I, Melissa J DeJonckheere, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies.

It is entitled:
Illustrating the Contextual Nature of Stress and Resilience among Adolescents in Three Low-Income Communities

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Illustrating the Contextual Nature of Stress and Resilience among Adolescents in Three Low-Income Communities

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Abstract
Chronic, uncontrollable exposure to social and environmental stressors has been associated with negative health and well-being outcomes, including high blood pressure, cardiovascular reactivity and disease, psychological distress, passive coping strategies development of mental health problems later in life, poor academic achievement, and lower relational competence. Chronic and uncontrollable stress disproportionately impacts at-risk youth, including low-income, minority and immigrant populations. However, most research focuses on the broader experiences of these youth rather than contextual and community factors that influence chronic stress. The purpose of this study was to address gaps in the literature by (1) understanding the cultural and contextual differences and (2) consider factors of resilience, rather than risk, in low-income populations in Cincinnati. Three communities were recruited to participate in the study: rural White Appalachian, urban Black, and urban Latino adolescents. Through a narrative and participatory approach, 18 adolescents participated in a narrative interview and 8 adolescents subsequently engaged in participatory analysis and creation of a visual narrative. The results reveal that although all three groups experienced many chronic stressors (e.g., neighborhood characteristics including violence and drug use, conflict in relationships, academic stress), their experiences with risk and protective factors were very different in each community. The results indicate a need for tailored interventions rather than one-size-fits-all approaches to reducing chronic stress and supporting adolescents. Implications for future research and recommendations for strategies to bolster protective factors in each community are discussed.
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Stress is widely accepted as a contributor to disease and psychopathology across the lifespan. Despite prominence in health, psychological, and educational literature, “stress” continues to be a broad, poorly defined construct that is difficult to operationalize and examine in children and adolescents (Grant et al., 2003). Historically, three models have been used to conceptualize and measure stress: stimulus (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), response (Evans & Kim, 2007; McEwen & Seeman, 1999), and transactional perspectives (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). All three perspectives define stress as the persistent or relatively momentary environmental conditions that challenge individuals, yet differ on the degree to which psychological processes impact stress and associated outcomes (Grant et al., 2014).

For example, Holmes and Raye (1967) outlined stimulus/objective stress as the measurable changes within the environment that impact individuals regardless of cognitive appraisals or perceptions. More recently, Grant and her colleagues (2003) proposed a return to an objective measure of stress to more clearly understand the effects of specific events and conditions, including the ways in which the stressors contribute to negative health outcomes. They defined stress as “environment events or chronic conditions that objectively threaten the physical and/or psychological health or well-being of a particular age in a particular society” (p. 449). Using this model, objective measures of stress have been associated with psychological problems in adolescents (Grant et al., 2004), including internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression, and externalizing symptoms such as aggression and delinquency. Stimulus/objective models frequently include attention to moderating (Leventhal & Brooks-
Gunn, 2008; Wadsworth & Santiago, 2011) and mediating (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2009; Grant et al., 2006) variables that influence the relation between stress and psychopathology.

The response models of stress focus on the physiological and emotional responses to external conditions that threaten health and well-being. Looking at the brain and the effects of stress on the brain, research suggests that acute stress responses promote successful adaptation, whereas chronic stress can promote or exacerbate physiological dysregulation (McEwen, 2008). The overwhelming impact of chronic stress on health and functioning is referred to as “allostatic overload,” and includes changes in behavior (sleep patterns, nutrition, exercise, smoking and substance use, etc.) that occur in response to chronic stress (McEwen & Seeman, 1999). Allostatic overload is measured through stress hormones and related physiological biomarkers and has been linked to depression and anxiety disorders (McEwen, 2008), learned helplessness (Evans, 2003), and physiological reactivity and dysregulation (Evans & Kim, 2007). Evans has further developed the response model of stress to examine “cumulative risk” in low-income populations, where poverty creates multiple environmental risk factors that accumulate and impact coping and well-being across the lifespan (Evans, 2003, 2004; Evans & Kim, 2007, 2013; Evans & Marcynyszyn, 2004).

The most frequently cited conceptualization of stress is the transactional model articulated by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). This model defines stress as the relationship between external, environmental events and an individual’s response to these events. That is, stress cannot be measured only as an event, but rather as an interaction between cognitive, emotional, and coping processes. Primary in these cognitive, emotional, and coping processes is an individual’s appraisal of the external condition. Appraisal allows the individual to: (1)
evaluate the potential threats, harms, and challenges associated with an event (“primary appraisal”), (2) determine the possible coping behaviors that can be used and their expected results (“secondary appraisal”), and (3) continually reassess the threats, harms, challenges, and coping behaviors as the situation evolves (“reappraisal”) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Despite problems with the measurement of transactional stress, the approach has been used to explain differences in the development of psychological, health, and educational outcomes for youth who experience high levels of stress (Grant et al., 2003; Grant et al., 2004).

All three models provide evidence that stress is a substantial contributor to negative health and well-being outcomes and highlight the additional burden of chronic, rather than acute stress (Evans & Kim, 2013; Goodman, McEwen, Dolan, Schafer-Kalkhoff, & Adler, 2005; Grant et al., 2014). In order to better understand and respond to disparities in adolescent health and well-being, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore the disproportionate levels of chronic stress experienced by youth living in low-income communities in and near Cincinnati, Ohio. This dissertation responds to two prevalent gaps in the adolescent stress literature: (1) attention to the contextual and community-specific risk factors that contribute to stress in low-income communities, and (2) exploration of contextual and community-specific protective factors that may buffer the impact of chronic stress.

In this chapter, research is presented that examines chronic stress through several communities labeled as at-risk¹ for negative outcomes associated with stress. The aims of this

¹Though frequently criticized as a broad, negative label that misses the contextual complexity of individuals, the term “at-risk” is used in the literature to describe individuals from populations that frequently experience multiple, chronic life stressors (e.g., Evans, 2003; Grant & Carlson, 2008; Ungar, 2007). “At-risk populations” is used over “at-risk youth” to reflect the uncontrollable circumstances that adolescents face.
chapter are to: (1) define chronic stress and the impact of chronic stress in adolescence; (2) analyze the ways in which some youth are disproportionately affected by chronic stressors; (3) critique attention to stressors by presenting evidence from resilience research; and (4) identify implications for future research and interventions with youth experiencing chronic stress in “at-risk” and underserved communities.

**Chronic Stress in Adolescence**

Research suggests that as children reach adolescence, they face more environmental stressors in addition to physiological changes. These environmental stressors may include peer and romantic relationships, family conflict, harassment or discrimination, academic pressure, and other external factors that challenge the physiological and psychological capacities of youth (Cohen, Burt, & Bjorck, 1987; Petersen & Hamburg, 1986; Rutter, 1981). Many of the stressors youth face are normative, acute experiences that involve relatively little exposure, but with increased exposure there is more risk of negative outcomes. Acute events (e.g., fighting a peer once) are suggested to have a different outcome than chronic events (e.g., being bullied throughout the school year), and controllable (e.g., not studying for a test) to have a different outcome that those events that are uncontrollable (e.g., parental divorce). The most detrimental events are those which are both chronic (Grant et al., 2003) and uncontrollable (e.g., Seligman, 1972).

Chronic, uncontrollable exposure to social and environmental stressors has been associated with high blood pressure (Brady & Matthews, 2006), cardiovascular reactivity and disease (Low, Salomon, & Matthews, 2009), psychological distress (Benjet, Borges, & Medina-Mora, 2010; Grover et al., 2009; Hammen, Brennan, Keenan-Miller, Hazel, & Najman, 2010),
maladaptive coping strategies (Evans & Kim, 2007), and development of mental health problems later in life (Benjet et al., 2010; Evans & Schamberg, 2009). Some children face disproportionate exposure to chronic, uncontrollable stress that threatens their development, health and well-being. The literature on stress, coping, and psychological symptoms and behaviors has explored this increased risk among children and adolescents living in poverty or low-income family environments, urban youth, rural youth, African American, Latina/o, LGBTQ adolescents, immigrant youth, and other minority identifications. These youth are not only more likely to face significant adverse childhood experiences (e.g., divorce, violence, etc.; Burke, Hellman, Scott, Weems, & Carrion, 2011) but also the daily hassles that are associated with minority status in the United States (e.g., discrimination; Bennett & Miller, 2006). Hassles have been found to predict negative adjustment and poor outcomes in youth, and represent the day-to-day stress of discrimination and "trying to get by" (Bennett & Miller, 2006; Li, Nussbaum, & Richards, 2007).

**Stress Experiences of Adolescents in At-Risk Cincinnati Communities**

In order to gain relevant local knowledge, extant research is presented that examines risk factors and stress-related outcomes for community identifications that are prominent within the greater Cincinnati area. For the purpose of this dissertation, at-risk populations in greater Cincinnati include: (1) poor and low-income, (2) urban, (3) rural, (4) African American, and (5) Latino adolescents. The existing research that examines risk factors and outcomes for these five at-risk populations is extensive but lacks clarity due to the inter-relatedness of at-risk community identities. For example, youth from families with a lower socioeconomic status and urban environments are more likely to also identify with a racial or ethnic minority (Carlson & Grant,
Describing the stressors faced by one "group" often ignores the compounding factors that influence stress, coping, and psychological outcomes. Understanding life experiences is further muddied when considering neighborhood, gender, age, and ability, pointing to an ongoing need to investigate and understand stressors within individual communities (rather than by race or SES) that may be particularly relevant for youth. More research is needed to identify risk factors within culturally bound or context-specific communities (e.g., neighborhoods within Cincinnati), tailoring interventions to the specific needs and resources of particular neighborhoods or community groups. The following section describes research that has attempted to tease out some of the nuances in experiences of adolescents in at-risk populations. Acknowledging the inherent problems in generalizing findings within at-risk populations and the need to focus on more localized risk factors, literature is synthesized that describes (1) risk factors and (2) health and well-being outcomes for the five at-risk populations prevalent in greater Cincinnati.

**Youth in Poor and Low-Income Families**

In 2013, Cincinnati had the fifth highest childhood poverty rate, with over 46 percent of children under the age of 18 living in poverty (Skinner, 2014). Poor families are defined as those with a family income below the federal poverty threshold, or $24,250 for a family of four in 2015 (Burwell, 2015). Low-income families have an income less than twice the federal poverty threshold ($48,500 for a family of four in 2015). In the U.S., 44 percent of all children live in low-income and poor families, and nearly 20 percent live below the federal poverty line (Burwell, 2015). "Poverty-related stress" has been defined as the major events and daily hassles that disproportionately impact individuals living in poor and low-income households (Wadsworth et al., 2008). With 14.7 million children living in poverty, and another 15 million
living in low-income families, it is essential to better understand the stressors and life 
experiences that may contribute to negative outcomes for health and well-being.

Poverty can be considered in multiple dimensions, including neighborhood-level and 
family-level. Neighborhood-level poverty is a chronic stressor for youth and impacts all 
individuals living within a community. Poverty, unemployment, low levels of education, and 
high residential mobility create unstable environments with fewer resources and higher rates of 
crime (Santiago, Wadsworth, & Stump, 2011). Attar and colleagues (1994) described the 
instability of poor communities as "neighborhood disadvantage," a factor that augments the 
negative effects of individual and family-level stressors. At the individual level, poverty impacts 
youth and their families through economic strain, family conflict, exposure to violence, and 
discrimination. For individuals and families who experience chronic poverty, stress includes 
major life events, chronic interpersonal stressors and the daily hassles of living with less money 
that the individual or family needs (Grant et al., 2000).

**Neighborhood Disadvantage**

Poverty is particularly influential through characteristics of the environment in which 
children grow and develop. Social and physical stressors, including family conflict, interpersonal 
stress, family dissolution, maternal depression, exposure to violence, and parent harshness, are 
correlated with income (Evans & Kim, 2013; Grant et al., 2003). Poor children and children in 
low-income families are more likely to live in homes that are chaotic or unstable. These home 
environments can include noise, crowding, and frequent mobility. In poor neighborhoods, 
adolescents are exposed to crime, violence, poor quality housing, food insecurity, and fewer 
places to exercise or engage in physical and healthy activities (Evans, 2004; Evans & Kim,
Since neighborhoods include individuals, families, schools, community centers, places of worship and other institutions, the impact of neighborhood disadvantage is far-reaching as each of these people and places interact in complex ways (Bennett & Miller, 2006).

**Cumulative Risk**

In addition to experiencing several, significant risks, youth living in poverty and low-income environments face the combination of multiple risk factors, across multiple domains and for long periods of time (Evans & Kim, 2013). Factors within the home, school, neighborhood, and broader community create a cumulative risk that impacts development. Further, in an ecological perspective, each setting is embedded within another impoverished context that impacts other adults and institutions within the child's life. Parents, peers, teachers, and neighbors are all impacted by the effects of community poverty.

**Outcomes for Adolescents in Poor and Low-Income Families.**

Poverty is a powerful variable that has the potential to influence cognitive development (Heckman, 2006), socio-emotional development (Grant et al., 2003) and physical health (Evans et al., 2012) throughout the lifespan. Research has demonstrated that health and SES are correlated, with more health problems developing for each step down the SES ladder (Santiago, 2009). These health problems are not fully explained by a lack of access to health care or lifestyle risk factors, but rather in part reflect the substantial impact of chronic poverty and resulting stress (Santiago, 2009). Both neighborhood-level and family-level poverty are risk factors for poor adjustment, including development of behavioral problems, emotional distress, and academic dropout or failure (Evans, 2004). In children and youth, poverty-related stress has...
been associated with depression, anxiety, aggression, and hostility (Evans & English, 2002; Hammack, Robinson, Crawford, & Li, 2004)

Poor individuals and their families are more likely to face chronic, uncontrollable stressors that contribute to poor psychological health outcomes than the general population (Wadsworth, 2008). The stress and daily hassles associated with not having enough financial support and living within a poor neighborhood intensify risk of psychological disorders and symptoms. For example, Santiago and her colleagues (2009) found that poverty-related stress was associated with psychological problems and anxious/depressed symptoms and contributed to worsening symptoms for delinquency, attention problems, and somatic complaints. A problem within low-income and poor communities, poor housing quality has been linked to worse emotional and behavioral functioning, lower reading levels, and lower cognitive skills among children and adolescents (Sanchez, Lambert, & Cooley-Strickland, 2013)

Finally, poverty interferes with self-regulation and coping strategies that should enable adolescents to adjust in the face of stress. Processes involved in self-regulation, including attention control, memory, delayed gratification, and planning, are all impeded by chronic stress. Research also demonstrates that low-income children with better self-regulatory skills have better adjustment and are resilient to maladaptive psychological outcomes (Evans & Kim, 2013). In terms of coping, low-income adolescents are more likely to use disengagement strategies, such as avoidance and withdrawal (Wadsworth & Santiago, 2011). Disengaged coping strategies are associated with increases in internalizing symptoms, externalizing behaviors, and social problems (Evans & Kim, 2013; Wadsworth & Santiago, 2011).

**Urban Youth**
Neighborhood Disadvantage

Similar to youth living in poverty, youth in urban settings are influenced by the effects of neighborhood disadvantage. In an urban context, neighborhood disadvantage results from macro-level structural forces that lead to disorganization and economic downturn (Bennett & Miller, 2006). Bennett and Miller (2006) describe the impact of urban neighborhoods in terms of distal stressors and proximal outcomes. Distal stressors include the structural forces that negatively impact the local economy, community organizations, and other institutions that may affect the lives of adolescents. Stressors within neighborhoods may include poverty, population density, rates of crime and violence, physical deterioration, and other characteristics that suggest social disorganization (Baumer, Horney, Felson, & Lauritsen, 2003; Brody et al., 2001). Additional context-specific stressors may include violence, pressure to join a gang, fearing one's safety, and harassment (Bennett & Miller, 2006).

Outcomes for Adolescents in Urban Environments

Living in a socially disorganized and disadvantaged neighborhood, especially for long periods of time throughout childhood, is associated with negative health and psychological outcomes for adolescents, some of which extend into adulthood (Baumer et al., 2003; Bennett & Miller, 2006; Brody et al., 2001; Copeland-Linder, Lambert, Chen, & Ialongo, 2011; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). For example, urban neighborhood disadvantage has been related to higher rates of adolescent health risk behaviors, including adolescent sexual activity, aggressive behavior, and substance abuse. Poor psychological and academic outcomes include aggression, delinquency, depression, social withdrawal, school failure, and substance abuse (Schmeelk-Cone & Zimmerman, 2003).
The effects of stress build on one another such that adolescents in socially disorganized, urban neighborhoods may have difficulty coping with their life experiences. Because youth are exposed to multiple, chronic stressors, their likelihood of experiencing poor social and developmental outcomes increases (Zimmerman, Ramírez-Valles, & Maton, 1999). Simultaneously, the weak, disorganized, or declining status of social institutions and support networks within communities may fail to provide opportunities for healthy development and functioning (Bennett & Miller, 2006). Additionally, others have demonstrated that risky health and social behaviors among adolescents can be a coping response to disorganization, where acting aggressively or engaging in dangerous behaviors helps youth to be socially accepted and avoid appearing “weak” in communities with crime and violence (Copeland-Linder et al., 2011). As a result, youth facing cumulative chronic risks to their health and well-being are rewarded for passive coping strategies and left without proper support to overcome stress factors.

**Rural Youth**

The research on rural youth is considerably less extensive than that examining the experiences of urban children and adolescents. Although limited, evidence suggests that the environmental factors that create chronic stress within rural settings often mirror those of urban areas. For example, Elgar (2003) found no significant differences between the stress levels in urban and rural adolescents, with both communities affected by high rates of unemployment, poverty, and residential mobility. Similar to urban environments, adolescents living in rural areas are also at increased risk for chronic, uncontrollable environmental stressors, including exposure to violence, geographic isolation, loneliness, barriers to health services, and economic instability. Adolescents in rural areas report stress resulting from lack of insurance, lack of transportation,
limited access to resources and services, and levels of unemployment (Wadsworth & Berger, 2006).

**Outcomes for Adolescents in Rural Areas**

As with youth living in other low-income environments, adolescents in rural areas face stressors stemming from economic strain. For example, adolescents in rural areas coping with poverty-related stress display more anxious and depressed symptoms as the result of proximal stressors, including conflict among family members and perceived economic strain (Wadsworth & Berger, 2006; Wadsworth & Compas, 2002). Neighborhood characteristics may include high levels of parental and community unemployment, poverty, and poor academic attainment (Curtis, Waters, & Brindis, 2011). These community-level factors may affect the availability of resources to support health and well-being, including preventative efforts to mitigate risk factors.

Rates of sexual intercourse, number of sexual partners, substance use, and alcohol consumption, are particular concerns for rural adolescents, whose engagement in high-risk health behaviors is higher than urban and suburban samples (Curtis et al., 2011). Other health disparities faced by rural adolescents include rates of obesity, depression, and unintentional injury (Curtis et al., 2011). Although threats to health and well-being may be similar to urban youth, it is likely that adolescents in rural settings experience different effects due to their geographic isolation, lack of governmental resources to support education, prevention, and treatment efforts, and family- and community-level poverty (Curtis et al., 2011; Weber, Puskar, & Ren, 2010). Substantial research is needed to understand the experiences of rural youth and identify culturally-relevant interventions that respond to their life stressors.

**Stress Experiences of Minority and Immigrant Youth**
Adolescent stress research has focused much attention on at-risk populations with significant overlap, making it difficult to differentiate between the cultural- or community-specific factors that impact health and well-being (Goodman et al., 2005). For example, our understanding of stress and coping among minority youth is heavily entangled with our understanding of youth living in poverty because racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented among families in poverty. In 2014, 36.9 percent of African American children and 30.4 percent of Latino children lived in poverty compared to 10.7 percent of White children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Therefore, much of the literature on stress and coping in African American and Latino youth has focused on those living in low-income families and/or in urban environments.

A model presented by Garcia Coll and colleagues (1996) prioritizes attention to cultural and contextual perspectives as essential in understanding sources of stress relevant to minority youth. As a result of social positioning and constructs, factors of race, social class, ethnicity and gender indirectly influence development and pathways to positive functioning (Coll et al., 1996). Development is influenced directly by the racism, discrimination, prejudice, and oppression that create segregated environments and specific social conditions that minority youth must navigate. Following this framework, the subsequent sections reflect the risk factors faced by African American and Latino adolescents under a macrosystem that includes social inequalities, racism, and social hierarchy.

**African American Youth**
The primary risk factors for African American youth include poverty and neighborhood disorder (Baumer et al., 2003; Bennett & Miller, 2006), community violence (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009) and racism and discrimination (Copeland-Linder et al., 2011).

**Poverty and neighborhood disorder.** African American youth are disproportionally represented among low-income and poor families in the U.S. Compared to other racial/ethnic groups, African American youth tend to live in isolated and segregated neighborhoods characterized by poverty, economic disadvantage, unstable and underfunded local organizations or institutions, and weak social support networks (Bennett & Miller, 2006) and affected by crime, drug use, violence, and abandoned property (Brody et al., 2001). As a result, the findings presented above for low-income and urban environments may be particularly relevant for research and implications for African American youth, including an increased prevalence of symptoms of depression, anxiety, oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder (Copeland-Linder et al., 2011). Individual and community-level poverty affects African American adolescents through the family system and limited economic resources. Hammack and colleagues (2004) found that African American youth living in poverty are at increased risk for experiencing the detrimental, uncontrollable stressors that impact long-term health and well-being. For these youth, chronic stress is compounded by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness because of limited opportunities for economic growth (Sanchez et al., 2013).

**Community violence.** Disproportionate representation in neighborhoods characterized by crime and violence places African American adolescents at a disproportionately high risk of exposure to community violence both as victims and witnesses (David-Ferdon & Simon, 2014), both of which negatively impact health and well-being. Victims and witnesses to community
violence are more likely to develop internalizing symptoms, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms and disorder among youth (Cooley-Quille, Boyd, Frantz & Walsh, 2001). In addition, adolescent exposure to community violence has been linked to health risk behaviors, including aggressive behavior, violence, substance abuse, sexual risk taking, suicidal ideal, and suicide attempts (cited in Cooley-Quille et al., 2001).

**Racism and discrimination.** Racial discrimination is associated with negative adjustment among African American adolescents, including increased depressive symptoms (Gaylord-Harden, Burrow, & Cunningham, 2012), increased problem behaviors (Brody et al., 2001), heightened risk of substance abuse among boys (Copeland-Linder et al., 2011), and a rise in risky health behaviors (Copeland-Linder et al., 2011). In schools, racial discrimination has been linked to poor academic engagement (Dotterer et al., 2009) and suspensions for adolescents (Cooper et al., 2013). Racism and discrimination are powerful influences on health and well-being, as youth may begin to internalize and accept the discriminator’s negative perspectives as the truth. Internalization of racism and discrimination can contribute to anxiety, depression, and other internalizing psychological symptoms in youth (Brody et al., 2006; Sanchez et al., 2013).

**Outcomes for African American youth.** Compared to the general population, low-income urban African American youth experience higher rates of psychological distress and problem behaviors (Grant et al., 2000; Li et al., 2007). For example, Grant and her colleagues (2000) found that African American adolescent boys and girls were more likely to score in the clinical range for all self-report syndrome scales, including internalizing, externalizing, anxious-depressed and delinquent behavior scales. Other research demonstrates that African American youth are at increased risk of internalizing symptoms in response to discrimination and economic
stress and heightened risk for deviant and problem behaviors when exposed to community violence (Li et al., 2007). These stressors impact the social and environmental contexts that influence perceptions and responses to stress.

Like urban youth in general, African American adolescents’ coping can be influenced by the environmental contexts in which they live. Youth living in unsafe environments are less likely to demonstrate internalizing behaviors that could be viewed as signs of weakness, fear, or emotional neediness (Grant et al., 2004). Instead, youth that are witnesses and victims of community violence are likely to display their distress through externalizing behaviors to avoid future victimization and adapt to their hostile environment (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009; Cooley-Strickland, Griffín, Darney, Otte, & Ko, 2011). This may be particularly true if youth see others being rewarded for delinquency or hostile behavior. Aggressive behavior is therefore viewed as an asset and reinforced as a means to successfully avoid victimization, enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy, and create a sense of security and belonging in the community (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2011; Sanchez et al., 2013).

**Latino Adolescents**

From 2000 to 2012, the Latino population in the U.S. has grew 61.9 percent among native Latinos and 33.1 percent among Latino immigrants, compared to 1.4 percent for Whites, 14.3 percent for Blacks, and 52.0 percent for Asians (Brown & Patten, 2014). Latinos in the U.S. are a heterogeneous group, representing many ethnicities, countries of origin, and migration histories. The stress experiences of Latino youth are likely just as diverse, reflecting different individual, family, interpersonal, community, and cultural backgrounds. Understanding the
contextual factors specific to immigration that influence stress is essential in developing culturally responsive and ecologically appropriate interventions.

**Migration.** In 2012, Latino immigrant children represented 6.3 percent (or nearly 2,600,000) of the total Latino population (Brown & Patten, 2014). Latino immigrants to the U.S. define a myriad of reasons for immigration, including poverty, financial prospects, and respite from violence (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Simultaneously, migration impacts family structures and processes and Latino immigrant children may be separated or reunified with their immediate family over time. Family experiences are likely to be shaped through stress caused by separation and isolation, trauma during or after travel, and poverty or changes of income (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Furthermore, youth who have limited choice in immigration are more likely to have negative outcomes upon arrival, as youth are forced to navigate a new culture. The perspectives of this new culture, whether supportive of or discriminatory toward immigrants, influence the opportunities and challenges youth face (Zayas, Kaplan, Turner, Romano, & Gonzalez-Ramos, 2000). For youth arriving in a city with a small population of Latinos and Latino immigrants, cultural isolation and discrimination intensify chronic, uncontrollable stress.

**Acculturation and assimilation.** Acculturation refers to the process by which individuals assume or accept the values, language, practices, and norms of a new culture (Berry, 1997). There is significant debate over whether acculturation is a positive measure of adaptation, with evidence that both high and low levels of acculturation increase problematic behaviors, including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse in adolescence (Cervantes & Cordova, 2011). Considering acculturation as a stressor, rather than as a desired outcome, researchers have enumerated potential risks to development, including difficulty in relationships, health, and
psychological functioning. Though perhaps more obviously experienced by youth recently arriving in the U.S., acculturation stress can impact all youth as they negotiate differences between their family’s cultural background and the practices of a new culture. Acculturation stress has been linked to family conflict, decreases in parental monitoring and involvement, and increases in risky behaviors (Cervantes et al., 2011). Research has supported that these outcomes are caused in part by adolescents’ changing perspectives of traditional cultural norms and expectations, perpetuated by parents and challenged by their peers in the U.S. (Lorenzo-Blanco, Unger, Baezconde-Garbanati, Ritt-Olson, & Soto, 2012).

**Discrimination.** As described above, the perspectives of the new culture toward immigrants and minorities heavily influence the experiences of Latino youth. Racism is heavily embedded in U.S. culture, and Latino youth report being the victims of discrimination on a daily or frequent basis (Córdova & Cervantes, 2010; Romero & Roberts, 2003). Racism and discrimination have been associated with substance use and early adult-role taking (e.g., pregnancy, financial support for family) in Latino adolescents (Chapman & Perreira, 2005; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Mental health outcomes for youth perceiving racial discrimination include depressive symptoms and lower feelings of self-worth (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Romero & Roberts, 2003; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). Additionally, perceived discrimination impacts youth’s perspectives on the safety of their neighborhood and school environments. As a result, high levels of perceived discrimination have been associated with poor academic achievement, including lower grades and increased absences (Benner & Graham, 2011).
Outcomes for Latino youth. Existing research supports that stress in general contributes to poor health and well-being outcomes in Latino youth, including depressive symptoms (Romero & Roberts, 2003), suicidal ideation and behavior (Zayas et al., 2000), and academic failure (Perreira, Fuligni, & Potochnick, 2010). Additionally, compared to white adolescents, Latino youth are more likely to be diagnosed with adjustment, anxiety, attention and psychotic disorders (Yeh et al., 2002). Acculturation stress in particular, has been linked to depression and mental health problems (Zayas et al., 2000) as well as high-risk health behaviors, including substance abuse, smoking, and alcohol consumption in youth (Cervantes & Cordova, 2011).

Outcomes for Latino youth are further influenced by geographical factors, including the neighborhoods where families reside. Upon arrival in regions with large populations of immigrants or ethnically similar families, community can be found in cultural enclaves, where systems and resources are already in place to support youth and their families (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001; Zayas et al., 2000). With Latino immigrant families increasingly settling in nontraditional destination areas, and Latinos relocating to other parts of the country, cultural isolation is a key risk factor for youth. In these nontraditional areas in the Midwest, health and other service providers are seeing an increasing number of Latinos and often lack the knowledge, resources, and infrastructure to adequately care for Latino families (Chapman & Perreira, 2005). Developing services around the specific risk factors Latino youth face in these regions will allow providers to more accurately respond to their needs and priorities.

Gaps in the Literature

This review provides evidence of significant variability in youth’s experiences of and responses to chronic life stress. It is evident that the layered environmental and social contexts in
which youth develop have an impact on their health and well-being. Even within similar community contexts, individuals exposed to stress adjust differently according to individual, relational, and environmental factors that influence their affect and behavior. Because of this variability in adjustment, there is growing interest in understanding the individual differences and contexts that impact stress and subsequent functioning (Sanchez et al., 2009).

**Overcoming Stress: From Vulnerability to Resilience**

The examination of youth in low-resource communities cited above largely ignores the youth who are achieving and developing well despite exposure to significant stress and difficulties (Reyes & Elias, 2011). Some youth are able to successfully overcome adversity and demonstrate positive adjustment and resilience. Resilience is a process of successful adaptation and development in the presence of adversity (Garmezy, 1991; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Rutter, 2012). Successful adaptation is culturally dependent, but generally includes internal factors (e.g., psychological and physical health and well-being) as well as external factors (e.g., environmental adjustment). Risk factors, such as poverty, discrimination, and environmental stress, interact with protective factors, such as effective parenting, positive peer relationships, access to resources, and emotional regulation, to predict resilience in youth (Masten & Obradovic, 2006).

**Conceptualizations of Resilience**

Review of the existing literature reveals discrepancies in the definition of resilience and related constructs, including risk and competence. Garmezy (1974) introduced resilience through his study of social competence among those diagnosed with severe psychopathology, namely schizophrenia. This work was extended to applications with vulnerable populations, where risk factors were identified as significant contributors to development of psychological problems
(Garmezy, 1991; Rutter, 1979). In these early conceptualizations, Garmezy emphasizes resilience as an active ability: “the tendency to ‘rebound or recoil,’ ‘to spring back,’ ‘the power of recovery’” (1991, p. 459). Masten and Obradovic (2006) defined resilience as a “broad conceptual umbrella” related to positive adaptation “where the adaptation of a system has been threatened by experiences capable of disrupting or destroying the successful operations of the system” (p. 14). Similarly, Rutter (2012) described resilience as “relative resistance to environmental risk experiences, the overcoming of stress or adversity, or a relatively good outcome despite risk experiences” (p. 34). Important in this definition is the emphasis on relative, highlighting the different outcomes that result across domains, contexts, and individuals.

Inherent in all of these definitions are two coexisting assumptions: first, that youth must be exposed to significant adversity and second, that the youth are able to achieve positive adaptation despite these risks. That is to say, resilience is only manifested in the face of threats to healthy development (Luthur, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Still, there are variations in the definitions of both adversity and positive adaptation. When considering adversity, definitions have ranged from single stressful life experiences (e.g., sexual violence, exposure to war, surviving a natural disaster, etc.) to cumulative measures across multiple stressful events (e.g., poverty, parental divorce, repeated childhood abuse, etc.).”

Debate over the definition of resilience is paired with criticism of related terms, including “resiliency” and “resilient.” Masten (2014) argues for use of the word “resilience” over “resiliency,” the latter of which connotes a fixed, finite personality trait rather than a dynamic process. Resilient should not suggest a static characteristic of the child, as development brings
new challenges, strengths, and circumstances that must be navigated (Jordan, 2013; Masten, 2014; Masten & Obradovic, 2006; Rutter, 2012b). In fact, some research demonstrates the decline of resilience over time with continual exposure to chronic stressors (Luthar & Zigler, 1991), emphasizing the importance of understanding the individual, relational, and community protective factors that can support positive adaptation into adulthood.

**Social-Ecological Model of Resilience**

While the above conceptual models of resilience acknowledged the different levels of protective factors, from individual characteristics to community resources, research to date does little to integrate these characteristics and resources within the context of a specific environment. As evidenced by the context-specific stressors detailed above, the community and cultural factors play a large role in the stressful life experiences of youth (Grant et al., 2003; Sanchez et al., 2013).

Ungar (2011) explains the important role of these social and environmental contexts in his definition of resilience. According to Ungar (2011), resilience is “the capacity of individuals to access resources and enhance their well-being, and the capacity of their physical and social ecologies to make those resources available in meaningful ways” (p. 6). Research on resilience and social ecologies suggests that resilience is not necessarily a trait of the individual, but rather resulting from the risk and protective factors present in a specific environment (Ungar, 2010). Individual resilience can only be understood when also giving attention to community- and context-specific protective factors. As such, it is essential that research on adverse factors, protective factors, and resilience take into account that complex social environment in which an individual lives.
Protective Factors

Protective factors are defined as variables that moderate the relationship between stress and psychological symptoms, whereby psychological symptoms are reduced or eliminated among individuals who experience high levels of the specific protective factor (Rutter, 1990). Protective factors, unlike absence of risk, interacts with risk to predict a particular outcome (Grant et al., 2000). For example, a well-adjusted adolescent does not exhibit resilience solely because they lack depressive and anxious symptoms. Rather, the well-adjusted adolescence exhibits resilience when there are risks to psychological well-being, such as family-level stressors, that inhibit psychological adjustment. Interesting, then, are the protective factors that interact with significant, chronic, uncontrollable stress to reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes.

Within the context of a social ecological model of resilience, protective factors may include individual, family, interpersonal, neighborhood, community, cultural, and global characteristics that weaken the impact of life stress. To date, the majority of interventions that target at-risk adolescents focus on supporting the development and maintenance of individual-level protective factors that have been linked to resilience for some youth at risk for psychological problems (Grant et al., 2000). Limited attention has been given to family- (e.g., strong parent relationships) and community-level (e.g., religious involvement, mentoring) preventative interventions to build protective factors for adolescence. Understanding protective factors and the relative effects on youth are important for developing and implementing interventions that reduce the negative impact of stress (Seidman, 1991).

Protective Factors and Resilience in At-Risk Youth
Individual Level

Individual characteristics are thought to support resilience through adaptive coping and personal resources that encourage positive thinking and appraisals of stressful situations. Yet evidence of successful adaptation as a result of personal characteristics is unclear. For example, factors such as self-confidence and self-esteem among African American urban youth protect against the effects of poverty for both externalizing behaviors and internalizing symptoms (Li et al., 2007), but other research demonstrates that self-worth is only protective for boys who may have lower expectations than girls in certain contexts. Active coping strategies are considered protective, yet some research supports avoidant strategies as protective for boys and African American youth. In samples of Latino youth, positive self-concept and ethnic identity have been protective against the negative impact of perceived discrimination (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). Academic competence is associated with increased academic self-efficacy and prosocial behavior, fewer risky health behaviors, reduced problem behavior, and less risk of substance use, but research supports academic competence as significantly more protective for boys than for adolescent girls (Copeland-Linder et al., 2011). Because children are socialized differently and may be held to different emotional and behavioral expectations, it seems likely that protective characteristics, coping strategies, and competencies are context-specific (Sanchez et al., 2013).

Family/Interaction Level

Social support is widely considered a protective factor for adolescents, though research shows some variation by gender, type of support, and type of stressor. For example, Cooper et al (2013) found that social support moderates the relationship between racial discrimination and psychological adjustment. In the face of racial discrimination, maternal and neighborhood
support were protective for African American boys, and maternal and paternal support were protective for African American girls. Specific to school achievement, religious connection and mentoring were protective for boys, while father presence and mentoring moderated the effects of discrimination for girls (Cooper, Brown, Metzger, Clinton, & Guthrie, 2013). Though limited, the evidence suggests that family and close relationships likely play an important role in buffering the effects of significant and chronic life stressors.

Community Level

Community and cultural level factors influence youth directly, and through their impact on the relationships and personal perceptions of stress nested in more immediate environmental contexts. For example, one protective factor for Latino youth is familism, or the cultural value where the needs of the family as a whole are placed higher than the needs of individual family members. Through cultural expectations related to familism, families may have higher levels of cohesion, support, and positive functioning than in families who reject this cultural norm. As such, familism is protective by influencing the relationships youth have with their families, family support, and strength of cultural or ethnic identity (Cervantes, Goldbach, & Santos, 2011; Cervantes & Cordova, 2011; Chapman & Perreira, 2005). Community enclaves where youth have respite from isolation and discrimination have also been associated with positive outcomes for youth, including academic achievement ( Cervantes & Cordova, 2011). Finally, neighborhood factors (e.g., community centers, resources, mobility, safety) may be protective against neighborhood disadvantage (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Li et al., 2007).

Implications
Though research has established that low-income, urban, rural, and youth of color are at heightened risk, little attention has been given to the protective factors that ameliorate the effects of stress (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Because protective factors interact with personal characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, age, SES), the influence is not the same for every child. As a result, protective factors have to be considered within specific, defined contexts and examined for ecological and cultural relevance (Grant et al., 2000). The research on protective factors presented above, though limited, demonstrates patterns of difference among youth and understates the importance of understanding the context- and culturally-specific factors that influence youth. Additionally, it is important to note that many of the protective factors that have been linked to resilience can be found within community contexts. Yet, many of the interventions designed to develop protective factors emphasize individual and immediate relationships, rather than community-wide protective factors (Grant et al., 2000). Much more attention is needed to delineate the community needs and resources that could be used to implement more appropriate and responsive interventions that better serve youth.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that chronic stress negatively affects adolescents, particularly those living in environments where chronic, uncontrollable stressors are prevalent. It is also evident that within these environments, youth still understand, perceive, and react to similar stressors in complex, nuanced ways. Therefore, it is difficult to articulate a “typical” experience for low-income or minority youth without significantly undermining the very specific ways in which youth experience life stressors. Additional attention needs to be given to these contextual experiences
so that interventions within schools and communities can react to clearly defined and relevant needs. Moreover, significant attention should be devoted to resilience specifically, acknowledging the protective factors that contribute to healthy functioning in the face of chronic stress.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Frameworks

**Frameworks to Understand Stress and Resilience in At-Risk Communities**

Research suggests that as children reach adolescence, they face more environmental stressors, including peer and romantic relationships, harassment or discrimination, community violence, academic pressure, and other external factors that challenge the physiological and psychological capacities of youth (Grant et al., 2014; McEwen, 2008). Though all adolescents face some level of stress, chronic and uncontrollable exposure to stress increases the likelihood of detrimental psychological, health, and educational effects (Compas, 1991; Compas et al., 2001; Gonzales, Tein, Sandler, & Friedman, 2001). The existing literature suggests that particular social groups, including low-income, urban, and minority youth may be at heightened risk for chronic and uncontrollable stressful life experiences (Compas et al., 2001; Grant et al., 2014). For example, low-income, urban, and minority youth experience substantially more adverse childhood experiences than their peers, including community stressors, discrimination, economic hardship, abuse, witnessing violence, victimization, and living with a drug user (Burke et al., 2011; Wade, Shea, Rubin, & Wood, 2014). Such traumatic, chronic life events are associated with negative outcomes ranging from learning problems to obesity (Wade et al., 2014). Research supports that context-specific structural and economic factors create a unique set of conditions that youth must navigate for healthy development.

In order to better understand the factors that affect adolescents and their response to adversity, attention must be directed toward the context, community, and cultural circumstances that influence youth. Research supports the idea that these contextual and community factors, including SES (Finkelstein, Kubzansky, Capitman, & Goodman, 2007; Letourneau, Duffett-
Leger, Levac, Watson, & Young-Morris, 2013), neighborhood characteristics (Baumer et al., 2003; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; McMahon, Felix, & Nagarajan, 2011), immigration status and cultural differences (Romero, Carvajal, Valle, & Orduña, 2007), social support and engagement (Caldwell, Rudolph, Troop-Gordon, & Kim, 2004), and particular personal characteristics, including coping strategies and self-esteem (Copeland-Linder et al., 2011; Li et al., 2007) can disproportionately expose youth to chronic, uncontrollable stress that negatively impacts their well-being. Two theoretical frameworks, social ecological theory and relational cultural theory, are appropriately suited to examine stress and resilience in youth in order to detail the specific, contextual factors that support youth facing adversity.

**Social Ecological Theory**

Ecology refers to an examination of the relationships between living organisms and their environment. Initially, ecological analyses focused on biological processes and the geographic environment. In the 1960s and 1970s, social ecology emerged to address the influence of cultural and institutional factors on people-environment interactions (Stokols, 1996). Concepts from the natural ecosystem were used to help interpret and understand human phenomena. For example, terms such as interdependence, adaptation, systems, and sustainability, are extended to the interactions between individuals, communities, and the broader cultural and social climate.

A social ecological framework assumes that human phenomena are complex and require a multilevel analysis that integrates multiple perspectives. The social ecological perspective acknowledges the reciprocal interaction between personal and environmental factors, which include the physical, social, cultural, economic, and historical contexts that impact people and
their relationships (McLaren & Hawe, 2005). Inside each of those contexts, individuals display specific attributes and behaviors that further complicate the person-environment interaction.

Ecological research extends beyond the family unit, a frequent site of analysis, to include recognition of the multiple social groups and relationships to which individuals belong. Simultaneously, individuals are members of genders, religious groups, ethnic groups and nationalities. Individuals are participants in intimate relationships, family units, and neighborhoods and because of these complex, multilayered identities and memberships, social ecology gains relevance (Earls & Carlson, 2001). A social ecological perspective values analysis of both the proximal and distal environments that influence human development, adaptation, and outcomes.

Stokols (1996) argued that barriers to health and well-being are too complex to be understood from the limitations of a single perspective. Instead, more comprehensive analyses are required that integrate psychological, organizational, behavioral, cultural, and other perspectives. Similarly, McLaren and Hawe (2005) described the recent renewed interest in ecological thinking in the public health fields as influenced by several key factors: recognition of the complexity of public health problems, frustration with individualism and causality research, acknowledgement of the link between social inequities and health disparities, and the independent effect of neighborhood on health outcomes. The following section highlights principles of social ecological perspectives and the ways in which these approaches allow for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of human experience and the influence on environmental conditions.

**Principles of Social Ecological Theory**
Well-being is related to conditions in the social, cultural, and physical environment. First, a social-ecological framework acknowledges the multiple physical, cultural, and social dimensions of any given environmental setting. The conditions within each of these dimensions impacts an individual’s well-being over time, influencing physical health status, maturation, emotional well-being, and social functioning (Stokols, 1996). These characteristics do not act independently, but rather have cumulative effects on individuals. This brings into question factors within each dimension that hinder development and encourage vulnerability, and simultaneously, the characteristics of a healthy, health-promotive, or resilient dimension.

Individual and community well-being are influenced by multiple factors of the person and multiple dimensions of the environment. The second principle of social ecological theory suggests that functioning and development is not only determined by external, contextual factors, but also by a variety of personal characteristics. These personal attributes may include genetics, intelligence, temperament, and behavioral patterns.

Intrapersonal and environmental factors are reciprocally related. Just as individuals are directly influenced by the multiple contexts within which they live, individuals also exert influence over their surroundings through their personal and collective attitudes and actions. Stokols (1996) described this as “cycles of mutual influence” whereby individuals and communities interact and create varying degrees of consequences.

Health and well-being are outcomes of the person-environment fit. In social ecological research, the fit between people and their surroundings has an important influence on health and wellbeing. Specifically, both health and illness are primarily determined by the degree of fit between people’s biological, behavioral, and social needs and the resources available to
them within their environment (Stokols, 1996). Rather than focusing on solely biological, behavioral, environmental, or cultural determinants of health, social ecological analyses focus on the interrelations between these domains. As a result, the same environmental conditions may affect people’s health differently, depending on their personality, access to resources, attributions, and sense of control.

**The physical and social environments are interdependent.** Social ecological theory assumes that the environmental conditions within settings are closely related, with some conditions interlinked with others (e.g., poverty and geographic mobility). Some closely related conditions exert both independent and joint impacts on the well-being of community residents (Stokols, 1996). Further, domains are nested, with local contexts (e.g., school, neighborhood, broader community) situated within distal contexts (e.g., culture, country of residence, social norms).

**A comprehensive understanding of health and well-being is achieved through multidisciplinary approaches.** Social ecological perspectives are multidisciplinary in their approach to research. Acknowledging the layered dimensions of individual and environmental contexts described above, the approach integrates individual and community-wide investigations of a particular problem. Multiple levels of analysis allow researchers to examine the personal, relational, community, cultural, and environmental components of human interactions and behavior. In health promotion, interventions using this approach would then focus on both the individual, therapeutic strategies or medicine and behavioral health and the broader, community-wide prevention or education strategies utilized in public health (Stokols, 1996).

**Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model**
Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model has been widely used to explore the complex, layered effects of environment and context on human development. This model suggests that development takes place through the reciprocal relationships between individuals and other people, objects, and ideas within the external environment. Though many studies claiming use of a bioecological model for analysis focus primarily on context (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009), Bronfenbrenner’s (1998) framework incorporates four components: (1) process, (2) person, (3) context, and (4) time (PPCT model).

The PPCT model identifies Process as the primary source of development, and is summarized in two key propositions. First, development takes place through increasingly complex, reciprocal interactions between humans and other individuals, objects, and symbols in the external environment. These interactions, or proximal processes, are continuing, systematic relationships in an individuals’ immediate environment and allow people to make sense of and interpret their place in the world around them, and exist within and modify the world through their actions (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Second, as Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) described, each proximal process is dependent on aspects of the individual and the context:

The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes affecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person; of the environment; the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration; and the social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived (p. 798).
Similar to Stokol’s (1996) principles of social ecological theory described above, Bronfenbrenner’s PPCT model articulates the reciprocal relationship between people and their environments, influenced by characteristics of the individual (see Person below), nested spheres of the environment (see Context), specific developmental outcomes, and events and experiences over time (see Time).

*Person* in the PPCT model refers to the personal qualities that an individual carries with them into any given environment. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) conceptualize these qualities as: (1) demand, or the qualities that immediately influence interactions, including age, gender, race, physical appearance, etc.; (2) resource, including emotional, mental, social, and material resources available to the individual; and (3) force, or qualities of temperament and motivation. When investigating complex phenomena, the *person* and personal characteristics are essential in understanding individual differences within similar environments or with similar temperaments. For example, two children with similar demand characteristics (age, race, and gender) may have two very disparate trajectories reflective of resource (opportunities) and force characteristics (persistence).

In the PPCT model, *context*, refers to four interrelated, nested systems that influence and are influenced by human development (see Figure 1). The microsystem reflects the environment where the individual participates directly, and includes activities and interactions at home, school, and any other physical space where that person spends a lot of time. Outside of the microsystem lies the mesosystem, which includes interrelations among the microsystem. As children get older and spend more time within more than one microsystem, their activities and interactions overlap. The mesosystem includes relationships between microsystems, including
interactions between caregivers and teachers or peers and teachers. Even broader, the exosystem is made up of environments that have an indirect impact on the individual’s development. This includes the workplaces, local community centers, and other organizations that impact one’s neighborhood, school, and access to local resources. Finally, the macrosystem is the shared context that encompasses a group (e.g., cultural, religious, social) and influences resources, lifestyle, traditions, norms, and opportunity.

![Bronfenbrenner's contexts of human development](image)

**Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner’s contexts of human development.**

*Time*, or the chronosystem, in the PPCT model includes historical events and transitions over the course of a lifetime (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Time is particularly important in the bioecological model, as a child growing up during WWII faced different environmental stressors (and historical events and life transitions) than a child growing up in the same country during the twenty-first century.

**Social Ecological Perspectives of Stress and Resilience**
Just as social ecological approaches draw from our understanding of biological ecology, so too can our analyses of stress and resilience among individuals and communities. In ecology, vulnerability reflects disturbances within the biological and geographic systems that impact natural life, including famine, food insecurity, natural disasters, and introduction of nonnative species (Adger, 2000). In vulnerable ecosystems, environmental stressors can create potentially irreversible changes that impact individuals and communities of species (Adger, 2000). Further, when systems are already vulnerable, even small changes or momentary disruptions can lead to devastating, permanent consequences. Extended to people, community or social vulnerability is the exposure of groups or individuals to stress as the result of some external situation. In response to vulnerability, individuals are forced to shift in order to manage the stress, which may include physical, social, psychological, economic and other sources.

Despite vulnerabilities, some ecological systems are able to adapt and overcome significant stress. These are described as resilient ecological systems. Adger (2000) defines ecological resilience as the adaptive functioning of an ecological system or “the magnitude of disturbance that can be absorbed before a system changes its structure by changing the variables and processes that control behavior” (p. 349). Extending this work to human-environment interactions, social resilience then is the ability of communities to withstand shocks to their institutions and infrastructure, which may include disruptions due to environmental variability, political upheaval, social inequalities (Adger, 2000). Individual resilience occurs when people leverage their internal and external resources to adapt and overcome adversity (Stokols, 1996).

Risk and protective factors occur within all levels of the environment, including individual characteristics, relationships, communities, and broader society. Using a social
ecological perspective, stressors in each of these levels interact and accumulate to threaten health and well-being (Stokols, 1996). In the following section, research is presented that examines stress and protective factors in the nested levels of Bronfenbrenner’s PCCT model described above, including the personal characteristics of the person ecology and the four context ecologies (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem). Consistent with social ecological perspective, this analysis assumes that individuals have reciprocal relationships with their environments (process) and that these relationships are impacted by historical events and life transitions (time).

Social Ecological Sources of Stress

Person. Person in the PPCT model refers to the personal qualities that an individual carries with them into any given environment, including demographic characteristics, resources, and motivation. The research on race and ethnicity as a mechanism of risk is extensive (Vacek, Coyle, & Vera, 2010; Vera et al., 2011; Williams & Mohammed, 2009), yet findings suggest that other contributing factors, such as poverty and access to resources, may more strongly influence associations with stress and negative outcomes (Finkelstein et al., 2007; Goodman et al., 2005). Cognitive vulnerabilities, including rumination, dysfunctional attitudes, and negative inferential style, are considered risk factors for stress and development of negative social and psychological outcomes (Flynn, Kecmanovic, & Alloy, 2010; Young, LaMontagne, Dietrich, & Wells, 2012).

Microsystem. The microsystem includes the places and relationships with which an individual spends a significant amount of time. In adolescence, immediate relationships include family members or caregivers, though youth are spending increasing amounts of time with their peers. Family conflict and lack of parental monitoring are commonly examined as a source of
stress that lead to negative psychological outcomes and healthy risk behaviors (Davis, Ammons, Dahl, & Kliwer, 2004; Wadsworth & Compas, 2002; Wadsworth et al., 2008). For peer relationships, research suggests that peer victimization and interpersonal conflict are a significant source of stress for adolescents (Clarke, 2006; D'Esposito, Blake, & Riccio, 2011; Flynn & Rudolph, 2011).

**Mesosystem.** The mesosystem can be described as a system of Microsystems, and it includes the relationships between two or more Microsystems. For an adolescent, the mesosystem will include their neighborhood, school, family, and peer groups. Some family factors may be closely related to neighborhood factors, such as family income and parental education. Poverty, low family income, and lower parental education contribute to higher stress levels for adolescent boys and girls (Finkelstein et al., 2007; Glasscock, Andersen, Labriola, Rasmussen, & Hansen, 2013). In addition, interpersonal neighborhood factors, particularly community violence and victimization, significantly impact stress and psychological outcomes for youth (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009; Harvey, 2007).

**Exosystem.** The exosystem consists of external settings in which the individual has no direct role, including schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Neighborhood violence not only impacts the relationships among other community members, but also influences adolescents indirectly through perceptions of safety and exposure to violence (Carlson, 2006; Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009; Rasmussen, Aber, & Bhana, 2004). Other neighborhood factors, including access to resources, mobility, and income, can be chronic, uncontrollable stressors that affect youth across the lifespan (Baumer et al., 2003; Brody et al., 2001). Community poverty
may also affect youth through the schooling system, where disparities in income are readily evident in academic resources and opportunities (Gallagher, Goodyear, Brewer, & Rueda, 2011).

**Macrosystem.** In their conceptualization of the macrosystem, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) described the norms and traditions that encompass a particular cultural, religious, ethnic, or other defined group. Using this perspective, macrosystem level factors that contribute to stress in adolescents in the U.S. includes racism and discrimination (Copeland-Linder et al., 2011; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003), language differences (Romero et al., 2007), and perceptions of being “different” or excluded from the cultural norm (Sellers et al., 2003; Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2010; Vera et al., 2011)

**Social Ecological Sources of Resilience**

**Person.** Despite the substantial external risks present in many environments, some youth demonstrate resilience and overcome adversity (Rutter, 2012a). Using a social ecological perspective, resilience is due to specific protective factors that promote healthy development and outcomes, some of which are personal characteristics (Ungar, 2012). Psychological resources, including a “shift and persist” coping response where individuals reframe stress more positively and persist in the face of adversity, have also been shown to limit the impact of significant life stress (Chen, Miller, Lachman, Gruenewald, & Seeman, 2012). Additional psychological resources and individual characteristics that act as protective factors against stress for some adolescents include self-confidence and self-esteem (Umaña-Taylor, Vargas-Chanes, Garcia, & Gonzales-Backen, 2008), emotional intelligence (Cha, 2009; Polan, Sieving, & McMorris, 2013), academic competence (Acevedo, 2010; Copeland-Linder et al., 2011) and use of adaptive coping strategies (Sanchez et al., 2013; Wadsworth & Berger, 2006).
**Microsystem.** Microsystem level protective factors for some adolescents include interpersonal relationships and social support (McMahon et al., 2011; Taylor, 2010). For example, strong relationships with adult mentors and parents (Cooper et al., 2013) are protective against racial discrimination and maladjustment among African American adolescents. For children and adolescents exposed to community violence, close family relationships are protective factors against development of internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Ozer, Lavi, Douglas, & Wolf, 2015). Furthermore, social support and interpersonal competence is associated with self-esteem and self-worth, which may improve outcomes for youth (McMahon et al., 2011).

**Mesosystem.** Very little research to date has explicitly examined protective factors within the mesosystem, or interactions between multiple microsystems, with the exception of parental involvement. For example, adolescents who have parents actively encouraging them related to their schoolwork have better relational, behavioral and academic outcomes than adolescents without encouraging parents (Chen & Gregory, 2009). Similarly, high parental expectations have been linked to positive behavioral and academic outcomes (Chen & Gregory, 2009; Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002). Parental involvement is a protective factor outside of school as well, buffering the negative effects of violence exposure (Pearce, Jones, Schwab-Stone, & Ruchkin, 2003).

**Exosystem.** Resilient communities are able to withstand significant disturbances and promote health and well-being. Adger (2000) defined a resilient community as featuring high and equitable levels of mental and behavioral health, functioning, and quality of life. These communities pull from the capabilities and adaptive qualities of community members to manage
the impact of stress and create an environment that supports individuals toward positive outcomes (Boon, Cottrell, King, Stevenson, & Millar, 2012). Furthermore, economic community resilience not only provides economic or organizational resources, but also supports individual resilience, including mental health, perceptions of quality of life, and self-efficacy (Sherrieb, Norris, & Galea, 2010). Access to resources through higher family income, neighborhood, and availability of community resources, are likely to protect against chronic stress (Finkelstein et al., 2007; Goodman et al., 2005).

**Macrosystem.** Cultural or community protective factors that encompass a cultural, religious, geographic, racial, ethnic, or other identification vary depending on the practices of that particular group. For example, protective factors for some Latino youth living within enclaves or traditional cultural roles include familism (Cervantes & Cordova, 2011; Chapman & Perreira, 2005), a value that prioritizes the well-being of the family over the individual, and strength of cultural identity (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2008). Racial identity similarly protects against stress for African American youth (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2012; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006).

**Implications of Social Ecological Theory for Stress and Resilience Research**

Social ecological theory proposes that health and wellness is determined by the degree of fit between biological, behavioral and sociocultural needs and the environmental resources available to an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 2009; Stokols, 1996). In other words, stress that overwhelms an adolescent is likely to contribute to negative health, psychological, and academic outcomes because the individual cannot readily adapt to or overcome the adversity. Chronic, uncontrollable stress is likely to overwhelm individuals, particularly those with limited
economic, community, and relational resources to protect against the negative effects of stress. It is essential to understand the multiple individual, social, community, and cultural needs facing youth within low-resource and vulnerable settings and the corresponding resources that can be used to support positive adaptation and resilience.

A social ecological perspective allows for attention to these needs and resources within specific community settings. Because social ecological theory assumes that each community setting has unique needs and resources (influenced by the particular risk and protective factors within the community), interventions cannot be developed using a one-size-fits-all approach. Protective factors that buffer the impact of stress for some Latino adolescents in Chicago, for example, may have limited effect on Latino adolescents in Cincinnati because the structural and community resources may be very different. Instead, interventions have to target community-specific needs and build upon individual, structural, community, and social supports already in place.

**Relational Cultural Theory**

In order to better understand the factors that affect youth and their response to adversity, attention must be directed toward the context, community, and cultural circumstances that influence youth. The existing literature suggests that relationships, social support, and social engagement are protective factors against stress and psychopathology in youth (Caldwell et al., 2004). Despite this, little research to date has explored stress and resilience through the lens of relational cultural theory (RCT). RCT can be used to better understand the influence of relationships on stress and resilience in vulnerable youth by exploring relational competence and authenticity within the context of larger societal expectations.
Grounded in the worlds of psychology and feminist theory, RCT was theorized in response to the alarming lack of attention to the centrality of relationships in women’s experiences. Miller (1986) challenged the predominant view in psychological theory that healthy development is dependent on autonomy and individuality. Citing the lived experiences of women and other marginalized groups, Miller and her colleagues argued that participation in and empowerment through complex, genuine relationships is instead a source of healthy development and wellness across the lifespan (Gilligan, 1996; Jordan, 1997; Miller, 1986).

The core concepts of RCT focus on growth through and within relationships. Judith Jordan (2000) described the concepts associated with RCT, including: (1) growth toward relationships throughout the life span; (2) maturation and healthy development through mutuality, rather than separation; (3) growth through the ability to participate in complex relational networks; (4) growth-fostering relationships characterized by mutual empathy and mutual empowerment; (5) growth-fostering relationships characterized by authenticity; (6) growth through participation in growth-fostering relationships; and (7) realization of increased relational competence and awareness over time. This more inclusive model of development is grounded in the notion that health and healing is a result of relationships. Rather than developing into separated, individuated beings, growth occurs through increasingly complex connections with others (Duffey & Somody, 2011; Jordan, 2013).

**Principles of Relational Cultural Theory**

Central in RCT is the notion of growth-fostering relationships, or relationships that are marked by mutual empathy, authenticity, and mutual empowerment. Mutual empathy occurs when both participants in the relationship are emotionally affected by and communicate this with
the other. Mutual empathy supports connection by allowing each participant to feel less isolated and more powerful (Duffey & Somody, 2011). Authenticity refers to the ability of individuals to feel represented fully and honestly in relationships. Through mutual empathy and authenticity in relationships, mutual empowerment results, whereby both partners of the relationship experience growth in health and capacity. Miller (1986) described the outcomes of connection through growth-fostering relationships as a sense of zest, clarity about the self and the relationship, personal sense of worth, the capacity to be productive, and the desire for more connection.

In contrast, disconnection is the inevitable failure within relationships when an individual’s response lacks empathy, people interact in hurtful or disingenuous ways, or power dynamic inhibits well-being (Cannon et al., 2012). In contrast to the positive outcomes of connection described above, RCT posits that disconnection results in a lack of energy, withdrawal, an inability to act productively or authentically, confusion, or a decreased sense of self-worth, particularly in relationship (Comstock et al., 2008). Though disconnection is experienced in all relationships, the goal within mutually empowering relationships is to process this disconnection through empathic understanding. As a result, the stress is mitigated and the relationship is strengthened. Chronic disconnection, on the other hand, occurs when the relationship is left ruptured. When an individual is not understood or heard, faces significant power differentials, or encounters frequent inequalities, she experiences the withdrawal, confusion, or decreased sense of worth that characterize breaks in relationship. Chronic disconnection may lead to depression, withdrawal, or other negative symptoms that reflect the lack of empowerment and empathy we achieve through growth fostering relationships (Jordan, 2008).
Important to a thorough understanding of connection and disconnection in relationships, RCT also explicitly addresses larger, more societal and cultural causes of disconnection. For example, Jordan (2008) argued that disconnections can also result from power relations that oppress or silence some groups while privileging others, not just from individual relationships. Acknowledgment of the broader cultural causes of disconnection is important because it removes some blame from the individual, instead looking at the larger context within which our relationships develop and function (Comstock et al., 2008). That is, though some disconnection may be reflective of limited shared empathy on an individual level, the disconnection may be amplified by larger social expectations. When examining stress and resilience, the societal contexts play a particularly important role, as our cultural and community beliefs, networks, and resources impact the challenges we face and the strategies we use to adapt (Ungar, 2004).

**Relational Cultural Perspectives on Adolescent Stress and Resilience**

The lack of attention to the construct of “stress” within RCT literature is surprising considering the parallels to disconnection. In the stress literature, stressors are defined as external sources of adversity. Grant and his colleagues (2003) defined stress as: “environmental events or chronic conditions that objectively threaten the physical and/or psychological health or wellbeing of individuals of a particular age in a particular society” (p. 449). As described above, disconnections are the failures within relationships where empathy and empowerment are absent and may result in withdrawal, isolation, and restricted growth. Jordan (1995) described disconnection as “one of the primary sources of human suffering,” a state that creates “distress, inauthenticity, and ultimately a sense of isolation in the world” (p. 1). Like with stress, chronic
disconnection creates a paralyzing effect, or learned helplessness, which inhibits further engagement and encourages continued disconnection.

Disconnection, then, can be defined as an interpersonal stress as it threatens the development and wellbeing of individuals across the lifespan by externally challenging our sense of self, feelings of connectedness, self-worth, and empowerment (Comstock et al., 2008). Disconnection from relationships impacts the ways in which youth view themselves and their competencies. For example, in Cannon, Hammer, Reicherzer, and Gilliam’s work (2012) with female adolescents in a group therapy setting, the girls described disconnection as “a series of emotions that frequently left [them] feeling isolated and cut off from their larger relational contexts” (p. 11). Such disconnection resulted in rejection, loneliness and “a sense of lack of identity” for many of the adolescents (Cannon et al., 2012, p. 11).

Though chronic disconnection produces interpersonal stress, limits the relational capacities of individuals, and threatens psychological well-being, limited research has evaluated the role of relational theory in addressing interpersonal or other types of stress in youth. Additionally, while some literature explores the possibilities of connection and social support to buffer chronic, uncontrollable stress, the intent is not explicitly to maintain or promote relational competencies (Clarke, 2006; Zand et al., 2009). What does exist in the extant stress literature is attention to specific variables that predict and correlate with interpersonal stress (Flynn et al., 2010; Flynn & Rudolph, 2011).

**RCT Perspectives on Sources of Stress**

Flynn and Rudolph (2011) summarized the predictors of interpersonal stress in adolescence, including maladaptive interpersonal behaviors (e.g., unassertiveness and
dependence), reassurance seeking, ineffective problem solving, rumination, and depressive personality traits (e.g., pessimism and criticism). These factors potentially influence relational disconnections as well through interpersonal stress, encouraging misunderstandings, inauthenticity, and lack of empathy within relationships. For example, reassurance seeking has been associated with deteriorating friendship quality, relationship instability, and depressive symptoms in female adolescents (Prinstein, Borelli, Cheah, Simon, & Aikins, 2005). Similarly, negative relational self-views contribute to negative development through a cyclical effect whereby maladaptive interpersonal behaviors and attitudes produce behaviors that contribute to disconnection and stress (Caldwell et al., 2004). Specifically, youth who view themselves as relationally inadequate or ineffective are likely to experience isolation, rejection, and withdrawal and begin to remove themselves from pro-social situations and close peer relationships.

Importantly, interpersonal stress in turn produces negative psychosocial and relational outcomes in youth, predicting peer rejection and peer victimization (Lopez & DuBois, 2005). Some research suggests that this link is direct, with interpersonal stress leading to long-term rejection and victimization (e.g., Lopez et al., 2005) while other research supports lowered self-esteem as a mediator of rejection and victimization (Grills & Ollendick, 2002). Peer victimization, a more severe form of relational disconnection, has been associated with psychological dysfunction in childhood and adolescence. For example, Troop-Gordon and Ladd (2005) found that preadolescent boys interpret social failure, including rejection, isolation, and victimization, as indicating a hostile social environment. Additionally, students report feelings of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. These perceptions of hostility and rejection predicted both internalizing and externalizing problems in adolescence (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2005).
Additionally, being the target of peer aggression is associated with later direct and indirect academic stressors that impact learning over time (Nishina, Juvonen & Witkow, 2010).

**RCT Perspectives on Sources of Resilience**

Despite the significant interpersonal and other stressors present in adolescence, many youth develop healthy and high functioning lives. The relational perspective provides additional insight into the role of protective factors, particularly through connection, that support youth in overcoming adversity. The existing literature supports the notion that relationships, and particularly connectedness, promote positive psychological, educational, and health outcomes in children and adolescents. Connectedness, through the forms of peer and family support, adult support networks, sense of belonging to school and the community, work as protective factors that buffer stress and disconnection (Jordan, 2013).

In the stress and disconnection literature examined above, self-esteem was an individual characteristic attributed with mediating the association between interpersonal stress and psychopathology or poor adjustment. Improving self-esteem, then, may help to promote resilience and transform the stress into a positive response. Bell (2001) argued that facilitating connectedness, satisfaction from being in relationship with others, a sense of power through relational and general competency, and acknowledgement of personal successes and strengths will support development of self-esteem that protects against life stressors. Bell’s description of connectedness and resilience through connectedness strongly aligns with the tenets of RCT, arguing for a more relational understanding of “self”-esteem that in enhanced through participation in growth-fostering relationships (Bell, 2001).
Relationships with competent and responsible peers and adults facilitate the development of self-esteem while providing social support (Rew & Horner, 2003). For example, Aronowitz (2005) described the relationship between youth and supportive adults as safe zones where adolescents could test their competencies, counter stereotypes, and reach their goals. The youth benefited from connectedness to adults who believed in them, supported their goals, served as role models, and pushed them toward their commitments. The findings suggested that setting high expectations, improving confidence and self-efficacy, and demonstrating competence within a supportive, caring relationship with a responsible adult served to promote resilience for the youth participants (Aronowitz, 2005).

Furthermore, connectedness can help to support a collective identity, consciousness, or action against the social norms that hinder healthy development and functioning. In work with sexual minority adolescents, DiFulvio (2011) argued that social connection affirms one’s identity and provides a space within which youth can express their struggles and organization collective action. The support that youth receive in connection with others who have experienced similar life circumstances counters the negative effects of marginalization (DiFulvio, 2011).

The protective effects of connectedness act as a buffer against the chronic and harmful obstacles that children and adolescents face. From poverty to abuse, the power of connectedness has been demonstrated to push youth toward resilience (Rew & Horner, 2003). Using a RCT lens, these social spaces and supports promote growth through relationships that protect against isolation, withdrawal, or fear common in disconnection.

Models of Relational Resilience
Resilience is a process of successful adaptation and development in the presence of adversity (Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Masten, 2001). Successful adaptation is culturally dependent, but generally includes internal factors (e.g., psychological and physical health and well-being) as well as external factors (e.g., environmental adjustment). In most models of resilience, risk factors, such as poverty, discrimination, and educational stress, interact with protective factors, such as effective parenting, positive peer relationships, access to resources, and emotional regulation, to predict resilience in youth (Masten, 2001).

Jordan (2013) presents a model of resilience aimed at the experiences of young girls, but inclusive of all individuals and the experiences that contribute to connection. Contrary to several theories of resilience that emphasize the individual characteristics that contribute to healthy growth and development, Jordan (2013) argues that social and relational practices, rather than individual traits, are at the core of successful adaptation. For example, secure relationships provide the resources to support people to “bounce back” from adversity. There is even evidence that the physiological effect of chronic stress on the body can be attributed to social conflict over time (Goldstein & Thau, 2011). Jordan (2013) posits that all growth and development takes place within a relational context, and therefore, a relational model of resilience should include: supported vulnerability, empathy, relational confidence, empowerment, and relational awareness. In this model, isolation is the primary source of stress and connection is the primary source of resilience.

**Implications of Relational Cultural Theory for Stress and Resilience Research**

Attention to the stress that results from relational disconnections is important when planning preventions and interventions for at-risk youth. Research suggests that relational
development and competence in early and middle childhood have a lasting influence on psychological and relational functioning in adolescence. In middle childhood, boys and girls are simultaneously experiencing increased contact with peers and decreased parental monitoring. This results in greater autonomy to interact with peer relationships, social roles, and new interpersonal experiences (Prinstein et al., 2005). Peers become a prominent source of social support and influence. Additional research suggests that youth use the perspectives of their peers and peer experiences as the primary source for identity and self-concept development. Clearly, relationships and authenticity within relationships play a key role in adolescent development.

Interpersonal stress is associated with lower self-esteem, depression, and withdrawal in youth. For example, some research demonstrates a relationship between frequencies of victimization in childhood and less positive self-evaluations in middle childhood (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2005). Arguably, because peers are a significant source of interaction for youth, these peer relationships may additionally determine views of self-worth and self-efficacy. Troop-Gordon and Ladd (2005) suggested that youth who are mistreated, excluded, or rejected experience greater self-blame for relationship stressors, lower levels of perceived social competence, and reduced global and social self-worth. Others have argued that the implicit and explicit messages received from peers are internalized and reflected in a child’s self-esteem.

Using a relational perspective to examine the stress experiences of adolescents, it is clear that relational disconnections and interpersonal stress cause significant harm to health and well-being. Importantly, the literature examined here suggests that many forms of interpersonal stress become chronic, and often uncontrollable forms of adversity. This detrimental form of stress is more likely to cause lasting effects that impact psychological and academic functioning and
hinder general well-being (Grant et al., 2003). Though the factors discussed here are largely individual characteristics or responses to peer relationships, a significant gap in the literature is an examination of these factors as symptoms of larger social problems including discrimination, stigma, or unattainable expectations. A relational perspective allows for such inquiry into the systemic structures that foster disconnection in individuals and relationships.

**Conclusion**

As they reach adolescence, youth face a wide range of environmental stressors that impact their psychological and academic functioning. Both social ecological and relational cultural perspectives provide insight into the risk and protective factors that influence the effects of these environmental stressors. Through a social ecological lens, for example, attention is placed on the personal, interpersonal, community, and cultural factors that contribute to chronic stress in youth, particularly among those living in at-risk communities. For low-income, minority, and immigrant adolescents, environmental factors may accumulate and overwhelm the coping skills and resources available to deal with stress. Social ecological perspectives address a gap in the stress and resilience literature by integrating understanding of stressors within different environmental contexts that influence outcomes for adolescents. Furthermore, very little research to date has examined protective factors within defined and local community settings.

The relational cultural lens further contributes to an understanding of stress and resilience in adolescence by examining the role of relationships as both a risk and protective factor. Interpersonal stress with peers can lead to withdrawal, isolation, lowered self-esteem, and maladaptive behaviors that discourage healthy friendships. As a result, research to date has focused attention on the predictors and outcomes of interpersonal stress. Little attention,
however, has been given to interpersonal stress through a relational lens. Relational cultural theory highlights the contributions of empathy, empowerment, connection, and growth-fostering relationships in development and wellbeing. Consistent with RCT, findings from the existing stress literature suggest a link between relational disconnection, stress, and more chronic, harmful symptoms of psychopathology. Importantly, research into the successes of youth who overcome adversity also point to the potentially protective powers of connectedness and relationships in supporting resilience in adolescence.
Chapter 3: Research Method

Methods to Capture the Contextual Nature of Resilience

Relying on an objective and singular picture of reality, positivistic research approaches have failed to fully capture the perspectives and experiences of diverse populations in several important ways. First, traditional approaches miss the cultural, community, and context-specific factors that affect the way individuals experience the world. Second, these approaches have also ignored, silenced, or misrepresented the perspectives of individuals and communities, particularly those who have been historically marginalized. Third, these approaches have relied heavily on deficit models of human phenomena, rather than attending to the significant strengths and resources of individuals and communities. In order to address these concerns and contribute to the field of stress and resilience research, it is necessary to employ innovative research designs and methods that value local knowledge and reflect the unique factors that influence our experiences. Two such research approaches are youth participatory action research and arts-based inquiry.

Participatory Action Research

Participatory research frameworks, like participatory action research (PAR), have developed alongside feminist and critical race theory to incorporate the multiple, diverse perspectives that are often missing in research and academia (Cahill, 2007a). Acknowledging that the voices are not new but rather excluded, marginalized, or ignored, these perspectives articulate the potential for women, people of color, and other populations, to transform the world by responding to misrepresentations in the extant literature and helping to shape and define research questions, designs, and interpretations (Cahill & Torre, 2007; Hill Collins, 2009). In
doing so, people have the potential to achieve sustainable and relevant change that speaks to the needs of their community (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007).

**Principles of Participatory Action Research Approaches**

Instead of conducting research on communities, PAR collaborates with communities to build capacity, share knowledge, and work toward social change (Cahill, 2007a). PAR approaches seek to build collective knowledge and create a community of researchers that can elicit needed change, as experts rather than objects of inquiry (Pain, 2004). This framework differs from traditional research approaches in many distinct ways, including: (1) valuing and building on strengths and resources; (2) facilitating partnership in all research phases; (3) maintaining an action-orientation and developing praxis; (4) encouraging co-learning and empowerment; (5) addresses issues of local concern; (6) valuing multiple perspectives and local knowledge; (7) attending to social inequalities with the intention of improving; and (8) disseminating knowledge to a wider, public audience beyond the academy (Mertens, 2007; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2010; Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

**Value-oriented.** Participatory action research projects explicitly attend to the strengths, knowledge, and resources of a particular community. As a result, PAR projects address important issues and interventions that will promote capacity building, community development, and the empowerment of individuals and communities. PAR approaches orient their research design around community assets rather than deficits.

**Collaborative partnerships.** An important departure from traditional research approaches is in positioning community members as partners rather than participants. Rather than conducting research on a particular population, PAR approaches collaborate with all
stakeholders in an equitable, democratic relationship. As a result, the term “researcher” is applied to all of those who contribute to the research process, whether through knowledge, skills, time, or resources (McIntyre, Chatzopoulos, Politi, & Roz, 2007). The goal is for co-researchers work together in equitable, collaborative relationships in all phases of the research. Reason and Bradbury (2008) argued, “action research is only possible with, for, and by persons and communities, ideally involving all stakeholders both in the questioning and sense-making that informs the research, and in the action which is its focus” (p. 5). That is, without the involvement and equitable collaboration of all stakeholders in all phases of the research process, research that aims to create social change will fail. Community co-researchers should play a role in research design, data collection, data analysis, and public dissemination.

Multiple perspectives and local knowledge. Consistent with a social constructivist and critical pedagogical approach, PAR projects seek to gain insight from multiple perspectives. PAR is centered on "the understanding that people -- especially those who have experienced historic oppression-- hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences, and should help shape the questions, [and] frame the interpretations” of research (Torre et al., 2008). Rather than privileging the perspectives of experts, PAR approaches engage all stakeholders in designing a study, collecting data, and analyzing and interpreting the findings. Furthermore, the community stakeholders or co-researchers provide more than guidance in interpretation. Instead, the community co-researchers are positioned as experts about their everyday experiences. Cahill (2007a) described this paradigmatic shift as privileging a “bottom-up analysis” by valuing the interpretation of the community collaborators.
Issue of local concern. Oriented toward building on a community’s strengths, resources, and knowledge, PAR approaches do not assume that the research interests of researchers are the same as the concerns of community stakeholders. Traditional research paradigms position the interests and decisions of the research team above the interests of the community (Cahill, 2007a). Specifically, the research team selects a research question based on their research interests and professional objectives, impacting the research design. The PAR approach explicitly aims to improve local communities and create social change. In order to do so, PAR projects address issues that that specific community identifies as pressing. PAR projects respond to the practical, immediate issues in the lives of community members in order to create change (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

Co-learning and empowerment. As a result of the democratic design of PAR projects, there is an opportunity for all co-researchers to develop capacity, both as individuals and as a collective partnership. Co-researchers develop their strengths as co-inquirers, including skills in decision-making, collaboration, reflection, and research (Cahill, 2007b; McIntyre et al., 2007).

Action-orientation and praxis. The PAR approach is an emergent, cyclical design that moves from questioning and gathering data toward action. The action phase within PAR is essential to the approach and efforts toward social change. Inspired by Freire’s (1970) critical consciousness and praxis, PAR projects seek to bring together theory and practice to create solutions to issues important to the community. Constant reflection and engagement in the research allows for knowledge to deepen and more questions to arise (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).
**Dissemination beyond the academy.** After the co-researchers have participated in data analysis and interpretation, the knowledge generated should be shared beyond peer-reviewed academic journals and conference presentations. Disseminating knowledge within the community and among appropriate stakeholders increases the likelihood that the findings will be translated into interventions or practices. Additionally, co-constructed knowledge that is publically disseminated within the community will enhance the potential for buy-in from the broader community.

**Attention to social inequalities and social change.** As a research approach, PAR projects are dedicated to ameliorating social inequalities, including the negative health, psychological, and educational outcomes resulting from racism, sexism, and discrimination. The larger goal of PAR is to contribute to social, political, and psychological well-being within the community by responding to issues that directly affect the lives of the participants.

**Youth Participatory Action Research: Challenges and Exemplars**

Emerging from participatory and action research approaches, youth participatory action research (YPAR) is a process that seeks to create positive and meaningful change in the lives of youth specifically. YPAR is a methodological framework that is deeply engaged in community development and capacity building, as it encourages youth to identify and explore meaningful topics and subsequently advocate for positive, local change (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). YPAR projects value the expertise and knowledge of young people and actively partner with these youth to create positive local change that will have immediate impact on their lives. In its purest form, youth are involved in each step of the research, from problem identification and research design through the dissemination of results. Goals of YPAR
projects include empowering youth, facilitating critical reflection on important local and global issues, and developing the capacity of youth to advocate for social change. YPAR asserts that youth and adults can work to challenge inequities, overcome disparities, and ultimately change the world around them (Cammarota & Fine, 2010).

Despite the significant advantages of employing an empowering approach that values partnership and works to define practical solutions to local problems, there are also challenges that threaten the success of YPAR projects. For example, participatory approaches have been criticized for not fully engaging youth throughout all phases of the research. In many projects described as “participatory,” youth are commonly only involved in the problem identification and research design and data collection phases of the study (Jacquez, Vaughn, & Wagner, 2013). This may result from limitations of the academic researcher (e.g., time, lack of extended engagement in the community, resources), the youth (e.g., interest and engagement, developmental capacity, resources), or the partnership (e.g., project goals and design, funding, time) (Chen, Poland, & Skinner, 2007).

Some researchers have challenged the assumption that youth gain the most from full, extended participation and argue instead that YPAR approaches should seek “optimal participation.” For example, Chen, Poland and Skinner (2007) detailed their experiences with YPAR where youth were disempowered and overburdened by the requirements of data analysis. The authors suggested that while youth were still involved in this phase of the process, the oversight required by the academic researchers limited the experience for all co-researchers. Youth reported feeling as though they could not meet the demands of the project and that they were disappointing their partners (Chen et al., 2007). With this understanding, it is important for
researchers using YPAR approaches to actively reflect on the participation required from all co-researchers and consider the strengths and resources each partner brings to the collaboration. Overall, the goal should be to actively engage youth in research rather than position them as passive participants or subjects to be investigated (Jacquez et al., 2013).

Another significant challenge for YPAR partnerships is the amount of time and resources required, factors over which youth typically exert very little control. Academic and recreational commitments, transportation, and family needs may limit the amount of time that youth can devote to participation (Powers & Tiffany, 2006). Ideally, youth researchers would be compensated for the time they spent dedicated to YPAR initiatives, yet lack of funding may reduce or eliminate this possibility and therefore further complicate youth recruitment and retention in these projects (Powers & Tiffany, 2006; Sánchez, 2009b).

Table 1 revisits the characteristics of participatory action research detailed above, and describes YPAR projects that align with each of these key principles. I describe three specific exemplars of YPAR to demonstrate the variety of applications across contexts. Though participatory approaches are often criticized for not adequately involving co-researchers in the full research process (if including them at all), these three examples share power and decision-making responsibilities with the youth partners throughout the project and describe powerful outcomes. Additionally, all three projects described and navigated the challenges faced and implications for future work that critically engages youth. First, Sánchez (2009) collaborated with three youth to produce a children’s book representative of transnational Latinas’ experiences with themes uncovered through Photovoice. Cammarota and Romero (2006a) used a YPAR approach grounded in critical pedagogy to transform a high school social studies
classroom into an empowering environment that promotes awareness and critique of social injustices. Finally, Torre and Fine together with their youth and community partners (2008) described their use of “research camps” and participatory theater to investigate racial and social injustices in schools.

YPAR approaches have frequently been used to create space for the silenced voices of minority and immigrant youth. Using feminist and critical theory perspectives, Sánchez (2009a) engaged youth in Photovoice and critical dialogue, examining their shared yet contextualized experiences as immigrant youth who maintain contact with family in Mexico. Sánchez (2009a, 2009b) presented her transformative, culturally informed research with transnational Latina youth in three phases: building relational knowledge (through photovoice and dialogue about shared and disparate experiences and conversations about social contexts), collecting and analyzing data, and writing for social change. Through writing, publishing, and distributing a bilingual children’s book about transnational immigrant youth, the co-researchers co-constructed and shared the knowledge generated through their collaborative work (Sánchez, 2009a, 2009b).

Table 1

YPAR Principles and Application in Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YPAR principle</th>
<th>Peer-reviewed research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value oriented</td>
<td>Co-researchers created a “counterstory” to current popular narratives in U.S. society about Latino immigrants; Valued the expertise, skills, and assets of Latino immigrants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaborative partnerships</strong></td>
<td>Youth participated in all phases of the research project; Academic researcher was explicit about her needs to write about the project in a dissertation and publish in order to support her career.</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multiple perspectives and local knowledge</strong></td>
<td>Youth researched the experiences of transnational youth while all identifying as transnational Latinas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issue of local concern</strong></td>
<td>Youth researched questions that focused on their own experiences, including barriers to immigrant and minority youth and the lack of support for transnational youth in their community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Co-learning and empowerment</strong></td>
<td>Critical consciousness; Creation of a “counterstory” to popular cultural narratives about immigrants; Empowered by sharing their knowledge through creative outlets; Skills in writing, publishing, and distributing books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action-orientation and praxis</strong></td>
<td>Distribution of books to family, schools, and the community spread knowledge about needed supports for transnational youth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Dissemination beyond the academy | Creation and publication of a children’s book; Knowledge shared with different age groups and community members. | Reports were presented to district, state, and city officials to improve school policy (e.g., to allow display of cultural symbols, for the expansion of racial diversity in advanced programs, etc.) | Youth participated in dissemination through artistic performances. 

| Attention to social inequalities and social change | Youth described the experiences of Latino youth, particularly those still tied to family members in Mexico. | Investigated social factors that contribute to disparate experiences and opportunities in schools. | Youth explored the opportunity gaps in schools, specifically addressing issues with racism and discrimination. |

Sánchez’s investigation of the lived experiences of transnational Latina youth demonstrate the characteristics of YPAR approaches. First, the framework valued the experiences of these Latina youth and brought to light their strengths as individuals and as a collective group. The research team used their expertise in transnational youth (as transnational youth themselves) to critically analyze the political and social structures that supported and hindered the development of this community, highlighting the emphasis of YPAR projects on local knowledge, multiple perspectives, and attention to social injustices. The youth were trained in research skills that they used to collect and analyze data, through arts-based methods, observations, field notes, and interviews, actively contributing to multiple research phases. Additionally, the youth wrote and published a children’s story that was shared with family, community members, teachers, and local libraries. This public dissemination was a form of action, spreading knowledge about needed resources for transnational youth.

Similar to the silencing of minority and immigrant youth across settings, students traditionally have a limited role in classroom decisions, curriculum development, or policy changes in schools. Cammarota and Romero (2006a) implemented a social justice education
program with high school students as research partners to challenge the traditional structure of classrooms (Cammarota, 2007; Cammarota & Romero, 2006a, 2006b, 2011; Cammarota & Romero, 2009). The curriculum, the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP), supplemented the standard social studies curriculum with an additional attention on critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and Chicana/o literature. As part of the curriculum, youth collaborated in their own research projects investigating problems and concerns within their own social environments. Dissemination of the knowledge generated in these projects has extended to school and political officials, with the goal of empowering youth to “reclaim the political space that silences their voices” (Cammarota & Romero, 2011). A lack of power and agency within the classroom can leave students feeling disengaged and ultimately lead to poor student outcomes, including dropout or low achievement (Morrell, 2010; Nind, Boorman, & Clarke, 2012). YPAR approaches within education seek to make space for student power and voice within classrooms and schools, and strengthen learning outcomes in the process.

The SJEP provides an example of research that critically engages youth as knowledgeable experts. The youth were co-researchers in this project, investigating issues that personally affected their performance and opportunities at school. The SJEP aligns with YPAR principles by: valuing the voice and expertise of youth; involving youth in all phases of the research process; uncovering barriers to education within the youth’s own schools and environments; encouraging social action through policy change and political activism; empowering youth to challenge the status quo; supporting youth skills development in research, public speaking, and community activism; and attending to issues of social justice, including racism and disparate opportunities in education.
In order to explore disparities within and between schools, Torre and Fine et al. (2008) engaged youth in a detailed, large-scale investigation of school environments. In their project, *The Opportunity Gap*, youth participated in research training camps where they explored key assumptions within research, including questions of what evidence counts as research, who can contribute to knowledge, and how knowledge can be presented. Following the camps, the youth participated in school-based research teams that investigated questions related to the opportunity gap across various school environments. Youth from diverse backgrounds and abilities engaged with academic researchers to better understand youth perspectives on injustices within school and community contexts. Students worked collaboratively in school-based research teams to gather data through interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Youth researchers demonstrated significant power and decision-making capabilities by determining the research question and methods with support from adult researchers (Torre et al., 2008). The youth researchers in *The Opportunity Gap* project participated in each phase of the research process: research design, problem identification, instrument development, data collection, data analysis, interpretation, and dissemination.

Torre and Fine et al. (2008) presented a clear example of deep, meaningful, full participation with youth researchers. Their project very distinctly aligns with YPAR principles by focusing on capacity building (through research training and critical dialogue) and partnership (through extended engagement with youth co-researchers) with youth. The authors detailed the depth of their analysis, suggesting that the youth co-researchers were essential in this phase of the research. Additionally, dissemination of their findings was public and extended beyond the academy, using theatre and the performing arts to engage the audience in critical awareness of
social injustices in education. The youth were central in public dissemination; taking the role of the presenter and sharing their knowledge with the broader community.

**Implications and Conclusions**

Participatory methods have risen in response to methodologies that seek to support youth and adult participants in communicating their perspectives and knowledge with the broader community. Rather than relying on an expert to conduct research *on* a community, examining phenomena that are of interest to the researcher, these methods require research that collaborates *with* community members to explore issues of local importance. Inherent in this perspective is a strength-seeking stance that values the knowledge and expertise of the community. Situated, insider knowledge accurately reflects the lived experience of those engaged in a social phenomenon on a daily basis. Participatory methods push for multiple perspectives and an expanded understanding of whose voice “counts” and should be shared in research.

Effective YPAR projects actively include youth as participants in the research process, consider the strengths and resources of those youth, and build capacity and knowledge among all partners. A YPAR approach to the study of stress and resilience may be particularly useful in its ability to empower and support vulnerable youth, helping the participants to develop relevant skills in research, writing, public speaking, and advocacy. Because traditional research methods have been inadequate in exploring the perspectives of youth, YPAR can been used to actively engage youth and encourage full involvement in the research process. Such an approach is useful in better understanding local issues of importance, encouraging community and youth buy-in, and developing effective, desirable interventions with youth.
Importantly, all three projects described above employed arts-based methods to engage youth in critical conversations about community issues or to disseminate the research findings to the broader population. Arts-based inquiry may be particularly effective as a tool to involve youth in the research process, garner community support, and share knowledge with community members (Cahill, 2007a).

**Arts-Based Inquiry**

The use of arts-based inquiry to understand youth perspectives has become more prevalent in the past five years and has caused researchers to expand traditional notions of what counts as “evidence” (Boydell, Gladstone, Volpe, Allemang, & Stasiulis). Two main factors have fueled the increase in arts-based research methods: the need for techniques that allow individuals to accurately describe their true subjective experiences and the need for research outputs that can be disseminated beyond academic outlets. Whereas increased engagement in health research can be a challenge among all generations, it can be particularly difficult to capture the true experience of youth and to communicate research outcomes to young people using traditional research methods. As such, research suggests that arts-based approaches show particular promise for engaging children and adolescents in research (Daykin et al., 2008). Through production of visual media, the youth are regarded as experts of their experiences, participants in the construction of knowledge, and authors of their own story, rather than subjects in an outsider’s research and analysis.

**Voice and Access in Arts-Based Methods**

Arts-based inquiry, like participatory methods, has emerged from feminist, critical, and postmodern theories that argue for context and multiplicity in our understanding of the world and
advocate for the betterment of society. Traditionally, some voices have been valued in political, social, and academic contexts while others have been marginalized. The voices of the students, children, patients, ethnic minorities, and those living in poverty are substituted by the voices of the administrators, academics, mental health counselors, or other professionals (Tolia-Kelly, 2007). Arts-based approaches, coupled with participatory methods, attempt to provide a space within which this paradigm can shift, privileging instead the voices of the marginalized (Carrington, 2007; Packard, 2008).

Arguably, arts-based methodologies in particular are useful in providing space for voice and communication in the research process. Working as producers of knowledge, participants get to tell a story through their own eyes. The youth can control what is told, how it is told, and with whom it is shared. Representation of their perspectives, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are no longer subjected to the interpretation of the researcher, but are instead put forth as valid understandings of a particular issue. This aspect of participatory visual methodologies is essential in building trust with youth participants and ensuring that their voice is appropriately shared.

**Expanding Notions of What Counts as “Evidence”**

Using images as evidence has significant implications for philosophical and paradigmatic assumptions, particularly epistemology. Epistemology investigates the nature of knowledge and asks questions like: How do we know what we know? What is the process of inquiry? What information is valid? And for what purposes is it valid? Though visual arts research methods today are generally associated with subjective, descriptive, and qualitative approaches, the emergence of photography as data or evidence was largely linked to a search for objective
documentation. According to Stanczak (2007), the camera and positivism came to prominence simultaneously, as the search for truth focused on the examination and documentation of objective facts observed in society. The camera, he argued, became a tool for empirical understanding and construction of knowledge across disciplines (Stanczak, 2007). For example, social scientists such as Jacob Riis or Lewis Hine utilized visual evidence for social critique, documenting social and economic disparities in the late nineteenth century (Stanczak, 2007). With a rise in photography that told visual stories of social problems, including poverty, unemployment, urbanization, drug abuse, or family dynamics and populated the walls of museums, some argue the potential of visuals in the social sciences or as a policy tool lost its momentum. Concurrently, the academic focus within the social sciences shifted toward the highly quantitative positivist paradigm, which privileged large quantities of data from representative samples that underwent rigorous, systematic analysis (Stanczak, 2007). Though critical documentary and media studies reemerged later in the 20th century, the focus was on the impact of images on audiences and society rather than using the images as data or methodologies for constructing knowledge (Stanczak, 2007).

**Bias and Subjectivity in Visual Research Methods**

Recently, as the use of visual images as data has reemerged in the social sciences, epistemological assumptions have shifted toward subjectivity. The construction and interpretation of images is viewed as deeply personal and situated; dependent on the experiences, knowledge, and intentions of both the producer and the audience (Rose, 2012). When using a photograph as data, for example, the producer makes choices about the content, angle, lighting and depth. The producer chooses who or what to capture and when. When viewing a photograph
of an infant, the audience will vary in their reading and emotional connection based on previous experiences with children. As such, though the camera may “objectively” capture what is present in that moment, the data that is presented reflects several levels of subjectivity.

**Visual Arts Production as Methodology**

When approaching research within a participatory framework, participants are ideally engaged in all aspects of the research process, including design, development of research questions or problem of interest, data collection and analysis, and dissemination. Therefore, simply relying on interpretation of visual data would not be sufficient to engage youth in the full research process. Instead, youth should be active in both the construction and analysis of knowledge. This perspective is consistent with visual arts research methods that advocate against the summarizing of visual content and for production of data. Rose (2012) wrote that visual arts research methods use “various kinds of images as ways of answering research questions, not by examining images—as do visual culture studies—but by making them” (p. 10). When producing and manipulating visual images, whether by editing digital media or through other artistic means, the participant is able to create an accurate representation of their perspective (Clarke, Boorman, & Nind, 2011). The youth ensure validity and accuracy by producing a visual that is as much reflective of the phenomenon as it is of the producer (Carrington, 2007).

In order to highlight the experiences of local vulnerable youth, my intention was to facilitate a process in which youth actively manipulate and create visual material in the form of a visual narrative. Rather than simply responding to visual data, the youth will be responsible for conceptualizing, designing, filming, narrating, and editing the data. Consistent with a YPAR
approach, the youth will be valued as the experts of their own experiences, and will be invited to help understand the factors that contribute to their resilient lives.

**Visual Narrative Research**

Arts-based inquiries have utilized a multitude of artistic expressions, including written word, drama, theatre, dance, and drawing (Boydell et al.), but the most commonly used techniques rely on cameras to capture individual experiences. Collier (1967) stated that a camera can be used as a visual extension to analyze a complicated phenomenon in greater depth, including societal barriers and relationships that contribute to disparities in health and well-being (Collier, 1967). Perhaps the most popular form of arts-based research, Photovoice has been used to examine a wealth of complex phenomenon by placing the data collection tools in the hands of the participants (Wang & Burris, 1997). Like Photovoice, visual narratives originated from a Freirian model that uses images to generate dialogue, incorporate multiple perspectives, and value the experiences of the storyteller (Wexler, Gubrium, Griffin, & DiFulvio, 2013).

Visual narrative research builds on the potential of images as evidence by combining art production with written or auditory narration that further develops and defines meaning in the data. As Ball (1998) wrote, “As a form of data, photographs are not capable of talking for themselves, the information has to be teased out of them, interpreted and decoded, this visual availability of the phenomena has to be unpacked.” The addition of a nuanced narrative, through discussion, focus groups, interviews or written reflection, adds a first-person interpretation and description to the visual data. This allows the participants or research team (in collaboration with the participants) to make meaning of the visual data and create a product (e.g., journal
publication, public exhibition, conference, community meeting, etc.) that can be disseminated to a broader population.

Visual narrative research incorporates photographs, film, and narrative texts to investigate a phenomenon of interest to the participants. Narrative research designs involve storytelling that focuses on an individuals’ lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Czarniawska (2004) defines narrative as “a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (p. 17). These designs typically bring together multiple individuals who share experience with the phenomenon of interest in order to inductively generate common themes across the lived or told experience. Through individual storytelling, group discussion, or co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and the participants, these stories can shed light on the intent, context, or meaning behind visual data.

Visual narrative designs build on narrative research and have been used to investigate social inequalities, relationships, and other experiences of at-risk or marginalized populations. When working with youth, the larger goal is often to empower and build capacity rather than collect data (Packard, 2008). For example, Clarke, Borland, and Nind (2011), used a visual narrative methodology to help youth diagnosed with behavioral and emotional disturbances effectively and appropriately express their emotions at school. Through use of a video diary room, youth were able to communicate feelings of frustration, disappointment, and success. Similarly, Carrington, Allen, and Osmolowski (2007) used visual narrative methodology to drive development of student voice and autonomy in a middle school context.

When framed in a YPAR approach, visual narrative research encourages youth to illustrate the structures that hinder and the resources that support their opportunities. In the work
of Carrington and her colleagues (2007), using cameras allowed the students to capture situations that inspired conversations that questioned the traditional institution of schooling. In similar projects, youth have been asked to envision changes they would like to see in school or their community, and to visualize how this change may occur (Kostenius et al., 2012). Within the YPAR framework, researchers advocate for awareness and reflection on the malleable nature of reality. Youth are encouraged to recognize and act upon their capacity to change their community for the better. For youth who experience little control over their lives, exercising autonomy in this capacity may be particularly beneficial (Carrington et al., 2007).

**Visual Narrative Process**

As with all qualitative research approaches, the visual narrative design is emergent and can be modified throughout the course of the project. Visual narrative designs can include individual or group processes, but include similar basic components: (1) photography or visual media training (introduction to the purpose and process of visual narratives); (2) idea generation (brainstorming content, individually or in groups); (3) photo/video collection (photography during or outside of project sessions); (4) group discussion and theme building; (5) video compilation and editing; (6) dissemination (Wexler et al., 2013). Workshops can take place over several days, weeks, or months, depending on the project goals and feasibility. In projects with youth participants, many projects are embedded within school contexts.

Wexler and her colleagues (2013), for example, offered annual five-day workshops in their digital storytelling projects with Alaskan Native youth to target protective factors against suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Participants were recruited through local schools, where project staff introduced visual narratives by sharing existing stories that had been created by Alaskan
Native youth. For three hours each day, the youth participants shared their own life experiences through photos and illustrations, wrote and recorded narrative descriptions, and learned to assemble digital stories with computer tutorials. The participants specifically focused on their lives, relationships, and achievements, including aspects of their experiences that “make life worth living.” To share the narratives publically, family and friends were invited to view the stories throughout the week.

Using a slightly different approach, the Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth (DUSTY) after-school program emphasized scripting and recording stories before seeking accompanying images (Hull, 2003; Hull & Katz, 2006). With the support of university students, elementary through high school aged youth first began by writing about their community through poetry, narratives, and short stories. Writings were edited, typed, and recorded for use in the final visual narrative. Next, youth took to the streets to collect photographs and video clips to be added to their stories. DUSTY used visual narrative techniques to help develop school-based and digital literacies, particularly among children and adolescents without regular access to computers, camcorders, and other technology.

Both of these visual narrative projects included trainings in digital media and photography as well as sessions for brainstorming and script development, image collection, compilation, and editing of the final stories. However, because each project had a different emphasis (positive youth development compared to school-based literacies), the structure and function of the visual narrative process was unique. When designing a visual narrative project, particularly within the context of youth participatory action research, attention must be given to
the specific research questions guiding the approach. As a result, the design will be emergent and representative of the needs and priorities of the youth participants.

**Research Limitations**

Though much of the research on participatory, arts-based methodologies has focused on the potential benefits of this type of inquiry, little has been formally reported regarding the ethical considerations and limitations (Packard, 2008). It would be naïve to assume that participatory methods are without inherent challenges, including issues of power and feasibility in projects with youth.

**Power and Relationships in Participatory Visual Projects**

As with more traditional research methods, unequal power relationships may still exist within participatory, arts-based research projects. Because the researcher may approach youth participants with a project idea, facilitate meetings, or lead the data analysis, some power remains with the researcher as the originator of the process. Youth may default to the researcher, both as an adult and an expert, when making decisions or providing input during the inquiry process. Even when researchers actively work to share power and build equal relationships, some youth may revert to typical cultural standards that elevate the status of the researcher above the youth (Chen et al., 2007). As such, it is essential for the research team to have explicit conversations about building trust and sharing power within the partnership. All members of the research team must take an active role in ensuring engagement and autonomy.

Importantly, the use of cameras also brings into question the traditional power relationships that exist between participant and researcher and that can often still exist within participatory projects. For example, for those who have been traditionally marginalized or
silenced, producing written or oral material may be intimidating (Carrington, Allen, & Osmolowski, 2007; Clarke et al., 2011; Nind et al., 2012). Visual imagery, on the other hand, may level the playing field and make knowledge generation more accessible to youth. In addition, with the falling cost of and increased access to digital cameras, it is likely that many youth participants have already engaged with photographs. Whether through the camera on a phone or a family camera, many youth cite previous experiences with photographs and cameras. As a result, the researcher is less likely to serve as the expert or teacher compared to other research methods. Together with explicit, mutual dialogue between researchers and participants, visual methods can shift the positivistic paradigm toward a more participatory, egalitarian approach.

Feasibility and Practicalities

As described already with regard to YPAR projects, successful arts-based YPAR approaches require careful consideration of the unique needs and skills young people bring to projects. Developmental needs and capacities, access to resources, and limited experiences with power, decision-making, and autonomy may hinder the ability of youth to fully engage in research. Without the proper training and scaffolding, youth may feel overburdened and like they cannot meet the demands of the project (Chen et al., 2007). Additionally, limitations of the academic researcher (e.g., time, lack of extended engagement in the community, resources) and the partnership (e.g., project goals and design, funding, time) influence the success of YPAR projects (Chen et al., 2007). Because arts-based, participatory research can be an extensive, slow-paced process, there is a substantial amount of time and resources required.

Opportunities and Implications for Research
Despite these challenges, arts-based YPAR offers substantial opportunities for high-quality research. When centered on shared decision-making, youth engagement in arts-based PAR has the potential to positively influence youth, the quality of the research and the broader community as well (Suleiman, Soleimanpour, & London, 2006). For youth, participation in the research process can promote social and emotional development, increase self-efficacy, enhance autonomy, provide opportunities to explore diverse perspectives, and build community awareness. Youth develop practical research and critical thinking skills, gain leadership and mentoring opportunities, and establish new relationships with peers, adults, and community members. The quality of research also improves when community members are positioned as knowledgeable experts about particular issues. When youth are invested in the research, the results are more likely to be used to create positive changes within the community.

Furthermore, participatory interpretation and analysis of data allows for the youth participants to intentionally represent their own perspectives. Youth are responsible for generating and analyzing data: they produce the stories they want to create through photographs, film, visuals, and correlating narrative data. The youth are also responsible for deciding who will be able to view the data and how it will be shared with the community, if at all). The youth participants are empowered to produce, analyze, and disseminate knowledge. Through extensive reflection and member-checking, a process through which findings are shared with the participants and the community to determine accuracy, participatory methods ensure the validity of the visual data and analysis (Borland, 2013). Importantly, research suggests that members of the community view participatory projects (within which community members collect data) as more valid and accurate than traditional research findings (Jardine & James, 2012).
When working with youth living in at-risk or low-income communities, participatory and arts-based methods are useful to develop trust, garner community support, and create effective and practical strategies for change. Instead of essentializing at-risk and low-income youth as a population to be studied, participatory and arts-based approaches support the youth in constructing their own narratives about their experiences and perspectives. To date, YPAR designs have been used to engage youth in conversations about social injustices, particularly within their school and community settings (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Sánchez, 2009b).

It is important to consider the barriers to participation, including time, funding, and inequitable power relationships, that can hinder the success of PAR projects with youth. Even with the best intentions, some partnerships continue to privilege the experiences of the academic researcher, both as an adult and as an “expert” in research, data collection, and analysis (Chen et al., 2007). Further obstacles arise as youth are pushed to accept power and decision-making opportunities, likely contradicting their roles in other contexts. Despite these challenges, careful and reflective research combining YPAR and arts-based approaches can engage and empower youth as partners.

**Present Study**

The present project is part of a larger mixed methods sequential explanatory study, directed by three academic researchers (see Figure 2). I worked as the Project Coordinator and Qualitative Researcher for the project. The focus of this dissertation is Phases 2 and 3, the qualitative and participatory phases that explore contextual sources of stress and resilience and highlight youth perspectives in three low-income communities. Phase 1 is briefly introduced.
below to situate Phases 2 and 3 in the context of the larger study and to describe the integration procedures that guided participation selection.

**Research Questions**

In order to address the gaps in the literature, the research questions for the present project are: (1) how do youth in three distinct low-income communities in or near Cincinnati describe the individual, relational, and community risk factors that influence their lives?; and (2) how do these youth describe the individual, relational, and community protective factors that support their well-being?

![Study design](image)

**Community Settings**

Three low-income communities, in and near the greater Cincinnati metropolitan area, were selected as partners in the mixed methods study. The three communities were invited to participate because each has an established community-academic partnership with one of the
researchers. All three faculty members invited their community partner into the project. The three communities are defined as:

1. *Rural White Appalachian* adolescents, recruited from a public school in a rural town two hours east of Cincinnati.
2. *Urban Black* adolescents, recruited from a local community organization that provides youth development programs in an impoverished inner-city neighborhood in Cincinnati.

Community characteristics are described in greater detail in the findings, Chapters 4-6.

**Phase 1: Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis**

A community coordinator was employed at each site to facilitate recruitment and consent procedures. Youth were invited to participate in the study if they were between 10 and 15 years of age and able to speak conversational English. Forty-two (14 Appalachian, 14 Latino, 14 Black) adolescents participated in Phase 1, which involved collection of biological samples (blood and saliva) and completion of a questionnaire. The biological samples were used to measure allostatic load, a composite measure of physiological stress (McEwen, 2007). The questionnaire included demographic information, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS, Cohen, 1987), the Multicultural Events Scale for Adolescents (Gonzales, Gunnoe, Jackson, & Samaniego, 1997) and the California Healthy Kids Resilience subscale (Constantine & Benard, 2001) and was used to separate participants into high and low relative perceived stress.

**Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data**
Following Phase 1, the youth were divided into quadrants based on their biological data and questionnaire scores (see Figure 3). The biological data was analyzed for allostatic load, a composite measure of the physiological effects of chronic stress (McEwen, 2008). High allostatic load represents an increased neuroendocrine response in the body which indicates repeated exposure to stress. The resulting quadrants for each of the communities were: (1) low perceived stress, low allostatic load; (2) low perceived stress, high allostatic load; (3) high perceived stress, low allostatic load; (4) high perceived stress, high allostatic load. In order to address the research questions for Phase 2, we recruited participants from both of the high perceived stress groups: (1) high perceived stress, low allostatic load and (2) high perceived stress, high allostatic load. This allowed us to compare the lived experiences of youth with high perceived stress within and across the three low-income communities.

Figure 3: Quadrants based on biological data and questionnaire scores.

**Phase 2: Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis**
Qualitative interviews were collected in order to gain an understanding of the youth’s perspectives on risk factors, coping strategies, and protective factors in their lives and the lives of others in their community.

Table 2
*Participant Demographics by Community and Level of Participation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting and community</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Narrative Interview</th>
<th>Participatory analysis and visual narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rural, Appalachian</strong></td>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brady</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malcolm</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urban, Black</strong></td>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Javon</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kemiya</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Makayla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nicki</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urban, Latino</strong></td>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alexander</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fresa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mia</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teo</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes.* Participants were encouraged to select their own pseudonym; Age and grade reflect characteristics at the start of Phase 2.
Participants

All 20 participants that were assigned to the two high perceived stress quadrants (7 Appalachian, 7 Black, 6 Latino) were invited to participate in a narrative interview. At the time Phase 2 began, one of the Appalachian participants and one of the Black participants had moved away and could not be reached via telephone. The remaining 18 adolescents agreed to participate and were consented for the interview. Participant ages ranged from 10 to 15 at the time of the narrative interview (average 11.9 years old). Nine of the participants identified as female (see Table 2 for details).

Narrative Interviews

Narrative research designs involve storytelling that focuses on the lived experiences of an individual and allow for subjective and contextual understandings of phenomenon (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Czarniawska, 2004; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). A narrative research approach was selected because it mimics classroom instructional techniques with which most youth would be familiar. Storytelling, compared to other formal interview approaches, allows youth to comfortably share their experiences with stressful life experiences. The individual interviews lasted 20-45 minutes and the youth were asked to recall stories of stressful life events, coping strategies, and supportive factors that contributed to their emotional and behavioral responses. The youth were asked to recount stories of their own life experiences in addition to their friends or peers in their community. Each participant received $10 at the completion of their interview.

Narrative Analysis
The narrative interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed using an inductive, narrative approach (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I grouped the interviews by community setting, read each interview, looked for stories related to participants’ life experiences, and then coded for key elements of the story (e.g., time, place, conflict, resolution). After initial coding, codes were condensed into themes that incorporated multiple codes (Creswell, 2013). Following Connelly and Clandinin’s (2000) three-dimensional narrative-inquiry approach, several qualities of each participant’s story were considered, including personal characteristics, social interactions, environmental contexts, and continuity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The findings presented in Chapters 4-6 include stories of the adolescents’ experiences, descriptions of personal and social interactions, and illustrations of the complexity of stress and resilience in the three community groups. For each of the three communities, a theme and sub-theme were considered salient when described by at least four of the six participants.

**Phase 3: Participatory Visual Narratives and Analysis**

For the final phase, youth created visual narratives that told their story of stress and resilience in their community. Youth were invited to generate the visual narratives and engage in participatory analysis processes to facilitate understanding of their experiences.

**Participants**

Participants were invited based on willingness to participate and feasibility of working in a group setting. Though a group visual narrative was planned for each community, only the urban Latino and rural Appalachian participants finished the visual narrative process. The urban Black youth were unable to complete the visual narratives after the community contact
disengaged from the research project and it was no longer feasible to have further interactions with the participants. The participants ranged from 10 to 15 years of age and half of the youth were female. See Table 2 for participant demographics.

**Participatory Visual Narratives**

Visual narrative research incorporates photographs, film, and narrative texts to investigate a research question. Through individual storytelling, group discussion, or co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and the participants, these stories can shed light on the intent, context, or meaning behind visual data. Each participant was given a digital camera to use throughout the duration of the project (3 weeks). To accommodate their school schedules (including conflicts with state-wide testing), the Appalachian group met once per week, for 1 hour each session and the Latino group met twice per week, for 30-45 minutes each session. All meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The community groups each designed a visual narrative that represented the most significant stressors, coping strategies, and protective factors facing youth in their community. This iterative, creative process included: (1) training on visual research methodology, (2) training and practice with cameras, videos, and narration, (3) brainstorming, storyboarding, and scripting the visual narrative; (4) filming and editing visual narrative; and (5) ongoing participatory analysis of themes (Wexler et al., 2013).

As recognition for the considerable time and effort they contributed to the project, each participant received 20-30 printed photographs and a $30 gift card.

**Participatory Analysis**

The data from the interviews and visual narratives were analyzed using Jackson’s (2008) 4-stage process for community-based participatory analysis, which includes: (1) preparation of
the data (transcribing, paraphrasing, collecting notes); (2) coding and identification of themes; (3) interpretation and integration; and (4) revision, dissemination, and advocacy. Targeted discussions during storyboarding, scripting, and editing served as the bulk of the analysis. Youth identified themes present in their own photographs and narratives and looked for shared meaning across the group discussions (Jackson, 2008).

**Research Quality**

Quality in qualitative research has been extensively theorized (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 2011) and includes terms such as validity, credibility, trustworthiness, authenticity, and plausibility. According to Creswell and Miller (2000), evaluation of quality in qualitative research should align with the theoretical orientation of the researcher and the study design. As a result and consistent with principles of action research, relational cultural theory, and social ecological theory, I have highlighted several measures of quality below: (1) richness and depth of description; (2) collaboration; (3) member checking; (4) ethical considerations; and (5) positionality.

**Richness and Depth of Description**

Rubin and Rubin (2011) call for rich, thorough description that brings multiple perspectives and presents the complexity of human phenomenon. Rather than oversimplifying data, quality results from the details, examples, and evidence that supports the findings. In order to adequately articulate the results in the present study, data is reported in Chapters 4-6 in narrative form with participant quotations.

**Collaboration**
Creswell and Miller (2000) argue that credible data results from close collaboration with research participants throughout the full research process. According to the authors, collaboration helps to “build the participant’s view into the study” rather than simplifying their perspectives (p. 128). Participants in this study collaborated to interpret the Phase 2 interview data and create a visual representation of their experiences through the Phase 3 visual narratives. Participatory analysis of the data increases validity by ensuring that participant perspectives are adequately and accurately presented (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Jackson, 2008).

**Member Checking**

Member checking places the validity checking in the hands of the participants, who confirm or refute the findings and interpretations (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because the participants were involved in the data analysis, member checking occurred continuously throughout the Phase 3 process as participants interpreted interview data in the context of their own experiences. In addition, participants in both of the Phase 3 groups reviewed the videos in the visual narratives to ensure that their story was being accurately presented. As stated above, the findings in Chapters 4-6 are presented in their own voice (as block or short quotations) as much as possible to reflect their perspectives.

**Ethical Considerations**

This study followed two processes to ensure ethical conduct. First, the project was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the Principal Investigator’s institution and met standards for human subjects research. Parents were consented in their native language prior to Phase 1 and youth participants gave their assent before all three phases of the study. Second, following a description of the goals of the project, the youth participated in a structured ethical
reflection (Brydon-Miller, 2008; Brydon-Miller, Rector Aranda, & Stevens, 2015) to determine community standards of ethical conduct. The structured ethical reflection process uses a grid of critical questions to encourage researchers to consider ethical principles in relation to their research project. Brydon-Miller (2008) described these ethical principles as a “shift toward the more engaged forms of scholarship and more collaborative notions of knowledge generation found in action research” (p. 158). If used within a community setting, this process leads to a participatory, collaborative understanding of community principles to be upheld in specific research relationships.

In order to create a research relationship with the youth participants and ensure that high standards were upheld, the youth and I completed a structured ethical reflection. Table 3 displays values that the participants and I identified when discussing the overall project, process, and goals. Youth were quick to describe the importance of honesty and respect, particularly when representing their thoughts and opinions. Communication was also important, especially in the group setting when they may be sharing their personal experiences with others with whom they do not have a close relationship. This point was important for the Appalachian youth, who did not know each other well prior to participating in the project and stated concerns with confidentiality due to high school gossip in their small town. Overall, the youth wanted their conversations to be anonymous and not spread to classmates, peers, or teachers.

As the researcher, I described my goals of authentically and accurately representing their experiences. We discussed my responsibility as a researcher to accurately reflect their experiences in order to recommend positive changes. I asked the participants if they were willing to be included, using a pseudonym, in my dissertation. I explained that the dissertation would be
published and their stories would be shared, but I would not describe their family or the
participants using identifiable information. Some of the participants were curious about the
dissertation, why I was interested in their community, and why I was only speaking to certain
students. We also discussed the definition of resilience and how this project would seek to
capture their stories of strength and resilience in addition to stress.

Positionality

In qualitative and participatory research, subjectivity is a valued characteristic that
enhances research quality. Creswell and Miller (2000) argue that researcher reflexivity, whereby
positionality, assumptions, and beliefs are directly articulated as part of the research process, is
essential to ensure quality and credibility. In response to participant questions about the
dissertation and my curiosity in their community, I explained the goals of the project, the
relationships between faculty members and the community, and how participants were selected
for the qualitative phases. I described my intentions as a participatory researcher and their role in
determining the direction of data analysis and visual narrative generation. I also described how I
came to be interested in stress and resilience as a former special education teacher, responsible
for students with emotional and behavioral disorders who had been expected to achieve little to
nothing. In this role, I have witnessed the incredible fortitude that children can exhibit when
faced with challenges, and given the right protective factors, manage to become healthy and
well-adapted individuals. As a result, I approached this study with an explicit interest in the
considerable strengths and resources available to youth in individual, relational, and community
contexts. As an action researcher, I also entered this study with an intention to learn specific
strategies that will support resilience in the three communities that participated in the project.
## Table 3

**Structured Ethical Reflection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Planning Project</th>
<th>Recruiting Participants</th>
<th>Collecting Data</th>
<th>Analyzing Data</th>
<th>Member Checking</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Going Public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authenticity</strong></td>
<td>Is the research question important to my participants?</td>
<td>Is the project aligned to the greatest needs of the participants? Will my project genuinely reflect my participants?</td>
<td>Am I clear about the project goals when talking with potential participants?</td>
<td>Do my methods allow for genuine results?</td>
<td>Does the analysis technique reflect my participants' perspectives?</td>
<td>When reviewing the data or process, do the participants feel genuinely represented? Do my participants disagree with my findings?</td>
<td>Do my conclusions reflect the data and member perspectives? Am I accurately articulating their experience to represent their voice?</td>
<td>Do the participants feel comfortable with publication or presentation? Will the publication or presentation appropriately represent the participants?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>Am I giving participants the opportunity to speak/share their story and voice?</td>
<td>Did I ask for feedback or advice from participants? Did I talk to who I needed to (to get permission, establish relationships, etc.)</td>
<td>Am I clear on expectations? Goals? The process? Do all the students (ELL, IEP, etc.) understand the project?</td>
<td>Are all perspectives represented? Was everyone able to complete the task? How could I better capture student ideas?</td>
<td>Does my analysis reflect what was said?</td>
<td>Does everyone feel well-represented? Does the analysis seem accurate? Did we miss any perspectives?</td>
<td>Am I accurately articulating perspectives? Am I capturing multiple perspectives and the complexity in these perspectives?</td>
<td>Are we clear on how the data will be used? Who owns the data? How can we share this information with the larger community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>Planning Project</td>
<td>Recruiting Participants</td>
<td>Collecting Data</td>
<td>Analyzing Data</td>
<td>Member Checking</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Going Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Is my research question morally, socially, ethically responsible?</td>
<td>Does my research question lead me to beneficial conclusions about the population or phenomenon?</td>
<td>Am I recruiting participants that will help to answer my particular research question?</td>
<td>Am I accurately summarizing the data? Does my analysis consider the strengths and resources of the participants and the community? Am I reflecting upon the data and the effectiveness of the questions (responsibility for authenticity of data?) Am I accurately transcribing the data?</td>
<td>Am I accurately summarizing the data, finding themes, and interpreting the data? Am I reporting the data in a way that is ethically and socially just?</td>
<td>Am I reporting the data in a way that is ethically and socially just?</td>
<td>Am I taking ownership of any mistakes?</td>
<td>Am I reporting the data in a way that is ethically and socially just?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Respect</td>
<td>Am I developing a question that will provide meaningful data for the researcher, the participant, and the community?</td>
<td>Am I constructing a project that will be meaningful/of interest for this population?</td>
<td>Am I considerate of my participants' time, resources, availability, strengths, etc.?</td>
<td>Are my techniques, questions, methods considerate of my participants? Do these methods accurately and appropriately reflect my participants?</td>
<td>Does my analysis allow for reflection and revision? Do the participants feel accurately and authentically represented in the data? Are the findings respectful of participant differences, experiences, perspectives?</td>
<td>Does my writing appropriately reflect my participants? Does my writing show respect for their perspectives, experiences, strengths, etc?</td>
<td>Am I responsive to my participants needs in terms of publication/presentation? Do I share presentation/publication information with my participants?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>Planning Project</td>
<td>Recruiting Participants</td>
<td>Collecting Data</td>
<td>Analyzing Data</td>
<td>Member Checking</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Going Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>-----------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>Do my questions accurately reflect gaps in the literature and/or the needs of the community?</td>
<td>Does my research design allow me to openly share the experiences/voices/perspectives of my participants?</td>
<td>Am I transparent about the nature of the project, the role of the participants, and how the data will be used?</td>
<td>Am I creating an environment in which participants feel comfortable to converse freely, openly, and honestly? Am I transparent about my intents and purposes with the data collection?</td>
<td>Do my conclusions have logical connections to the data?</td>
<td>Am I giving my participants the opportunity to refute or rescind any of their statements? Does the data accurately reflect their perspectives?</td>
<td>Does my writing accurately address the data? Am I honest about any limitations, contradictions, or challenges within the data?</td>
<td>Are my participants informed about any publications and presentations that will result from the project?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>Does my research question look for strengths in my participants?</td>
<td>Does my project look for strengths in my participants? Does the project help to build strengths or capacity?</td>
<td>Are my participants aware of my positionality? Do they know how I perceive them and their expertise?</td>
<td>Is the data responding to my research question?</td>
<td>Does my analysis allow for a strengths-seeking approach?</td>
<td>Do the participants feel well-represented by the data? Do the transcripts/data accurately reflect their perspectives?</td>
<td>Am I looking for and addressing strengths in my writing?</td>
<td>Will the participants have a role in presenting or publishing?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4: Findings

Rural White Appalachian Adolescents Outside of Greater Cincinnati

Participants

Seven participants from Phase 1 were invited to an interview. Six agreed to participate in Phase 2 and verbally assented to be interviewed. The seventh eligible participant had moved to a different town by the time Phase 2 began. The participants were thirteen- to fifteen years old at the time of the initial interview (see Table 4). Two participants identified as female and four identified as male. Of these six participants, four were invited to participate in the subsequent group analysis and visual narrative process. These participants were 2 female and 2 male adolescents.

Table 4

Participant Demographics for Rural White Appalachian Adolescents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age*</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Group Analysis</th>
<th>Visual Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brady</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malcolm</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Age at time of individual interview

Research Setting

All of the data was collected from a rural high school in a small village along the Ohio River. The village has a population slightly above 2,000 residents and is located approximately 75 miles east of Cincinnati. According to the 2014 American Community Survey, 97.6% of
residents reported their race and ethnicity as White/Non-Hispanic, 2.4% Hispanic/Latino and 1.8% reported two or more races. Of those who identified with two or more races, 1.1% identified as White and American Indian and 0.8% identified as both White and Black/African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). In 2013, the median household income in this community was $25,164.

The public high school is representative of the community in terms of race and socioeconomic status. The high school enrollment is 97.7 percent White/Caucasian and 99.9 percent of students are classified as economically disadvantaged (Ohio Department of Education, 2015). In Ohio, economic disadvantage is determined by: (1) eligibility for free and reduced lunch (income below $44,863 for a family of 4 in 2015-2016, participation in Head Start, child is a foster child, and/or child is homeless, migrant, or runaway), and/or (2) family eligibility for public assistance (Ohio Department of Education, 2015).

**Risk Factors for White Rural Appalachian Adolescents**

Analysis of the interviews, group discussions, and participatory visual narratives revealed several sources of stress and adversity in their small town. Overall, the stories reveal an overarching theme of isolation: isolation from larger society, their community, parents, and peers. In their community, the teens described a pervasive apathy that impacts both adults and children and results from widespread financial strain and limited opportunity in the area. According to the youth, apathy on top of poverty leads to rampant problems with substance abuse and violence. The teens feel “stuck” or “down in the ground,” unable to seek opportunities outside of their town and isolated from broader society. In their relationships, the teens also struggle with isolation, exclusion, loss, and disconnection. The youth reported incidences of
victimization by peers and adults. Individual characteristics, including passive coping strategies and the struggle to balance multiple conflicting responsibilities, further contributed to the overwhelming stress that left these youth feeling isolated and stuck in a cycle of community apathy. The following section describes the results of the qualitative data analysis by examining, in greater detail, the risk factors present within the three social-ecological levels: (1) community, (2) relational, and (3) individual.

**Community Risk Factors**

The youth described their frustration and apathy with the physical and social circumstances that dominate their community. Community-level factors suggest widespread risk with the potential to influence the experiences of many adolescents and their families. Analysis of the interviews, group discussions, and participatory visual narratives revealed three community-level themes: (1) geographic and social isolation, (2) quality of life in the town, and (3) academic stress. See Table 5 for detailed breakdown of themes, sub-themes, and select quotations.

Table 5

*Community Risk Factors for Rural White Appalachian Adolescents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Lack of resources</td>
<td>So I had to wait 2 and a half to 3 hours for [my aunt and uncle] to get there and then another half an hour to get to Maysville. So I went 3.5 to 4 hours without going to the ER (Malcolm, 15, Visual Narrative).</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td>Parents down here are just not very successful in their whole lifetime. There are some every now and then. But most could not care what their kids do in their life. And those kids are feeding off of them not being successful. (Jennifer, 15, Group Analysis).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of life</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>I live out in the country. I used to live down in here and I still go to town a lot because I have friends down here (Malcolm, 15, Interview).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>There are a lot of people I don’t trust. They seem kinda weird like they are on drugs or something. They wander and look around all the time. They scare me a little bit. I feel unsafe about it. I feel like I’m not really safe in my own home because of what’s happening around my life (Stephen, 14, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime and violence</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>He was drinking and the person who killed him was drinking, too. That guy’s girlfriend was sitting on [my uncle’s] lap and all flirting with [my uncle] and he didn’t like it, he got jealous of [my uncle]. He threw the girl off of [my uncle] and he started stabbing my uncle. He got stabbed like, 49 times (Autumn, 14, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug and alcohol abuse</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>The drugs are with everyone. Kids, parents, people out of school. I mean, my gosh, this guy got stabbed to death [downtown]. Over drugs. They were strung out on drugs and one guy talked to another guy’s girlfriend and he stabbed him to death (Malcolm, 15, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial strain</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>There’s some kids around here that their parents really don’t have money, they’d rather spend their money on other stuff than the kids. There’s some people that really don’t have no money (Matthew, 14, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotypes and discrimination</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>You say you’re from [here] and everyone says, “Oh, you’re from [there]. Everything in that town is drugs.” (Oh really?) It’s hard to get work if you’re from [here], especially if it’s on a farm or even just doing odd jobs. You know, you say you’re from [here] and people you know don’t trust you. I don’t like putting up with that, because I think I’m trustworthy (Malcolm, 15, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Expectations and amount of work</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>Sometimes it feels like all work and no play. We get crammed with so much work that there’s nothing else to do besides work (Stephen, 14, Group Analysis).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of instruction</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>They won’t teach us nothing. They’ll sit and talk for the whole class period and then assign us homework at the end (Malcolm, 15, Group Analysis).</td>
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</table>

**Geographic and Social Isolation**
The small town is situated alongside the Ohio River in a string of small towns separated by farmland and campgrounds. As you drive west toward Cincinnati, there is increasing access to retail and restaurants. The youth participants live in the town center or off of state routes a fair distance away from the high school. The geographic isolation influences life experiences in many ways, including visible effects on their relationships jobs and opportunities, and access to resources.

Living far away from peers determines how frequently youth are able to socialize with their friends. Autumn, Stephen, and Malcolm described how, although they have some friends, they are unable to see them outside of school hours. As a result, the youth rely on activities at the school (e.g., lunch, classes, sports, working out at the recreation center) to spend time with their friends. Autumn states that she only sees her friends during the school day and at track practice and Stephen’s only friend attends another school in a different town. Malcolm said that he has friends that live in town, but he lives further in the country. He mostly spends time with his friends when he is going to and from football or track practice and when working out in the school’s recreation center.

The geographic isolation of the town also influences the number and quality of jobs and opportunities in the area. A dearth of opportunity leads to financial strain and community apathy. Jennifer described the cyclical effect of community level stress that now influences her peers: “Parents down here are just not very successful in their whole lifetime. There are some every now and then. But most could not care what their kids do in their life. And those kids are feeding off of them not being successful.” The teens agreed that there is little to do in the town, leading to widespread use of drugs and alcohol to cope and pass the time.
Finally, geographic isolation contributes to limited access to resources and services. For example, both Stephen and Malcolm told stories of having to go a long time without medical care because of the distance to the nearest hospital (30-45 minutes). When Malcolm had a football injury during a game, he had to wait for family to drive to the field to pick him up and then transport him to the hospital. As he explained, “I had to wait 2 and a half to 3 hours for [my aunt and uncle] to get [to the field] and then another half an hour to get to Maysville. So I went 3 and a half to 4 hours without going to the ER.” Similarly, Autumn described the difficulty of finding a ride to the store to buy shoes for track practice. She cannot easily get to a store herself, and others claim the cost of gas prohibits them from giving her a ride.

Quality of Life

All of the youth described community-level factors that influenced their perceived stress by creating an environment that feels unsafe and toxic. Specifically, youth described their town as a barrier to their physical and mental well-being, arguing that unsafe neighborhoods and the prevalence of crime, widespread use of drugs, crime, lack of opportunity and financial strain, and negative stereotypes associated with the town contribute to chronic stress among children and adolescents.

All of the teens described the rampant drug and alcohol abuse as a serious problem in their community. The effects of substance abuse are far-reaching, potentially influencing parental employment, financial strain, and child well-being. Matthew described how many of his friends have trouble with their parents who are addicts, stating, “a lot of my friends’ parents have a history of being on drugs and stuff, and my friends bring it up to me sometimes.” He discussed how difficult it can be if your parents are addicted to drugs or alcohol, and the hatred that
children can feel toward the caregivers. He recounted a time when he was at a friend’s house: “I have a friend that one time, his dad came home drunk one time and was screaming at him and stuff. It was pretty bad. Cops had to come get his dad… The cops had to take him, and he spent the night in the drunk tank.” Autumn agreed that addicted or alcoholic parents have negative influences on their children, stating that her father gets very emotional when drunk and often calls her house crying after a night of drinking. For some youth, parental substance abuse can lead to more severe outcomes, including violence and a chaotic home environment. Both Matthew and Autumn described their personal experiences with substance abuse-related violence, including screaming, throwing objects, and physical altercations with other children and adults.

Related to the widespread substance abuse, the youth told stories of crime and violence in their community. Stephen explained that he is wary of those who appear to be on drugs. He explained:

There are a lot of people I don’t trust. They seem kinda weird like they are on drugs or something. They wander and look around all the time. They scare me a little bit. I feel unsafe about it. I feel like I’m not really safe in my own home because of what’s happening around my life.

Several of the teens had personally been affected by crime or violence, including break ins of cars or homes. Three weeks before the interviews, Autumn’s uncle had been murdered in town. Both Malcolm and Autumn talked about this incident, describing that her uncle had been killed as a result of drug and alcohol use.
When discussing poverty and financial strain, five of the teens described “other people” or “some kids” as not having enough money. Stephen described how differences in wealth can cause a significant amount of social comparison between students at school, whereby some students judge others for their clothing and personal belongings (e.g., technology, phones, video games, etc.). Some of the teens agreed that differences in family income contributes to much of the teasing and bullying at school. Stephen explained a likely thought process for someone who bullies others for financial reasons: “All it amounts to is somebody wasn’t able to get this, so I’m going to make fun of this person because I didn’t get it because I feel jealous of this person. They got it and I didn’t, and I’ve been really wanting it.” Similarly, Jennifer stated, “If you say ‘I want that Under Armour hoodie’ but don’t have the money to get it, I’m going to tell you it looks bad so you won’t wear it anymore. So I don’t have to get it. Then we’re on the same page.”

Unlike the others, Autumn described her own family’s difficulty with money. At the time of the interview, Autumn and her sister were collecting donations so that they could participate in sports this spring. Autumn explained:

We found jars and putting our picture on it and taking it to our grandpa’s store. We’ve been taking jars and putting it in stores and stuff and getting money. It’s been working for a few dollars. I finally got my money for track, but she hasn’t made enough for cheerleading. She needs $44 this week. We are going to go find her jars today and see if she has $44 yet.

Even though she has collected enough money for her shoes, Autumn still needed to find a ride to the store. Her mother’s boyfriend was refusing to give her a ride and instead told her to quit track
because it is not important. Of note, Autumn discussed this circumstance matter-of-factly and was hopeful that her aunt could give her a ride to the store the afternoon of the interview.

Finally, the data revealed that the youth perceive their community as a hindrance to their health and well-being, stating that their town is a difficult and frustrating place to live. In fact, several teens advocated that leaving their community may be their only hope of future success. The youth feel “stuck” in their community, with little opportunity or resources to help propel them forward. When asked what it would take for Malcolm to be successful in his town, he laughed, “Successful and happy [here]? I’m never looking back at this town as soon as I graduate.” Malcolm was also concerned about the way others perceive him, arguing that even though he lives outside of town, others in neighboring areas are less likely to hire him or trust him because of his association with the community. Malcolm, Jennifer, and Stephen all have plans of moving away after graduation to pursue college outside of their county.

**Academic Stress**

Academic stress was a dominant theme throughout the individual interviews, group discussions, and visual narratives. All of the sessions were interspersed with state testing, so experiences with high-stakes testing were likely fresh in their minds. Still, the adolescents describe four main sources of academic stress: difficulties with balancing school requirements with other responsibilities, frustration with the amount of work they are required to complete, and the lack of active instruction time in classrooms.

Most of the participants were also involved in extracurricular activities that place demands on their times. Balancing the commitments of multiple activities, while still meeting the high expectations of their parents, is a significant source of stress. Stephen stated that his parents
pressure him to get only A’s, Malcolm stated that his parents expected a 4.0 grade point average, and Jennifer mentioned that she is not allowed to play sports or participate in extracurricular activities if she does not maintain good grades. When discussing their photographs, Malcolm shared a picture of the high school. He described his picture (see Figure 4):

I took a picture of the school because it’s something that I really, really dislike because of the amount of stress that it puts on the students. If they really try, I mean, you have some people that don’t try at all, and they just fail but they don’t really care. And their parents don’t care. But a lot of people’s parents do care what kind of grades you get. So if you don’t do something, you get grounded. It’s just a lot of stress.

Figure 4: Photograph of school parking lot by Malcolm, age 15.

With all of these demands, sometimes the youth do not feel adequately supported. Jennifer recalled a memorable moment when she felt the stress building up to overwhelm her:
I didn’t want to do my homework; I just didn’t want to do it. And they told me I was going to fail my class, and I knew that I can’t play sports if I fail or I have bad grades. My mom won’t let me play. So I was so stressed out about getting all those done, and I knew I should have done it, but I didn’t. And I called my mom and I was like, ‘I didn’t do this, I need to do it’ and she was like ‘Just take a breath and just do it.’ I was so far on the edge that I was scared I wouldn’t get it done.

Jennifer continued, “You have pressure from your teachers telling you what to do, you have after school people telling you what to do. There’s so much pressure without being supported.”

Figure 5: Photograph of daily schoolwork by Jennifer, age 15.

In addition to the enormous pressure students face to maintain high grades and balance multiple responsibilities, the teens also expressed frustration with their daily school workload. To capture the amount of homework that the students are assigned, Jennifer photographed a tall
stack of books and binders (see Figure 5). Still discussing Jennifer’s photograph, Malcolm argued:

I think that if we have to go to school for 8 hours a day to do work, then why should we have to go home and do more work? That doesn’t make sense to me. The teacher says it will make you better, well if you want to make us better at whatever we’re doing, then make use of the time you have in class. I mean, that’s your job.

Each of the students reported varying amounts of homework, with some completing their assignments during study hall and others requiring additional time at home. All of the students agreed, however, that their time in class could have been better spent to support their learning.

The third sub-theme, the lack of active instruction time in their classrooms, results from excessive time spent testing in addition to time spent off task. The students overwhelmingly agreed that classroom time should be used more effectively to avoid the unreasonable amount of work required outside of school. The four students in the group discussion emphasized their frustration with classroom instruction and the lack of engagement exhibited by their teachers. In response, Autumn stated that her teachers “just don’t care” and “they just sit at their desk.” Stephen, Jennifer, and Malcolm agreed that teachers often veer off topic and talk about their personal lives, their past experiences, or even sports. Malcolm summed their conversation by remarking, “They’ll sit and talk for the whole class period and then assign us homework at the end.” When the students are engaged in academic work, it is often required state testing.

**Relational Risk Factors**

Relational risk factors represented the broadest and most frequently discussed category of stress faced by the youth participants in this community. Six broad themes emerged from the
data analysis: (1) emotional isolation, (2) loss of a loved one, (3) peer conflict, (4) parent-child conflict, (5) parent-parent conflict, and (6) absent parents. Each of these themes and associated sub-themes are discussed in the following sections (see Table 6).

Table 6

*Relational Risk Factors for Rural White Appalachian Adolescents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Emotional       | Isolation                        | **Feeling unheard, ignored**
|                 |                                  | He doesn’t want to take us. Because he says it’s his car and he needs it. He says shoes ain’t important this time. I need it if I want to do track. He says I can quit track. I say I don’t want to quit track. He got mad and sent me to my room (Autumn, 14, Interview). |
|                 |                                  | **Feeling excluded**
|                 |                                  | I kinda feel out of place here. I feel like when people are talking, I don’t really know what they’re talking about. My parents weren’t from here so we don’t know a lot of people here. I just kinda listen and try to understand what’s going on. I feel like the oddball person (Stephen, 14, Interview). |
| Loss            | Death of a loved one             | When my dad died, we cremated my dad. That’s a locket that holds part of my dad’s ashes in it. And the reason it’s a heart is because it’s a heart that dangles next to my heart. So it’s my dad’s heart next to my heart (Jennifer, 15, Interview). |
| Peer conflict   | Social comparison and judgment   | Kids stress a lot around here, like what other people are saying to them, what they aren’t getting, what they don’t have that others do (Jennifer, 15, Interview). |
|                 | Teasing                          | People make fun of me because sometimes I get a real bad lisp. I will kinda stutter really bad… They’ll go “like, like, like, like.” It drives me insane (Stephen, 14, Interview). |
|                 | Peer victimization               | They’re physical [fights]. I’ve seen some people get knocked out pretty hard. Like there’s this kid last week that got picked up and slammed on the floor. Right in the hallway, it was pretty crazy (Matthew, 14, Interview). |
| Parent-child    | Lack of communication            | I have a hard time keeping my mouth shut to my mom when she makes me mad. It’s difficult. Whenever I have a point |
conflict and understanding made but she doesn’t get it (Jennifer, 15, Interview).

Pressure When [my parents] went to school, people may have been mean. But when we go to school there’s so much judgment. You have pressure from your teachers telling you, you have after school people telling you what to do. There’s so much pressure without being supported (Jennifer, 15, Interview).

Abusive and chaotic home environment I’ll run in there and tell him to stop. Then she’ll push him and I’ll take his hand and pull him. But he won’t go anywhere, so I’ll block him and my mom. I’ll stand between them. It’s complicated. It gets me in trouble a lot, but I just am protecting my mom (Autumn, 14, Interview).

Parent-parent conflict Abusive and chaotic home environment For the past week me and my sister and brother was thinking that if Danny would go away for at least a week or two, then we and my mom would be together again. And it would bring us closer together. But that’s not going to happen because Danny won’t stay away. My mom has been telling him to leave for the past week because he won’t stop yelling at her… He hits her sometimes, but my mom will start crying (Autumn, 14, Interview).

Absent parent -- Most of my friends, like me, like, they go to their dad’s on certain days… My mom really won’t let me [see my dad]. He makes stupid decisions. (Brady, 13, Interview).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Emotional Isolation</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The youth participants in this study described the emotional isolation that can occur as a result of feeling unheard or excluded. During the group discussion of photographs, Jennifer shared a picture of one of her paintings (see Figure 6). The painting features a colorful flower surrounded by a sea of darkness. All four of the youth identified with the painting and the isolation and exclusion it represents. Jennifer explained, “The reason why it’s so dark on the outside is because even though everything can seem so bright, everything else can be so dark.”</td>
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</table>
Malcolm agreed with the sentiment, stating, “Somebody can seem really happy but not be happy at all.”

![Figure 6: Photograph of a painting by Jennifer, age 15.](image)

The youth also described feeling unheard and excluded in their relationships with peers and family members. For example, Stephen frequently discussed feeling like he does not fit in with his peers. He lamented, “I kinda feel out of place here. I feel like when people are talking, I don’t really know what they’re talking about. I just kinda listen and try to understand what’s going on. I feel like the oddball person.” Similarly, Brady discussed social exclusion from the opposite perspective, noting that many adolescents in his class are not accepted by his peers. He remarked, “There are some kids in my class that I never really talk to. They don’t fit in. [Others] make fun of how big they are, or how little they are.” Jennifer and Malcolm concluded that
relationships are difficult to manage, because not everybody in their town is nice to talk to or willing to engage in meaningful relationships.

**Loss of a Loved One**

All four of the visual narrative participants had experienced significant losses that they each described as one of their most significant stressors. Their descriptions of the loss are below:

Malcolm: *Last week, April 25th, was the third anniversary of whenever my brother died. Last week was a pretty tough week... When he was a senior in high school... this was 3 years ago, I was in 7th grade, he got in a really bad car accident. He hit one of those industrial sized street lights that they have on highways, like when you’re going onto a bridge.*

Jennifer: *My dad’s been sick for about two years. He died with 7 types of cancer. Yeah, my dad had a trach in his throat. He had an ulcer that burst and gave him cancer. He had liver cancer, he had kidney failure, heart failure, and had cancer in his kidneys. It started in his liver. He started with chemo and radiation and it didn’t... it helped for a little bit and he lost a lot, a lot of weight. Then he just got really, really sick. They found out he had an ulcer on his throat, on his voice box, and then it outburst and he received cancer there.*

Autumn: *A year ago today. And my uncle just died March 3rd. My other aunt just died March 2nd. My first aunt died of cancer, my second aunt died of a heart attack, and my uncle got killed. He got murdered, he got stabbed.*

Stephen: *About three years ago, my grandma passed away. She had a trach put down her throat. One morning Papaw went to wake her up in the morning, she was*
slouched down like this and she had suffocated herself. She had passed away in her sleep. It was probably one of the hardest times I had to deal with. We live four hours away, they live in North Indiana. My mom came down and said, “Son, I know this is going to be really hard, but Grandma has passed away.” I was already crying. We got in the car and went to Indiana. A few days later we were going to the funeral and all that other stuff.

The four students described dealing with this stress in different ways. Jennifer remembers her father by playing the guitar, drawing and looking through photographs. She wears a locket every day that contains some of her father’s ashes. Autumn remembers her uncle by looking through photographs, but also spends time trying to forget or move on. Stephen talked about having conversations with other family members and the value of time to move on. For Malcolm, working out and other distractions have been helpful in dealing with the stress of losing his older brother.

Peer Conflict

As described above, social comparison can be the cause of conflict between peers and even result in bullying and peer victimization. Social comparison may include judgment based on income, ability, dress, language, and other factors. Jennifer concluded that social comparison is an important source of stress. She stated, “Kids stress a lot around here, like what other people are saying to them, what they aren’t getting, what they don’t have that others do.” Because they live in a small town and their high school is a small school, rumors spread quickly and most are aware of each other’s social circumstances.

Perhaps the most salient stressor, each youth participant identified peer victimization and bullying as a particular problem at their high school. The students told stories of both physical
and verbal aggression. Matthew described the physical fights that he has witnessed this year. He commented, “I’ve seen some people get knocked out pretty hard. Like there’s this kid last week that got picked up and slammed on the floor. Right in the hallway, it was pretty crazy.” For the teens, teasing is an unavoidable part of adolescence. Autumn explained, “We all know each other but everybody just wants to fight with everybody. They get some awkward pleasure out of fighting with others. It’s something to talk about. Something for everybody else to talk about.”

For Autumn, Jennifer, and Stephen, the peer victimization is personal. Autumn and Jennifer both frequently experience bullying through their immediate relationships. For example, Autumn described her experiences with teasing and peer conflict as follows: “Well, my friend is getting bullied and I don’t like it. I’m trying to find a way to get it to stop, but they’re just starting the bully me. They’re saying that she’s not rich like them.” She continued to explain that the boys constantly try to antagonize her and her friends. Similarly, Jennifer frequently witnessed her peer being harassed. She recounted:

I used to take care of this girl named Mary. She went to this school. She still does I think, but she’s older than me. Kids were making fun of her because she’s mentally disabled. I would take her to the nurse station every day to get her medicine and make sure that she was clean, and stuff like that… make sure she brushed her hair, brushed her teeth. That was my job. People were making fun of her and they just kept doing it. They started pushing on me and I punched them. Other people are like, ‘Why do you even help her? It’s not like it’s your job. It’s not like she’s related to you.’ And I’m like ‘I don’t care what you guys think, if someone needs help I’m going to help them.’
Stephen experienced his own victimization, being teased for his height, his lisp, and his perceived sexual orientation. For years Stephen reports doing his best to ignore his peers and forget their remarks. Despite his efforts, he eventually had enough and resorted to aggression to deal with the bullying. He explained:

About a month ago is when I stopped it. They’ve been calling me [nicknames related to name + incest]. This has been going on for a few years. So, I just had enough of it, I didn’t want to hear it anymore. So, I ended up getting in a fight. I got suspended for 5 days for getting in the fight. I know I shouldn’t have done it, but I was just tired of it. It stopped right then and there.

Though he claims that the bullying has stopped, he went on to describe how he feels like he doesn’t fit in with his peers, indicating that his problems with peers are not resolved.

Victimization by peers may cause significant worry, anxiety, isolation and stress in the lives as adolescents.

**Parent-Child Conflict**

Another theme revealed through data analysis was the prevalence of parent-child conflict as a source of stress. This conflict included a lack of communication or understanding between the parent and teen, parental pressure, and a toxic or abusive home environment.

Several of the youth reported feeling disconnected from their parents, either because they lacked effective communication, felt misunderstood, or perceived conflict in the family. For example, Jennifer described difficulty effectively communicating with her mother, particularly when feeling stressed or upset. This makes her feel even more stressed, as she cannot find a way to express her feelings or get her point across. Jennifer explains, “You want to just sit there and
be mad, but you know, you’re not going to be mad forever. Then it makes you more mad and you want to get your point across, especially to your parents. I know I’m not going to be mad forever but I have to be mad so that she knows I was mad.”

Autumn described severe disconnection with her step father, who frequently told her to stand in the corner instead of engaging with her in conversation. When her uncle died, Autumn’s step father was the one who told her. She recalled the following:

My step dad told me [that my uncle died] and he didn’t like my uncle. I started crying and said I just wanted to go to my room, I didn’t want anybody to talk to me or anything. So he got mad and sent me to the corner, but I didn’t like that. I started being mouthy about it. He said, ‘Stay out, you’re not going to your room or nothing.’ I said, ‘I want to go to my room, I want to be alone.’ And then he said, ‘If you’re going to be mouthy and everything like that you can go to the corner,’ so I had to go to the corner.

Responding to her uncle’s death, Autumn wants to have privacy and time to grieve. Instead, her step father lacks understanding and empathy. According to Autumn, he is purposefully hurtful. More recently, her step father tried to keep her from going to the funeral and benefit. She told me, “He wouldn’t let me go to my uncle’s benefit yesterday so we had to sneak out. My mom had to make us sneak out. Because he wouldn’t let us. He’s been acting like a big old baby for the past two days.”

Described above in relation to academic stress, the adolescents reported significant pressure from their parents to maintain their grades while also participating in other programs and activities. The youth felt that the pressure was unnecessary and reflected that their parents did not understand everything they are facing. The pressure is particularly overwhelming when it
interferes with their ability to cope. For example, Jennifer remarked, “I like basketball and I like to watch football. And I got out with my friends and play football. But I can’t do what I want if I can’t get what I need to get done.” Malcolm also discussed having to balance multiple obligations: “I think it’s stressful, you know, trying to excel at sports and still be good in school. And mixing in the different clubs I’m in, like Beta Club and NHS, and still trying to work also so that I have some money.” He concluded, “I think they forget that they were teenagers once too.”

Finally, parent-child conflict is frequently evidenced by a chaotic or toxic home environment. Brady and Matthew described the potential stress that results from parents not properly caring for their children. As Matthew explained above, many parents in the area engage in substance abuse which can negatively affect the home environment. He described a friend whose father became aggressive when drunk. Similarly, this stress was discussed in-depth by Autumn, who has lived with two verbally and physically aggressive men in the past few years. Both her father and stepfather have mistreated her mother and created an environment that is stressful for Autumn and her siblings. Autumn described being yelled at, hit with a piece of wood, and witnessing her mom being hit and flipped out of a bed. She remembers the evening when her father was taken away to jail for domestic violence:

It was Thanksgiving, and he wouldn’t stop yelling at my mom and my brother and my sister for no reason. So… I started yelling at him and telling him to stop, so he whooped me. With a piece of wood. So we had to call the cops. He started hiding and then he went to prison for about 3 months.

In these situations, Autumn tries to smooth over the situation by standing between her mom and the aggressive male, protecting her mom from the verbal and physical violence. Autumn
recounted: “I’ll run in there and tell [my step dad] to stop. Then [my mom] will push him and I’ll take his hand and pull him. But he won’t go anywhere, so I’ll block him and my mom. I’ll stand between them. It’s complicated. It gets me in trouble a lot, but I just am protecting my mom.” She discusses how she wishes her step father would leave for a while so that her mother and siblings can live together in peace. She states, “It would bring us closer together.” Despite desperately wanting this, Autumn believes that the circumstance is unlikely to change.

**Parent-Parent Conflict**

The youth participants reported stress resulting from fighting or conflict between parents or other guardians. Matthew and Brady both have parents who are divorced or in the process of divorcing. Matthew described that the divorce proceedings are difficult, having to listen to his parents argue and feeling forced to take a side in the disagreement. For Autumn, the conflict between her parents was directly related to the conflict she experienced with her father and stepfather. She witnessed significant violence between her mother and both her father and stepfather, causing her to try to step in and protect her mother. Despite her best efforts, Autumn and her family still live with these aggressive men. Autumn copes by trying to get away from the house, spending time outside, and spending time with adult friends. She stated that her aunt, grandmother, and other adults in her life try to give her support and advice for dealing with her stepfather.

**Absent Parents**

Five of the six participants described the prevalence of absent parents in their community, particularly in their own lives. Four of the youth have parents who are separated, divorced, or never married. Stephen, whose parents are married, spends a lot of time away from his father
who works on a boat and is frequently out of town. Matthew reported that he sees both of his parents “every now and then” while Brady stated that like most of his friends, he goes to his dad’s house “on certain days.” Brady also commented that his mom purposefully keeps him away from his father because “he makes stupid decisions.” At the time of the interview, Autumn remarked that she had seen her father four or five times in the past three years. When asked why, Autumn claimed that he works a lot and is often away. Similarly, Jennifer described her strained relationship with her father before his recent passing: “My parents divorced when I was 5 years old. I didn’t talk to my dad there for a while. I recently came back into my dad’s life and started to hang out with him a lot more, almost every weekend.” The youth described absent parents as normative in their community, yet still a significant source of stress in their lives.

**Individual Risk Factors**

In addition to community- and relational-level factors, the youth participants also identified several individual risk factors for experiencing stress and associated negative outcomes. Individual risk factors include personal characteristics and behaviors that influence stress and coping. Analysis revealed two main individual-level sources of stress: (1) passive coping strategies and (2) balancing multiple responsibilities. See Table 7 for summary and representative quotes.

Table 7

*Individual Risk Factors for Rural White Appalachian Adolescents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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</table>
### Passive coping strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passive coping strategies</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
<th>Distraction</th>
<th>Aggression</th>
<th>Balancing responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My mom tried to get me to talk to a psychiatrist but it didn’t really work out very well. I just didn’t feel really comfortable with talking. It was depressing, very depressing. It just wasn’t comfortable (Stephen, 14, Interview).</td>
<td>Then to get my mind off of my uncle dying and my aunts dying, I just hung out with my friends and tried to get over it (Autumn, 14, Interview).</td>
<td>I would’ve been crazy [if my dad were violent], I probably would’ve said -- I probably would’ve fought him back to be honest (Matthew, 14, Interview).</td>
<td>I was doing really bad in a class and didn’t really care. And my mom said, you aren’t doing well in class. You’re going to hang your jersey up soon (Jennifer, 15, Interview).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Passive coping**

Of the individual-level risk factors, passive coping strategies were most frequently identified by the youth. The passive coping strategies indicated by the participants included: (1) avoidance; (2) distraction; and (3) aggression. Avoidance, distraction, and aggression were salient themes for the participants that they personally implemented, and were also described as likely strategies for other youth in the community.

**Avoidance.** A common passive coping strategy is to avoid actively considering or dealing with the source of stress. Many of the Appalachian youth in this study reported “ignoring” or “walking away” from stress, particularly in response to relational stress. For example, Stephen discussed his response to peers who victimize him at school. He reported, “I just walk away or ignore them. I kind just go on. I just listen to what people are saying. I’ll listen to music or something, go on about my day.” However, he also stated that it may have been more useful if he had taken his problems to an adult instead. Stephen continued, “[We] need to maybe
talk about it. Go to a parent or guardian or principal. Say, ‘This is happening, will you please make it stop? I don’t want to go through this.’”

Jennifer and Brady also reported avoidance as a strategy for all types of stress, whether feeling upset about their relationships or worried about school. Brady argued that he chooses to “not deal with it anymore” and that he chooses to “leave, go somewhere else.” Jennifer explained that she may choose other activities while avoiding the source of her stress. She stated, “The way I deal with [stress] is go draw or play with my guitar and just kind of walk away from everything. Just have that period of time to [myself].” Avoidance allows these youth to ignore and take time away from a problem, but does not support youth to positively reframe the situation or plan strategies to improve their situation.

**Distraction.** Distraction was described by all six participants as a strategy used to deal with chronic stress. For example, Stephen reported using distraction to forget about peer-related stress or problems at school. During the group analysis sessions, he presented two photographs he had taken that reflected his coping strategies in the face of stress. One was of a dirt bike and the second was a brick structure he had found in the woods (see Figure 7). He explained, “I kind of just forgot about it and went on….I’ll go out in the woods and look at stuff. Something to get my mind off of [the problem].”
All of the participants in the group sessions agreed that distraction is useful because it provides time away from the problem. For example, Autumn explained that when you have a hobby, “you can have fun, pass time, and forget about what is going on.” When her mother and her mother’s boyfriend get into arguments at their house, Autumn leaves with an adult friend. She reported that this friend “takes us on a bike ride or something to get it off our mind.”

Many of the distraction strategies occurred through relationships with peers or adults. Matthew explained that he spends time with his friends to distract him from a problematic situation. He stated, “We just like, hang out with friends and try to have fun to take it off our mind. [We will] go to the river. I’ve been there a couple times with my friends and stuff to throw rocks.” Autumn also relied on friends for distraction. After discussing the recent loss of several members of her family, she explained, “To get my mind off of my uncle and my aunts dying, I
just hung out with my friends and tried to get over it.” The Appalachian participants in this study relied on activities to take their mind off of the significant stress they were facing. In this way, they did not have to consider or actively cope with the problem.

**Aggression.** All four of the male participants described aggression as a path for solving their problems with peers. When asked for strategies that he uses to deal with stress, Brady responded that an option was “by punching [the people].” As described above, Stephen also tried to resolve a bullying situation with his peers by becoming aggressive rather than passively accepting the teasing. He explained, “I think the fight actually helped the bullying and kinda helped people think that I’m not that kind of person that just takes it and just doesn’t do anything.” Interestingly, Brady described the same event from his own perspective as an example of aggression and victimization in their school. He recounted, “Stephen was like, ‘If you say it one more time, I’m going to punch you in the face.’ He gets right up to his ear and says it again and Stephen got up and… They both got suspended for five days.” Aggression helped Stephen to deal with an immediate source of stress, yet he ended up with negative consequences because of his behavior at school.

Malcolm also reported that he can be aggressive, yet he is actively trying to choose other coping strategies because he is worried about losing his chance of obtaining scholarships and attending the Naval Academy. He explained, “I’m a very aggressive person when it comes to guys messing with my friends or messing with me. I know that if I don’t stop myself, I’ll end up fighting. So I’ll try to stay away from that. My parents told me that I need to stop fighting people.” Malcolm has developed a few more positive coping strategies to support him while also
working toward his long term goals. He continued, “I just try to act nice and walk away or go work out or something, go for a run. Maybe go toss a football with my other friends.”

Balancing Responsibilities and High Expectations

Academic stress was previously introduced as a community risk factor that includes the substantial pressure that the rural Appalachian face to earn good grades and meet the expectations of their teachers and parents. As a result, the youth are constantly trying to balance their obligations and responsibilities to meet expectations. The pressure and stress associated with balancing multiple responsibilities emerged as an individual-level risk factor as well, as the youth perceive their lives as chaotic, overwhelming, and unstable. Malcolm explained how difficult it is to manage all of his obligations, stating, “I think it’s stressful, you know, trying to excel at sports and still be good in school. And mixing in the different clubs I’m in, like Beta Club and NHS, and still trying to work also so that I have some money.”

The group discussion related to balancing responsibilities and high expectations emerged when Autumn shared a photograph of a rooster outside her window (see Figure 8). Autumn is the sole caretaker of the rooster, mostly because everyone else in her family refuses to feed him, and expressed extreme frustration toward the animal. She recounted, “I was getting ready to go to bed and the stupid thing wouldn’t shut up. And it was getting ready to fly to my window where it can get some food. I have to [feed him], I’m the only one that feeds him.” The other participants interpreted her image as representative of the tasks and responsibilities they do not want to complete, but do anyway. Malcolm responded to the photograph by starting, “It kinda resembles… sometimes no matter how much you don’t want to do something, you just gotta do it.” Stephen agreed: “Even when things pester you, you have to deal with it anyway.”
While the participants agreed that having responsibilities, fulfilling obligations, and displaying dedication and integrity are parts of being a well-adapted individual, they often felt alone, overwhelmed, and frustrated by the pressure placed on them to “do it all.”
Protective Factors for Rural White Appalachian Adolescents

The findings evidence a wide range of stressors that the rural white Appalachian adolescents face in their small town outside of Cincinnati. From isolation to relationship strain to passive coping strategies, many of the youth are left feeling disconnected from their community and their peers. Despite their hardships, the youth also identified sources of protection against the harmful effects of stress. Specifically, the youth heavily relied on individual-level factors, particularly personal characteristics that provided them with hope for healthy adaptation and future success. The following sections explore the protective factors identified by the youth in this group, divided into the three social ecological levels: (1) community; (2) relational; and (3) individual. While salience was not reached in the community or relational protective factors, emerging findings are included to provide examples of their statements.

Community Protective Factors

Among the Appalachian adolescents, no salient themes emerged related to community protective factors. However, some of the participants did describe resources and opportunities in their community and at their school that supported youth to deal with stress. For example, the two female participants identified a teen group at the library and religious summer camps, which they find to be supportive of youth in their town, yet only Autumn regularly attends either of these opportunities. In addition, three of the participants identified their school sports teams as an important protective factor in their lives, but the theme did not reach salience. For those who played, belonging to a team provided needed distraction, access to friends, and something to look forward to in their week. Still, descriptions of these protective factors were not consistent across
the participants and did not reach salience within the group. Overall, there is limited evidence to suggest that community protective factors are accessible to the rural Appalachian adolescents.

**Relational Protective Factors**

Similar to the findings related to community protective factors, there was little agreement among the participants regarding relational protective factors available to buffer the impact of challenges they are facing in adolescence. Despite the lack of salient themes, many of the youth did indicate that relationships were important when dealing with stress. For example, three of the Appalachian adolescents described needing conversation with someone they trust. In addition, two teens stated that they needed someone who understands their life and their experiences. Two of the participants identified friendship as a relational protective factor, through which they can express their feelings and be supported during times of adversity. For two of the youth who had lost loved ones, memories can also be a source of support by providing needed comfort and helping the youth to recall moments when they felt loved, connected, and included. The lack of identifiable, shared relational protective factors may be a potential place for intervention to promote healthy adaptation during chronic stress.

**Individual Protective Factors**

The Appalachian participants described the many personal characteristics and one adaptive coping strategy that protect against chronic stress. Though not all of the participants personally utilized these strategies, they viewed them as essential in progressing toward their goals and overcoming adversity. While the two themes reached salience, the sub-themes in this section represent personal characteristics and adaptive coping strategies that were described by at least two participants, including: (1) motivation and determination; (2) future planning and
positive outlooks; (3) academic competence; (4) integrity; and (5) physical activity (see Table 8 for summary).

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal characteristics</td>
<td>Motivation and determination</td>
<td>You have to prove it to yourself that you want to do something. Because if you can’t, if you don’t want it then it’s not going to happen (Jennifer, 15, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Future planning and positive outlook</td>
<td>Overall your attitude toward your situation. Some people start out with a bad situation and are dealt a crappy hand in life. They can still be successful because they really think they are going to do something with their life (Malcolm, 15, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic competence</td>
<td>You can’t slack off during school, you work to the best of your ability. If you do well you can get an education and go to college (Stephen, 14, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Integrity and hard work</td>
<td>She doesn’t care what everybody else thinks about her, she doesn’t care what she wears, she wears what she wants, she’s not afraid to speak up and say her mind. Most kids are. Most kids won’t speak up because they’re afraid to be judged, but she doesn’t care (Jennifer, 15, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive Coping</td>
<td>Physical activity</td>
<td>I still kinda feel [that I don’t belong] sometimes, but I’ve been having a lot more friends. Like baseball helps me get through a lot. Because I put all my efforts into sports (Stephen, 14, Interview).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Personal Characteristics**

Motivation and determination. When describing what it would take for an individual in their town to overcome the community, relational, and individual stress factors that are affecting their lives, the visual narrative participants were quick to point to determination and motivation. Similar to the concept of grit, the participants argued that persistence, particularly when things
feel difficult, is the best hope of being successful. For example, Jennifer explained how determination influences life outcomes:

You just have to be determined. You have the option to either go to your friend’s house or stay home and do your homework. Your friends aren’t going to help you be successful, doing your homework is going to help you be successful. That’s being determined.

You’re determined to do that and not be persuaded by other things around you.

Even though there might be peer pressure, parental expectations, negative influences, and other factors making it difficult to persevere, being determined and making positive choices will support teens. She continued, “You have to be determined, focused, be full hearted in everything you do. You have to do 110% into everything you do. If you want to be successful. It’s the kind of person you are, if you’re willing to do whatever you can to get to that spot.” Similarly, Malcolm described how effective determination has been in helping him to achieve his goals to go to college and sign up for military service. In the visual narrative, he explained, “You have to be better than people say you’re going to be. There’s a lot of people at this school that don’t even think I’m smart or nothing. I just want to prove them wrong; you know what I mean? I want to be able to prove the kids wrong here that don’t think I’m smart.”

**Future planning and positive outlook.** Future planning includes goal-setting, future orientation, and hopefulness that individuals use to focus their attention toward long-term goals (Nurmi, 1991). The Appalachian participants in this study all identified future goals, including going to college, developing a career, supporting their parents, and moving away from their town. Malcolm explained the importance of having a positive future orientation: “Overall your attitude toward your situation. Some people start out with a bad situation and are dealt a crappy
hand in life. They can still be successful because they really think they are going to do something with their life.” Developing long-term goals may be protective against the community, relational, and individual level stress that permeates life in their small rural town.

For all of the participants in the visual narrative and group analysis, moving out of their town was a significant part of their future planning and outlook. All four of the teens described the limited opportunity available in their town and, as a result, their goals to move away as soon as possible in order to pursue future educational and career plans. In her concluding remarks in the visual narrative, Autumn argued that in order to be a healthy and well-adapted individual, she and her peers needed to “Get good grades in school, graduate from high school, go to college, graduate from college, get a good job, and move out of [our town]. And Ohio.” Jennifer argued that moving away allows for an individual’s perspective to grow and develop as they pursue new opportunities: “You are breaking away from everything you’ve ever known and experiencing something new. Because then you are more focused on what the real world is, instead of what you know day by day.” It is clear that community level risk factors have particular influence over the youth in the rural setting. Building skills in future planning and time perspective may help support youth to imagine their lives beyond the immediate hassles and day to day stress.

**Academic competence.** The youth participants were confident that one of the most important individual characteristics, which could protect against the effects of chronic stress, is academic competence and success. All six of the Appalachian participants advocated for working hard in school, getting good grades, and graduating for high school. These goals were directly related to the future planning described above. In order to get out of their town, the adolescents believed that they had to do well in school. Jennifer described, “There’s no other
way that you’re going to get a good job and be able to pay for your own family, without going to
college.” The others agreed. Stephen stated that in order to overcome stress, youth need to make
sure “[they’re] not slacking off during school, [they] work to the best of [their] ability.” He
explained, “If you do well you can get an education and go to college.”

**Integrity and hard work.** The youth also described the importance of working hard,
fulfilling obligations, and being a person with good character. For example, Jennifer described
how her work ethic will contribute to her reaching her goals in the future. She explained how she
is different than many youth in her community: “I have to work for everything I have.
Everything I have I’ve worked for. If I want to go shopping, I have to work. I gotta go do my
chores. I have to go help my mom with whatever she needs.” Unlike many teens that she knows,
Jennifer feels that she is someone who has to balance multiple competing responsibilities while
also helping to take care of her family. Stephen also suggested that being accountable for
responsibilities is a sign of grit in the face of adversity. He explained, “I think [having
responsibilities] is very good for me because it means… it gives me an opportunity not to slack
off and it gives me an opportunity to progress with being a successful person.”

In addition to being accountable for commitments and responsibilities, the youth
frequently described being a “good person”; an individual who displays integrity, stands up for
others, and does what is considered fair and just. For some of the youth, integrity includes
supporting others in the community. For example, Stephen stated that youth also need to “be a
good influence” to support other youth in their community. Three of the participants were
positive influences by personally advocating for others who have been bullied in their school.
For example, Autumn defended a peer who was frequently bullied in the cafeteria. The youth participants saw their focus on what is right and what is fair as a significant strength in their lives.

**Adaptive Coping**

**Physical activity.** For some of the youth, the importance of physical activity to deal with stress was evident when they were unable to participate on their sports teams due to injury or conflicting responsibilities. For example, Stephen described a football injury that left him unable to play for the remainder of the season. He explained in the visual narrative, “I tried to go to some practices but it was hard to because of the cast. And this is probably one of my favorite sports in playing football. It’s a big pastime for when I’m having trouble in school or something. That was a big letdown for me.” Similarly, Malcolm recognized how important physical activity is in his life because he did not play baseball this year. When presenting a photograph he took of his baseball jersey, Jennifer hypothesized that he took the picture to represent a protective factor because “he leaves all his stress on the field.” Malcolm saw the image differently, and explained, “I enjoy playing baseball, but I took the picture of [my jersey] because I didn’t play this year, and I kind of regretted it. Because it’s something that I always like to do, it’s a stress reliever.” Malcolm was still able to use physical activity to help him deal with recent life events, through both informal workouts at the school recreation center and participation on the track team in the spring.

Four of the six participants indicated that physical activity, through sports teams and informal activities, are important for managing life stressors. Exercise, spending time outside, and interacting with friends allowed the youth to feel like they could handle problems at school
and calm themselves down when experiencing a difficulty. Jennifer commented that whenever
she gets into an argument with her mom, she has to go outside and be active. She remarked, “I
walk around because I can’t just sit there when I’m aggravated. I have to do something. I have a
basketball rim outside so I’ll stay there and shoot basketball forever.”

**Summary**

The Appalachian youth in this study lived in a rural setting that contributed to overall
feelings of emotional and physical isolation. In their community, the youth were worried about
safety, violence, and drug and alcohol abuse. In their school, the adolescents reported feeling
overwhelmed by high expectations and the amount of work required, while also indicating that
the teachers were not effectively engaging them in learning. Relationally, the youth described
significant loss and conflict. While experiencing multiple chronic stressors across contexts, the
adolescents also reported personal characteristics that supported their development and well-
being. Individual-level protective factors, including dedication, motivation, and future planning
allowed the youth to feel confident that they could and would eventually overcome adversity.
Chapter 5: Findings

Urban Black Adolescents in Cincinnati

Participants

Eight participants from Phase 1 were categorized as “high perceived stress” based on the biomarker and questionnaire data. All eight were invited to an interview. Six agreed to participate in Phase 2 and verbally assented to be interviewed. Of the two who did not participate, one teen had moved away and no longer attended programs at the community center and the second teen could not be reached by phone. The participants were eleven- to fourteen years old at the time of the initial interview (see Table 9). Four of the participants identified as female and two identified as male.

Table 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age*</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Group Analysis</th>
<th>Visual Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javon</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kemiya</td>
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<tr>
<td>Makayla</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nicki</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Age at time of individual interview

Research Setting

All of the participants were recruited from a community center located in a low-income neighborhood near downtown Cincinnati. In 2014, the area had a population of 7,875 and was predominantly African American (72%) and female (54%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).
addition, the median household income was $16,330 and family income was $20,996. In 2014, 12% of housing units were vacant. However, not all participants lived in this neighborhood at the time data was collected. Due to racial and economic segregation, many of the neighborhoods in urban Cincinnati have similar demographic patterns. For example, in the two other neighborhoods where participants lived, the populations are also predominantly African American (73%; 85%) with a high percentage of vacant housing (27%; 24%).

**Risk Factors for Urban Black Adolescents**

As described under Methods, only interview data was collected from this group of participants. Analysis of the interview data revealed stories of perceived stress and coping among the youth who attend the community center. Of the six participants, four have moved to neighborhoods outside of the area near the community center. Additionally, two participants discuss no longer coming to the community center regularly, either due to their new residence, issues with transportation, or a desire to seek out different opportunities.

**Community Risk Factors**

Within the past few years, including after Phase 1 of data collection, several of the participants have moved to different houses or different neighborhoods. The teens are dispersed among several low-income, urban neighborhoods within Cincinnati. When discussing community-level risk factors, I asked the teens to consider their experiences in addition to the experiences of their African American peers. As a result, the community-level risk factors presented below may include shared experiences for African American youth in Cincinnati, across areas of residence and schools. Analysis of the qualitative interviews revealed three broad themes related to community-level risk, including (1) neighborhood stress, (2) isolation, and (3)
academic stress. See Table 10 for detailed breakdown of themes, subthemes and quotations associated with the community-level risk factors.

Table 10

*Community Risk Factors for Urban Black Adolescents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood stress</td>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>I got a bulletproof vest now. So I put it on when I go to sleep. They be shooting, and then if they shot in my house. Like this house down -- they like, these townhouses, how they connected together? At the end, somebody got shot -- shot in there, they said somebody had died in that house. Yeah and so, that’s why I go to sleep with a bulletproof vest on (Danielle, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>There is a lot of shootings, a man got his neck sliced. Down the street. Around the corner from my house (Makayla, 13, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drug use</td>
<td>I see some (drug use). When I go up to the store. I see them hiding them, before I get to see it. But I always -- I always see it. Like, in they pocket, I could see it (Nicki, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Moving</td>
<td>I thought after I moved I was coming back the next week. That’s when I still went to Hayes, before I was transferring schools. So, after I transferred to a different school, I haven’t been seeing [my friends] (Danielle, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>[Baseball is stressful] because we have to know -- always trying to ask when practice is, get to practice, get back home. On the way down, my sister be going home and she gives me a ride, but today I took the bus, but I missed my game (Javon, 13, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic stress</td>
<td>Conflict with teachers</td>
<td>My teachers just like to be my momma. They just yell and yell and yell, and don’t know how to stop. Yelling at me because I’m making noises. Just tell me to stop, don’t yell at me (Makayla, 13, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Studying/Homework</td>
<td>Huge tests, like, they are so stressful to study for. But I</td>
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</table>
Neighborhood Stress

Sources of neighborhood stress for the participants included concerns over safety and gun violence. Concerns over personal safety and the safety of their family is a significant stressor for the young participants. Feeling unsafe occurred both within their own homes and outside in the neighborhood. For example, Danielle described her fear in her own home:

When I was asleep, like I heard it, ‘Boom!’ I thought it was an earthquake. And I was like, ‘Momma, get up, get up, get up! Momma! Momma! Momma!’ I was like, ‘The earth is falling down!’ And then she was like, ‘No it’s not, you would’ve heard shaking.’ I was like, ‘Oh.’ My brother was like, ‘Oh, they shooting again. Go back to sleep. I’m tired, I had a long day at work.’ I said, ‘Come on, please. Come on, get under a table.’ So I had went to sleep under the table the rest of the night.

She continued:

I got a bulletproof vest now. So I put it on when I go to sleep. They be shooting, and then if they shot in my house. Like this house down -- they like, these townhouses, how they connected together? At the end, somebody got shot -- shot in there, they said somebody had died in that house. Yeah and so, that’s why I go to sleep with a bulletproof vest on.

However, the majority of the participants reported feeling relatively safe in their own home or on their street. Nicki, for example, described her street as quiet. She stated, “We be hearing gunshots. I don’t hear a lot of stuff. Only up the street. At the top of the street where the store at.” Notably, the store at the top of the street is only several blocks away. Similarly, Tyler procrastinate and I need to stop doing that, because I wait to the last minute to study (Kemiya, 14, Interview).
described issues with safety in neighborhoods closer to downtown Cincinnati, but remarked that he feels safe in his own area. He said that there are problems with “lots of fighting and gangs.” Makayla also stated that she is not personally affected by safety, but the major neighborhood problems in her area are “the weed-selling, the gambling, the violence.” When asked if her perceptions of drug use and violence affected how much she hangs around outside or time she spends at the center, which is very close to her house, Makayla stated that she is still outside every day.

Perceptions of unsafe neighborhoods are related to community violence. All of the participants described the impact of violence among African American young people in Cincinnati. Javon’s brother was killed seven years ago. He explained his loss, stating, “He got shot when I was seven. He was seventeen. And he tried to break up a fight against his friends, and they thought he was trying to jump in. So they just -- he wound up shot. He passed away.” Javon worries about his older brothers. He explained, “When they be shooting, my brothers is always outside and I be thinking that they never safe.” The majority of the teens have personally heard gunshots or witnessed others using guns in the neighborhood. Danielle described frequent experiences in her apartment complex, where neighbors pull out guns during arguments. While at a friend’s house recently, Nicki and her friend were running away from two adults who were shooting guns. She confided, “Her daddy and her daddy friend start arguing, and then that’s when -- we didn’t know about it -- and then they start shooting…we start running and we thought we was going to get [shot].”

Isolation
As described above, four of the six participants and one of the invited participants who completed Phase 1 but not Phase 2 have recently moved to a new neighborhood or location within their neighborhood. During Phase 1, Danielle had lived close to the center, but moved approximately 15 miles away recently after. She described multiple additional moves in the last several years:

I been at “H” for preschool through the last and the second grade -- I mean the first and the second grade. When that’s over, I went to, uh, “R” for a year, the last and the second grade, and the first and the third grade, and then I went back to “H” for the rest of the grades. And then I transferred school in the fifth grade. That was the last half of fifth grade.

Danielle described being moved from school to school. She also described moving between streets in the area near the community center and other neighborhoods in Cincinnati. The effect on Danielle is mostly reflected in her relationships. She stated, “I miss this place... It make me sad, like, when I ain’t see some friends that I knew from “H” and stuff.” She also described her confusion after a move, reporting that “I thought after I moved I was coming back the next week.” Her relationships with peers have been strained since attending a new school and not returning back, as expected. She stated that she has not seen her best friends since the move, but has tried to make new friends at her new school.

Additionally, several of the students, who used to be regular attendees at the community center, are now unable to attend the programming there. Javon, Nick, Tyler, Danielle, all have moved away from the neighborhood. Though they may want to attend programs, they can only attend when they have enough time to take the bus to the center or the option to catch a ride with
a family member. Both Javon and Danielle described being late or absent because of not having a timely ride from their neighborhood to the center. This leaves most of the participants only attending occasionally, mostly on the weekends. Javon remarked that he mostly attends in the summer now, when he is bored and looking for something to do outside of his house.

Access to transportation affects access to resources and other opportunities as well. In addition to Javon, Nicki, and Danielle describing their limited access to the community center due to transportation, Javon also described the stress of arranging transportation to and from his baseball practices and games. He explained, “[Baseball is stressful] because we have to know -- always trying to ask when practice is, get to practice, get back home. On the way down, my sister be going home and she gives me a ride, but today I took the bus, but I missed my game.”

**Academic Stress**

The participants attend different schools, yet report similar experiences of academic stress. Common risk factors across this group include conflict with teachers and the amount of homework/studying required. Four of the six participants described difficulty in school related to their relationships with their teachers. For example, Makayla explained, “My teachers just like to be my momma. They just yell and yell and yell, and don’t know how to stop. Yelling at me because I’m making noises. Just tell me to stop, don’t yell at me.” Others agreed that conflict with their teachers result from the teachers not listening, yelling, or spending a significant amount of time correcting the behavior of students. Tyler explained, “Teachers keep calling a student names, and a student might get upset a little. Like, keep constantly calling their names. To [pay attention].” Danielle agreed: “They be like, ‘Sit down!’ after you sitting down. And then yesterday, we couldn’t have extra recess, because nobody was talking and it was after she
already said, ‘Sit back down, all y’all talking.’ And nobody was talking.” The teens reported feeling unfairly and unnecessarily punished. Moreover, Makayla described these issues as resulting from her lack of autonomy at school. She stated, “We just can’t do nothing. We don’t have the freedom to do anything.”

On top of conflict with teachers and peers at school, the students described the academic stress associated with homework, studying, and testing. Kemiya reported having difficulty studying for tests:

Huge tests, like, they are so stressful to study for. Like, but I procrastinate and I need to stop doing that, because I wait to the last minute to study. And I think, like, ‘Oh, I’m going to get all of this stuff in a little bitty amount of time,’ but it doesn’t happen. It doesn’t work that way sometimes, but sometimes you pull through. I hate studying at night. I always just be like, ‘Ugh, I do not feel like studying for these tests.’ I wait to the last -- like, literally. Okay, so we got, like, three test-- three to four tests tomorrow, I guarantee I’m going to put it off until, like, 20 minutes before we got to take the test, and then try to study and get it all through.

Despite the stress of studying, Kemiya manages to earn high grades in school. Her tactics for success and protective factors will be discussed further below. Javon also discussed his difficulty in school, reporting that he missed a significant amount of class and therefore, a significant amount of work. He remarked, “I got to get it all together. Because I be forgetting to do it at night.” The students explained that their work does not get completed at school, either because the time in school is wasted or because other students are distracting and interrupting their classes.
Relational Risk Factors

Analysis of the qualitative interviews revealed many themes related to relational risk factors for stress and, therefore, negative outcomes. Overall, the youth described problems with communication and chronic disconnection in their relationships. Miscommunication, feeling unheard, and feeling misunderstood left the participants emotionally isolated and in conflict with peers, teachers, parents, and siblings. Four themes were particularly salient across the group: (1) emotional isolation; (2) loss of a loved one; (3) peer conflict, including negative influence, difficulty maintaining relationships, and peer victimization; and (4) relationships with siblings, including caring for and conflict with siblings. The following sections describe the shared experiences within each theme, including select quotations that highlight the experiences of the youth (see Table 11 for summary).

Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional isolation</td>
<td>Feeling unheard</td>
<td>When I came home when I had got in trouble at school because I had got a phone call, and then my cousin said, “You got in trouble,” and then she said, “You giving me all this excuse,” and I said I was telling the truth, but she thought I was lying. And it made -- and I was -- it was stressful for me (Nicki, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>Death of a loved one</td>
<td>And then the ambulance came, and then that day -- that morning, I woke up, everybody was crying. I -- I -- I already knew what was happening. Ain’t nobody tell me until, like, I got to my cousin house, and she told me, and I start crying (Nicki, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer conflict</td>
<td>Negative influence</td>
<td>It’s too many attitudes, like, too many different personalities that I can’t adjust to. Like, so many things I am not used to that people do. And, I just can’t adapt to it, like, I’m not used to it. Like, I don’t hear and see this on a regular basis… People I’m not used to seeing,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
words I’m not used to hearing. I’m just not used to being around it (Kemiya, 14, Interview).

**Difficulty maintaining relationships**

Today me and this boy was -- well, me and my friend was running game, and then this boy butted in. I was like, “Don’t butt in our conversation, because we wasn’t talking to you.” Then we start arguing, and then it was just downhill from that. And then, I tried to be nice, and he just start cussing me out, so I was just like, “You know what? I don’t even care. I try to be your friend and I just…” You know? And I just left. I just walked away (Kemiya, 14, Interview).

**Peer victimization**

Oh, I see a lot of bullying going on, that’s half -- a lot. I just think people want to be funny and they want attention. So they cause problems (Makayla, 13, Interview).

**Parent-child conflict**

Communication

I don’t talk to my momma a lot. By choice. Because I feel like she always going to yell and stuff, so. [It makes me feel] bad, because other people talk to their momma. Like, if they a girl, they -- some girls are best friends with their momma (Makayla, 13, Interview).

**Relationships with siblings**

Caring for siblings

Watching [my sisters], that’s kind of a stress. They don’t listen (Tyler, 14, Interview).

**Arguments/Fighting**

My siblings. Especially the oldest one, she always yelling for no reason. She get mad at everything, it’s not a day go by where she just ain’t happy. She always got an attitude (Makayla, 13, Interview).

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**Emotional Isolation**

Analysis of the interview data revealed three experiences associated with emotional isolation and relational disconnection, including feeling unheard, feeling lonely or excluded, and poor communication. For Nicki, a significant stress is feeling unheard or mistrusted by her family. She expressed, “People don’t believe me if I get in trouble-- if I tell the truth, and they still be thinking I’m lying.” She continued:
When I came home when I had got in trouble at school because I had got a phone call, and then my cousin said, ‘You got in trouble,’ and then she said, ‘You giving me all this excuse,’ and I said I was telling the truth, but she thought I was lying. And it made -- and I was -- it was stressful for me.

Nicki described the disconnection she feels when her guardian believes the teacher over her. Similarly, other participants described emotional disconnection as a result of feeling unheard when also discussing relationships with their teachers. Makayla talked about her lack of autonomy in the classroom, and many of the other participants described being accused of a behavior they were not doing. These accusations frequently result in consequences that affect the students beyond the immediate redirection or correction of behavior.

Emotional isolation also results from feelings of exclusion or loneliness. The young women in this study all reported feelings of emotional isolation that are prevalent in their community or in their own lives. For Nicki, the loneliness followed the death of her mother, which will be discussed below as another significant source of relational stress. Still, the loss of her mother results in emotional isolation and loneliness that impacts Nicki’s well-being. She described how some of her peers may have difficulty, like her, when being without their loved ones. She explained, “Say they don’t live with they momma because of something. And they got to deal with not having -- being with their momma or something, or their daddy. Like me, because my momma died.” At school, Kemiya and Makayla feel excluded at school, where excessive teasing, arguing, and fighting make students feel that they are “less than.”

Finally, the participants described feeling isolated when they were unable to effectively communicate with others. This isolation occurs with both their family and peer relationships. For
example, Makayla illustrated her problems communicating with her mother: “I don’t talk to my momma a lot. By choice. Because I feel like she always going to yell and stuff, so. [It makes me feel] bad, because other people talk to their momma. Like, if they a girl, they -- some girls are best friends with they momma.” In a similar manner, Kemiya had difficulty effectively communicating with her peers. She described her troubles solving problems and building relationships by sharing a story of her interactions with a peer:

   It was like every time me and her best friend get an atti-- like, get into it, she picks him over me. But she always be like, ‘Oh, you my ‘day one,’ I’m never going to let -- I’m never going to leave you for nobody, you not going to get traded, I’m not—’ No, you do, like. And it hurt for a while, but I got over it.

Kemiya continued on to tell stories of miscommunication with other peers that resulted in fights or frustration.

**Loss of a Loved One**

   When asked to describe a source of stress for their peers, Danielle, Javon, and Nicki remarked that death of a loved one is a common experience that young people in his community frequently face. Danielle mentioned that she had lost an aunt, uncle, and cousin, mostly due to cancer. Javon described the loss of his grandmother, stating “My grandma died last year. She was in the hospital for a month, and passed away in her sleep.” Nicki had recently lost her mother after a battle with cancer. She described the loss of her mother:

   I remember when I first heard. Do you want me to tell you? We was all at home and then, I don’t -- I don’t remember how she start acting up and stuff. Like, with her sickness.

   And then, like, the ambulance came, and then that day -- that morning, I woke up,
everybody was crying. I -- I -- I already knew what was happening. Ain’t nobody tell me until, like, I got to my cousin house, and she told me, and I start crying.

While she has a close relationship with her sister, she grieves the relationship she once had with her mother. Nicki expressed how difficult it is for her to not be able to have a relationship with her mother, particularly when many of her friends consider their mother a close friend.

As introduced earlier, Javon also lost his brother when he was younger due to gun violence. He explained, “[My brother] got shot when I was seven. He was seventeen. And he tried to break up a fight against his friends, and they thought he was trying to jump in. So they just -- he wound up shot. He passed away.” Javon struggles with this loss, explaining that he fears for the lives of his other older brothers who spend time in the streets at night, where Javon feels there is a constant threat of violence.

**Peer Conflict**

The youth frequently described peer conflict as a source of stress that dominates their lives and the lives of their friends in their community. Peer conflict results from the negative influence that others create, the difficulty of maintaining relationships, and ultimately, peer victimization. The students reported that some of their troubles stem from their relationships with friends who may exert peer pressure or have a negative influence on personal behavior. Kemiya, for example, stopped coming to the community center because of the negative influence of some of her peers. She explained:

> It’s too many attitudes, like, too many different personalities that I can’t adjust to. Like, so many things I am not used to that people do. And, I just can’t adapt to it, like, I’m not
used to it. Like, I don’t hear and see this on a regular basis, so I’m not going to be -- like, acting like I know you and I really don’t, so.

She continued, stating that the negative influence comes from “people I’m not used to seeing, words I’m not used to hearing. I’m just not used to being around it.” Similarly, Nicki described how she often gets in trouble at school because of others, and how that makes her feel mad at herself and her peers. As will be presented below through the analysis of protective factors, both Kemiya and Nicki suggest that positive attitudes and influences are essential in combating the potential problems associated with peer relationships.

Others suggested the ways in which relationships with peers can simply be difficult—miscommunication, arguing, misplacing blame, and misreading situations may lead to problems interacting in a healthy and sustainable manner. Kemiya discussed a challenging situation with a peer that occurred the day of the interview, remarking that she was forced to swallow her emotions and hold back so as to diffuse the situation. She recounted:

I just be trying not to say nothing to nobody, then they just catch my attention and I just… Freak out, like, I just start going off, and it’s just… Not okay. I think about my actions, but I think about their reactions after it happen, and what can happen. Like, my mom told me, ‘Don’t never say anything bad to anyone, because that might be the last thing you ever say to them.’ So, I might, like, get mad at you in a minute, and then, like, five minutes later, I be like, ‘Oh! Yeah yeah yeah!’ [I have to] be friendly.”

She provided an example from the day of the interview:

Me and my friend was running game, and then this boy butted in. I was like, ‘Don’t butt in our conversation, because we wasn’t talking to you.’ Then we start arguing, and then it
was just downhill from that. And then, I tried to be nice, and he just start cussing me out, so I was just like, ‘You know what? I don’t even care. I try to be your friend and I just…’ You know? And I just left. I just walked away.

Kemiya shared several examples of expressing little emotion so as to manage a situation with a peer. Rather than authentically express her concern, anger, or frustration, she held back so that it would not create further problems. Others also experienced difficulty maintaining healthy relationships, like Makayla, who remarked that once she has an argument with her friend, “they [are] gone forever.”

Like the rural Appalachian group, the participants from the urban Black community also reported peer victimization and bullying, but to a much lesser extent. Most of the students reported that fights in school are a substantial source of stress in their lives. Tyler talked about how there were physical fights at both his current and old schools. Only Makayla described being the victim of bullying. She claimed, “I was bullied when I was in elementary school. I felt bad. I thought that I was less than.” When asked to explain why bullying or victimization occurs, Makayla argued that “people want to be funny and they want attention” and as a result, “they cause problems.”

**Relationships with Siblings**

Three of the six participants identified an additional relational stress, that of their relationships with their siblings, as a significant source of stress in their lives. Two of the six teens are responsible for watching their younger siblings on weekdays after school. Having to care for siblings causes stress in multiple ways, as the teens are expected to balance their responsibilities to properly care for their younger siblings and as the teens have arguments or
difficulty communicating with their brothers and sisters. For example, Danielle, who is 11 years old, explained that until recently, she watched her three siblings until her mom gets home from work. Danielle was frustrated with her three younger brothers who cause problems and create messes that she has to clean. Tyler felt similarly, reporting that he has to watch his sisters and he feels angry and frustrated when they misbehave or do not listen to him. Other participants reported that they also frequently fight with their siblings, which causes relational stress in their lives. Makayla commented, “My oldest [sister], she always yelling for no reason. She gets mad at everything, it’s not a day go by where she just ain’t happy. She always got an attitude.” Similar to her experiences with her teachers, conflict with siblings frequently revolved around emotional disconnection and lack of autonomy in relationships with others.

**Individual Risk Factors**

The youth from this group less frequently noted individual characteristics and behaviors associated with stress. Still, evidence of one theme emerged from the interview data with the urban Black adolescents specific to individual-level risk and protective factors, passive coping (see Table 12 for summary).

Table 12

*Individual Risk Factors for Urban Black Adolescents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passive coping strategies</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>I just go upstairs and go to sleep (Nicki, 11, Interview).</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distraction</td>
<td>I just go outside and play football. I was like, “Let’s calm our stress, so let’s play football.”… Sometimes we just tackle each other whoever got the football. That’s all we do (Danielle, 11, Interview).</td>
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</table>
Acceptance  I just… Sometimes I cry, sometimes I just be like, “Yeah, you know what? It just wasn’t meant to be” (Kemiya, 14, Interview).

Passive coping

When asked to identify the coping strategies they used to feel better about difficult circumstances, the youth described avoidance and distraction techniques. For avoidance, the teens responded to difficulties with peers in particular by walking away or ignoring the individual. Makayla stated that she “just walk[s] away” and Nicki responded that she will frequently “go upstairs and go to sleep.” Similarly, distraction allows for the adolescents to temporarily forget about a difficult experience or circumstance. Danielle discussed how football is a distraction for her—she goes outside to play with her friends and get her mind off of her worries. While these behaviors give the youth time away from the stressor, they do not necessarily help them to actively cope with the problem.

Protective Factors for Urban Black Adolescents

As described above, the adolescents who participated in this study expressed several sources of stress from multiple settings and contexts. Despite this, the youth also indicated many aspects of their lives that, they believe, will lead to happiness and success in the future. Overall, the youth in this community described avoiding negative influences and maintaining a positive outlook in order to become successful, well-adapted adults. The youth described the importance of harnessing the positive influences around them, particularly through relationships with adult mentors who can advise and support the adolescents. The adults who were influential in their lives included natural mentors, like parents and grandparents, in addition to siblings and other community members. The following sections present factors that the youth identified as helpful
in their own lives to mitigate the effects of stress within three social-ecological levels: (1) community, (2) relational, and (3) individual.

**Community Protective Factors**

When describing aspects of their neighborhood that were supportive of youth, the participants in this study focused on safety and access. Specifically, the majority of the participants indicated that two sources of support for adolescents in their community were: (1) community centers, because they are a safe place, provide access to helpful adults, and provide access to educational and recreational programs; and (2) perceived safety of the community.

Table 13 provides a summary of the themes, sub-themes, and representative quotations associated with community protective factors for the urban Black adolescents living in Cincinnati who participated in this study.

Table 13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Protective Factors for Urban Black Adolescents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Community centers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community centers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community centers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived safety</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Community Centers

Three of the six participants described the importance of community centers, like the one they attend, in supporting students to become successful, well-adapted individuals. Community centers are supportive to youth by providing a safe place for teens, opportunities to build relationships with supportive adults, and access to educational and mentoring programs.

Safe place. Makayla, Nicki, and Javon described community centers as a space for adolescents to gather with peers after schools and on weekends. Makayla stated, “I think we should have more centers where kids can go. It [makes] them stop being in the streets, stop seeing what they see.” When having a hard time, having a community center to attend may be helpful in coping with stressors. Javon explained, “We don’t want to be in the house by yourself. You could just go to somewhere that’s with your friends or something.” Similarly, Nicki described the role centers could play in supporting youth:

If they make a center or something about -- well, if they make a center, but they got a class where you go to to express your feelings. Like, say what you do everyday: like, you come in, do your homework, and stuff. And then you get -- and then you get the paper, and then you get to express your feelings with, you know, other classmates or your teacher or whoever there to help.

Nicki recognized the potential for youth centers to actively engage youth in expressing and coping with their emotions.

Access to mentorship. The community center also provides opportunities for the teens to engage with supportive adults outside of their immediate family. Two of the participants named staff members as influential in their lives, helping the youth to identify appropriate coping
strategies and healthy behaviors to manage their life experiences. Kemiya explained that one staff member from the after-school program “told me to count to ten or twenty, and if it doesn’t work, say a little, but not a lot. Express your feelings, but not a lot.” Kemiya described the negative effects of “saying too much” and the importance of being able to regulate her emotions.

Makayla talked about her relationship with another staff member, who build relationships with the youth and engages them in meaningful conversations about their struggles and successes. In addition, Makayla stated that this woman “trusts us” and “pushes us to do a lot of things.” The relational support that the youth can access through the community center is discussed further under the Relational Protective Factors section below.

**Access to programs.** Several of the students attend the youth center in order to participate in the available educational, recreational, and mentoring programs. Both Javon and Tyler attend the engineering program on the weekends. Before the interview with Javon, the boys in the program were building radios. Other programs include youth development groups for boys and girls, STEM education, an after school program, and summer camp. The center also includes athletic and recreational opportunities. For example, Kemiya attended the center to participate in boxing classes and has since competed in tournaments.

**Perceived Safety**

As stated above, several of the youth viewed their neighborhoods as not as unsafe as other neighborhoods in Cincinnati. Tyler, Nicki, and Javon, for example, described their neighborhoods as quiet and safe. Javon remarked, “It’s not really bad -- down here it is, but where I live at it is quiet. Because the police are always down our street. There ain’t a lot of shootings up there, but there’s a lot of shooting down here.” When asked why this difference
exists, Javon explained that there is a police presence in his neighborhood that prevents shootings and other crimes. Still, Javon worries about others and their safety when outside or in other neighborhoods. Similarly, Nicki described stress related to violence, crime, and drug use, but felt relatively safe in her own house and on her street.

**Relational Protective Factors**

Relational protective factors were discussed less frequently than both community and individual level protective factors. The youth in this study did not suggest that they have meaningful peer relationships that protect against stress, rather all of the youth identified at least one adult as an important source of support in their life. Adult mentorship, through relationships with family members or adults in the community, provided the adolescents with guidance and also pushed them to reach their goals. When asked to describe the importance of this protective factor in their lives, the participants identified several aspects of the relationships, including: (1) trust; (2) shared experiences and understanding; (3) advice; (4) challenge and high expectations; and (5) role models and positive influence. See Table 14 for a summary of relational protective factors, including quotations that represent youth perspectives of adult mentorship.

Table 14

**Relational Protective Factors for Urban Black Adolescents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult mentorship</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Well, I could talk to anyone about it, but I just choose not to. Because I don’t -- I -- I only can talk to my sister, because I -- because she -- I’m really close to her (Nicki, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shared experience and understanding</td>
<td>Because she sits down -- or we just talk about it. Because my sister, we got the same momma. We just talk. I’m close to everybody in my family, but I’m the closest to her because [we] go through the same problems (Nicki, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If we have bad grades, she’ll push us to make better ones (Makayla, 13, Interview).

[She taught me] to always work hard. Like, be the best you can now in public. Don’t show people the crazy you, but the real you. Express your feelings how you want to be treated. I mean, how you want to, like, be. And never, ever, ever follow someone else that can get you in trouble (Kemiya, 14, Interview).

My stepdad and my mamaw and my granny, they -- they’re just my role models. They teach me not to give up, like, they tell me, “Never give up. Have God in your life. And stay strong and do everything. You might crack down -- you might crack a little bit, but stay strong, like, never give up.” So, I been taking that in, and so far I’ve been successful. I just want to see how long it lasts, and how far I can go (Kemiya, 14, Interview).

**Adult Mentorship**

**Trust.** The youth described their relationships with adults as oriented around trust. The adults trusted the youth to make good decisions and the youth trusted the adults to provide guidance and support. For example, Makayla described her relationship with one of the staff members at the community center. When asked to identify someone who supports her, Makayla claimed, “Ms. Andrea. She talk to us a lot. And she takes us places. Like to her friend’s houses. She trust us. She push us to do a lot of things.” In addition to feeling trusted, it is important for the adolescents to believe they can trust the adults with information about their lives and their emotions. Nicki explained, “I only can talk to my sister, because I--- I’m really close to her.” Both of these relationships are characterized by mutual trust and respect and, as a result, allow for continued interactions and mentorship.
Shared experience and understanding. In addition to trust, the adolescents discussed building their relationships with adults on shared experience and understanding. Explaining her connection with her sister, Nicki described how they both had lost their mother at a young age. Through their similar experiences, they are able to relate to and support one another. She discussed her relationship with her sister:

She sits down and we just talk about it. Because my sister, we [have] the same momma, and we just talk. Like, she be like, “Do you want to?” and then I be like, “Yeah,” and then she say, “It’s going to be okay.” Stuff like that. I mean, I’m close to everybody in my family, but I’m the closest to her because me and her go through the same problems. Nicki actively chooses to share her problems and seek advice from the individual she feels can most relate to her.

Advice and Support. When facing a problem, the Black participants in urban Cincinnati expected the adults in their lives to be able to provide advice and guidance. The teens use this advice to make decisions in their relationships, at school, and within the community. Kemiya described how she relies on this advice to regulate her emotions and adapt in the face of adversity. She recounted the advice her mother gave her:

To always work hard. Like, be the best you can now in public. Like, don’t show people the crazy you, but the real you. Like, express your feelings how you want to be treated. Like, I mean how you want to, like, be. And never, ever, ever follow someone else that can get you in trouble.

Similarly, Nicki suggested that adults should be providing advice to young people in their community in order to prevent youth from engaging in risky health behaviors or making poor
decisions. She argued, “You [should] talk to them. You talk to them about, ‘We don’t want to end up like that, so we going to stay in the house. Stay out of all of that. And we are going to try to do better than what they do.” Nicki described how, even if a parent is unavailable, other adults in the community can provide important advice that may increase positive and healthy choices among her peers.

**Challenge and high expectations.** The youth participants also identified the challenges and high expectations placed on them by their adult mentors as an important aspect of influential relationships. Kemiya described how her mother encourages, explaining that “she says she never wants me to be like her” but instead wants for Kemiya to more successful. Nicki assumes that her mother, who passed away, would have wanted her to be successful. She expressed, “I don’t -- she never really talked to me, because I was, like, seven, six. Like, she never really talked to me about stuff. But I know she probably wanted me, when I get older, to get a job, stay out the way and stuff.” Despite losing her mother, Nicki has developed relationships with other adults, including her aunt and her sister, that support her toward healthy development.

As described earlier, adult mentors are not limited to family members. For Tyler, his basketball coach is someone who pushes him to be a better person, not just a better basketball player. Tyler explained how his coach challenges him, while also providing support: “He would help me with my behavior, and my grades in school, and things. He was helping me with my social studies once. When I was having a trouble with it - I had a D. See, he was helping me with that.” Similary, Makayla gains significant support through her relationship with Ms. Andrea at the community center, who challenges the students to improve their behavior and “make better grades.”
Role models and positive influence. Finally, adults mentors were important for the youth participants because they are a positive role model and influence in their lives. Many of the adults they described as mentors were successful or encouraged the youth to be more successful than them. Kemiya explained how she tries to emulate the advice her extended family provides:

My stepdad and my mamaw and my granny, they -- they’re just my role models. They teach me not to give up, like, they tell me, “Never give up. Have God in your life. And stay strong and do everything. You might crack down -- you might crack a little bit, but stay strong, like, never give up.” So, I been taking that in, and so far I’ve been successful.

I just want to see how long it lasts, and how far I can go.

For youth who do not have adult mentors, Nicki suggested that successful adults could be helpful at community centers or community events to support young people to make healthy and appropriate decisions. She explained, “[They] could talk to somebody and talk about [their life]. It would make them look back and say, ‘I did bad things before, but I made it better in the future.’ Or maybe [tell the teens], ‘I did something bad when I was a kind, but I changed my life around. I went to college and got a job.” Overall, the Black youth in this study described the potential power of adult mentors to build trusting relationships with youth that provide support, guidance, encouragement, and a positive influence over the lives of young people.

Individual Protective Factors

In addition to the community and relational protective factors that the youth identified as important when experiencing stress, there were also themes of individual protective factors that supported youth toward health and well-being. The adolescents frequently described personal
characteristics and adaptive coping strategies that allowed them to persist and look forward when experiencing stress. Specifically, the participants explained the role of the following individual protective factors: (1) motivation and determination; (2) goal setting; (3) positive influences; (4) positive reframing; (5) self-talk and calming techniques; and (6) physical activity. The salient themes and sub-themes are presented below and summarized in Table 15.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal characteristics</td>
<td>Motivation and determination</td>
<td>Always try to succeed in something you don’t think you can. Show, like, the people that down you that you can do it, and there’s a way that you can do it better than how it is, like. Tell people that tell you you can’t that you can. Like, show them how you can do it (Kemiya, 14, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goal setting</td>
<td>Well, for high school, I’m trying to get accepted to a good high school. And college, I want to get a scholarship so my grandma wouldn’t have to pay for it. For basketball, and get my degree and become a mechanical engineer (Tyler, 14, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive influences</td>
<td>They just need to focus on school and stop going to the wrong neighborhood. (Javon, 13, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive coping strategies</td>
<td>Positive reframing</td>
<td>They just keep, like, going forward and -- with they life, and just don’t think about that sometimes. Like, think about something positive than negative (Nicki, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-talk/Calming techniques</td>
<td>Ms. Johnson from the after school program told me to count to ten or twenty, and if it doesn’t work, say a little, but not a lot. Express your feelings, but not a lot (Kemiya, 14, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical activity</td>
<td>That calm down my stress. Like, when I’m crying, so I just be go out there, be mad, and then soon as I see somebody get tackled, I laugh. So I was like, “Let’s calm our stress, so let’s play football.” We just played catch with the football. Sometimes we just tackle each other, whoever got the football. That’s all we do (Danielle, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Personal Characteristics

**Motivation and determination.** When asked to articulate what characteristics lead to achievement and resilience in the face of obstacles, several of the youth described the importance of commitment and persistence. Rather than giving in to stress, Kemiya argued that you have to demand your own success by stating, ‘Yes, I’m going to get this, I’m going to get this done, I’m going to get this done now, and I’m going to be successful in life later.’

**Goal setting.** Several of the teens discussed goal setting as helpful in overcoming obstacles and staying focused on the future. These long-term goals allowed the teens to let go of some of their smaller worries. Overall, the participants reported similar long term goals—attending a good high school, going to college, and building a career. Two of the youth described the importance of getting into a good high school. Kemiya elaborated “I told myself this year for school that I would try to get in the first school that I’ve been wanting to go to since, like, third grade. And I actually did! I got approved, so, I’ll be going to PM next year.” Kemiya was encouraged to continue working hard in order to achieve her other long-term goals. Tyler and Nicki also described their goals of getting a scholarship to study mechanical engineering and earning money from a good job, respectively.

**Positive Influences.** Important in dealing with chronic stress is being able to avoid the negative influences. When asked to identify factors that support adolescents to be successful, Kemiya described how successful individuals “never follow people that are going to get [them] in trouble.” She continued, “I stopped hanging around [some friends], because they just—all they do is—it’s a whole lot of drama.” Kemiya earlier had described the same friends as a source of interpersonal stress, creating arguments from miscommunication. Javon also described the
importance of avoiding negative influences, particularly where youth spend their free time. He concluded, “They just need to focus on school and stop going to the wrong neighborhood.”

Adaptive Coping

Most of the youth were able to identify at least one adaptive coping mechanism that they employ to deal with and overcome chronic stress. Though their techniques varied, overall the youth described the impact of their attitude and behaviors on their perceived stress.

Positive reframing. One particularly dominant theme in the interviews was the adolescents’ use of positive reframing to help deal with problems. For example, Kemiya described a recent incident with a friend that ended with her walking away from the situation. She explained, “I tried to be nice, and he just start[ed] cussing me out, so I was like, ‘You know what? I don’t even care…’ And I just left. I just walked away.” Kemiya recognized that getting mad at the situation was not going to help her to effectively communicate with her friend and was not going to lead to a positive outcome. She thought about her goals and decided to walk away instead of engaging with her peer.

Self-talk. A second form of adaptive coping described by the youth includes self-talk and calming techniques. Kemiya also shared an example of how her mother taught her to regulate her emotions:

My attitude has changed my stress level a lot. Like, I used to get stressed, like, every day. Like, every day. Like, but now, since my attitude done went down, and I done got better at controlling my feelings, and my attitude and my actions, it done got better. And I don’t get stressed as much, and if I do, I count to ten, and then I’m just relieved.
Nicki also uses self-talk and positive attitudes to deal with her stress. As she explained, those who are successful “just keep going forward and -- with they life, and just don’t think about the past. Like, think about something positive than negative.” Self-talk in the form of deep breathing, positive thinking, and acceptance are regularly employed by youth in this community.

**Physical Activity.** Finally, the majority of the participants relied on physical activity to relieve stress. Javon and Tyler discussed letting out any anger in organized sports, Kemiya described “running the frustration off” and Danielle identified tackling others during football as a stress reliever.

**Summary**

The Black adolescents in the present study lived in segregated urban neighborhoods that are characterized by concerns about safety, violence, and drug use. Overall, the Black participants felt misunderstood and misheard in their relationships: at home, at school, and in their community. Many of the teens described loss, conflict with their parents and siblings, and peer victimization. At school, the adolescents readily described conflict with teachers and the resulting frustrating with their school structure and systems. In their community, the teens were frequently isolated due to transportation access and unable to rely on stable friendships due to multiple changes in place of residence. For these youth, relationships with caring and supportive adults and personal characteristics, including motivation, positive thinking, and self-talk, were essential in helping them to feel supported and capable of dealing with challenges.
Chapter 6: Findings

Urban Latino Adolescents in Cincinnati

Participants

Six Latino adolescent participants from Phase 1 were categorized as “high perceived stress” based on the biomarker and questionnaire data. All six were invited to an interview and all six agreed to participate in Phase 2. The participants were ten to thirteen years old at the time of the initial interview (see Table 16). Three of the participants identified as female and three identified as male. Of these six participants, four were invited to continue to participate in the visual narrative. They were invited based on willingness to participate and feasibility of working in a group setting. Two were female and two were male adolescents.

Table 16

Participant Demographics Urban Latino Adolescents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age*</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Group Analysis</th>
<th>Visual Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teo</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Age at time of individual interview.

Research Setting

In 2014, the Cincinnati metropolitan region had an estimated population of over 2 million and the Latino population is estimated to be 50,000 to 60,000 people, or 2.5-3% of the city’s total (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Between 2000 and 2010, the Latino population in Greater
Cincinnati grew significantly, with most regions experiencing population growth rates between 100 and 200% and some regions reaching over 200% growth (Jacquez, Vaughn, Pelley, & Topmiller, 2015). As described in Chapter 1, Cincinnati is considered a nontraditional migration city that lacks the necessary resources to support the Latino immigrant population. Further, unlike many more traditional migration cities, Cincinnati features small pockets of growth throughout the region, indicating that many of the city’s Latino families live in geographically isolated enclaves (Jacquez et al., 2015).

All of the Phase 2 data were collected at the public bilingual K-8 school that the participants attend. Their school is a language immersion magnet school, allowing students from around the city, not just the immediate neighborhood, to attend. According to the Ohio Department of Education, 54.6 percent of enrolled students self-identify as Black and 40.8 percent of students self-identify as Hispanic. 3.1 percent of students are multiracial. Furthermore, 93.5 percent of students are considered economically disadvantaged (Ohio Department of Education, 2015).

**Risk Factors for Urban Latino Adolescents**

Analysis of the interviews, group discussions, and participatory visual narratives revealed several sources of stress and adversity for the urban Latino adolescents in this study. Overall, the stories presented an overarching theme of relational disconnection and isolation related to immigration and other cultural factors. The relational risk factors (e.g., social isolation, loss, peer victimization, chaotic home environment) were discussed more frequently than either community (e.g., neighborhood stress, isolation, academic, and immigration stress) or individual-level risk factors (e.g., passive coping, low self-esteem, school misbehavior). Moreover, the
community and individual-level risk factors were often closely related to the relational stress factors. For example, disconnection and isolation permeated themes at the community, relational, and individual level. In their community, the teens experienced disconnection through discrimination, particularly for Latino youth who live outside of culturally homogenous enclaves. In their relationships, the Latino youth described feelings of disconnection that result from peer victimization, loss, and chaotic home environments. Individually, the adolescents may respond to stress with social isolation and other passive coping skills that further the divide between participants and their support networks. The following section describes the results of the qualitative data analyses by examining the risk and protective factors present for the urban Latino participants, within three social-ecological levels: community, relational, and individual.

**Community Risk Factors**

The Latino adolescents willingly shared stories of stress within their neighborhood and broader community. For the participants in this study, community-level risk included factors present in their neighborhoods and schools that directly affected their functioning and factors the participants believe impact the Latino immigrant population living in Cincinnati. Through the analysis of the interview data and participatory analysis during the visual narrative creation, four themes emerged: (1) neighborhood stress, including issues related to safety and financial strain; (2) isolation, particularly social isolation from friends and family; (3) academic stress, specific to comprehension in school; and (4) immigration and related cultural factors, including isolation, language, and discrimination. The following sections detail the themes that emerged from analysis of the lived experiences of the Latino youth in this study. See Table 17 for a summary of these themes, sub-themes, and representative quotes from the participants.
### Table 17

*Community Risk Factors for Urban Latino Adolescents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood stress</td>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>A lot of people would point guns at people. I didn’t like it because I used to be afraid of them. I was scared people would get hurt or something would happen to my family. And then the guns might go through other people (Abigail, 12, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial strain</td>
<td>Last time the water went out. At the new house. My brother didn’t pay the money in October and I needed to take a shower for school (Alexander, 13, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>When we came to this house I got too upset. I’m still upset because I miss my cousins. And now I’m not going to see them anymore because I’m going to another school (Fresa, 10, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>[School is frustrating] because the teachers give you problems that you haven't learned yet and you still have to do them. And they give you bad grade if you don't do it. But if we don't understand it, you - they still have to - we still have to do it (Abigail, 12, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration and related cultural factors</td>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>I’ve never seen my grandparents. I’m trying to go to see them (Miguel, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Some people get upset because some people - like they come from another place, that they don't know English, they come to a new school and then people make fun of them because they don't know how to speak English (Abigail, 12, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>Some people - some people, they call racist names to other people, [because they] - like they some - they sometimes make fun of people, how they don't know English or they just start arguing with other people that they don't even know, for no reason (Abigail, 12, Interview).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Neighborhood Stress
Safety. Safety was frequently described as a source of neighborhood stress, with the adolescents reporting problems with crime, gun violence, and discrimination in their community. During the group analysis sessions, Miguel described a recent event in his neighborhood. He happened to have his camera on hand, and took a picture of the aftermath (see Figure 9). The photograph shows a cracked window on his school bus, taken the day before our final group analysis session. Miguel explained, “At first, we dropped - my bus driver dropped these two kids, right? And [when] we just start leaving, we heard a crack but we didn't think it was the bus. My sister stood up. We heard her crying.” Miguel continued, “She said she got hit in the face. They threw a rock at the window and it hit my sister's face. The window cracked. I was really mad that time. I said - if - if something bad were to happen to her, [worse] than what happened, I would have run after.” In the visual narrative, he added, “It made me upset because if something would have happened to my sister, it would have been my fault… because I needed to take care of her.”

Figure 9: Photograph of a shattered window by Miguel, age 11.
Miguel’s description of safety, or lack of safety, in his community is deeply relational. He worries about his ability to care of his sister when facing community violence. For Miguel, stress arises from the worry of being unable to protect his family from problems in the neighborhood.

Others in the group responded that they, too, have had similar incidents where they felt unsafe in their neighborhood. Both Fresa and Abigail have witnessed residents carrying or using guns in their neighborhood. For example, Fresa explained that she witnessed two men with guns across the street from her house. Fresa described her fear when talking about her photograph during group analysis (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Photograph of a neighbor’s house by Fresa, age 10.

She pointed to the house, and recounted, “They were standing right here. They were there and I was like, ‘Oh my God, why are they doing that?’ I thought it was the end of the world. Like
when God takes us.” During the group analysis, Abigail agreed that gun violence is a problem in her neighborhood. Though she stated that she lives in a better neighborhood now, Abigail has witnessed violence and heard gunshots. She described, “A lot of people would point guns at people. I didn’t like it because I used to be afraid of them. I was scared people would get hurt or something would happen to my family. And then the guns might go through other people.” For many of the youth, worries over safety extend to anxiety about the safety of their family.

All six of the participants discussed a recent incident in their community, which may have influenced their perceptions of safety and gun use in their neighborhoods. Two boys in their school had been involved in an accidental shooting where the older sibling shot and killed his younger brother. The death of a kindergarten student at their school and a peer in their community took a significant toll on many of the participants, even those who did not have close relationships with the family. For others who did, like Mia who is a cousin to the two boys and Miguel, who is close friends with the older sibling, the incident colored some of the conversations during the interview. Miguel brought up this incident, either directly or indirectly, several times during his interview. For example, he described parent neglect as a source of stress in his community. He explained, “Some parents don’t care about their kids. Like if somebody had a gun in their house, they don't care if their kids see it. They might even let their kid borrow it.”

Some of the perceived violence and lack of safety are specific to experiences related to their cultural identity and ethnicity. Five of the six adolescents described experiences with discrimination and stereotypes based on their assumed ethnicity. These experiences contribute to feeling threatened and unsafe in their own neighborhoods and at school. In the group analysis,
the students also agreed that their perceptions of safety may be particularly stressful for new immigrants or others who move to their community. Abigail concluded, “I think [a problem] is danger around people. Some kids, not kids from this country, [when] they see danger think this country might be horrible for them or they might try to do it - like the same things other people are doing.” The participants in their community are negatively influenced by violence and lack of safety, as a potential victim and perpetrator. Discrimination is discussed further below related to immigration and cultural stress.

**Financial Strain.** The school that all of the adolescents attend is marked by substantial poverty and low resources. Though many of the participants did not describe themselves as low-income or needing economic support, all of the participants could identify peers in their community that struggled to have their needs met due to financial strain. It is likely that all of the participants are themselves in low-income families or at least know others who are low-income or in poverty, as 93.5 percent of students are considered economically disadvantaged (Ohio Department of Education, 2015).

Alexander and Fresa both shared personal experiences related to financial strain and the quality of their housing. During that academic year, for example, Alexander and his family had gone without water after not being able to pay the service fee on time. Alexander commented, “The water went out at the new house. My brother didn’t pay the money in October and I needed to take a shower for school.” Fresa also alluded to problems with her housing when discussing the cramped living situation that she had recently left. In a two bedroom apartment, her family (mother, father, and three children) had lived with her aunt’s family (aunt, uncle, and two cousins). Fresa instead, talked about the space: “We moved because, you know, when my baby
brother was born there was no space. We just had a room for us and a room for my aunt. And when my sister comes for visits, she used to stay where in the kitchen. She used to sleep there.” She was excited to report that she has her own bed and her own toys in her new house. She explained, “I have my own room with my brothers…I don’t have to be squashed with my whole family.”

**Social Isolation**

Five of the six participants reported that Latino adolescents frequently feel lonely or excluded in their community. For Miguel and Abigail, their neighborhood provides a sense of comfort and support. There are many other Latinos who live in their neighborhood, including other students at their school. Miguel and Abigail live down the street from one another, and both discuss how difficult it would be for them to move. Miguel explained, “My parents want to move, but I don’t. I have all my friends in that neighborhood.” As the youth described later during the group analysis, having others who you can relate to and who have experienced similar backgrounds can be beneficial in feeling supported and confident. For children who are isolated from similar peers, like Fresa, it may be difficult to cope with daily stressors. Fresa remarked, “I felt upset when we moved to this house, because I don’t have friends with this house. I miss all the kids that were my friends. Those apartments… there are a lot of Spanish people there.” When Fresa’s family moved to accommodate her growing family, she also moved away from her cousins. She continued:

When we came to this house I got too upset. I’m still upset because I miss my cousins.

And now I’m not going to see them anymore because I’m going to another school. I used
to live with them and it makes me upset. They lived with me, like 11 years with me. Then when we moved it made me sad because I didn’t have nobody to play with and things.

Similarly, Alexander has moved several times in the last few years. While he lives with many family members, he describes how easy it is to feel alone and neglected when away from his peers. Several of the youth also described loneliness that results from separation from family members due to immigration (See analysis of Immigration theme below).

**Academic Stress**

Unlike adolescents from both the rural Appalachian and urban Black communities, the urban Latino participants did not spend much time discussing academic or school stress in their interviews or the group visual narrative. Still, problems related to comprehension in school were a salient source of stress identified by most of the youth. In general, problems related to either language barriers or poor understanding of material. Alexander described difficulties speaking in class and completing assignments in English. Even though Fresa does not struggle with fluency, she has seen the same problems for her two school-aged brothers who continue to perform poorly at school. Their difficulties have frustrated her parents who now want to send the children to a different school, where they believe the English-only instruction will better serve the boys who are facing challenges developing skills in their second language.

Other students reported difficulty with comprehension of assignments and class materials. Mia in particular has difficulty completing and turning in assignments. She talked about missing a lot of school time and therefore, missing a lot of assignments. When she was present, sometimes she did not understand the material well enough to complete it. She explained, “Last week I didn’t do my homework. It was hard so I didn’t do it. I ended up giving
them blank pages. But I [turned it in]. I didn’t do it, but I [turned it in].” Mia emphasized that she did turn in her assignments because she had recently been in trouble for skipping class and getting poor grades. Abigail also described difficulties with assignments, attributing her poor comprehension to lacking instruction at her school. She lamented, “[School is frustrating] because the teachers give you problems that you haven't learned yet and you still have to do them. And they give you bad grade if you don't do it. But if we don't understand it, you - they still have to - we still have to do it.” The students compared this to standardized tests, where even if you have not learned the material, you are still expected to know what to do and how to respond to questions.

**Immigration and Related Cultural Factors**

Immigration, regardless of generation, was a substantial source of stress for the urban Latino adolescents in this study. Though the youth varied in their immigration status and citizenship, amount of time they have lived in the United States, nationality, and reasons for immigration, the participants identified several factors that may influence the stress and coping experiences of children and adolescents in their community. These factors include social and emotional isolation, language barriers, and discrimination.

**Isolation/Separation.** The adolescents in this study identified social and emotional isolation, including longing for one’s native country, as a source of hardship for urban Latino youth. Familial immigration can create separation that impacts the adolescents. Fresa explained a situation with her uncle while sharing a photo of him fixing a car outside her house: “My uncle in the picture doesn’t live in that house, it was a big house and he used to live by himself. His wife and sons are in Mexico. He’s too sad so he moved into those apartments where I used to
live so he’s closer to other people.” Though Fresa doesn’t remember much about living in Guatemala, she is still able to see the impact on her immediate family. Similarly, Alexander described the desire for his family to return to Guatemala. He explained, “[One of my cousins] wants to go back to Guatemala. He was born there and he feels sad to live here.” Alexander, Fresa, Mia, and Miguel all described a desire to visit family and even move back to another country.

Even for adolescents born in the U.S., familial immigration can still create a sense of loss and isolation. For example, Miguel has never met his grandparents who live in Mexico and describes longing to meet them. Mia agreed, stating, “I want my grandma and grandpa to come back. But they might not come back. They came when school began last year. My mom was going to bring them back when my brother is born. They said they might come, maybe or not, they aren’t really sure.” Uncertainty over reunification with family members permeated the interviews, group sessions, and visual narratives with the urban Latino youth.

Language barriers. Language barriers impact the lived experiences of the participants by creating stress at school and within the community. Several themes emerged related to language barriers, including poor communication, a lack of confidence, and the difficulties of having to serve as translators for family members.

All of the participants reported that language differences are a significant obstacle for recent immigrants and others in their community. The participants, their siblings, parents, and other family members have, at times, struggled to effectively comprehend and communicate with others. When thinking about language barriers as a stressor, Miguel remembered his cousin who recently emigrated from Mexico. He explained, “I was going to take a picture of my cousin that
came to the United States [for the visual narrative]. It’s going to be difficult for him because he hears everyone speaking English around him, and he won’t understand.” In agreement, Abigail explained how language differences impact students at her school: “[The kids] come here and [have to] write in English, [speak] in English…. Some teachers tell them to write an essay in English or talk about it in English, too. They don’t know some of the words and what they mean.” Many new immigrants may be pushed into a classroom that is English-only or provides limited supports for English language learners. Issues with comprehension and communication extend beyond the classroom, as individuals have to learn to interact with others in their community.

Four of the participants discussed feelings of isolation and diffidence due to their limited English fluency. Miguel described how English language learners may feel isolated as a result of their limited ability to communicate with peers. He suggested, “I think they do have a hard time because there are rarely [other] people like them. Probably some younger kids, but you’re older… so you don’t talk too much to little kids.” Miguel thought that immigrants may feel embarrassed by their limited ability to communicate with others. Similarly, Alexander and Fresa both commented on the ways they have been teased (or others could be teased) based on their fluency. Teasing has resulted in a lack of confidence when speaking in class or in community settings. Alexander explained that when he first came to the U.S., he struggled to read and was embarrassed to read in class. He said that his peers would laugh and say, “You can’t read!” as he was sounding out words. Even though Alexander has now lived in the U.S. for nearly 10 years, he still expresses anxiety when speaking in front of his classmates. He concluded, “I just need help” from the teacher or his peers when struggling with fluency. Fresa described the difficulty
her brothers are facing in developing English skills. She stated that her brothers are afraid of translating and speaking in English in public, and therefore, rely on her to communicate with others. As a result, her family is considering sending them to a different school that is English-only so that they can focus on speaking and reading in English.

In addition to the stress of learning a second language, five of the six adolescents detailed having to serve as a cultural gatekeeper or translator for their parents as a significant source of stress. Though Mia stated that she sometimes will translate for her mother, both of her parents speak some English and this is not a salient source of stress for her. Most of the youth described translating as both a stressor and a source of pride. For example, Abigail explained that she always thought translating would be fun. After her sister went to college, Abigail took over as translator. She explained, “Now that I’m the one translating it’s not that easy like I thought it was, because you are speaking two languages and you forget some of the words you mean. And you don’t know some of the meanings and you forget. It’s stressful.” Translating for a parent can also be stressful for youth who are unsure of their abilities or doubt their English fluency. Alexander explained how he feels nervous when translating for his father: “I have to translate things. I get nervous because I just do it so that my dad doesn’t yell at me. When I say it, sometimes I say it wrong to my dad. I be like, I know I can do it, so I just do it!” Fresa explained that she enjoys translating, but wishes her family would still learn English and not depend on her as much. She said, “I’m tired of doing it. My dad always takes me to his place where he needs to translate. Always. Every single day. I like helping people. They really need to learn though. They want to learn.” The youth told stories of translating for their parents and siblings at school, stores, the bank, and the post office.
**Discrimination.** One particularly salient theme was feelings of being discriminated against for being Latino or from another country. According to the participants, discrimination occurs both within their neighborhoods and at school. In their neighborhoods, the adolescents described being teased or treated differently without cause. Fresa did not describe the specific comments she has heard, but remarked that her neighbors in her old apartment complex “think that we are so ugly, that we stink.” At school, the students reported divisions between different races and ethnicities. Fresa explained that a boy in her class frequently makes comments about her looks and her clothing. Alexander, who has gotten into a lot of fights during the past school year, stated that his peers “fight me just because I’m Hispanic.”

Using religion as an example, Abigail explains how discrimination may lead to feelings of separation or exclusion at school:

Some people in our school, some people they say different things about Christians and it hurts our feelings. And then they take us out of their groups. Like if I was Christian and other people in my group didn’t accept me they might take me out because of who I am. They wouldn’t be friends with me, wouldn’t include me in the group.

Fresa discussed feeling excluded and threatened in class when she has to interact with peers who make disparaging remarks about her looks. For Miguel, who frequently deals with stress by crying, relayed that he is called “crybaby” or teased when trying to respond to discrimination.

Of note, the three Guatemalan students reported frequently being called derogatory names for being Mexican, rather than Latino or Guatemalan. Mia explained that at school, “[Other kids will] be calling [us] some names. Like Mexican, bad Mexican. They’ll be like ‘You Mexican.’ I say ‘No.’ They’ll be like, ‘Yeah, you Mexican.’ I’m like, ‘No I’m from another
country.” For Alexander, the discrimination extends to being blamed for incidents at school. He claimed, “Sometimes [kids at school] say I did something. They blame it on me. They say that because I’m Hispanic. They say that I’m Mexican, I’m from Mexico. But I ain’t, so…” When asked to postulate why others may call them Mexican as an insult, the students were unsure, but recognized that the comments were intended to hurt their feelings.

Relational Risk Factors

In addition to the community factors that likely influence health and well-being, the participants also identified relational risk factors as an important source of stress in their own lives and the lives of others within the Latino immigrant community. Relational risk factors, particularly isolation, loss, and negative relationships with peers, were described as substantial challenges by all six adolescents. Analysis of the data revealed four salient sources of relational stress for the Latino youth in this study, including: (1) emotional isolation; (2) loss, particularly the death of a loved one; (3) peer conflict, in the forms of teasing and peer victimization; and (4) chaotic and unstable home environments. The following sections describe these themes in detail and present many of the stories of the youth in their own words. See Table 18 for a summary of themes, sub-themes, and representative quotations of relational risk factors.

Table 18

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Isolation</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>[This is] one of the old cars and it was bad that a car is there, alone, by itself. Like us. A car is like us. And he’s abandoned (Alexander, 13, Group Analysis).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>Death of a loved one</td>
<td>His brother picked the gun up and the brother said, “This gun’s not a real gun.” And the brother shot the little brother who was 5 years old (Teo, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Peer conflict**

Some people used to call me names for the way I look. I didn’t like how they used to call me names because it made me really sad about it. They always used to say I didn’t look good like the other girls. But I always thought to myself, “Well, I look the same way I’m going to look every day and forever” (Abigail, 12, Interview).

**Peer victimization**

Kids want to fight with me but I be like, “Okay, but I don’t really want to fight at school because I don’t want to get suspended.” Because my parents would say something. So I be like, “We can fight but like, far away from the school” (Alexander, 13, Interview).

**Chaotic home environment**

Now that they are divorced it can be rough because now they are always mad at each other. I don’t want them to be mad at each other or anything (Abigail, 12, Interview).

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**Loneliness and Exclusion**

One powerful finding from the data was the loneliness and exclusion that the youth frequently feel. This theme did not emerge until the group analysis, when Alexander displayed a picture of an old car that had been sitting on his street for several months (see Figure 11).
He remarked, “[This is] one of the old cars and it was bad that a car is there, alone, by itself. Like us. A car is like us. And he’s abandoned.” He later described his picture in the visual narrative:

This picture of a car that feels sad because it’s by itself, like a human. This one guy just left it there and he just ran away. On Saturday, the police came and was checking the car.

Kids feel sad, lonely, upset. No food, no drink, no gas. Like the car—it has nothing. They just leave it like a junkyard. If it were a human, it would just die.

Fresa, Abigail, and Miguel all connected with Alexander’s photograph during the group analysis. They all have felt lonely and neglected, either through their relationships with their family or their peers. Miguel said that he also felt like the car. He elaborated, “I feel lonely. Sometimes I feel like the car because I feel like my family hates me.”

Once this theme was introduced, it permeated many of our conversations about stress and about coping. The youth connected loneliness to depression and removing oneself from social activities and opportunities. For example, in one of the video clips, Miguel suggested that when children feel lonely or depressed, they no longer want to come to recess out on the playground. He also suggested that others should be doing more to make them feel included. He claimed, “A lot of people around here are lonely and don’t have anyone to play with. I think that’s pretty sad because, like Alexander talked about with the car, it was lonely there like a human. I think we should care more about them and play with them more.” Abigail also talked about the ways she tries to help her peers to feel included. She commented:

Some people don’t like each other but I just want to be friends with each kind of person. I like to be friends with both of them. But every time one friend doesn’t want to hang out
with the other one because they don’t really like each other, I really try to hang out with both of them. It’s kind of hard. They are both the same person, they have a lot in common with each other, but the difference is that they don’t really like each other, so I try to put something they both like together so that they can be friends.

Based on their experiences of feeling lonely and excluded, the participants recognized their role in supporting their peers to feel like a part of their community. The community-level protective factors, like shared experiences and maintaining culture, could play an important role in reducing this form of interpersonal stress.

**Loss or Death of a Loved One**

When asked to consider what factors could cause stress in their lives or for other youth in their community, many of the participants described the death of a loved one. In fact, the youth in the group analysis identified loss as one of the top stressors for Latino youth. The stress that results from loss can be difficult to overcome, even over time. Abigail remarked that “some people deal really [poorly] with [death].” She suggested, “If someone dies that is really close to you and you wanted to spend more time with that person, you will be super sad. Upset because then you won’t have time to spend with them.” Among the youth in this study, most described the death of both extended family members and peers at their school.

At school, Mia and Fresa described a young girl who had died of brain cancer and all six participants discussed the accidental shooting death of a kindergartner introduced above. Earlier in the year, one of their peers had been accidentally shot and killed by his older brother. Teo recounted the incident: “His brother picked the gun up and the brother said, “This gun’s not a real gun.” And the brother shot the little brother who was 5 years old.”
Three of the youth had a grandparent who had passed away, and two of them had never met the grandparent before they died. Both Miguel and Fresa have relatives in their native countries that they were not able to meet before they passed. Miguel and Fresa described how, despite this, they still felt sad and cried over the news of their death. Miguel stated, “My grandpa died but I never met him. I was really sad when I knew he was dying. My dad was crying [about it], and my uncle was…I had a lot of people dying in my family.” Notably, only one of the adolescents described the death of someone in their immediate family. During her interview, Abigail talked about her mother having a miscarriage before her baby brother was born last year.

**Teasing and Peer Victimization**

All six of the participants discussed teasing as a source of stress among their peers. In addition, all six of the participants had personally been teased or ridiculed during the past academic year. They were teased for their looks, abilities, their ethnicity, or their reactions to problems. For example, Abigail reported, “Some people used to call me names for the way I look and I didn’t like how they used to call me names because it made me really sad about it cause they always used to say I didn’t look good like the other girls.” Miguel is frequently called “crybaby” and Mia is teased for being “stupid.” As described above under the Immigration theme and Discrimination subtheme, teasing and discrimination based on ethnicity was also a salient source of stress for all of the students in this study.

In some circumstances, teasing and conflict between peers can turn into fighting or other forms of victimization. All six of the participants described that fighting between peers as a source of problems in their neighborhoods and at school. Both Mia and Alexander, in particular, have had recent personal experiences that have caused them to get in serious trouble at school.
Luckily for Mia, she believes that most of her problems are over. She claimed, “This year I made more friends than last year. Last year there was fights, there was name[calling], they kept bothering [me.] But this year, there has been a fight but not that… really serious.” In her interview, Mia told two stories of recent incidents where she wanted to fight a peer, but ended up not getting involved in a physical altercation. In both incidents, miscommunication between Mia and another peer resulted in hurt feelings and motivation to be aggressive. However, Mia described how friends, teachers, and even the bus driver stepped in to stop the fight from occurring. Mia realized that “we just got mad for no reason” and that the fights were largely unnecessary. Alexander also frequently responds aggressively to teasing or miscommunication. He is having a hard time resisting the fights, despite not wanting to get in trouble with his parents. He reported, “Kids want to fight with me but I be like, ‘Okay, but I don’t really want to fight at school because I don’t want to get suspended.’ Because my parents would say something. So I be like, ‘We can fight but like, far away from the school.’”

Largely, the youth believed that very little could be done to improve the victimization at their school. All of the girls reported ignoring teasing and remembering that teasing reflects the characteristics of the perpetrator rather than the victim. For example, Mia recalled advice her mother gave her: “It’s like they’re saying it to their own self. They call me a name like, what’s it called, stupid or something like that. It’s like they’re telling it to themselves.” The boys also talked about trying to ignore the teasing but not being that successful. For Miguel, being called a crybaby typically results in him crying whereas for Alexander, teasing typically results in fights.

**Chaotic and Unstable Home Environments**
The fifth theme that emerged related to interpersonal-level stress was chaotic, abusive, or unstable home environments. These environments impacted the daily lived experiences of these youth by influencing their relationships with their parents and siblings. For example, Abigail spent a lot of time discussing her parents’ divorce, and the impact that divorce has had on her relationships. She described how she used to have a lot of fun with her family, and that their divorce has made it impossible for them to spend time together. Abigail also discussed how many of her peers also deal with arguments and aggression between their parents. She described having to comfort multiple friends when their parents began hitting one another. Abigail remarked that, in the long run, it is better for parents to be apart if they are going to be violent or hurt their children.

Three of the youth described having to hide from their fathers due to their aggression and alcohol abuse. In one of the video clips, Abigail recalled her experiences with her parents arguing in the living room, before their divorce:

I took this picture because this is where my parents used to fight a lot. I didn’t like that because my older sister wasn’t here, and I was the oldest one, who had to take care of it. My dad pushed my mom, but I didn’t know why. I think he was drunk. My mom was really mad and she told me to call the police. I didn’t want to, because I was scared, but I wanted them to stop fighting. I had to do something. I yelled at them. I was stressed because they kept fighting every Saturday night. It was time for us to go to sleep and we didn’t want them to be fighting a lot.

Abigail sees herself as responsible for her younger siblings, and during one of her father’s episodes, would do what she could to protect her younger sister. She explained, “I always take
[my little sister] to the closet to read books that will make her feel better or draw something to express how she feels like.” Similarly, Fresa’s father used to drink and become violent toward her mother. Fresa reported the fear she experienced when dealing with her father’s drinking. Her mother would take her family to their uncle’s house and they would lock the door so that he could not get to Fresa or her siblings. Finally, while Alexander does not physically hide from his father, he avoids speaking with him or sharing his struggles at school as to avoid any physical consequences.

Both Abigail and Fresa described how religious belonging has influenced their family’s home environment. For example, Abigail reflected on the changes in her family since they became Christian and got involved in their church. Regarding her family’s fighting, she concluded “Now that they are Christian they are peaceful and now they are just happy.” Similarly, when Fesa’s father became aggressive toward her mother, Fresa described how he apologized and promised to go to church. She described how he has changed since this incident and regularly attends church to improve his conduct and limit his drinking.

**Individual Risk Factors**

Individual risk factors include personal characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors that are stressors or encourage negative responses that exacerbate the effects of chronic stress. For the Latino youth in this study, the salient themes related to individual risk factors were: (1) coping strategies, including isolation, distraction, avoidance, risky health behaviors, and aggression; (2) feelings of low self-esteem and inadequacy, and (3) school misbehavior, particularly fighting and missing class. The following sections describe the youth perspectives on these themes and the findings are summarized in Table 19.
### Table 19

*Individual Risk Factors for Urban Latino Adolescents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coping strategies</td>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>I just don’t talk to anyone (Alexander, 13, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distraction/forgetting</td>
<td>We used to go to the pool in the summer, and then I forgot about it, I forgot what made me sad. I used to go to the pool and I’d forget (Fresa, 10, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ignore the problem</td>
<td>I didn’t do nothing. I didn’t talk to her, I didn’t look at her, nothing (Mia, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Risky health behaviors</td>
<td>Some people be sad because some people do love their parents but their parents doesn't love them back and then they start becoming other things that they - like they could do anything they want. Like some of your parents tell you not to [get] drugs and things, but if one of your parents does - one of your parents doesn't take care of you, they start - they - you start taking drugs or things like that (Abigail, 12, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>Sometimes I just ignore them, sometimes I just… I just yell at them. And say I didn’t do it (Alexander, 12, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self-esteem and inadequacy</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Some people get stressed when they see all the kids being smart and getting chosen. They give everything they have so they can… so they can be on that wall. And it’s too much (Miguel, 11, Visual Narrative).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Misbehavior</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>They suspended me one more because I wasn’t in class, I was with someone else. So they suspended me for that (Mia, 11, Interview).</td>
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</table>

### Coping Strategies

Many of the youth in this study identified passive coping strategies as their preferred mode of dealing with the risk factors they face, including avoidance, distraction, isolation, risky health behaviors, and aggression.
Avoidance. All six participants identified ignoring the problem or ignoring an individual as their most used strategy to deal with stress. In response to a recent incident with a peer, Mia stated, “I didn’t do nothing. I didn’t talk to her, I didn’t look at her, nothing.”

Distraction. Also prominent for these youth was distraction, or engaging in other activities to forget their problem. Fresa explained that when you participate in other activities, you often forget what was bothering you in the first place. She remarked, “We used to go to the pool in the summer, and then I forgot about it, I forgot what made me sad like my baby brother. I used to go to the pool and I’d forget.” Abigail agreed, commenting, “I go outside and play with other people that I know and then start to forget things and have fun.” The youth were involved in sports, playing with friends, or spending time with family as a form of distraction. Mia likes to draw when she copes with stress, stating, “Sometimes I draw and use my imagination, so I can forget all about it.”

Isolation. Mia and Alexander frequently discussed isolation, or removing themselves from a situation and spending time alone, thinking. Both stated separately that they “just don’t talk to anyone” and either spend time alone in their rooms or outside.

Risky behaviors. Abigail, Miguel, and Alexander talked about the risky health behaviors that their peers engage in, including drug or alcohol use. During the group analysis of themes, Abigail explained how stress, particularly relationships with parents, may influence substance abuse:

Some people [are] sad because… their parents don’t love them back and then they start doing anything they want. Like some of your parents tell you not to get drugs and things,
but if one of your parents does - one of your parents doesn't take care of you, you start taking drugs or things like that.

All of the participants in the group session could identify peers who were experimenting with drugs and alcohol, some during school hours.

**Aggression.** While only Alexander and Mia admitted to becoming aggressive in response to stress, by fighting or engaging in arguments with their family and peers, all of the participants recognized that aggression is a coping strategy used by other adolescents at their school. All six participants described how there are many fights at their school and seemed convinced that this was simply the way that children and adolescents deal with their problems in relationships.

**Low Self-Esteem and Inadequacy**

Another risk factor prominent for youth in this urban Latino community is low self-esteem and general feelings of inadequacy. Several of the participants described feeling incompetent, unsuccessful, or like they were not meeting the expectations placed on them. These feelings were discussed largely in relation to a video clip of a “Stars of the Month” display in one of the hallways at their school. Alexander explained the display:

This is a wall of people who are Star of the Month. These are kids who are intelligent, like every month, they do their homework or they just respect their teachers. The teachers pick the kids and the kids are the Star of the Month. They are happy with their teachers for picking them. I’ve never been Star of the Month because I just... I’m disrespectful of my teacher and I don’t really do my homework. So I can’t be Star of the Month. I’d have to do my homework, respect, make sure I don’t play around, and do a good job. Be a problem-solver.
Miguel also described how he has not been the Star of the Month. He stated, “Some people get stressed when they see all the kids being smart and getting chosen. They give everything they have so they can… so they can be on that wall. And it’s too much.” Miguel was disappointed that he had not achieved this recognition, and explained how trying very hard to meet expectations can result in significant stress.

**School Misbehavior**

School misbehavior (e.g., missing class, fighting) is included here as an individual-level risk factor, despite only being described as personally-relevant for two of the participants. However, this type of stress affected multiple aspects of their lives, including their relationships with their parents and their academic performance at school. It is included here as an important theme that may be salient for others in the community, despite only Mia and Alexander admitting their problem behaviors during the interviews or group analysis. During the individual interviews and group discussions, their peers agreed that school misbehavior is a risk factor for many students in their school, even those who are victimized or only indirectly affected. Both Mia and Alexander have had disciplinary action at school during the past academic year due to their misbehavior.

Mia described how she had missed class, leaving with a peer to sit in another classroom rather than participate in her work. There were also rumors of Mia drinking at school, which other participants mentioned in their individual interviews, but Mia herself did not admit to this behavior. She recounted how her mother was very disappointed with her behavior this year. Her mother began showing up to school every Friday to check in with teachers and the ESL Coordinator, who is closely involved with many families in the community. Mia described how
this made their relationship difficult. Mia recalled how her behavior changed abruptly after her mother met with the principal and ESL Coordinator for the first time. “[The principal and my teacher] told me that if I do one more thing, I’m going to get expelled.” Since then, Mia has been trying to regularly attend class and turn in all her assignments. When asked to skip class, she reported that she tells her peers she can no longer miss.

Alexander has also frequently been in trouble at school. During the first two meetings for the group analysis, Alexander was suspended from school following an incident where he was talking back to his teacher. Before that, he had been suspended for two days after playing around during gym class. He explained, “We used to grab a paper towel and put soap on it and smack our hand on each other. So I got in trouble, I got two days.” Alexander reported that his behavior at school also creates consequences at home. He stated, “I just don’t tell my mom sometimes. I tell my mom, but I don’t tell my dad. Because my dad… But my mom just says, ‘Por qué?’ Like, ‘Why?’ Sometimes I tell her, sometimes I just lie.” Alexander knows that if his father finds out about his behavior, that there will be negative consequences at home.

**Protective Factors for Urban Latino Adolescents**

The findings evidence a wide range of stressors that these Latino youth face during their daily lives in inner-city Cincinnati. Their stressors span multiple contexts and likely influence individual perceptions of and reactions to stress. Still, the participants also explicitly described supports and coping mechanisms that act as buffers against high levels of chronic stress. Protective factors in individuals, relational networks, schools, and communities, are characteristics that support youth to more effectively manage and cope with stress. Overall, the youth in this study described the importance of belonging; belonging in their community, school,
and relationships. Individually, adaptive coping strategies support these youth to deal with chronic stress. The following sections present factors that the youth identified as helpful in their own lives to mitigate the effects of stress within three social-ecological levels: (1) community, (2) relational, and (3) individual.

**Community Protective Factors**

In conversations during the group analysis and the visual narrative creation, community protective factors were the focus. The adolescents were eager to share the aspects of their school and neighborhoods that contributed to their success and the success of those around them. Community factors that were prominent in the individual interviews and group discussions included: (1) cultural belonging, including shared experiences and maintenance of culture and language; and (2) religious belonging (see Table 20).

Table 20

*Community Protective Factors for Urban Latino Adolescents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural belonging</td>
<td>Shared experiences</td>
<td>I was going to take a picture of my cousin that came to the United States. It’s going to be difficult for him because he hears everyone speaking English around him, and he won’t understand. The good thing is that other people who are Hispanic can help him understand (Miguel, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintaining culture and language</td>
<td>You you won't forget the two languages you grew up with (Abigail, 12, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious belonging</td>
<td></td>
<td>I’m really appreciative of God and I thank him. And my mom is thankful to God because he gave her a baby. Sometimes she cries when she prays because she is happy (Fresa, 10, Interview).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shared experiences. The urban Latino adolescents described the importance of connecting with others who have been through similar situations in order to cope with stress, particularly related to immigration, language barriers, and discrimination. For example, Abigail discussed the importance of “having other kids that have the same problem as [you] did” in order to feel supported and less alone. At school, the adolescents are able to connect with both peers and teachers who speak Spanish or have dealt with moving to a new country. Miguel explained that new immigrants may find comfort in “knowing that another Hispanic kid is there so that they can help you translate.” Miguel has used his peers and teachers as a buffer to his own stress, concluding, “I believe my teachers help because they’re from my country and they can translate sometimes what I don’t know.”

Maintaining culture and language. The youth in this study described the benefits of successfully living in two cultures; being able to maintain their Latino identity and Spanish language fluency while also gaining skills in English. For example, the majority of the group analysis and visual narrative focuses on the benefits of attending a bilingual school, where students who already know English can support students who are new to the country or just learning English. The participants noted that their school is unlike any other in the area. Rather than only learning English when arriving to the United States, students in their school are able to learn both English and Spanish. Abigail said this is important “because then you won't forget the two languages you grew up with.”

In the group visual narrative, Abigail introduced the audience to the school’s ESL classroom as some of the processes that take place there (see Figure 12). She describes the physical structure of the classroom and the teacher’s instructional strategies:
In this school the Spanish speakers help the English speakers to learn Spanish, and the
English speakers help the Spanish speakers to learn English. For the people that don’t
speak English, there are a lot of kids here who could help so that they can learn.

These are some books the teacher uses to help kids learn English. Some of these
books are easy books, like for kids, but it’s still good for older kids that still don’t know
English so that they [can] know more English. There are these tables because there are a
lot of different people that take [ESL]. These are the ones who still have to learn to read
English, and these are the ones that have to learn to read and speak it.

We, the ones that know English, we have to help the ones that do not know
English to be a little bit better. We all can communicate together in an English way, not a
Spanish way, because that is what we need to use in the United States. [The ESL teacher]
has the people that do know how to speak English [in the classroom at the same time] so
that we can talk to each other, so they will understand and know what to say.

Figure 12: Still from group visual narrative of a classroom.
The four students who participated in the group analysis and the group visual narrative shared stories of helping others or being helped by others when first learning English. Miguel concluded that although moving to a new country can be difficult and scary, at his school “there are kids that talk the language and you understand each other.”

The benefits of their bilingualism are also evident in their willingness and pride in being able to translate for their family. Even though the youth recognize that translating can be difficult and frustrating, they are still practicing two languages and are able to help others communicate together. Abigail explained, “I say to myself that I’m kind of smart because it is fun to do it because you are talking two languages and it’s helpful to you to speak two languages and translate to other people who don’t know English or don’t know Spanish.”

**Religious Belonging**

Finally, several of the youth discussed their involvement in their church or religion as a source of strength and resilience in the face of challenges. Mia, Alexander, Fresa, and Abigail all regularly attend church with their families. Fresa finds comfort in prayer and attending church. She uses her religious beliefs to understand her life experiences, including her father’s excessive drinking and abusive behavior toward her mother. When her father stopped drinking, she thought that “maybe God [touched] his heart or something, because God is powerful.” She also turns to her religious beliefs to celebrate her positive experiences. She explained, “I’m really appreciative of God and I thank him. And my mom is thankful to God because he gave her a baby. Sometimes she cries when she prays because she is happy.”
Abigail uses her religious belonging as a way to get involved in the community and care for others. While he initially resisted her mother’s efforts to get her involved in church life, Abigail decided that she needed to try new things. She commented:

“My mom wanted me to be a Christian but I wasn’t used to it, until now, but I think it’s pretty okay now. When she asked me at first I wasn’t sure because I thought it would be really boring. And it was going to be like the things I don’t like to do. But it’s not really the same thing. Everything is different and you have to try new things.

Now Abigail takes care of the younger children at church. She explained, “I’m one of the teachers for little kids. The day came now when I can really take care of them. And now I’m really happy about it.” Religious belonging supports the adolescents to find comfort, explain difficulties, build connections with others, and develop a sense of purpose in their community.

**Relational Protective Factors**

Though relational factors were the main source of stress reported by the youth participants, there were also strong, supportive relationships that helped the teens to overcome barriers. The Latino adolescents identified three types of relational protective factors in their lives: (1) belonging, (2) peer support, and (2) family support (see Table 21).
Table 21

*Relational Protective Factors for Urban Latino Adolescents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>[What helps is] knowing that another Hispanic kid is there so that they can help you translate. And a teacher that knows how to speak their language (Miguel, 11, Group Analysis).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer support</td>
<td>Distraction</td>
<td>[To feel better] I just go play with my friends. If we have a soccer ball, we just play soccer. If we don’t, we just like… hang out (Alexander, 13, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>Distraction</td>
<td>[I felt better] when my aunt said, “Let’s go to the park.” And my sister was there too. They both said, “Let’s go to the park” (Abigail, 12, Interview).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional support</td>
<td>[My aunt is] telling me it’s going to be okay. When I listen to her good things happen (Mia, 11, Interview).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Belonging**

Belonging was described as a community protective factor, including both cultural and religious belonging that helped youth to feel connected to others. Belonging is also included here as a relational protective support because belonging is inherently relational; the youth feel connected to and engaged with those who share their cultural and religious identities. The students reported feeling lucky to attend a school that allows them to build relationships with peers and teachers who share their ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds. Many of the youth described how the culture of the school supports students who recently arrived by supporting connections to those with similar past experiences. Miguel concluded that when individuals immigrate to the U.S., they are supported by “knowing that another Hispanic kid is there so that they can help you translate.” The youth in this study knew that others in their school
shared many of their experiences and that this point of commonality supported their growth and development.

**Peer Support**

All of the six participants reported relying on social support to overcome barriers and deal with stress. Alexander, Miguel, and Teo each described hanging out with their friends, but not talking to their friends about the problems, to relieve stress. Alexander plays video games, plays soccer, or goes to the park with his friends. Teo described playing with his friends because “they make me happy. They make jokes.” Miguel stated that, “When you see other people having fun around you, you feel like you want to have fun with them and play with them.” He described how he gets support from his friends, but also how he was been there for peers struggling with emotional distress. When his friend returned to school after the accidental shooting death of his little brother, Miguel was there to spend time with him in between classes, comfort him when attending class was too difficult, and make him laugh to relieve tension. The adolescents in this study relied heavily on peers as a distraction during times of difficulty. While they may not have been actively coping with their stress, the youth reported feeling more relaxed, at ease, and happy when interacting with their peers and forgetting about their current problems.

**Family Support**

Unlike the boys, the adolescent girls in this group described their relationships with their family or other adults as most supportive when experiencing stress. Abigail talks to her sisters when she needs advice or support, and her sisters help her to “calm down.” Fresa has close relationships with her aunt and uncles and expressed that when she is having a problem, she
wants them to know. She explained, “My uncles already know about my life, my dad’s life, my mom’s life, my brother’s life. It’s easy to talk to them because they already know what happened to my mom.” Mia also has a close relationship with her aunt and often stays the night with her aunt when she is having disagreements with her mom. Furthermore, Mia started to see two counselors at school during the past academic year. Mia likes meeting with the counselors because they “talk to kids and help them.” All three of the female participants used their relationships with family members or other adults to take time away from their stress. However, unlike the male participants, the girls actively discuss problems with their support network. Interestingly, none of the girls described close peer relationships in general or as a source of support.

**Individual Protective Factors**

Individual protective factors include individual characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors that buffer the relationship between stress and poor outcomes. The youth in this study did not readily identify or discuss many individual-level factors that allow them to overcome adversity, but rather relied on community and relational factors to describe how they deal with difficult life circumstances. When discussing what they do to feel better when upset or stressed, the Latino youth did share several adaptive coping strategies that could serve as protective factors in this population.

**Adaptive Coping**

Despite the prevalence of passive coping described above, many of the youth also detailed their use of adaptive coping strategies used to overcome stress, including positive reframing, self-talk and calming techniques, and support seeking behaviors. The girls in
particular described use of positive reframing to reconsider the words and actions of their peers. For example, Abigail told a story of when her peers made fun of her for her looks: “Sometimes they are still teasing me about different things like how I look and things, but I don’t really pay attention to them. I ignore. Because they sometimes make me feel bad but I think I’ll be fine without what they’re trying to say.” Abigail recognizes that the words of her peers have little impact on the way she thinks and feels about herself. She continued, “I always thought to myself, ‘Well, I look the same way I’m going to look every day and forever.’” Fresa and Mia both discussed their belief that teasing reflects the attitudes and character of their peer, rather than the person being teased. For example, Fresa shared a lesson her mother taught her about peers who tease others. She recalled, “My mom says, there’s a lot of people who bully, but if you bully it comes back to you. If I say that you’re ugly, I’m the one that’s ugly.” Fresa uses this lesson to reconsider the words her peers say to her. Similarly, Mia argued that when a peer calls her stupid, “it’s like they’re telling it to themselves.” Interestingly, all three reported learning these reframing techniques from their mothers.

**Summary**

The Latino youth in this study lived in urban neighborhoods that are plagued with concerns about safety and financial strain. Rather than worrying about academic performance, they spent a lot of time focused on their neighborhood stressors, social and geographic isolation from friends and family, and immigration and related cultural factors, including language barriers and discrimination. They described turmoil in their relationships, through isolation, loss, conflict, and chaotic environments that lead to feelings of loneliness and disconnection. In order to deal with these stressors, the youth frequently employed passive coping skills that do not
allow them to actively resolve or respond to persistent barriers. Low self-esteem and acting out in school did little to help the teens cope with stress. What does help, according to these Latino adolescents, is engaging with peers, family members, teachers, and other adults who are able to understand and empathize with their experiences. The participants described the importance of belonging and connection; in their community, at school, and in their relationships. These findings suggest a point of entrance for developing coping skills and protective factors to promote health and well-being among Latino adolescents in Cincinnati.
Chapter 7: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

While previous research attempts to understand chronic stress in low-income populations, either as a whole or through studies that further take into account race and ethnicity, the present study adds a local perspective to highlight the specific experiences of adolescents living in or near Cincinnati. In this chapter, I present: (1) evidence of chronic stress across the three low-income communities; (2) synthesis of community-specific protective factors and implications for intervention; and (3) conclusions and directions for future research.

**Chronic Stress in the Three Low-Income Communities**

All three groups experienced a myriad of chronic stress, including community, relational, and individual risk factors. In their neighborhoods, three themes were salient in each group: (1) geographic and emotional isolation; (2) neighborhood factors, including safety and crime/violence; and (3) academic stress. At the relational level, the Appalachian, Black, and Latino adolescents reported the following shared sources of stress: (1) emotional isolation; (2) peer conflict, particularly peer victimization; (3) loss or death of a loved one; and (4) family relationships and functioning, particularly chaotic home environments. Individually, the Appalachian, Black, and Latino youth all reported use of (1) passive coping strategies to deal with chronic stress.

Although the Appalachian, Black, and Latino adolescents reported some consistent sources of stress across the three ecological levels, the manner in which each theme is experienced varies by community group. For example, though all three communities described isolation, only loneliness was a common characteristic across the groups. Limited resources were experienced by the Appalachian and Black adolescents and lack of opportunity was only
described by the Appalachian youth. Regarding neighborhood characteristics, all three communities identified stress associated with safety and crime/violence, yet only the Appalachian and Black groups noted problems with substance abuse while only the Appalachian and Latino groups discussed financial strain. Related to academic stress, all three groups agreed on an independent yet salient risk factor.

While all youth may feel a particular stress, the root causes may be very different. Therefore, efforts to improve or overcome the risk factor may fail if not considering the youth’s specific experiences. This finding further provides evidence of the importance of understanding the specific, contextual experiences that influence stress and coping. The following sections therefore describe the relationships between the broadly shared, yet contextually different stress experiences reported by the participants, including: (1) loneliness and isolation; (2) neighborhood characteristics; and (3) loss of a loved one. See Table 22 for a comparison of all themes across the three low-income participant groups.

Loneliness and Isolation

Overall, the Appalachian, Black, and Latino youth reported feelings of loneliness and isolation. For the Appalachian and Latino youth, social isolation was largely related to feeling excluded or feeling different from peers. Among the Appalachian community, the youth felt like “oddballs” for wanting to move out of their town and find an area with more to offer. The Latino youth reported feeling excluded because of their language, cultural, or religious background. While the Black adolescents did not describe their isolation as exclusion, they did indicate that they felt misheard or misunderstood by their teachers, family, and peers. Each group’s isolation resulted in different emotional responses; the Appalachian youth largely felt apathetic about their
Table 22

*Risk Factors Across Three Low-Income Community Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Appalachian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographic isolation</td>
<td>Lack of resources</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of opportunity</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional isolation</td>
<td>Feeling unheard, ignored</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling excluded</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood characteristics</td>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crime and violence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial strain</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic and school stress</td>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict with teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality of instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School misbehavior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural factors and immigration</td>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>Death of a loved one</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer relationships</td>
<td>Negative influence</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difficult relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social comparison</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teasing</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer victimization</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family relationships and functioning</td>
<td>Lack of communication</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pressure</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absent parent</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chaotic home environment</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Providing care for siblings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive coping</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
circumstances, the Latino youth expressed sadness, and the Black youth were frustrated that they could not effectively communicate with or be understood by important people in their lives.

For the Appalachian and Black adolescents, isolation was also related to their place of residence. In the rural setting, access to resources and opportunities was limited and augmented feelings of isolation and apathy across the community. It was difficult for the Appalachian adolescents to find work, spend time with friends, purchase grocery items or clothing, and access health care due to their physical distance from resources. In the urban setting, isolation occurred through limited access to transportation and frequent changes in residence. The Black youth had difficulty participating in sports or activities at the community center when relying on public transportation or family members to provide rides.

**Neighborhood Characteristics**

The rural white Appalachian, urban Black, and urban Latino adolescents in this study all expressed concerns over their safety, particularly in response to the prevalence of crime and violence in their neighborhoods and the local community. This finding is consistent with the existing literature examining stress in urban and low-income populations, where community violence is frequently cited as a source of chronic stress for children and adolescents (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009; Copeland-Linder et al., 2011). Moreover, research suggests that adolescents are at higher risk of exposure to violence than youth of other ages (Voisin, 2007). Exposure to violence is particularly important because of the relationship to the development of emotional and behavioral problems in adolescence and early adulthood and risk of future violent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
<th>--</th>
<th>X</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low self-esteem</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* “X” indicates that at least 4 of 6 participants described the theme.
behavior (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2011). In settings that are vulnerable to community violence, like the three illustrated in the present study, intervention with those who have been exposed or are likely to be exposed is essential in improving health and well-being (Aisenberg & Herrenkohl, 2008).

**Cultural Factors and Immigration**

One interesting finding was the salience of culturally-specific isolation and discrimination among the Latino and Appalachian groups, and relative absence of perceived isolation and discrimination among the Black adolescents. As described in Chapter 6, cultural factors and immigration stress were especially salient for the Latino adolescents in this study. Consistent with existing research, youth who have themselves immigrated to the U.S. or attend school with many peers who have immigrated experience a substantial amount of stress associated with language barriers, social and cultural isolation, and discrimination (Cervantes & Cordova, 2011; Roche & Kuperminc, 2012; Paul R. Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011). Immigration or acculturative stress is important to understand because it is associated with depressive symptoms (Romero & Roberts, 2003) and suicidal ideation (Hovey & King, 1996) for both immigrant and U.S.-born Latino adolescents.

The adolescents living in a rural setting also described isolation and discrimination and may experience similar types of stress related to cultural isolation. A review of the literature reveals no publications that examine experiences of discrimination of adolescents in rural Appalachian communities; however there is limited evidence that discrimination and other socio-cultural factors may influence health disparities in adulthood. Furthermore, there is evidence that low family income places adolescents at risk for discrimination and negative outcomes (Curtis et
al., 2011) which suggests that some of the cultural isolation and discrimination faced by the Appalachian youth may be associated with socioeconomic status rather than race or geography.

Interestingly, the Black adolescents living in inner-city Cincinnati did not report experiences with discrimination, stereotypes, or racism, unlike their Latino and Appalachian peers. Cincinnati is a highly segregated city, ranking in the top ten most segregated cities in the U.S. It is possible that the adolescents do not perceive racism or discrimination due to the racial homogeneity within their neighborhoods and schools, or however unlikely, that discrimination is not a problem in their community. Additionally, it is possible that the youth do not perceive the racism as an important life stressor because of overexposure to discrimination, where structural and overt racism are a part of daily life rather than an occasional experience. Further research that explicitly examines experiences of racism and discrimination against urban Black adolescents in Cincinnati would be helpful in more fully understanding the influence of the community domain on adolescent health and well-being.

Understanding perceived discrimination and protective factors that buffer the impact of perceived discrimination is important to support healthy development in adolescence. Perceived discrimination has been linked to higher levels of perceived stress and depressive symptoms, and poorer psychological functioning in African American (Sellers et al., 2006) and Latino populations (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). Academically, racial discrimination is associated with declines in grades, academic self-concepts, and school engagement, and increases in problem behavior among minority adolescents (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, Bámaca, & Zeiders, 2009; DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). As stated above, there are no published studies examining the relationship between
perceived discrimination and psychological functioning or health in Appalachian children and adolescents. A similar trajectory could be expected for rural Appalachian youth since similar findings have been demonstrated across low-income and minority populations (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). Of note, there is also some evidence that perceived discrimination may amplify the impact of neighborhood risk for ethnic and racial minority youth (Prelow, Danoff-Burg, Swenson, & Pulgiano, 2004).

**Dealing with Death**

A noteworthy finding of this research is the prevalence of loss within each community. Death of a loved one was a shared risk factor across the community groups, yet degree of loss differed. For example, all six of the rural Appalachian participants described the recent loss of at least one close family member. Among those who had died, a father died from cancer, a sibling had died in a car accident, and a father-like uncle who had been murdered. Three of the Black adolescents had suffered the death of a parent or sibling; two had been murdered and one had died from a chronic illness. Unlike the other two groups, the Latino teens had only experienced the death of their grandparents in their family, some of whom they had never met. In addition, the Latino youth described the tragic accidental shooting of one of their classmates as a significant source of stress.

According to the youth in this study, loss is an important source of stress for young people in their community. Understanding how these youth deal with grief is important to improve well-being outcomes, as loss has a powerful influence on mental and physical health. For example, research suggests that the death of a parent influences future depressive symptoms (including feelings of guilt and worthlessness, low energy, psychomotor agitation) and major
depressive episodes (Gray, Weller, Fristad, & Weller, 2011). In addition, children and adolescents who experience a parental death in the face of other life stressors are more at risk of developing psychopathology (Cerel, Fristad, & Verducci, 2006). The youth in this study may have an increased threat of future depressive episodes, symptomology, and other psychopathology as a result of the multiple, chronic stressors they will face over their lifetime.

However, the distinction between parent and nonparent bereavement may be irrelevant in terms of youth development and functioning. Research supports that, whether the loved one is a parent or a nonparent relative, youth who experience loss are at increased risk for suicide, post-traumatic stress, substance abuse, maladaptive grief, anxiety, conduct disorder, academic failure, and interpersonal problems (Cerel et al., 2006; Kaplow & Layne, 2014; Melhem, Walker, Moritz, & Brent, 2008). While the death of a close family member is associated with a myriad of negative outcomes, the death of peers may be particularly traumatizing as it is a “non-normative crisis” in the U.S., with most children and adolescents not accustomed to coping with the loss of someone their age (Balk, Zaengle, & Corr, 2011).

Summary and Implications of Chronic Stress Findings

The results of this qualitative, participatory study reveal a complex social environment within which youth in three low-income communities face multiple and chronic risk factors. When asked to describe what is difficult or stressful in their life, all of the participants were readily able to discuss adversity that they have tried to overcome. Across groups, youth experience stress related to social and emotional isolation, neighborhood characteristics, school environments, peer relationships, and family functioning. When dealing with adversity, the youth largely relied on passive coping skills, including avoidance and distraction strategies that do not
allow youth to actively manage their response to stress or proactively change their circumstances.

Despite the commonalities in themes across groups, each theme was experienced in different ways in each community. For example, though all of the communities had neighborhood factors that created stress for the youth, the degree of the stress or the specific characteristics present varied. This supports the idea that experiences are context-dependent and reflect the unique and complex social and environmental conditions in which an individual lives. The importance of understanding the contextual nature of stress is further evidenced by the diversity of protective factors that emerged across the three community groups.

**Protective Factors in Three Low-Income Communities**

Compared to the stress factors, there is significantly less overlap between communities. While each community demonstrated some use of adaptive coping skills, the strategies differed among the youth in and across each group. In fact, there is not a single protective factor sub-theme that is shared across all three community groups (See Table 23). In the following section, primary findings related to protective factors are presented, including: (1) belonging, (2) adult mentorship, (3) and future planning.

Table 23

*Protective Factors Across Three Low-Income Community Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Appalachian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Shared experiences</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintaining culture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious belonging</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td>Safety</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Centers</td>
<td>Access to mentorship</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to opportunity</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer support</td>
<td>Distraction</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>Distraction</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional support</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult mentorship</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shared experience</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenge and high expectations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role models/Positive influence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal characteristics</td>
<td>Motivation/Determination</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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*Note. “X” indicates that at least 4 of 6 participants described the theme.*

**Belonging**

One of the most commonly described risk factors in this study was the pervasive emotional and social isolation that leaves youth feeling alone, disconnected, misheard, and misunderstood. It is not surprising then, that both the Appalachian and Latino participants
described the importance of connecting with others in order to be healthy, happy, and successful. Research suggests that social relationships are particularly important in adolescence, when teens are seeking independence yet experiencing significant biological and social change that pushes them toward supportive peer relationships (Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007). Social connection in adolescence is associated with higher levels of peer acceptance, social competence, and school engagement, and increased levels of self-worth and leadership skills (Hall-Lande et al., 2007). Moreover, there is a demonstrated link between psychological health and meaningful connection with peers (Qualter & Munn, 2002), suggesting that loneliness could have detrimental effects on future health and psychological well-being.

For the Latino adolescents, belonging was described as forming connections with others who shared their cultural and religious background. The youth identified the protective influence of shared experiences and cultural identity in helping children to adapt to new experiences and environments. In the face of extreme adversity, the teens used their connections with others (e.g., teachers, peers, family members) that had also immigrated to a new country or had experience as an ethnic and linguistic minority. This finding is consistent with existing literature that demonstrates the protective influence of cultural and ethnic identity on stress resulting from discrimination (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). Some researchers suggest that cultural and ethnic belonging positively impact self-esteem, which may also independently protect youth from the harmful effects of discrimination and other sources of stress (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2008).

**Adult Mentorship**
Adult mentorship has been studied as a social support factor for youth, but limited evidence has examined the role of natural mentors as protective factors for low-income or at-risk populations (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). Natural mentorship, or that which emerges through an individual’s own social networks and external to planned programs, typically last longer and occur more frequently than formal program mentorship (Black, Grenard, Sussman, & Rohrbach, 2010). Some research suggests that natural mentoring encourages social and emotional development, cognitive development, and identity development (Rhodes et al., 2006). As noted by the urban Black participants in this study, relationships that involve qualities such as trust, empathy, authenticity, and respect are more likely to support positive youth development (Langhout, Rhodes, & Osborne, 2004; Rhodes et al., 2006; Spencer, 2007). Moreover, effective mentoring relationships allow youth to challenge themselves, seek advice, and pursue interests that may be less popular amongst their peers. Mentoring relationships provide a “safe space” for youth to develop their self-confidence and discuss difficult issues (Rhodes et al., 2006).

In urban and low-income populations, it is possible that natural mentoring relationships may be effective in supporting academic achievement and positive youth development. In a study of urban Latino adolescents, natural mentorship was associated with fewer absences, higher educational and success expectancies, and a greater sense of school belonging (Sanchez, Esparza, & Colón, 2008). These findings were influenced by the frequency of contact between mentors and youth, suggesting that close, meaningful relationships may support Latino youth in reaching their academic and future goals. There is additional evidence that school-based natural mentors, including teachers and staff within the school context, are effective in reducing
substance use, violence, and school disengagement while increasing academic achievement (Black et al., 2010).

The availability of and relationships with adult mentors varied greatly between the Appalachian, Black, and Latino adolescents in this study. Adult mentorship was most important to the youth in the Black community, with the majority of the participants explaining the role that parents, grandparents, or community members should have in providing a positive influence in their lives. These participants described the importance of trust in establishing these relationships, and suggested that the most effective adults were those that provided guidance yet challenged the youth to improve themselves and achieve their goals. For those who did not have mentors within their family relationships, the community center was a place that allowed for connections with influential adults through educational and recreational programming.

In comparison to their Black peers, the Latino youth were more likely to rely on natural mentors within the school system. As stated in Chapter 6, only the Latinas reported that they relied on adults in their family for emotional support when experiencing stress. Notably, none confided in their parents. In the Latino community, adult mentorship flourished through the relationships that adolescents built with their teachers, school staff, and other community members. The Latino youth reported that they felt connected to the adults in their school who had experienced many of the immigration and cultural related risk factors that they encounter. While they may not have felt as connected to their peers, the Latino participants recognized that the adults had similar experiences and perspectives and were available for guidance and support.

For the Appalachian youth, adult mentorship is noticeably absent from their stories. In relationships with their parents, the youth frequently reported not talking to their parents about
their problems due to feeling misunderstood. The two female students described not connecting with their parents in a way that allowed for meaningful conversation. In addition, the Appalachian adolescents were the only group to describe the prevalence of absent parents as a risk factor in their community. Whether because of drugs, violence, crime, or job opportunities that take parents away from town, absent parents were viewed as a barrier to success. At school, there may be a counselor or a teacher that was concerned with their well-being, but this support was not salient for the Appalachian youth. Instead, the teens relied on their own mindset, skills, and behaviors to overcome adversity. However, it is not clear that the Appalachian youth would not have readily accepted adult support, had it been offered. For example, Malcolm and Jennifer described the role of uninvolved parents in perpetuating feelings of apathy and worthlessness in their children. When speaking about adults in their town, the adolescents recognized the harmful role that many parents played.

**Future Planning**

Individual protective factors were particularly salient for the Appalachian youth. Personal characteristics, including personal responsibility, motivation, and self-confidence, were layered with an orientation toward the future that provided youth with support needed to overcome some of their adversity. In particular, the Appalachian youth were focused on the future, describing goal setting and their positive outlook on the future. They had large life goals—like college, jobs, and building a family—that they envisioned occurring outside of their town. All of the four visual narrative participants expressed their eagerness to leave their town and find different opportunities. By setting goals and reminding themselves of the future, the youth felt their plans
were attainable. Despite some negative circumstances, they were hopeful that they could break free of the cycle of apathy present in their rural town.

While the Black adolescents described long-term goals as well (e.g., going to college, getting good grades to go to another high school), their stories had less urgency than the Appalachian youth. The Latino youth displayed little to no future orientation. The participants did not describe goals to attend college, graduate high school, or follow a particular career path. Both their risk factors and protective factors were more immediate. Because they felt protected as part of a cultural community, it is possible that they did not feel the same type of urgency to change their social circumstances.

Future time perspective is defined as an individuals’ thoughts and attitudes toward the future (Nurmi 1991; 2004). Youth who envision a positive, successful future are more motivated toward academic achievement and are more likely to actively plan for the future. These young people also tend to reach their goals at higher rates than peers with low expectations for the future (Adelabu, 2008; Honora, 2002). Furthermore, there is evidence across races and ethnicities that future orientations predict positive development and adaptation in the face of stressors (Adelabu, 2008; Piña-Watson, López, Ojeda, & Rodriguez, 2015). For example, Adelabu (2008) demonstrated that future orientation and determination to reach goals was associated with higher academic achievement among African American adolescents. Similarly, Piña-Watson et al (2015) found that hope and grit predicted academic motivation among Latino adolescents. In both of these studies, cultural factors (including ethnic identity and familism) were also predictors of the positive outcomes.

**Summary and Implications of Protective Factor Findings**
All three groups reported community-, relational-, and individual-level protective factors that the participants believe support youth to adapt to and overcome substantial adversity. In comparison to the risk factors, protective factors were much more context-specific, with little overlap between themes or sub-themes across the three low-income communities. For example, the only theme that was present in all three groups was adaptive coping, yet youth in each community implemented different adaptive coping strategies, reflected through the different sub-themes representing each group.

Additionally, the analysis revealed that a protective factor that is especially salient in one community is not necessarily accessible in another. For example, the urban Black and urban Latino participants described having access to adult mentors and feeling a sense of belonging within their community. The Latino youth seem to have the most established sense of cultural belonging and effective mentor relationships that leave them satisfied with levels of social support. The Black adolescents are more actively seeking mentorship, through relationships at the community center that they would have access to otherwise. The Appalachian youth feel neither a sense of belonging or effective mentorship with adults in their community. While the Latino youth may appreciate additional relational support, the other two groups would more likely benefit from intentional efforts to improve relational connection. A similar pattern is observed related to future orientations, where the Appalachian adolescents demonstrate high levels of future planning while the Black and Latino teens are limited in their hope, goal setting, and future orientation in comparison.

Limitations
There are two primary limitations in this study. First, the urban Black adolescents were not able to collaborate in Phase 3, including creation of the visual narrative and participatory data analysis. Unfortunately, the research relationship was no longer feasible with this community group and data collection ended after the Phase 2 interviews. As a result, the analysis reflects my interpretations of the interview data only through inductive, narrative analysis. There is less data available from this group and interpretations were not supported by member checking or participatory analysis. In order to present their stories as authentically and accurately as possible, I included many direct quotations from the youth.

Second, though quantitative and qualitative data were collected across the phases of the larger mixed methods study, only the qualitative data is presented here. An original aim of the study included integration of the biomarker, questionnaire, interview, and visual narrative data in order to compare the experiences of youth with high perceived stress and high allostatic load to youth with high perceived stress and low allostatic load. After Phases 2 and 3, data integration would have determined differences in the descriptions of risk and protective factors between those who theoretically demonstrate higher resilience (measured by the relatively lower allostatic load and therefore, lower physiological impact on the body) and those with theoretically lower resilience (indicated by higher allostatic load and therefore, higher physiological impact on the body). However, unequal distributions in the Latino and Appalachian groups made it difficult to draw comparisons. For example, both of the high allostatic load participants in the Appalachian group were female, while both of the low allostatic load participants were male. Among the Latinos, all but one of the visual narrative participants fell into the low allostatic load category. Future research should be designed to effectively integrate quantitative and qualitative findings
to better understand the impact of chronic exposure to risk factors on the body. In addition, future research should examine the relationship between chronic stress and resilience, measuring the impact of risk and protective factors on resilience outcomes.

**Leveraging Protective Factors to Build Resilience**

Despite limitations, the results of this study have important implications for future interventions and programs designed to build protective factors that buffer the impact of chronic adversity in adolescence. Instead of relying on a one-size-fits-all approach to reduce chronic stress and support positive coping, effective change must follow a tailored approach that allows for differences between social contexts. Based on the findings presented, I recommend the following process for creating meaningful and sustainable interventions to support at-risk adolescents dealing with chronic adversity:

1) **Consider context-specific risk**, including community-, relational-, and individual-level risk factors that pose threats to the youth in a defined population or group.

2) **Capitalize on existing protective factors**, including community-, relational-, and individual-level resources and supports that buffer the effect of risk factors in a specific context.

3) **Target absent protective factors** that are underutilized or lacking in the community, emphasizing factors that will respond to the specific risks initially identified.

Returning to the context-specific findings of each participant community in this study, this three-step analysis would reveal different patterns of resources and absent protective factors to define intervention development. The following section briefly highlights the recommendations for each group.
White, Rural Appalachian Adolescents

Consider context-specific risk. The white, rural Appalachian teens who participated in this study described several sources of chronic stress across social-ecological levels. Community level risk factors, including drug use, violence, isolation, and academic stress, were particularly important to the adolescents.

Capitalize on existing protective factors. These participants largely relied on individual-level protective factors, including a future orientation, motivation, determination, academic competence, and self-confidence.

Target absent protective factors. Despite many individual-level protective factors, the participants noticeably lacked adaptive coping strategies to deal with their stress. Programs that coach adolescents to effectively manage stress, including positive reframing, planning, use of social support, and other active coping strategies (Green et al., 2012). In addition, weak and ineffective relationships with peers, parents, teachers, and other adults could be targeted to create more authentic, supportive mentoring relationships (Rhodes et al., 2006).

Urban Black Adolescents

Consider context-specific risk. The Black adolescents living in urban Cincinnati cited several neighborhood risk factors, including lack of safety and high rates of violence. The youth had difficulty maintaining healthy peer and family relationships, frequently due to miscommunication. Even at school, the adolescents in this study felt misunderstood and misheard.

Capitalize on existing protective factors. One strength of this community group was the presence of natural adult mentors, including parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other adult
community members. Youth felt that they could seek support and guidance through their relationships with adults in their life.

**Target absent protective factors.** Though some of the participants felt comparatively safe in their neighborhoods, neighborhood factors like crime and violence were a salient source of risk. Working with youth to create safer neighborhoods and bolster feelings of safety may be effective in protecting adolescents from the effects of this risk factor. Furthermore, targeting individual factors that would contribute to a sense of autonomy, self-confidence, and communication skills may support adolescents who feel misunderstood in their relationships and at school.

**Urban Latino Adolescents**

**Consider context-specific risk.** The Latino adolescents living in urban Cincinnati experienced several sources of context-specific chronic stress, particularly immigration and cultural factors like discrimination, language barriers, and social isolation. The youth also reported substantial amounts of relational stress, especially in relationships with peers.

**Capitalize on existing protective factors.** These participants described the protective influence of cultural and religious belonging. Through shared experiences, mutual respect, and cultural identity, the youth felt supported in dealing with chronic adversity.

**Target absent protective factors.** The Latino adolescents reported very few individual-level protective factors. They did not describe a future orientation, goal-setting, motivation, or determination in their own lives or for others in their community. Future interventions should target individual-level protective factors to build self-esteem and self-confidence, support academic competence, and encourage youth to develop high expectations for the future.
Conclusion and Future Directions

The results of this study provide important contributions to our understanding of stress and resilience within low-income communities. First, the findings of this study lend support to research that suggest sources of chronic stress for low-income and minority youth are broader than represented in current conceptualizations, including ACEs which typically only includes neglect, abuse, and other childhood trauma (Wade et al., 2014). The present study provides clear evidence that low-income youth in both rural and urban settings face a complex myriad of risk factors that threaten their health and well-being. These risk factors represent more than neglect, abuse, and trauma, and reflect the everyday social, economic, and individual challenges present in any particular environment.

Second, the data specific to risk and protective factors reveal the contextual nature of stress and resilience in youth and support the use of social ecological perspectives to understand and develop interventions that will be responsive to the needs of adolescents. The social ecological perspective acknowledges the reciprocal interaction between personal and environmental factors, which include the physical, social, cultural, economic, and historical contexts that impact people and their relationships (McLaren & Hawe, 2005). One important principle of social-ecological theory is the person-environment fit, which posits that health and well-being are determined by the degree of fit between an individual’s biological, behavioral, and social needs and the resources available to them within their environment (Stokols, 1996). Across the communities in the present study, there are clear differences in the types of risk and protective factors that youth recognize, reflecting a unique experience based on geographic, cultural, social, and linguistic contexts. Should the environmental contexts in which an
individual lives have more risk factors that the individual’s resources can handle, then the system is overwhelmed. Understanding the balance between context-specific risk factors and protective factors is essential to developing effective strategies to support at-risk adolescents.

Third, the data revealed a prevalence of risk factors associated with relational disconnection and alternately, the importance of connection in protecting youth from adversity. The impact of isolation, disconnection in peer relationships, misunderstanding in familial relationships, and chaotic home environments, revealed the role of disconnection in chronic stress. For many of the youth, the difficulty of maintaining meaningful relationships was a significant source of stress that dominated other types of risk. In the rural Appalachian community, there was a noticeable lack of meaningful and supportive peer and adult relationships and as a result, our conversations largely revolved around relational sources of stress. Of note, belonging and mentorship were determined to be protective factors for the Black and Latino participants. This finding is also consistent with relational cultural theory’s emphasis on the importance of close, authentic relationships for healthy development and functioning (Jordan, 1997; Walker & Rosen, 2004) and resilience in the face of chronic adversity (Jordan, 2013). Through connections that allow youth to express themselves, be heard, and engage in meaningful, supportive relationships, the adolescents were able to deal with chronic stress.

Overall, this study suggests that one-size-fits-all interventions that fail to consider to contextual and relational nature of chronic stress in at-risk populations are likely to be ineffective. The research field examining stress in low-income populations is extensive and supports the notion that adolescents living in low-income environments face multiple, chronic stressors that have a detrimental impact on health and well-being (Burke et al., 2011; Evans &
Kim, 2013; Goodman et al., 2005; Grant et al., 2014). However, this field does little to demonstrate the nuanced experiences of individuals living within specific neighborhoods or communities, and therefore, does not reveal effective strategies to provide meaningful support to at-risk adolescents. Future research should instead focus on identifying strategies to tailor interventions to fit the needs and resources within a given community or context.
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Appendix A: Visual Narrative with Rural White Appalachian Adolescents:

“From Stress to Success”

The four rural White Appalachian students that engaged in the participatory data analysis also contributed to the participatory visual narrative. In two hours, the youth were responsible for writing, filming, and reviewing video clips to be included alongside photographs and audio from the individual interviews. Below is the transcript of their narrative.

**Malcolm:** At the 25 yard line right there is where my sophomore season ended. It was my first year starting varsity, and football has always been my second biggest stress reliever, you know? Because you can just go out there and hit people if you want. I caught the pass at about the 50 yard line and ran across the field and leaped a couple people and I got to the 25 yard line and got talked. Whenever I got talked I went down, I don’t know if one of my own teammates tripped or something. He’s a big lineman, like 350 pounds, and fell on my shoulder while I was down on top of it. I broke my collarbone. Actually, I had a major break and a minor fracture in it. At first I couldn’t move my shoulder, it was kinda just dangling down there. Coach was like, “Oh it’s just a stinger, you’ll be alright.” I sat on the sideline for about half an hour, probably the worst pain I ever felt in my life. Then after about half an hour I was like, it hurts to breathe, and he was like “You need to go to the ER.” I called my mom and she wasn’t where she could pick me up. She was up at Shawnee State. I didn’t have anyone who could pick me up. So I had to call my aunt and it took half an hour for her to get here. So I should have gone to the ER in the first place, but so far it’s been an hour before I could go. On top of that she wasn’t allowed to take me to the hospital. I had to have a parent or guardian take me. So I had to wait 2 and a half to 3 hours for them to get there and then another half an hour to get to Maysville. So I went 3.5 to 4 hours without going to the ER. It was pretty awful. I was out for 10 weeks, so there went my season. That was a real stressful time for me.

**Autumn:** My definition of stress is bad, sometimes good. Mostly bad because it stops you from doing some stuff and makes you feel down in the ground. It feels bad.

**Stephen:** Stress to me means something too hard. It’s a dead weight. You can’t overcome. It’s too depressing or it’s hard. It brings back memories of something bad that happened. It’s something you have to deal with every day. It’s a thing people deal with all day long.

**Malcolm:** Stress to me is something that can be good or bad. A little bit is good so that you have urges to get your responsibilities done. But a lot of stress isn’t good because it’s
piling up on you. It’s a bad thing when you have too many responsibilities on your shoulders.

**Jennifer:** Stress to me is something that can be good or bad. It can motivate you to be as good as you possibly can, or it can bring you down so far that you feel like you can’t get back up. It’s like that moment where the world stops and you have to be determined to figure out what you have to do to get it done.

**Malcolm:** There’s a lot of things that can cause stress. Mostly what I think causes stress around here is when there’s a lot of stuff going on at school. At home this past week, I just found out that my transfer module isn’t going to transfer to the college I want to go to after that. I have to figure out everything I’m going to do there.

**Stephen:** Tests are a big thing here. We take the PARCC testing. It’s a test on the computer where you sit at the computer for 2.5 hours and take a test. It’s real stressful because staring at a computer screen hurts my eyes. It’s kind of dumb. I hate the PARCC tests. I’d rather do it on paper than stare at a computer screen all day long.

**Jennifer:** School is something that every kid has to do, something you can’t just get past. Yes there are things in life that everybody doesn’t want to do, but there are also things that you have to do, like school. There’s testing at school, there’s people at school you have to deal with.

**Malcolm:** There’s a lot of things that can cause stress, like prom, relationships, things like that.

**Jennifer:** There’s home problems. There’s people at home that aren’t always as easy. Not everybody has a good home here. You have to deal with that, you have to get up early and go to school and deal with [school], and you have all this testing that they’re piling up on you. They have high expectations for you. Sometimes it feels too high, but everyone can reach it.

**Malcolm:** Last week, April 25th, was the third anniversary of whenever my brother died. Last week was a pretty tough week.

**Autumn:** Sometimes when I feel stressed I’ll run the track at track practice. Or go to the teen group at the library. We play games and have lessons and eat snacks and stuff.

**Jennifer:** A stress reliever to all of this would be sports, by far, like on the ball court.

**Stephen:** I play sports like football and baseball. This here is where I played football for about 4 years. One of the hardest things that I’ve ever had to do is when I broke my wrist. We were playing a game here and I was blocking some kid. And he dropped his head and his helmet hit my hand and bent it back to touch my forearm. I had to go to the hospital
and get X-rays. When they found out I broke my wrist, I was so disappointed because I was out for the rest of the season. I couldn’t play. I tried to go to some practices but it was hard because of the cast. And this is probably one of my favorite sports, playing football. It’s a big pastime for when I’m having trouble in school or something.

Malcolm: Some things that I do to deal with stress. I work out a lot. Look around you. Up here in the weight room is where I come. Or I listen to some music, you know? Or talk to some of my close friends, just have a good time with them, you know? Go out and have fun with them.

Jennifer: You have to find the better things in life that will help you out, no matter what comes your way. There’s art, there’s music, there’s sports, there’s creativities, activities, yearbook... we offer so many things, but not everyone takes them. That just depends on the kind of person who you are.

Malcolm: Some things that I think that if you do you will be alright... You have to have a lot of determination. You have to be better than people say you’re going to be. There’s a lot of people at this school that don’t even think I’m smart or nothing. I just want to prove them wrong, you know what I mean?

Stephen: I try to stay good in school. I stay on my work, I finish my work on time, I turn it in on time. Good education, go to college, study, don’t fool around in school, get good grades. Playing sports, keep healthy, stay active, be a good sport. That’s about it.

Autumn: Get good grades in school, graduate from high school, go to college, graduate from college, get a good job, and move out of [here]. And Ohio.

Malcolm: I want to be able to prove the kids wrong here that don’t think I’m smart. I want to take care of my parents when they are retired. Don’t let them down or nothing. I’m trying to go to the Naval Academy. A big part of it is to keep my GPA up, and remain athletic, and participate in a lot of team and school activities.

Jennifer: To be successful, happy, and healthy people, you have to find the better things that you enjoy. You have to be determined, focused, be full hearted in everything you do. You have to do 110% into everything you do, if you want to be successful. It’s the kind of person you are, if you’re willing to do whatever you can to get to that spot.

Jennifer: Stress is something that’s rough but it’s something that everyone deals with.
Appendix B: Visual Narrative with Urban Latino Adolescents:

“Helping Each Other”

The four urban Latino students that engaged in the participatory data analysis also contributed to a participatory visual narrative. The visual narrative was filmed over two days and two total hours. The youth were responsible for writing, filming, and reviewing video clips to be included alongside photographs and audio from the individual interviews. Below is the transcript of their narrative.

**Miguel:** Stress is working hard and working a lot. It feels like you want to go to sleep.

**Abigail:** (image of flag poles in front of the school entrance). The flags are out here because it represents the different kind of language that we use in this school. Some of the stress in school is that some people that don’t know English, they come here and get the stress of writing in English, or speaking in English, because some teachers tell them to write an essay in English or talk about it in English, too. But the people who don’t know English they have the worst time and stress to talk about it in English, because they don’t know some of the words and what they mean in English.

**Miguel:** I think they do have a hard time because there are rarely people like them. Probably some younger kids, but you’re older so you know... you don’t talk too much to little kids. So I think [when they come to school here] there’s kids that talk the language there and you understand each other.

**Abigail:** This is a poster for our school, named “A.” Here we learn a bunch of different kind of languages, like English and Spanish. For the people that don’t speak English, there are a lot of kids here who could help so that they could learn... They could learn different kinds of language.

**Miguel:** I believe my teachers help because they’re from my country and they can translate sometimes, what I don’t know. My friend Armando, he helps sometimes, he translates to other kids.

**Abigail:** This is the class for Ms. CJ. She helps people who don’t know English. She helps them to read and write and do a lot of things. She also makes a lot of creative things with her kids that [helps with] English. Writing English, talking English, and doing creative things with English.
**Abigail:** These are some books the teacher uses to help kids learn English. Some of these books are easy books, like for kids, but it’s still good for older kids that still don’t know English, they could know more English. There’s these tables because there are a lot of different people that take [English as a Second Language]. These are the ones who still have to learn to read English, and these are the ones that have to learn to read and speak it. We, the ones that know English, we have to help the ones that do not know English to be a little bit better. We all can communicate together in an English way, not a Spanish way, because that is what we need to use in the United States.

She has the people that do know how to speak English so that we can talk to each other so they will understand and know what to say in English.

It helps them because you could communicate in both languages, English and Spanish. You could talk to them in English first, then translate it back to them in Spanish. If they learned in this class, they will translate it back into English [based on] what they have learned here.

This class helps people to understand English, but this teacher only helps the younger kids, like 4th and 5th grade to learn English. In this school the Spanish speakers help the English speakers to learn Spanish, and the English speakers help the Spanish speakers to learn English.

**Alexander:** (picture Alexander took of a car, see Figure 11). This picture of a car that feels sad because it’s by itself, like a human. This one guy just left it there and he just ran away. On Saturday, the police came and was checking the car. Kids feel sad, lonely, upset. No food, no drink, no gas. Like the car—it has nothing. They just leave it like a junkyard. If it were a human it would just die.

**Miguel:** This is another important thing because a lot of people around here are lonely and don’t have anyone to play with. I think that’s pretty sad because, like Alexander talked about with the car, it was lonely there like a human. I think we should care more about them and play with them more.

**Alexander:** When I get upset and sad I just calm down, like get a deep breath. And play with my friends. Like going outside or play around. I don’t know what else.

**Miguel:** (on the playground) This is a pretty good place to meet up, because there’s a lot of active stuff to play, sports, some stuff like that. It [helps kids deal with stress] because sometimes they are so stressed out that they barely want to come out here and play a lot.

**Miguel:** (picture Miguel took of the bus window, see Figure 10). The picture I took was about a cracked window and I, and I think it’s a pretty good picture because the violence is not good. If other kids learn about the violence thing, they’ll try to be violent too, or try
to do the same thing they see around them. I think they should not do it because they could get into trouble or pay a lot of money.

My bus was driving by a street, because we had dropped someone off. Then they threw a rock and it hit my sister’s face. It made me upset because if something would have happened to my sister, it would have been my fault. Because I needed to take care of her.

**Abigail:** This [represents] a living room. This is where my parents used to fight a lot. I didn’t like that because my older sister wasn’t here, and I was the oldest one, who had to take care of it. My dad pushed my mom, but I didn’t know why. I think he was drunk. My mom was really mad and she told me to call the police. I didn’t want to, because I was scared, but I wanted them to stop fighting. I had to do something. I yelled at them. I was stressed because they kept fighting every Saturday night. It was time for us to go to sleep and we didn’t want them to be fighting a lot. I always take [my little sister] to the closet to read books that will make her feel better, or draw something to express how she feels like.

**Miguel:** I was going to take a picture of my cousin that came to the United States. It’s going to be difficult for him because he hears everyone speaking English around him, and he won’t understand. The good thing is that other people who are Hispanic can help him understand.

**Abigail:** We made this video to represent [the experiences of] someone who doesn’t speak English. Some different types of things [that cause stress] are bullying, people having trouble with their language, with their family also. We also took these pictures to show how they deal with their stress.

**Fresa:** I was upset when my mom was at the hospital because she was at the hospital when she got my baby brother out of her stomach. That made me upset. My eye got red because I was crying. I was worried she was going to stay there forever. She stayed there for four days. That’s why I got mad.

**Miguel:** Sometimes kids fight because people boss them around and they get mad and start fighting, like you see me in the video. [Kids start fighting] because the teachers stress them out too much or kids say things about them, start to bully them. They get mad and try to hurt other kids. [It doesn’t solve the problem] because you could come out bleeding. I think it’s a good idea to teach people not to do this.

**Alexander:** They fight each other and one of them gets beat up so.

**Alexander:** This is a wall of people who are Star of the Month. These are kids who are intelligent, like every month, they do their homework or they just respect their teachers. The teachers pick the kids and the kids are the Star of the Month. They are happy with their teachers for picking them. I’ve never been Star of the Month because I just... I’m
disrespectful of my teacher and I don’t really do my homework. So I can’t be Star of the Month. I’d have to do my homework, respect, make sure I don’t play around, and do a good job. Be a problem-solver.

**Miguel:** Some people get stressed when they see all the kids being smart and getting chosen. They give everything they have so they can... so they can be on that wall. And it’s too much. They get stressed when they try a lot.

**Alexander:** Thank you for watching our video! We hope that you like it, we think that you will like it, because this is a true thing we are talking about. You should hear it, and you should learn it. Thank you everyone for watching.