



# “Something To Be About”: Identity and Institutions in the Lives of Urban Youth

*Stefanie DeLuca*

# Teamwork!

**SUSAN CLAMPET-LUNDQUIST and KATHRYN EDIN**

**Fieldworkers:** Phil Garboden, Elizabeth Talbert, Anna Rhodes, Jen Darrah, Eva Rosen, Siri Warkentien, Peter Rosenblatt, Barbara Condcliffe, Melody Boyd, Megan Holland, Brielle Bryan, Tracey Shollenberger, Queenie Zhu, Kaitlin Edin-Nelson, Marisa Edin-Nelson, Bridget Davis, Carly Knight, Jacqueline Hwang, and Anna Westin, Rebecca Kissane, Alessandra Del Conte Dickovick, Annette Rogers, Anita Zuberi, Jennifer Pashup

**Coding:** Holly Koogler, Robert Francis, Allison Young, Blythe George

**Funders:** Annie E. Casey Foundation, William T. Grant Foundation, Russell Sage Foundation, Century Foundation

**21<sup>st</sup> Century Cities Initiative**

**Our partners at HUD and PDR**

**Youth, parents and teachers in Baltimore**

**YOU!**



# Talking to Youth In Baltimore

## • **MTO Study**

- **Families recruited from highest poverty areas city**
  - **2003-2004**
    - 150 mothers, 89 youth, school observations and teacher interviews
  - **2006**
    - Pilot interviews for young adult study
  - **2010-2011**
    - 150 interviews with 15-24 year olds; longitudinal data for more than 50
  - **Ethnographic observations:** 2011-2013, through 2015, w 20 youth

## • **Hearing Their Voices Study**

- Youth 15-24
  - From Upton/Druid Heights, Sandtown/Winchester, Penn North, and Mondawmin, but also Park Heights (Northwest Baltimore), Morrell Park
- **Summer/Fall 2015**
- Youth participation in research process
- **Rapid response study to explore:**
  - Youth perspective and involvement in events around April 2015 unrest
  - Youth perspective on police in Baltimore
  - How youth view their place in the city
  - How youth view the city as a place to become an adult
  - Focus on disconnected youth



# Protest Activity



What did the media fail to show us?



# What People Think

---

I'm tired of being looked at like prey...I'm tired of looking at 11 year olds as potential thieves, muggers and murderers on my walk home from the office...I'm tired of doing the mental checklist of what I will do if I hear someone break into my house.... All I know is when there are more police, there is less crime. When people get arrested... they go do that shit somewhere else, or they think twice about doing it at all.... —Tracey Halvorsen, February 2014

It's not only money and better policy that are missing in these circles; it's norms...There are no basic codes and rules woven into daily life... People born into the most chaotic situations can still be asked the same questions: Are you living for short-term pleasure or long-term good? Are you living for yourself? ...Do you have the freedom of self-control or are you in bondage to your desires?—David Brooks, New York Times, March 2015

# Youth and the Events of April 2015

---

Most youth spent April 27th **simply trying to get home** from school or work. Home is where most remained for the next several days as they sheltered in place, eyes glued to the television.

While quick to affirm peaceful protests, youth almost uniformly **condemned the looting** and were deeply disturbed by the property destruction that ensued, especially to businesses that served the community.

But they reserved their sharpest criticism for their Mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, whom they saw as aloof and ineffectual.

Youth expressed nuanced perspectives on law enforcement. **Most said the unrest revealed tensions that went well beyond community-police relationships.**

*Yep, they there to protect and serve. All of them ain't like that. So I mean that's just like one apple spoiling the bunch. You got to figure out do you want to throw the whole bunch away or just get the spoiled apples out, or you going to stop eating apples because of one rotten apple? Or get another bushel! —Michelle, 23*

# “Set-Up City”

---

Narratives reveal their deep sense of abandonment and exclusion from the city of Baltimore as a whole.

*Baltimore. I mean, I love my city to death, but this is setup city. They set it up for you to fail. -Jayden, 20*

Youth characterize Baltimore as devoid of meaningful economic opportunity, a “drug city”—due to the dominance of drugs in the economic & social life of their communities—or “gun city” because of violence so endemic to their streets. Some feel it was unsafe to even attend a party—or school—without a weapon.

*When I was robbing people, there was a reason why I was doing it. My stomach was literally growling, nothing to do. Either I die, starve or I do something. I was too young for a job. I mean I cut grass during the summer. I shoveled snow through the winter. But do you do in between? -George, 20*

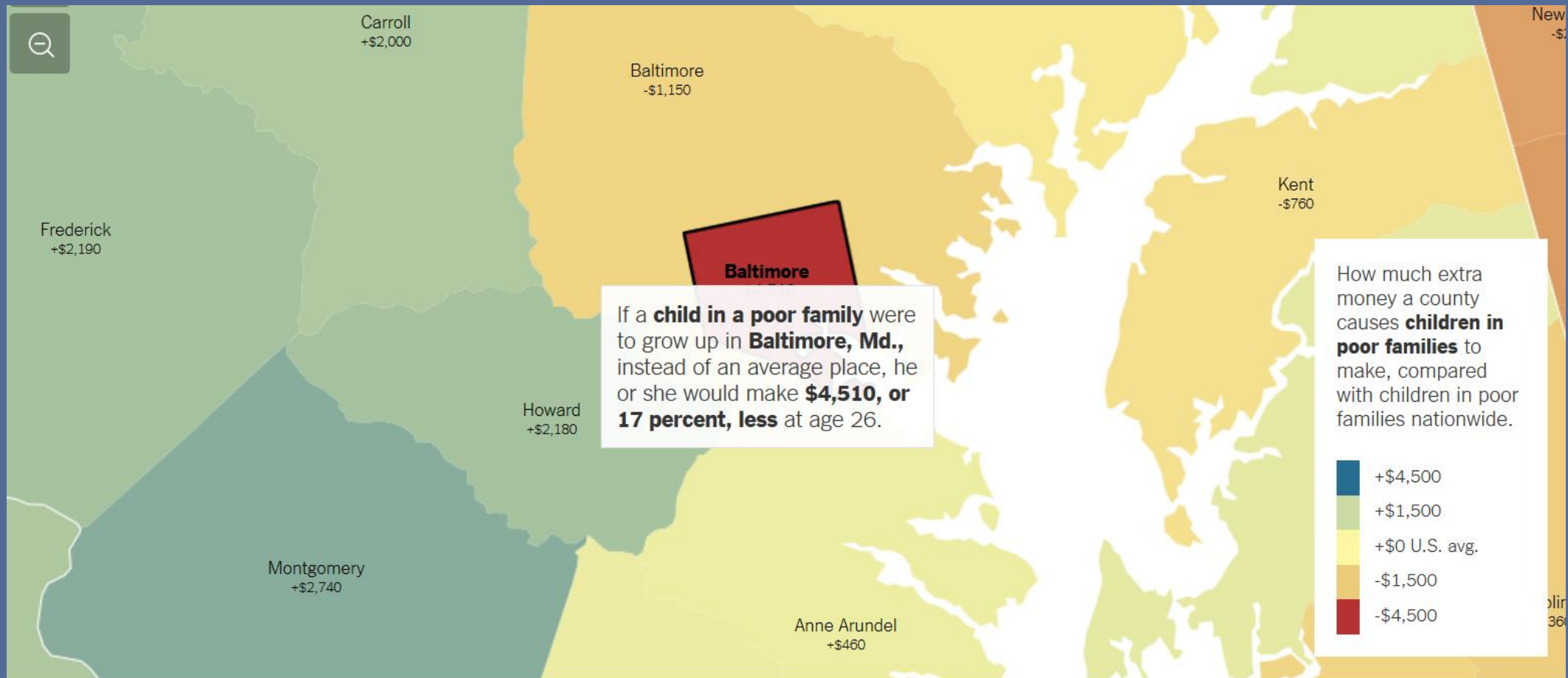
# “There’s Not Enough”

---

Yet the most common grievance—expressed by nearly every youth in the study—was the institutional abandonment of their neighborhoods—the lack of safe public spaces, recreation centers, and programs oriented toward youth development and their futures.

*We realized that, as children, we didn’t even have recreational centers, we didn’t have, we didn’t have anything to do during the day. Like — we got into fights and things because that’s — we — we had so much energy as kids, but it was nothing to put towards. We didn’t have people to say, “Well we got a football team over here, we going to start a football team,” or, “We got....” We didn’t have those type of resources.—Troy, 21*

*“There’s not enough resources to give people the stuff that they need to create themselves to where they need to make themselves, to make the youth better.”—Rhiannon 18*



Baltimore City is extremely bad for income mobility for children in poor families. It is among the worst counties in the U.S.

Source: Chetty et al, Equality of Opportunity Project, courtesy of the *New York Times*



- But in this least likely place, we found reason for optimism:
- We followed the fortunes of children who started their lives in the high-rise public housing projects deemed so toxic they were torn down.
- As a result of housing policies, children experienced less poor, less violent neighborhoods for part of their childhood. Their parents' mental health improved; they grew up with more employed and educated neighborhoods
- When they find something to be “about,” a passion that bridges their challenging present with their sought after future:  
**They're gritty, innovative, adaptive, and capable**

<i>Intergenerational Change in Baltimore</i>					
	High School Graduate	GED	Entry, College or Trade School	Ever in the street	“On Track” 2010
<i>Parents</i>	27%	5%	13%	50%	
<i>Youth</i>	72%	6%	51%	18%	82%
<i>Baltimore MTOQ10 Qualitative Study, N=150</i>					

# The Identity Project

---

What you're “**about**”: Concrete activities, hobbies, interests, passions that give meaning to **everyday** activities

Forged in direct **opposition to the street**

Help youth **distance** themselves from certain peers, some family ties (“not about that life”)

Helps youth leverage and **connect** with peers, teachers, mentors, parents

Creates an aspirational **bridge** between the difficult present and uncertain, hoped for future (sometimes vocational)

**Give grit the spark** so that youth can endure the tough slog of school and work



# Dana's TV Show



At ten-years-old, Dana Jenkins had a lot of things on her mind. In search of an outlet, “Dana’s TV Show” was born, shot in her bedroom using an old video camera of her dad’s. On that VHS cassette she recorded her innermost thoughts, read new poems she had written, and talked freely about her up and down relationship with her father, an addict who was in and out of jail. Often, she added a little show-and-tell, featuring favorite toys.

At 14, Dana found herself helping to care for a half-sister who was dying of AIDS. That’s when she realized, “Wow, I actually think this is something that I could do!” The tragedy of her sister’s death sparked the motivation for her life’s work: to be a registered nurse.



“Wanna see my birds? They is in a coop I built...me and my father built a coop in the backyard...[when I need to] I separate myself from everybody...I go out there and mess with my birds or whatever and I don’t feel like dealin with them.” –*Vicky*

# Bob, at 17

---

I saw this guy, a black guy, he had on this black trench coat and these really puffy black pants. They had spikes, they had chains, the whole nine yards. He had a shirt of a band that I had never seen before, but the shirt was so awesome, it just stayed in my mind and it was etched there... He showed me that you can be black but you don't have to be like these guys out on the street.

I found an outlet, though – they had an after-school program that a lot of kids liked to go to, and I started playin card games...I mean [Pokemon] it was so fast paced and high octane, the colors were awesome!

“We were all so different and that got me through those last two years of high school.”

# I'm Bold, Courteous and I Like to Dance!

---

Bridget made up her own routine and won admission to the competitive Academy for the Arts high school, despite a lack of any formal training.

Bridget said, “I’m here to get an education.”

Some of her middle school friends had already started to become “kinda bad ... they get high, sell drugs, skip school, get in trouble with their parents, sexually interactive and stuff like that.” Dance helped Bridget draw a clear line between herself and these friends, even telling several of them, “**You’re cut!**”

# Grit Needs Inspiration

---

“You can make anything little big. You know? ...I was working at the Burger King, I was only cleaning the dining room, only two, three hours a day, but **my mind was just bigger than just cleaning the dining room**, you know that’s why after awhile I was offered supervisors and manager positions.”-*Martin*

“I would just deliver mail from the Center to the School of Pharmacy, so I would walk around on the campus, and I’d see what’s going on. [The medical professionals] would basically talk to me, tell me how things worked and how things were going there. **So that’s what kind of sparked my interest to become a pharmacist.**” –*Tony*

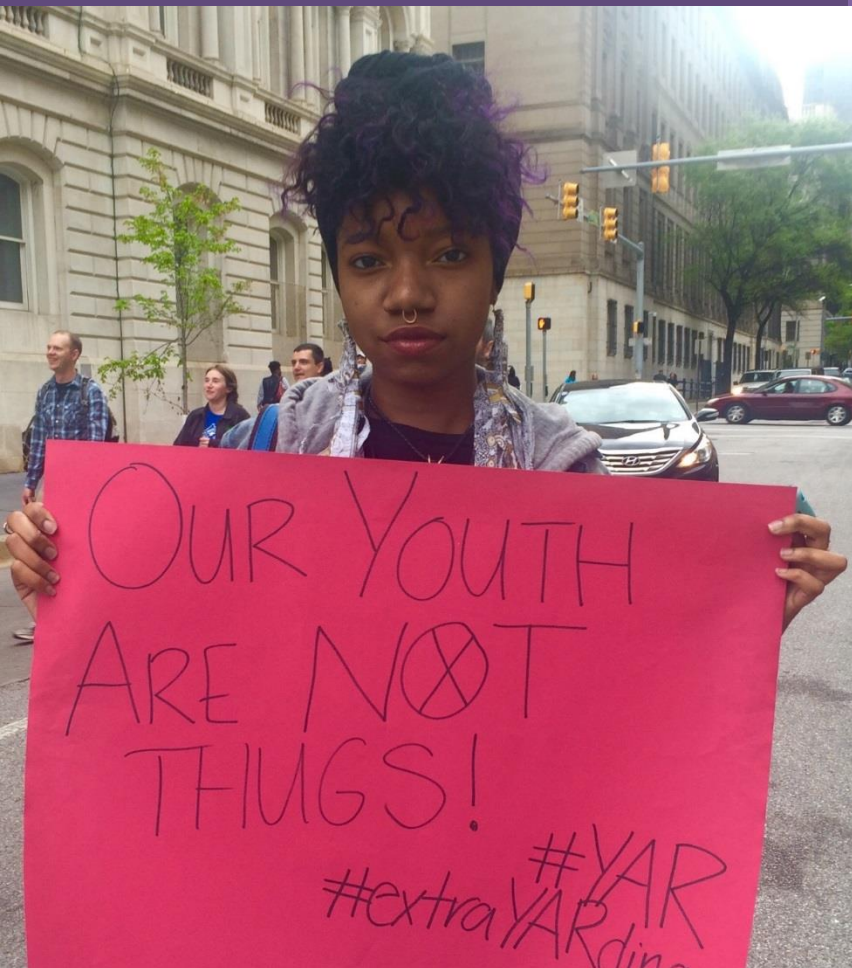
<b>Identity Project and Trajectory After High School (N=116)</b>			
	On Track	Neither Working Nor in School	Total
Youth Had Identity Project	94%	6%	100%
Youth Did Not Have Identity Project	65%	35%	100%

# Spoiler Alert: Grit Is Not Enough

---

- Intergenerational trauma and reduced capacity of their parents haunts them, and they are still disproportionately exposed to neighborhood poverty & violence relative to middle class peers
- They eagerly launch but do so too quickly and haphazardly—**expedited adulthood**
  - They have virtually no housing options of their own (Bob and Bridget)
  - “Life is short”
  - Scaffolding is missing, so they reverse the life course
- They are information poor and vulnerable to institutional traps:
  - Their high schools do not prepare them for college or work
  - They are served by struggling community colleges and predatory trade schools
  - “Why wait years to become something?”
- They work for exploitative employers, in industries that don’t pay enough

# Policy Directions



- Improvement in neighborhood quality
  - Housing mobility programs
  - Inclusionary zoning
  - Community development
- We can do better than luck: Investment in youth development
  - Career Academies
  - Arts, music and sports
- Make work viable and pay
  - Apprenticeship programs and summer work opportunities
- Help youth avoid postsecondary traps
  - High school counseling on options
  - Institutional improvements and regulation
- These kids are “Our Kids”
  - Isolation breeds extreme views on urban youth