that Affect Resilience**

The participants were asked during the interview process to describe experiences and perceptions related to factors that affected their personal resilience and factors they perceived generally as affecting resilience in African American males from their neighborhood. Two types of factors were described by participants with detailed examples provided in many cases. Internal factors noted by participants centered on internal or personal characteristics and qualities of the participants. External factors incorporated factors within the community and personal relationships that influenced their personal development of resilience and enabled their personal success. These internal and external factors do not exist in isolation and some demonstrate dependency on the other; for example, the intrinsic formation of values and specifically values that

stress the importance of education, were perceived to stem from external influences of family and personal relationships.

**Theme 3: Perceived internal factors that may contribute to academic resilience include motivation for a better life, values providing the ability to make good decisions, understanding hardships of others and the ability of education to provide for better circumstances, and having specific goals and ambitions**

Internal factors encompassing personal qualities and characteristics that were perceived by participants to influence academic resilience and enable positive decision-making and pro-social behaviors were described by participants. Participants cited personal qualities, which were generally perceived by participants to have been gleaned from family values. These personal qualities included motivation to better oneself (60%), perseverance and dedication (40%), and values contributing to the ability to make good decisions (60%). Other important personal characteristics mentioned by participants were having specific and well-defined goals and ambitions (100%) as well as an understanding of true hardship and the related benefits gained through educational accomplishment (40%).

**Theme 4: Perceived external factors that may contribute to academic resilience include parental influence, supportive and loving family, two-parent households providing a male role model, a strong sense of community in the neighborhood, family involvement in church, and attending non-neighborhood school**

Several external factors that were perceived to affect personal resilience were revealed as common perceptions among study participants. Of these external factors cited by participants, the most frequently cited were the contributions of family, which

included parental influence, a supportive and loving family, family involvement in church, and the presence of a male/father role model within a two-parent household. External factors that were perceived to affect personal resilience outside of the realm of the family were also cited by participants. The most frequent external community-based factors evidenced in the lived experiences of participants included a strong sense of community in the neighborhood and attendance at a non-neighborhood school. These community-based external factors were manifest in the experiences of all five participants.

### **Implications**

The current study provided information and insights into the views of successful African American males from high crime index areas and their perceptions regarding general resilience, their personal resilience, and the factors that have influenced their personal resilience and subsequent success. The findings from this study contribute to the exploration of the factors related to resilience of African American males from at-risk communities. Resiliency theory suggests that resilience provides a buffer effect to environmental stressors that can cause behavioral and psychological problems among children (Garbarino et al., 1992; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Sayfer, 1994). Environmental stressors can challenge a child's ability to focus on education; research has shown that students from urban schools demonstrate higher drop-out rates and low college attendance rates (Fox et al., 2007; United States Census Bureau, 2002).

The findings from the present study provide insight into resilience as defined by African American males who have demonstrated resilience themselves. As previous definitions of resilience have contributed to the formation of resilience models that

demonstrate how promotive factors support resilience (Fergus & Zimmerman, 1994), the perceptions of resilience provided by the present study emanating from the successful African American men from at-risk communities may provide evidence and understanding to base additional models for use in school or community based prevention and outreach programs. Accordingly, the findings demonstrate a perception of academic resilience specifically in terms of determination, persistence, and focus of the individual serving to continue to achieve academically despite obstacles to their success. It was also perceived by participants in this study that through this resilience, participants were able to succeed despite the negative circumstances and experiences that would otherwise yield a negative outcome. These findings align with resilience as described by Zimmerman and Arunkumar (1994) who asserted that resilience “refers to those factors and processes that interrupt the trajectory from risk to problem behaviors or psychopathology and thereby result in adaptive outcomes even in the presence of adversity” (p. 4).

The participants in the present study further provided insight specifically into academic resilience. Findings demonstrated a perception of academic resilience as stemming from a sense of the value and importance of education as a means to overcome obstacles and negative experiences and to improve life circumstances. These findings were related to familial influence, as this sense of educational value was perceived to have developed from parents or extended family who continually stressed the importance of education. This finding aligns with one characteristic found to contribute to resilience in the African American family, achievement orientation (Hill, 1972; McAdoo, 1997; Wallace & Fisher, 2007). This finding strengthens the need to further promote familial, especially parental, involvement with the school.

Educators and policy makers should therefore continue to incorporate programs and policies that promote greater interaction between the family and the school. Although 100% participation in such programs by parents is unrealistic, implementation of programs stressing the home and school interrelationship maintain a focus on the importance of education and the role of the parent in the academic achievement of the student. Stakeholders should continue to support these programs, or implement new programs, to promote greater parental involvement in the school.

One of the interesting findings offered by the present study suggested one obstacle to academic success for these African American men included prejudicial behaviors experienced within the school setting, primarily from teachers. This insight corresponds to results indicated by Hall (2006) in which academic failure of Black males was related to three factors, one being negative treatment in schools and classrooms. Aligning with Hall's study, this factor could represent an important element in the inability of urban schools to aid Black males in reaching their full potential. This finding suggests the need for schools to incorporate cultural diversity and competence training for teachers, particularly those in urban school settings.

These findings are significant, as this is a controllable element. Educators, administrators, and educational policymakers should institute sensitivity training and cultural competence in teacher training as well as continuing education development for existing teachers. Prejudicial behaviors should not be tolerated in a school setting, where the goal is to allow all children to reach their highest potential academically and beyond. Training and continuing education for teachers related to potential prejudice and other biases is essential to eliminate this negative influence on students.

The findings also demonstrate the positive effects of various external and internal influences. Aligning with Brooks (1994) and Zimmerman and Arunkumar (1994), who described three domains of protective influence to enable resilience (the individual, the family, and the environment), findings from the present study revealed perceptions of participants with regard to individual characteristics and qualities (internal factors) and familial and community factors (external factors) that contributed to their personal resilience. The findings suggested the perceived significance of familial influences that included the role of parental influence, particularly the role of the mother, the importance of a supportive and loving family, and the presence of a two-parent household providing a male/father role model. In addition, findings of the present study also indicated the perception of factors involving the community in terms of a strong sense of community within the neighborhood and involvement in the church community. Lastly, the findings demonstrated commonality among participant experiences that included attending a non-neighborhood school.

These results demonstrate alignment with the protective factor model of resilience. Protective factors, described as elements that are related to healthy psychological and physical development, are essential to development of resilience, and are attributed to individual characteristics or attributes, supportive family relationships/family cohesion and warmth, and access to community resources/support (external support systems) (Garmezy, 1985, 1991; Hall, 2006, 2007; Holzman, 2008, Masten et al., 1999; Myers & Taylor, 1998; Poindexter, 2000; Wallace & Fisher, 2007). The study findings also align with the characteristics that have been shown to contribute to resilience within the African American family, including adaptable family roles,

kinship bonds, work ethic, religiosity, and achievement orientation (Hill, 1972; McAdoo, 1997; Wallace & Fisher, 2007). The finding demonstrating a commonality among participants in terms of familial involvement in church is consistent with previous studies demonstrating a positive role of religion in the resilience of African American families and children (Brega & Coleman, 1999; Brody et al., 1996; Molock et al., 2008). Therefore, a possible venue for intervention and outreach programs could incorporate faith-based activities, which can offer supportive factors, such as friendship bonds and mentor relationships, within a religion-based format.

Although educators cannot control familial circumstances, such as a single-parent household, the school can be used as a vehicle to provide a supportive, accepting, and strong community base for the student, perhaps in the absence of a strong familial support mechanism. It can be suggested, therefore, that school community building efforts on the part of the school administration would prove worthwhile in terms of resilience building and academic performance for students. Providing community support and resources could provide the deciding factors promoting resilience and achievement for students who otherwise lack support.

These findings support previous literature as well as add to literature on factors that may influence resilience in African American males in at-risk communities. As previously mentioned, a common element among experiences of participants in the present study was the attendance at a non-neighborhood school. This factor may have provided a disconnection between peers demonstrating negative or violent social behaviors common to the high violent crime index neighborhood in which they lived. Some participants noted school as an “escape” from the negative circumstances and



experiences, which would support this notion. In addition, for approximately half of the participants, the non-neighborhood school attended was a parochial school, which could demonstrate interaction and incorporation of the previously noted element of religiosity as a factor mediating risk factors for participants.

Religion and the choice to attend a school environment that incorporates religion is a personal decision that must be made by the individual family. It is possible that the element of religiosity and its effect on the personal resilience of African American males from high crime index areas stems from the strong sense of community and common faith shared among church-going members of the community, providing the supportive, accepting, strong community base previously mentioned. In addition, religion adds a moral factor, helping to establish and promote positive, healthy behaviors, while discouraging self-destructive, negative behaviors. Although the incorporation of faith-based interventions is limited in public school settings, it is not limited in parochial school settings. Public schools can, however, incorporate general non-specific interventions that contribute to establishing a school community moral code, which could incorporate promotion of acceptable, healthful behaviors and the benefits of education with discouragement of non-acceptable behaviors such as cheating, stealing, injury to the health and well-being of others, and the detriments of incomplete education.

The data also support the use of non-neighborhood schools, particularly for students demonstrating special educational needs. While extremely talented students may benefit from interaction with a more diverse student base, students who are having specific difficulties may also benefit from removal from their social circumstances into a non-neighborhood school with different social circumstances and possibly a more diverse

population. Rather than automatically assigning students to the nearest school, perhaps mixing neighborhoods throughout the district schools could provide more diversity in the student populations at each school.

In addition to the findings demonstrating commonality among participant experiences that included attending a non-neighborhood school, participants commonly reported the presence of two parents within the household that provided a male role model. Although research has demonstrated the negative effects of single-parent households on African American youth (Molock et al., 2008; Noguera, 2008; Wallace & Fisher, 2007), results from the present study suggest a positive effect of two-parent households through the perception of the importance in providing a male role model. Implications for these findings can be related to mentor programs that may be able to foster a missing male role model and relationship similar to that of “fictive kin” relationships as described by Fordham (1996) as “people within a given society to whom one is not related by birth but with whom one shares essential reciprocal social and economic relationships” (p. 71).

### **Limitations**

Participation in the study was limited to five academically successful African American men from areas designated with a high violent crime index in the Chicago area. Because of the relatively small sample, which was limited to male participants originating from urban high violent crime index areas, the research findings may not be generalizable to other African-American male students from suburban or rural areas, or female African American students. One of the limitations due to the qualitative research method and sampling approach utilizing a small sample was that the analysis of the

findings cannot necessarily be extended to wider populations. Where quantitative methods incorporate large samples to enable statistical generalizations with a goal of generalizing findings and inferences to a larger population (Leech, 2005), qualitative methods can allow for *analytic generalizations* (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which are "applied to wider theory on the basis of how selected cases 'fit' with general constructs" (Curtis, Gesler, Smith, & Washburn, 2000, p. 1002). In qualitative research, the focus is on the generalizability of a conclusion within the specific setting or population studied (Leech, 2005; Maxwell, 1992).

In addition, the data from the study was contingent on the participant's willingness to answer honestly and openly during the interviewing process. Therefore, the validity of the study was limited to the reliability of the information provided by the participants. In an effort to ensure openness and honesty during the interview process, attention was given to provide a comfortable and confidential atmosphere to promote open and honest answers from participants (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The present study has provided useful information related to the perceptions of resilience and the factors that influence the academic resilience of African American males from at-risk, high violent crime index areas contributing to their educational persistence. This is an area that is worthy of further empirical investigation. The findings of the study support current resilience models in the literature while also suggesting specific factors that may impact individual resilience among this population. Two important factors were uniquely demonstrated to be perceived as contributory external factors to the participants' resilience in the study. These factors included the positive

effects of two-parent households and the male/father role model and the common experience of attending a non-neighborhood school. Although previous research has cited the negative effects of single-parent households, the present study suggests the possible positive effects of the presence of two parents.

Therefore, research should continue to examine the influential factors related to resilience and particularly academic resilience of urban African American male youth. Results of this study suggest the need for an examination into the importance of attending a non-neighborhood school for this population. Of interest may be the specific type of school, such as parochial, gifted, or trade-oriented, and the specific effects resulting from attendance of school outside the immediate neighborhood and the relationship with resilience. Future work could focus on identifying factors within these schools that could be providing enhanced resilience to these youth.

The current study was geographically homogenous in that it was comprised of African American males from high violent crime index areas in the Chicago area, limiting the generalizability of the findings of the study. Future research should focus on examining African American urban students from more diverse geographic areas. This may lead to additional valuable insights regarding the educational experience of urban African American students.

Finally, the present study was limited to African American men from at-risk neighborhoods within an urban setting. Further research could be inclusive of other minority groups and compare factors associated with resilience across groups, identifying more universal factors that can affect resilience in high crime areas. Urban versus rural low-income and high-risk areas could also be investigated to identify differences as well

as similarities in resilience and particularly academic resilience. Teachers and parents need to be find time to build positive relationships with students at an early age.

According to the data in this research project, individuals who spend extra time with the child to mold them as a person and take interest in the journey in which the children are traveling are more likely to have a lasting impact on that child.

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## Appendix A: Letter to University for Permission

To Whom it May Concern:

My name is Johnnie Thomas. I am currently a Doctoral Candidate at DePaul University in the College of Education. I have been approved by my dissertation committee to pursue a qualitative research study that examines the characteristics and factors that contribute to the academic success of African American males. This study will seek to answer the question: what enables these students to achieve academic excellence despite the influence of the environments in which they are raised? In an effort to complete this study, I am seeking your permission to post flyers to recruit potential candidates. I aspire to interview a sample of approximately five students who match the profile associated with this research project.

While the literature is clear about the factors that contribute to the African-American male's failure to achieve academic success, few studies have explored those that lead certain African-American males to succeed. Despite living in an economically-depressed, high crime environment, many African-American males are able to strive for excellence and successful completion of their education. African-American males continue to post the most negative outcomes in educational related data (i.e. achievement, attendance, drop-out rates, etc.). There is a need to understand why some African-American males from neighborhoods with high violent crime indexes are able to succeed academically while others are not. The dual purpose of this phenomenological study is, first, to understand the lived experiences of five resilient African-American males who were successful in their educational pursuits and second, to discover the central meaning of resilience and those factors, both internal and external, contributing to their success. The findings of this research may contribute to a better understanding of resilience and how to incorporate resilience into instructional programs practice to improve outcomes for African-American male students in the future.

In an effort to recruit participants for this study, I will need your assistance. I would like to post the attached flyer to provide information regarding the details of the study. Potential participants will have an opportunity to ask questions and will be provided with informed consent prior to their interview. It is my hope that this study will have a tremendous impact on the educational community as it relates to facilitating a better understanding of the needs of African-American males in schools. I look forward to the opportunity to work with students on your campus. Once I receive your permission, I plan to work to post information on campus. Please feel free to contact me with comments or questions at 773-469-4249.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this dissertation project.

Respectfully,

Johnnie Thomas  
Doctoral Student  
DePaul University

**Appendix B: Flyer for Recruitment of Participants**

# AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES



**Contact**  
**Johnnie Thomas,**  
**Doctoral Candidate**

Phone: 773-469-4249

Fax: 847-718-7698

[jthomasmsw1@yahoo.com](mailto:jthomasmsw1@yahoo.com)

## Are you successful?

While the literature is clear about the factors that contribute to the African-American male's failure to achieve academic success, few studies have explored those characteristics that lead to success. The purpose of this research study is to better understand why some African-American males from neighborhoods with high violent crime indices are able to succeed academically while others are not. The findings of this research will aid in shaping better understandings around supporting the success of African-American males in schools.

**You can  
make a difference!**

## **Appendix C: Consent Form**

### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

#### **AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES' PERCEPTION OF FACTORS INVOLVED IN THEIR RESILIENCE AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

**What is the purpose of this research?**

African-American males continue to perform poorly in school data (i.e. achievement, attendance, drop-out rates, etc.). The purpose of this research is to understand why some African-American males are able to succeed under difficult circumstances while others are not. I would like to share the stories of five resilient African-American males who have been successful in school and study those factors that contributed to their success. The findings of this research may contribute to a better understanding of how schools can successfully improve outcomes for African-American males. This study is being conducted by Johnnie Thomas a graduate doctoral candidate at DePaul University and is being supervised by his faculty advisor Dr. Gayle Mindes.

**How much time will this take?**

Participation in this study will take approximately 3 to 6 hours of your time.

**What will I be asked to do if I agree to participate in this study?**

Should you choose to participate, an interview will occur. In this interview you will be asked about your background, the environment in which you grew up, your definition of resilience, and key sources of motivation. You may choose to share names and relationships of those you believe aided you in academic success. The interviews will be recorded to make sure accurate notes are taken.

**What are the risks involved in participating in this study?**

The researcher anticipates that risks will be minimal. Some possible risks that could occur are loss of time, recalling stressful events, embarrassment, and invasion of privacy. The Principal Investigator anticipates minimal risks if any. Please remember you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

**What are the benefits of my participation in this study?**

Although there will be no direct benefit to you, my hope is that this research will contribute to better teaching practices to benefit students from similar backgrounds and circumstances.

**Can I decide not to participate? If so, are there other options?**

Yes, you can choose not to participate at any time for any reason. Even if you agree to be in the study now, you can change your mind later and leave the study. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate or change your mind later.

**How will the confidentiality of the research records be protected?**

The researcher will not share your name or any identifying information. Your identity will be kept confidential. A fake name will be used in any paper that is published. Only the researcher will have access to the records that identify you by name.

**Will I receive any kind of payment for being in the study?**

Participants will receive a gift card at the conclusion of their participation as an expression of gratitude for their time.

**Whom can I contact for more information?**

If you have questions regarding the research project, please do not hesitate to contact Johnnie Thomas at 773-469-4249 or faculty sponsor Dr. Gayle Mindes at 773-325-7769. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Susan Loess-Perez, DePaul University's Director of Research Protections at 312-362-7593 or by email at [sloesspe@depaul.edu](mailto:sloesspe@depaul.edu).

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have all my questions answered. (Check one :)

I consent to participate in this study.

I **DO NOT** consent to be in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date:

Printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Interview Questions

### Interview Guiding Questions:

#### Resiliency

- 1) What have you experienced in terms of academic resilience as an African-American male from a neighborhood with high crime and violence?
- 2) What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of resiliency?
- 3) Have you had to overcome obstacles? At home? At school? In the community? Others? How?
- 4) Describe yourself as a student. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses?
- 5) Describe your community. What is positive? What is negative?

#### Resiliency and African Americans Family

- 1) Describe your family. What are their strengths? What are their weaknesses?
- 2) What is your family makeup? Did it have an impact on you? How?
- 3) Describe your extended family. How large? What type of role do they have?
- 4) What is your relationship/closeness like with your family? why
- 5) Describe you church involvement.
- 6) Describe your family's church involvement.
- 7) What is it like in the community you grew up in?
- 8) What role did your family have in the community?



- 9) Do you have any close relationships with community members?

#### African American Males

- 1) What is it like being an African American in your community? How is it different or alike for African American females? How is it different or alike when compared to other racial groups?
- 2) What is it like being an African American at school?
- 3) Why is school important to you?
- 4) Do you have goals or dreams?
- 5) Do you consider yourself to be a successful student? Person? Friend? Family member?
- 6) How have you achieved excellence in an environment that has so many social problems?
- 7) When did you decide to become successful in school, and who influenced you?
- 8) Do you attend any other activities outside of school? What are they (explain)?

#### Caring Adults (Mentoring)

- 9) What type of person are you? Who helped to mold you?
- 10) Explain why you feel your peers are not as successful in school?
- 11) How involved are/were your parents during your time in high school?
- 12) Have you ever been out of the city? Where? When?

- 13) What school staff member was most influential to your success in school?  
Why? What about at home?
- 14) What do you want to be when you finish school? Why is that important?
- 15) How did you manage to stay away from trouble? At home? At school? In the community?

## VITA

### JOHNNIE THOMAS

**Place of birth: December 15,1973 Chicago, Illinois**

#### EDUCATION

**Bachelor of Arts**, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL: December, 1997

**Master of Social Work**, Loyola University, Chicago, IL: May, 2000

**Doctor of Education**, DePaul University, Chicago, IL: August, 2010

**Dissertation Title: African-American Males' Perceptions of Factors Involved in their Resilience and Academic Success**

#### CERTIFICATIONS

Illinois Type 75: Administrative Certificate

Illinois Type 73: Social Worker

#### PRESENTATIONS

Thomas, J. (2006). *Working with angry and aggressive individuals*. Teacher workshop presented to the staff of Humphery Middle School, Valley View Public School Schools, Bolingbrook, IL

Thomas, J. (2008). *Crisis intervention and prevention*. Social Worker conference presentation, Illinois Association of School Social Workers, Champaign, IL

Thomas, J. (2009). *Differentiated instruction: Teaching to all students*. Professional workshop for special education administrators, Illinois Alliance of Administrators for Special Education, Tinley Park, IL

Thomas, J. (2010). *Flexible Service Delivery Model (RtI)*. Teacher workshop presented to staff of Township High School District 214, Township High School District 214, Arlington Heights, IL

#### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2009-2010 Associate Superintendent for Student Services, Township High School District 214, Arlington Heights, IL

2005-2009 Executive Director of Student Services, Valley View School District 365-U, Romeoville, IL

2004-2005 Assistant Director of Special Education, Valley View School District 365-U, Romeoville, IL

2003-2004 Special Education Coordinator, Valley View School District 365-U, Romeoville, IL

2000-2004 School Social Worker, Chicago Public School District, Chicago, IL