

Shatia Strother  
Sds523@nyu.edu  
December 18, 2013

### **The Suppressing Weight of Poverty and the Systems that Perpetuate It**

*For if you suffer your people to be ill-educated, and their manners to be corrupted from their infancy, and then punish them for those crimes to which their first education disposed them, what else is to be concluded from this, but that you first make thieves and then punish them.*

(Thomas More, *Utopia*)

I was first introduced to the famous Thomas More quote in 1998 by way of a movie called “*Ever After: A Cinderella Story*”, starring Drew Barrymore. In hindsight, I realize my taste in movies at that age was questionable, but the one thing that drew me to the movie, was the director’s spin on the classic idea of Cinderella; turning her from a helpless, one dimensional character into a woman who was outspoken, well educated and a passionate humanist.

After hearing Cinderella utter those words, quoted from Thomas More’s *Utopia*, I made a beeline to the local library and loaned the book that would forever cement itself in the foundation of my personal philosophy towards the society in which I live. Until that moment, I had a very narrow and uninformed view of poverty and the social structures of America. While I learned about the atrocities exacted first upon the Indigenous people of America, then upon the Blacks and other “minority” groups in America, I was being taught that these injustices were a history to be learned from but not dwelled upon. While I was exposed to the stories of the many men and women who fought long and hard to eradicate racism and inequality, I was assured that these were histories to be celebrated but not delved into because they did not reflect the world in which we lived. I was torn between two ideologies that contrasted greatly and it became painfully obvious that the world was not as comfortably black and white as I believed. In school, I was being indoctrinated in what many call the “American Ideal”; the idea that living here afforded everyone the opportunity to rise above their circumstances to become as successful and happy as their imagination and determination could carry them. Hard work and sacrifice were the beacons of upward mobility and anyone who did not reach those heights were not worthy of the American Dream; they were lazy and content in their poverty which was something to be scorned and seen as unforgivable. In my community, and in the people I came across, life told a very different story, a story that spoke of societal and institutional structures that served as efficient and well-made roadblocks to reaching the coveted American Dream. Reading *Utopia* gave me an entirely new perspective on a conversation that I imagined could not possibly reach beyond the homes and meeting places of Blacks in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn where I grew up. I came to the realization, through many hours at the local library, that this wasn’t an imaginary struggle that we conjured up in our spare time, but a quandary worth debating and contemplating by many great minds throughout our history:

And yet so sure as this Talented Tenth is pointed out, the blind worshippers of the Average cry out in alarm: ‘These are exceptions, look here at death, disease and crime-these are the happy rule.’ Of course, they are the rule, because a silly nation made them the rule: Because for three long centuries this people lynched Negroes who dared to be brave, raped black women who dared to be virtuous, crushed dark-hued youth who dared to be ambitious, and encouraged and made to flourish servility and lewdness and apathy. But not even this was able to crush all manhood and chastity and aspiration from black folk. A saving remnant continually shows itself in thrift and ability and character. Exceptional it is to be sure, but this is its chiefest promise; it shows the capability of Negro blood, the promise of black men.

(W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Talented Tenth*)

Poverty is not a modern phenomenon, and it certainly isn’t something that will be remedied in the near future. Racism isn’t something that began with slavery in America and it didn’t end with the election of a Black President. Segregation is a practice that has transcended time, countries, cultures and races but is perpetuated in a subtler and harder to grasp form than 200 years ago or even 50 years ago. Throughout modern history, there has been an unending battle against poverty, racism and discrimination, a battle that oftentimes seems fruitless but always worth fighting. In addressing the multi-faceted stagnation that society finds itself in, we must first bring ourselves into an honest, self-aware and sincere conversation about racism, poverty and discrimination in this country.

Racism and discrimination can cause a negative impact on the psychology of its victims and can be identified as two (not exclusive) causes of poverty for communities of color. The perpetuation of poverty within these communities can be attributed to factors such as weakened cognitive ability, inadequate education, a lack of meaningful and adequate employment opportunities, and the absence of resources that could facilitate upward mobility. This creates high concentrations of poverty from which residents are unlikely to escape. As a result, chronic poverty contributes to diminish physical health as well as malnutrition and the development of diet-related diseases.

### **American Racism and Discrimination**

*The smoke and dust of travel had made him cough a lot. The eyes of the white men about the station were not kind. He heard someone mutter, “nigger.” His skin burned. For the first time in a half a dozen years he felt his color. He was home.*

(Langston Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*)

Racism in America is as old as America itself; it has forged its place in our collective consciousness so deeply and invasively that it is impossible to ignore its damaging effects on the minority populace. Hughes paints a picture of “home” experienced by many people of color. Our “home” has always been a hostile place, a place of no mercy and no refuge. A place where our forefathers drank and dreamt the word “nigger” until it became their definer and the identity of generations after them. And so deep does this hurt live in our belly, that our children have convinced themselves that the pain doesn’t exist, that they now own the power of this word even as they watch

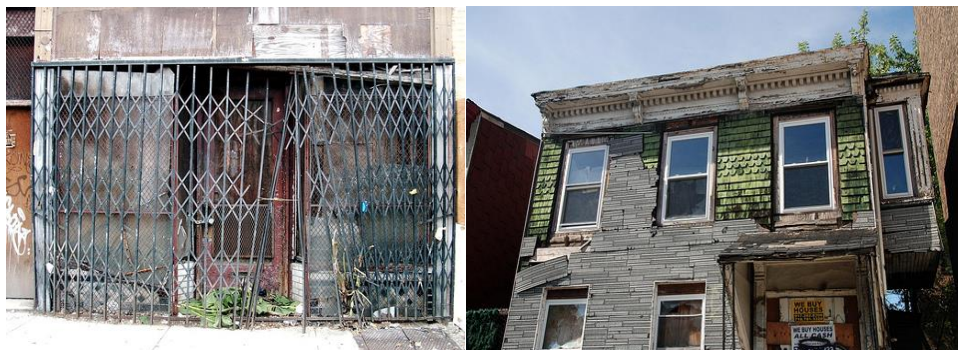
the blood flow thick from the wound. My aim is not to explore the historical implications of racism in America (although I will touch on them briefly for the sake of context), but to address racism in its modern incarnations and its negative impact on the economic stability of minorities.

In order to illustrate the link between racism and its effects on economic status, there must first be an understanding that racism is still a strong force in American institutions and culture. While doing so, I am in no way implying that our country has not seen great strides towards diminishing racism and narrowing the of equality. In writing the foreword to Aaron McGruder's *A Right to be Hostile: The Boondocks Treasury*, Michael Moore gives an accurate depiction of the modern Black experience:

Sure, the 'whites only' signs are down, but they have just been replaced by invisible ones that, if you are black, you see hanging in front of the home loan department of the local bank, across the entrance of the ritzy suburban mall, or on the doors of the US senate.

(Moore, 2003)

When Moore makes reference to the invisible signs of the home loan office, he is talking directly about the practice of redlining by lending offices. If a local bank considered a neighborhood too risky to invest in, thereby denying loans to homeowners and businesses, the neighborhood was left undeveloped or in a state of debilitating disrepair, with small businesses left unable to improve the neighborhoods' services. Historically and currently, the practice of redlining has had dire effects on neighborhoods of color that go beyond the inability of residents to own homes.



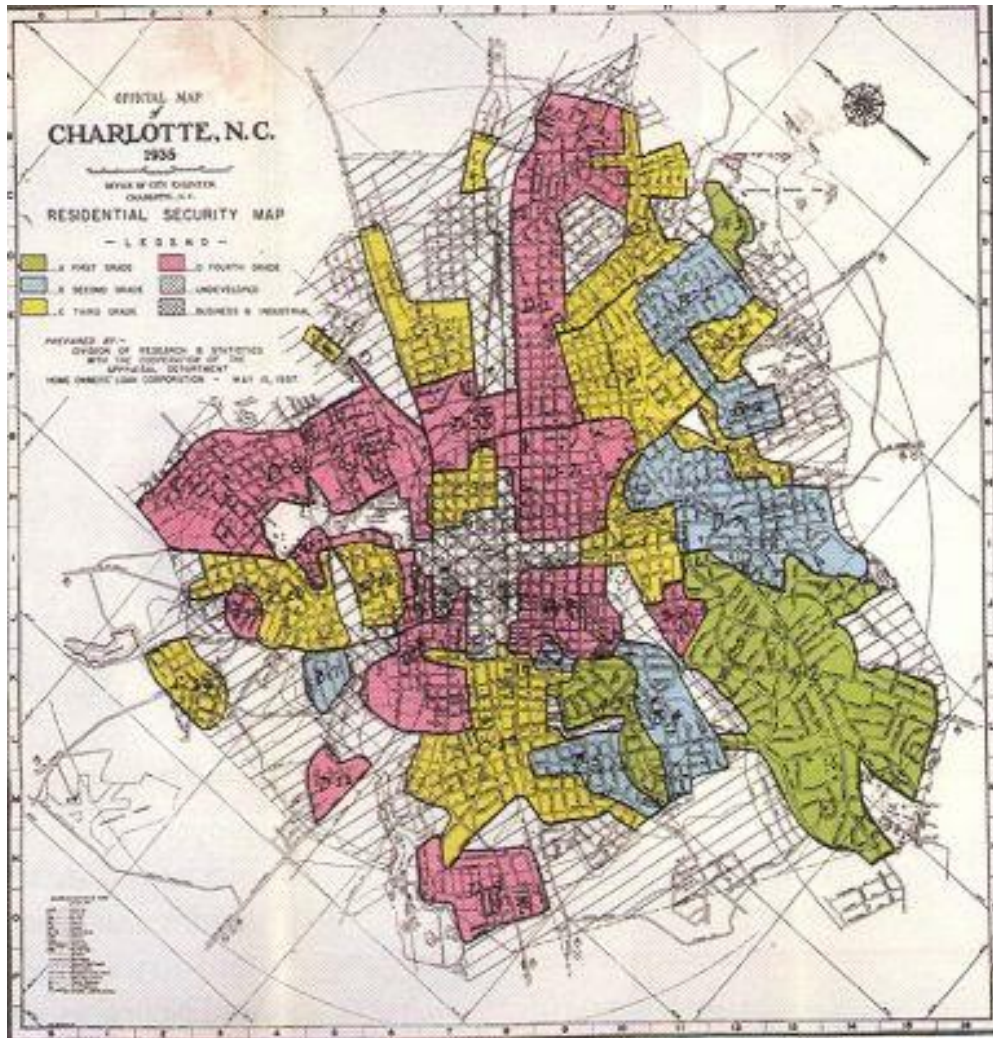
Abandoned store front and home in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn  
Images courtesy of brownstoner.com

Racial redlining is the practice whereby mortgage lenders figuratively draw a red line around minority neighborhoods and refuse to make mortgage loans available inside the red lined area. Broadly defined, racial redlining encompasses not only the direct refusal to lend in minority neighborhoods, but also procedures that discourage the submission of mortgage loan applications from minority areas, and marketing policies that exclude such areas.

In direct economic terms, racial redlining reduces housing finance options for borrowers in minority neighborhoods and weakens competition in the mortgage market. This often results in higher mortgage costs and less favorable

mortgage loan terms. More subtly, racial redlining discourages minorities from pursuing home ownership opportunities and in the broadest sense further entrenches the debilitating sociological effects of racial discrimination.

(Brown and Bennington, 1993)



Redlining Map, Charlotte, North Carolina, 1935  
Image Ownership: Public Domain

These areas “were frequently limited in their access to banking, healthcare, retail merchandise, and even groceries. When existing businesses collapsed, new ones were not allowed to replace them, often leaving entire blocks empty and crumbling.” (Gaspire, 2011) Gaspier notes that liquor stores have been the exception to the rule of redlining and have “seemingly transcended the area’s stigma of financial risk.” (Gaspire, 2011) Another adverse effect of redlining would be the lack of employment opportunities that would have otherwise been available if small businesses were encouraged to start up in these neighborhoods. “Crime often followed in the wake of these declining neighborhoods making future investment

less likely. These developments created a cycle which seemingly justified the initial redlining practices.” (Gaspaire, 2011) Brought into a contemporary setting, redlining is no longer a legal practice, yet it is still a practice with very limited Federal oversight and its effects are still felt in many communities of color today.



Abandoned building and severely cracked street in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn  
Images courtesy of bedstuyblog.com

Moore also mentions seeing those invisible signs across the entrances of “ritzy suburban malls”. I think it would be more accurate to say that those invisible signs can be seen in any shopping mall, elevator or even as you walk down the street:

There are very few African-American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me—at least before I was a senator. There are very few African-Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off.

(Obama, 2013)

What about the “doors of the US Senate” that Moore talks about? The 113<sup>th</sup> Congress of the United States is currently comprised of 100 Senators and 435 Representatives. Among those numbers, there exists 1 Black American Senator and 43 Black American Representatives. With a disparity such as that, it is hard to dismiss race as a non-factor in American politics. Our elected politicians should be a representation of our nation, and as it currently stands, it does not represent America and the diversity of which we are so proud. Social Injustice cannot be achieved for minorities if they find themselves underrepresented by the system that is supposed to be the vehicle for justice for all citizens. While addressing election reform during a speech, Hillary Clinton has stated “Anyone who says that racial discrimination is not a problem in American

elections must not be paying attention”, referring to Section Four of the Voting Rights Act being struck down by the Supreme Court.

The election of a Black American as President of the United States marked a significant shift in this American story; that shift being the force of hope that propelled the largest voter turnout for Black Americans since being included in the voting process. The alternate view of this shift in the American story is that “the election of the biracial Barack Obama was supposed to usher in a new era of racial harmony”. (Hanson, 2012) This view argues that we are currently living in a *post racial society* in which structural and cultural barriers based on race do not exist; essentially, that our country has become color blind:

The message that needs to go out, like a steady drumbeat, from here on out is, “No more excuses.” Obama is proof: if you do not make something of yourself in this country, then you can no longer blame the system. You can no longer blame entrenched racism. If a black man can persuade a majority of Americans of all races, creeds, colors, and backgrounds to give him the job as Commander-in-Chief, then there is no excuse why anyone else cannot obtain what they need and want through hard work and personal initiative.

(Laura Hollis, 2008)

According to Paul Krugman of the *New York Times*, “Racial polarization used to be a dominating force in our politics, but we're now a different, and better, country.” Those views are narrow-minded assessments from citizens studying a virus without the aid of a microscope. They see a group of successful Black Americans and ignore a larger population that is continuously reminded that their skin color subjects them to unfair stereotypes, unfair treatment, societal barriers, and systems that block their economic growth. Arundhati Roy best illustrates this point with an analogy on modern racism and exclusion:

The tradition of ‘turkey pardoning’ in the U.S. is a wonderful allegory for New Racism. Every year since 1947, the National Turkey Federation presents the U.S. President with a turkey for Thanksgiving. Every year, in a show of ceremonial magnanimity, the President spares that particular bird (and eats another one). After receiving the presidential pardon, the Chosen One is sent to Frying Pan Park in Virginia to live out its natural life. The rest of the 50 million turkeys raised for Thanksgiving are slaughtered and eaten on Thanksgiving Day. ConAgra Foods, the company that has won the Presidential Turkey contract, says it trains the lucky birds to be sociable, to interact with dignitaries, school children and the press...

That's how New Racism in the corporate era works. A few carefully bred turkeys — the local elites of various countries, a community of wealthy immigrants, investment bankers, the occasional Colin Powell, or Condoleezza Rice, some singers, some writers (like myself) — are given absolution and a pass to Frying Pan Park. The remaining millions lose their jobs, are evicted from their homes, have their water and electricity connections cut, and die of AIDS. Basically they're for the pot. But the Fortunate Fowls in Frying Pan Park are doing fine. Some of them even work for the IMF and the WTO — so who can

accuse those organizations of being anti-turkey? Some serve as board members on the Turkey Choosing Committee — so who can say that turkeys are against Thanksgiving? They participate in it! Who can say the poor are anti-corporate globalization? There's a stampede to get into Frying Pan Park. So what if most perish on the way?

(Roy, 2004)

Humans are creatures who have a deep desire for purpose and meaning in their lives, racism and discrimination suffocate the pursuit of this desire. Being faced with hatred, misunderstanding and deeply rooted stereotypes can fill you with dread and self-consciousness.

I was at a flamenco show once where my teacher performed, and I was grilled by a young white patron who didn't understand why I was there. She insisted that I must be an intern. But when my African American date wowed the table...instantly the young white patrons wanted to know where we were from, because we couldn't possibly be just regular black people from the United States.

(Womack, 2010 p. 71)

While this can be a positive motivation for some to prove themselves, it can also cause feelings of resentment and can be a heavy anchor that you carry every time you leave your home and face the world around you. For others, the motivation never manifests itself, and those people become angry and bitter and never find the strength to test their own abilities and talents. I knew a man once, he was Black and his family hailed from Trinidad. They had come to the United States when he was a teenager and he had a hard time adjusting to the culture shock of living here in New York. He described Trinidad as a place where everyone he grew up around looked like him and talked like him, no matter what the economic or class background. So he grew up in a very insular world where race was never a factor in his daily life. He thought of race in the abstract sense, through history books and television. When he moved here, he experienced for the first time what it meant to be a Black man in America. He experienced the debasing practice of “stop and frisk” on numerous occasions, usually while traveling home from work and had dealt with a lot of white women crossing the street away from him if he was traveling after dark outside of his neighborhood. During the time that I knew him, he was always very annoyed and carried a lot of angst around with him. He would get extremely defensive anytime a racial issue came up in conversation and did not get along well with any of my friends who happened to be white. I remember asking him about his anger and if he realized it was holding him back from being the man he wanted to be. I remember him looking at me and saying “Why bother working to be a man when no one will give you the respect as one?”(Anthony Lemaitre, personal communication 2010) Although I could never see myself as a defeatist, I understood his pain. I could understand growing up with all the promise in the world, then having it stripped away because you moved to a new land with a new set of rules that were stacked against the color of your skin. Instead of fighting against the

stream, Anthony became swept away by it. It's very easy to see these types of scenarios as choices that each individual makes. The choice to succeed or fail, to fight or lay down, to keep yourself intact or fall to pieces under the weight of discrimination. Motivation doesn't fall under the category of traits of which all humans are born equal. It isn't like basic human rights, something that all of us should have. Motivation is tailor made for each individual that is born to this earth and for some; motivation and self-actualization can be easily shattered. Let's take a look at Abraham Maslow and his *Theory of Human Motivation*:



Human needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of pre-potency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need. Man is a perpetually wanting animal. Also no need or drive can be treated as if it were isolated or discrete; every drive is related to the state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other drives.

(Maslow, 1943)

Racism and discrimination both attack the need for safety by instilling fear, insecurity and instability in the people who are brought face to face with them. They also affect the fourth tier of Maslow's hierarchy, attacking the need for individuals to be recognized and respected. If you live within a society that, through institutional and societal racism, continuously reinforces the idea that you are inferior, the pursuits of your *esteem needs* are perpetually thwarted. The motivation you need to reach your highest capabilities can suffer as a result, and pockets of populations are collectively left behind in the race to pursue fulfillment.

Satisfaction of the self-esteem need leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability and adequacy of being useful and necessary in the world. But thwarting of these needs produces feelings of inferiority, of weakness and of helplessness. These feelings in turn give rise to either basic discouragement or else compensatory or neurotic trends. An



appreciation of the necessity of basic self-confidence and an understanding of how helpless people are without it can be easily gained from a study of severe traumatic neurosis.

(Maslow, 1943)

This stagnation on the fourth tier of the hierarchy results in the inability to satisfy your need for self-actualization. Maslow's theory does not account for individual personalities, drives and the unique ability for humans to rise above their environment and circumstances but it does provide an insight into the influence (positive or negative) that society can have on citizens and their ambition towards self-actualization.

The American racial dilemma is one that is more entrenched in our society than we often like to admit. Ignoring them won't heal the issues that plague our society and yelling proclamations of equality won't either; this is just a salve on battle scars that have festered and rotted with time and ignorance. The answer begins with honest dialogue that isn't steeped in fear and suspicion, practicing respect for our national neighbors and ourselves and changing the social and systematic landscape that inhibits the fulfillment of our needs. So how do we address those needs within others and ourselves? Before we begin the process to eliminate systematic racism and discrimination, we must first embrace our own inner power and build confidence in that power.

### **The Effects of Poverty on Mental Capacity**

*One must talk about everything according to its nature, how it comes to be and how it grows. Men have talked about the world without paying attention to the world or to their own minds, as if they were asleep or absent-minded.*

(Herakleitos, 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. translated from the Greek by Guy Davenport)

Let's delve into the issue of poverty itself; what effect does poverty have on the brain and mental power? If poverty, in addition to being a roadblock to food, shelter and opportunity, is also a roadblock to optimum mental capacity, does that alter the equation for critics who claim that poverty is a result of laziness and the absence of ambition? What if the opposite were true, that perceived laziness and the absence of ambition is a result of poverty? Laziness aside, can poverty impair memory and cognitive ability? If the answer is "yes", then it can be proven that for the majority of people living in poverty, the road to economic stability and autonomy has already been eroded and left unfit for travel.

Many studies and much focus have been centered on poverty and its effects on physical health such as malnutrition, obesity, diabetes and other diet related diseases. Countless studies display the depressing statistics on starving children and helpless parents who struggle to make due as they live at or below the poverty level. Many organizations use this information to push for funding towards food pantries, soup kitchens, health education services and other resources that assist low-income families but despite these efforts, poverty persists at an alarming rate, and a large percent of people born into poverty are likely to stay there. The question then becomes, why is poverty so overwhelmingly inescapable? While providing temporary relief, are we

ignoring a deeper issue? Are we talking “about the world without paying attention”? (Herakleitos, 5 B.C.) In a study conducted by the Salvation Army, numbers reveal that many Americans believe the hurdle of poverty can be easily cleared with enough determination. “While most Americans accept that a helping hand is important to escape poverty, there is a significant minority who remains skeptical of the realities and reasons for poverty. Additionally, the further a person is from poverty, the less common he or she believes poverty is in society.” (Salvation Army, Perceptions of Poverty 2012)

### Skeptical Beliefs of Poverty



(Salvation Army, Perceptions of Poverty 2012)

In the scientific journal, *Science*, there is an article entitled, *Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function* which explores the link between poverty and diminished cognitive function:

The poor must manage sporadic income, juggle expenses, and make difficult trade-offs. Even when not actually making a financial decision, these preoccupations can be present and distracting. The human cognitive system has limited capacity. Preoccupations with pressing budgetary concerns leave fewer cognitive resources available to guide choice and action. Just as an air traffic controller focusing on a potential collision course is prone to neglect other planes in the air, the poor, when attending to monetary concerns, lose their capacity to give other problems their full consideration...Budgetary preoccupations can in real time impede cognitive function. Our proposed mechanism does not operate through brain development at early childhood but through an immediate cognitive load caused by financial concerns.

(Mani et al, 2013)

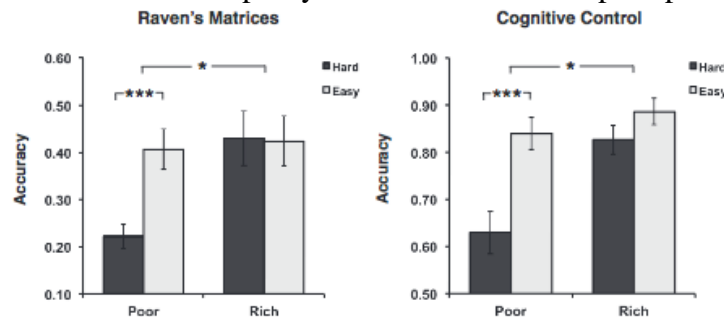
Part of the study conducted involved testing both rich and poor participants first with hypothetical financial scenarios that invoked their own financial situation, broken down into “easy” and “hard” based on the amount of money involved in a given situation. Participants were then tested immediately after on tasks that measured cognitive ability,

also broken down into “easy” and “hard”. Mani et al loosely defined poverty as the gap between a person’s needs and the ability to fulfill them.

For the financially “easy” scenarios, designed to generate relatively trivial concerns, the poor and rich performed similarly. In contrast, in the context of the financially “hard” condition, the poor performed significantly worse than did the rich on both Raven and on cognitive control. A two-way analysis of variance revealed a robust interaction between income and condition. In both tasks, the rich were uninfluenced by condition whereas the poor performed significantly worse in the hard condition. As a result, the poor performed reliably worse than the rich performed overall.

(Mani et al, 2013)

The below chart illustrates the disparity between the rich and poor participants:



**Fig. 2. Accuracy on the Raven's matrices and the cognitive control tasks in the hard and easy conditions, for the poor and the rich participants, when incentives were provided in experiment 3. (Left) Performance on Raven's Matrices task. (Right) Performance on cognitive control task. Error bars reflect ±1 SEM. Top horizontal bars show two-way interaction (poor versus rich × hard versus easy). \* $P < 0.05$ , \*\*\*\* $P < 0.001$ .**

(Mani et al, 2013)

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2007-2009 American Community survey, about 30% of BedStuy residents are living in poverty. Talking with people who struggle to survive under the poverty line can give a glimpse as to the validity of the claims made in the study:

“My goal is to make sure I eat. You feel me? My wife and I need to eat and that's my biggest concern. You want me to talk about ambitions and I don't even have a job. We stay in a shelter or with family, so, you know, we don't pay rent. I smoke, drink, and hang out. It's not like I don't have time, so we chill and do us.”

(Andrew “Deek” Jackson, personal communication October 2013)

What I took away from my interview with Andrew was that his situation didn't afford him any hope for improvement so he gave up on trying entirely. To speak to the aforementioned study of poverty on mental capacity, his preoccupation with scraping by superseded any thoughts to the future or improvement of his circumstances. Not being able to see a productive future in his life made the choice of spending his days drinking,

smoking and hanging out an easy one to make. One could argue that these habits are the causes of his situation, but according to the study, and to many similar observations in everyday life, these are symptoms of poverty, not the causes.

Poverty-related concerns impair cognitive capacity. Simply put, being poor taps out one's mental reserves. This could explain data showing that the poor are likelier than others to behave in ways that are harmful to health and impede long-term success—in short, behaviors that can perpetuate a disadvantaged state.

(Mani et al, 2013)

Mental strain on residents living in poverty should be taken into consideration by government agencies and non-profit organizations that offer social services and programs to these populations. If we take into account stress and impaired cognitive ability, we can begin to structure programs and services that have more flexibility for low-income populations. In addition to inserting compassion and understanding as “best practices”, there needs to be an added component that assists residents in stress management and rebuilding cognitive functions.

### **Brooklyn under a Microscope: The Truth about Poverty and Segregation**

*Neighbors bring food with death and flowers with sickness and little things in between. Boo was our neighbor. He gave us two soap dolls, a broken watch and chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and our lives. But neighbors give in return. We never put back into the tree what we took out of it: we had given him nothing, and it made me sad.*

(Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*)

One of New York's claims to fame is its status as the incarnation of America's melting pot mirage. All races, ethnicities and classes converge to live their daily lives in the city that never sleeps. Second only to Queens, Brooklyn seems to onlookers and insiders alike, as the borough of merging worlds; where all walks of life come to iron out an existence side by side. If one takes a closer look, the story is less virtuous. Brooklyn can be a borough of neighbors for some and that of strangers for others. Rarely is there an opportunity for different economic worlds to collide, even in such a densely packed universe. “Of all the largest U.S. metropolitan regions, all but New York have become less segregated over the past 40 years...but segregation isn't a problem just for minorities-it drives down the economic growth of entire regions” (Badger, 2013).

When rent and service prices soar, lower income residents are forced to move to more affordable locations that are usually neighborhoods with high rates of poverty already. This cause and effect scenario is the primary reason for neighborhoods to increase their wealth and prosperity while other neighborhoods decline in wealth. This creates a situation where poverty is highly concentrated within geographic locations and the disparity of opportunity between rich and poor is constantly maintained.

*The Atlantic* recently published an article that outlined 4 consequences of segregation in American urban areas; these conditions are directly relevant to the situation of Brooklyn's poor:

Segregation is a problem because it concentrates poverty, which isolates minorities from access to good jobs, quality schools and healthy environments. The consequences are striking.

- **Education:** For students, moving from a highly segregated city to an integrated one has been associated with a narrowing of the black-white SAT-score gap by one-quarter. Each year spent in a desegregated school has been shown to increase black students' average annual earnings after graduation by roughly 5 percent.
- **Incarceration:** Black students who attend desegregated schools beginning in elementary school are 16.9 percent less likely to be incarcerated by the age of 30 than black students who attend segregated schools.
- **Health:** Complete black-white residential integration would lower the black infant-mortality rate by at least two deaths per 1,000 live births. Older men in racially segregated, high crime neighborhoods have a 31 percent higher chance of developing cancer than their counterparts in a safer, less segregated areas.
- **Pollution:** Residents of minority neighborhoods experience five to 20 times more exposure to pollution than people who live in predominately white neighborhoods.

(Badger, 2013, "The Real Cost of Segregation" sect. 4)

Bedford Stuyvesant has been a hub of Black culture since the 1800's. It has produced famous names such as Chris Rock, Shirley Chisholm, Lena Horne and Jackie Robinson and has been a hotbed of arts and music for decades. It peaked in fame as the backdrop to some of Spike Lee's best movies, including *Crooklyn* and *Do the Right Thing*. To this day, it still remains a predominately Black neighborhood although there has been a more substantial influx of other races to the neighborhood in recent years. Throughout all of these changes, BedStuy still remains an art and culture epicenter.



Street Art By Swoon (Courtesy of 596acres.org)

In addition to famous names and movies, BedStuy is home to some of the most beautiful architecture in all of New York City and some of its oldest landmarks. This is a community that has seen periods of booming prosperity and inspiring perseverance. During a time when Blacks had no access to education in the area, BedStuy produced Sarah Smith Tompkins Garnett, the first Black female principal in the New York City Public School system. Bedford Stuyvesant was also home to many productive and profitable black owned farms, merchants and service providers. It was an insulated community that maintained self-sustainability for many years and remnants of that past can be seen all around us. So what happened?



441 Nostrand Ave.



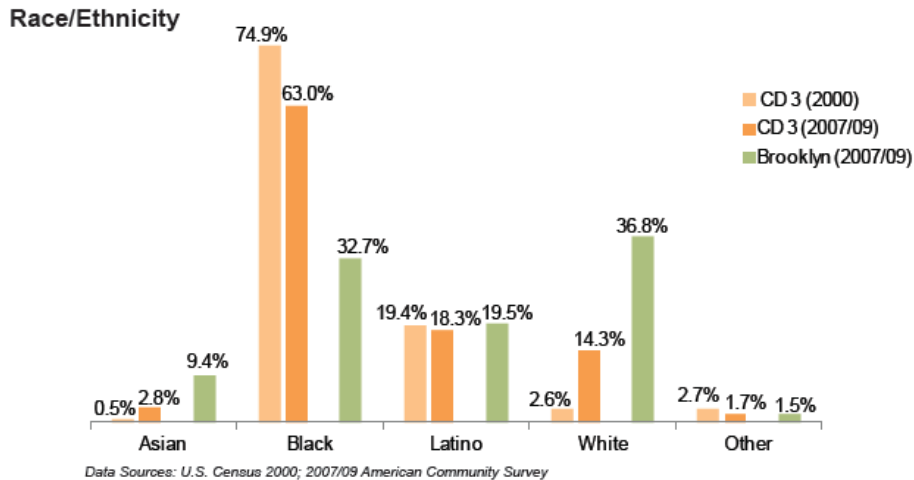
MacDonough Street

Economic segregation is a widespread reality in the United States and Brooklyn is the prime petri dish for examining the conditions that fester from this unfair condition of its most vulnerable residents. Living within the densely packed neighborhood of Bedford Stuyvesant, with its multimillion dollar brownstones nestled snugly together on tree

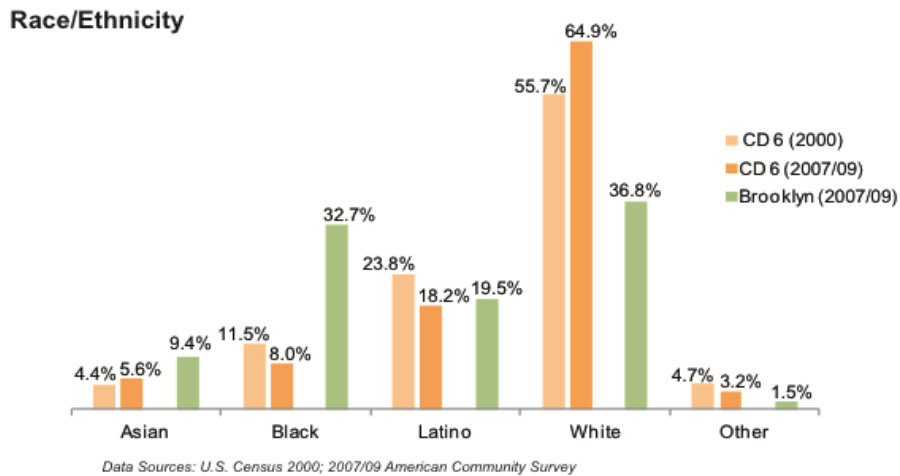
lined streets, a stone’s throw away from immensely impoverished housing projects and other low income dwellings, allows me the unfortunate opportunity to easily explore the multitude of factors that allow economic segregation and chronic poverty to perpetuate.

In order to compare Badger’s claims with the conditions in BedStuy versus other neighborhoods in Brooklyn, I turned to the *Brooklyn Neighborhood Reports*, published in partnership by the Brooklyn Community Foundation, the Center for the Study of Brooklyn and Brooklyn College. The report, published in 2012, explores areas such as youth & education, economy, housing, environment, health, public safety, art & culture and civic engagement.

To illustrate how segregation can play a factor in perpetuating poverty, let’s compare BedStuy (CD3) to an area of Brooklyn that is predominantly white. To do this, I chose Community District 6, which is comprised of Carroll Gardens, Cobble Hill, Gowanus, Park Slope and Redhook. I chose CD6 because its percentage of white residents is comparable to the percentages of Blacks in BedStuy. The first set of information we will look at is demographics, which shows that CD3 is 74.9% Black while CD6 is 64.9% white.



CD3



CD6

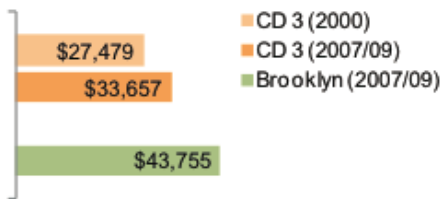
*Brooklyn Neighborhood Reports*

The next set of information I would like to look at is income comparisons. Along with racial segregation, economic segregation plays an important factor in determining the prosperity, opportunity and resource allocation of neighborhoods.

For many of New York City’s poor, the daily struggle to meet their basic needs is compounded by living in overwhelmingly poor neighborhoods. In these neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, communal resources are scarce and residents often face other significant obstacles to prosperity, such as a dearth of employment and educational opportunities, high crime rates, and poor housing quality. To better understand the scale and impact of this issue, Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York, Inc. (CCC) conducted an analysis of New York City neighborhood-level poverty data. Our findings, detailed below, suggest that despite a decline in the number of extreme-poverty neighborhoods and the share of people who live in them, concentrated poverty continues to be a serious problem for many communities.

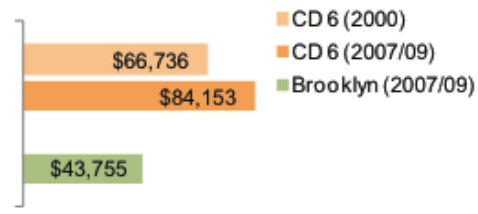
(Citizens’ Committee for Children, 2012)

**Median Household Income**



Data Sources: U.S. Census 2000; 2007/09 American Community Survey

**Median Household Income**



Data Sources: U.S. Census 2000; 2007/09 American Community Survey

All monetary figures in this report are adjusted for inflation to reflect 2010 dollars.

CD3

All monetary figures in this report are adjusted for inflation to reflect 2010 dollars.

CD6

*Brooklyn Neighborhood Reports*

Receiving a quality education is one of the most important factors in determining a persons’ economic future. In most low-income neighborhoods, children are pushed into overcrowded classrooms with teachers who do not have the capabilities to deal with the myriad of problems that come along with serving low-income neighborhoods. More often than not, a child from a low-income neighborhood walks into class with their book bags loaded not with books and pencils, but with abuse at home, food insecurity, navigating unsafe streets and the tough exterior it takes to survive in a hostile land. The school district that serves BedStuy (School District 16) has been identified as one of the lowest performing school districts. Contributing factors include a lack of resources that



are otherwise allocated to more affluent school districts, absent support in terms of social services and inadequate afterschool programs.

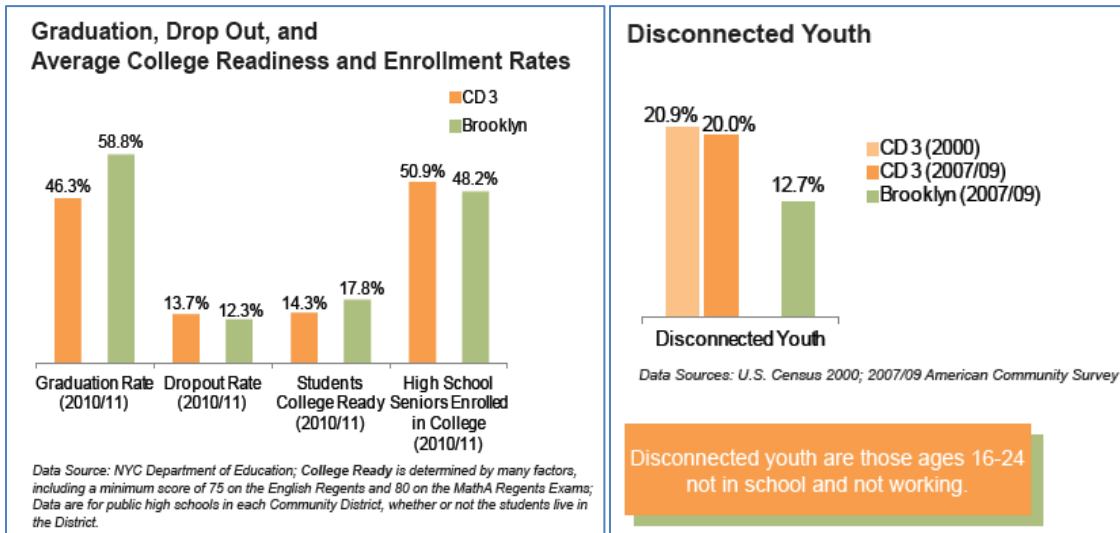
To put this in context, CSD16 had the lowest average College and Career Readiness score in the entire New York City school system, according to a Schott Foundation analysis provided for this report. If a District 16 student makes it to a CUNY School – half of CSD16 students don’t graduate in 4 years – chances are over-whelming that he or she will have to take remedial classes upon entering. In the case of the school with the 0.0% college readiness percentage, the score reveals that, statistically speaking, not one student in that school, after 13 years of formal schooling, was deemed prepared to attain a higher education or functionally enter the workforce.

Perhaps most importantly, CSD16 is under-equipped to address these needs. The Schott Foundation’s Redlining Report concludes that CSD16 has “fewer resources in terms of highly educated teachers with their comparatively higher salary and benefit levels...than most New York City Community School Districts.”

(Mark Winston Griffith and Anthonine Pierre, 2013)

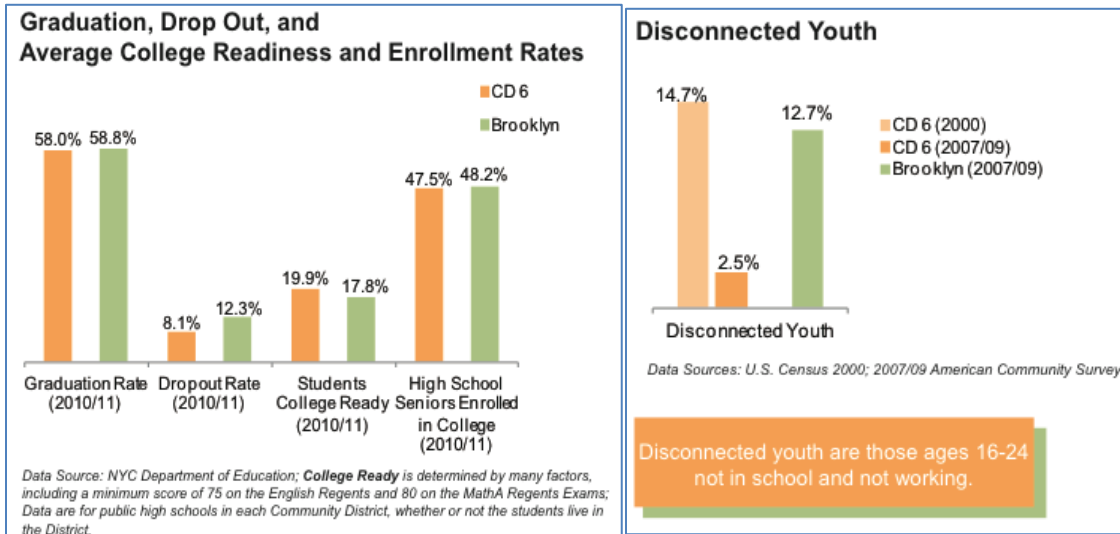
While discussing issues of poverty with my husband, one fact became glaringly obvious to him, “Services follow the economic flow of the people, but it does not follow the people who need them. If there is an influx of 25,000 poor residents into an area, services do not improve, they become overwhelmed. If there is an influx of 10 wealthier residents, prime services magically pop up overnight” (S.T. Strother, personal communications, September 14, 2013). Sadly, this statement holds true for the public school system in BedStuy, which has been a problem for many years.

CD3



Brooklyn Neighborhood Reports

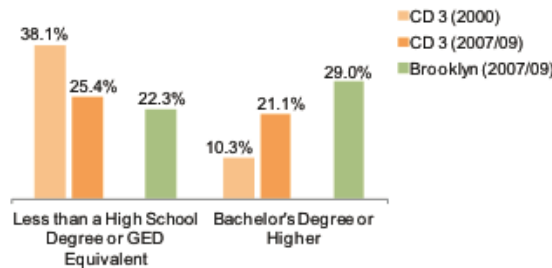
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*Brooklyn Neighborhood Reports*

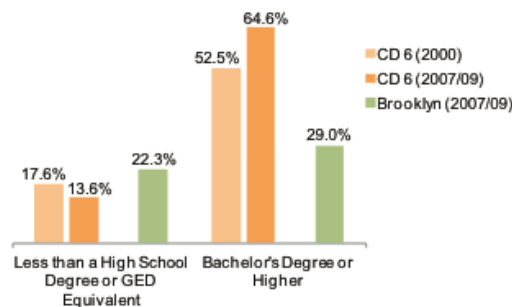
If students cannot receive a quality primary education, they are less likely to attend or finish college. This trend can be seen when you compare the above statistics to the statistics below in education attainment after high school:

**Educational Attainment Age 25 and Older**



CD3

**Educational Attainment Age 25 and Older**



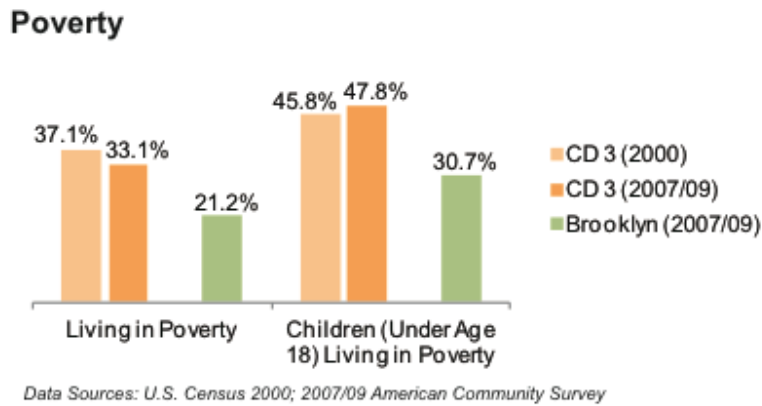
CD6

Referencing back to my conversation with Andrew while researching the effects of poverty on cognitive ability, I was able to make the direct link between being a product of a poor school system and unemployment. This gap in education limits the choices of employment for low-income residents and relegates them to low paying, unskilled work. If an entire population is subject to these limitations, the levels of unemployment skyrocket as more people compete for limited low-wage work.

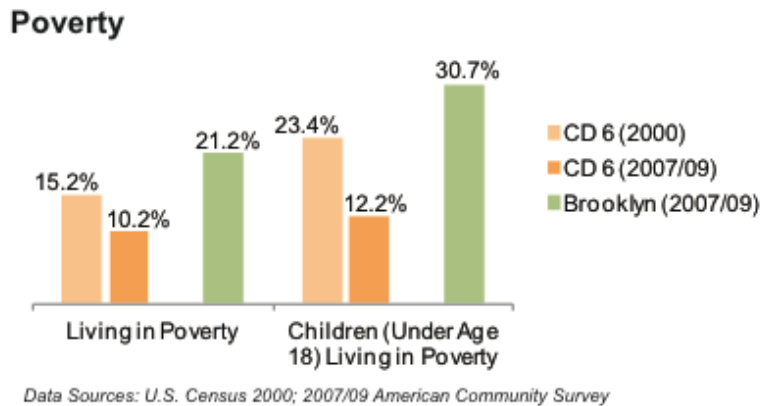
“I went to a shitty school, with shitty teachers and administrators who didn’t care. I never learned and eventually I gave up. How many good jobs can an unskilled, uneducated worker get? My wife and I live in a shelter and we get food stamps. I do what I need to do for money and I have no shame for it.”

(Andrew “Deek” Jackson, personal communication September 2013)

As one man’s perspective, it could be easy to dismiss his sentiment and to call him lazy and unmotivated. What is interesting though, is that his interview is accurately descriptive of the correlation between the education rates and the rates of poverty and unemployment:



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The unemployment rate in BedStuy is at a staggering 17.9% (Brooklyn Census Tract). Combine that with the 33% of residents in Bedford Stuyvesant who are living under the federal poverty level (City Harvest, Community Food Assessment 2009-2010) and you have a significant amount of household who have no economic security. With no income, or very little of it, families are forced to rely on benefit programs such as food stamps and housing assistance in addition to emergency services such as food pantries and soup kitchens. This not only creates a strain on agencies, organizations and taxpayers, this creates an unsustainable cycle of perpetual poverty aided by intermittent services that are not always available. In the profile of Bedford Stuyvesant done by the New York Department of City planning, I found that aside from unemployment, underemployment is also a major hindrance to residents who seek to improve their quality of life. 18.3% of Bedford Stuyvesant earns less than \$10,000 per annum, 13.6% earned \$15,000-\$24,999 and 10.4% \$25,000-\$34,999. (New York Department of City Planning)

The *Daily News* recently published an article entitled “Tale of two worlds: Statistics paint a picture of extremes of wealth and poverty that exist side by side in Brooklyn”, highlighting the inequalities between the wealthy and poor within the borough:

The prix-fixe dinner at the Chef’s Table at Brooklyn Fare in downtown Brooklyn is \$225 per person plus tax and tip; Brooklyn households receiving food stamps get an average \$277.70 worth to buy food for a month.

Park Slope has America’s largest member-owned food co-op (r.), with more than 15,500 signed up; one in five Brooklynites is unable to afford food at some point during the year.

(Milin and Croghan, 2012)

New businesses and services are entering the neighborhood but none of these cater to the lower income residents. What’s worse, is that a large portion of these businesses are not owned by natives of the neighborhood and also are not employing the many disconnected youth that could use meaningful employment to keep them off of the streets. BedStuy is currently undergoing a transformation that is facilitating a shift in demographics and economics, which makes it currently a neighborhood of relative diversity in culture, class and race. Unfortunately, this balance has already begun to teeter and will not be sustainable if the current trends and influx continue without a conscience effort to accommodate and encourage not only the wealthier residents to thrive, but every other resident that wishes to call or continue to call BedStuy home.

Houses are selling at record high rates to rival, and in some cases out bid Manhattan. Rental apartments are increasing their rents by hundreds of dollars, attracting residents who can’t afford more expensive neighborhoods, but can afford to pay \$1 million to purchase an apartment. This seems to most as a positive development in the BedStuy economy, but what happens to residents whose families can no longer afford to live in a neighborhood they’ve called home for multiple generations? These residents are either forced into homelessness, therefore putting an additional burden on the local and federal government, or are forced to move into cheaper, less prosperous neighborhoods,

and by doing so, deepening the concentration of poverty in other areas of Brooklyn such as Canarsie, Brownsville and East New York.

A final New York Times Article in August of 2009 noted that, “Today, the idea that BedStuy is different is nothing new. A friendly cafe with the playful name Bread Stuy, on a hip strip of Lewis Avenue, serves iced chai tea and terrific banana bread.” While changes like these may seem attractive to middle class White residents, the spike in property taxes and creation of businesses that cater to a more affluent base of consumers will inevitably displace poorer residents and lead to concentrations of poverty elsewhere. Moreover, this displacement will generate misleading statistics that show decreasing trends in poverty and chronic disease when, in actuality, neither of these issues is being solved for the residents; they’re just being moved to different neighborhoods.

(City Harvest, Community Food Assessment 2009-2010)

You cannot combat gentrification, and the question can be raised: Should you want to? It is the ebb and flow of people that cannot be controlled, nor discouraged in any tangible way. As Jake Dobkin from the *Gothamist* put it:

Here's an old native New Yorker joke— Q: what's the definition of a gentrifier?  
A: someone who arrived five minutes after you did. This stupid joke is getting at something very deep and disturbing: All New Yorkers are gentrifiers. Say you're of Jewish extraction: your forebears gentrified some Irish right out of L.E.S. around the turn of the century. Or maybe you're Irish, and your ancestors were responsible for gentrifying the marginal land around the Collect Pond in Five Points. Or maybe your family goes all the way back to New Amsterdam and Peter Minuit, the original gentrifier, who gentrified the poor Native Americans right off Manhattan Island. No New Yorker, no matter how long their tenure, has the right to point fingers and say to anyone else "the problem started when you arrived here."

(Carlson, 2013)

The burden should be on New York City government to have better regulations in place that allows for more responsible development and rent control. Instead of allowing developers to have free reign on where they build and how much they charge, laws need to be in place that protect middle and low income families from being displaced. Instead of arguing over who is moving into the neighborhoods, there needs to be a united fight against landlords and development corporations to hold them accountable. This is one way to halt economic segregation and displacement. As an extension to these regulations, the stigma of “low-income” housing needs to be eliminated through investing more money into building quality, attractive dwellings that cater to mixed incomes. This real estate should not be labeled as “affordable housing”, if it has a label, most affluent residents will not want to live there. There needs to be an atmosphere of inclusion and ambiguity. Low-income residents should not be made to feel as though they are

ostracized and exposed because of their circumstances. This is how class segregation is allowed to perpetuate, we build housing for our lower income residents, then we segment them to specific destinations and slap big bright warning signs that tell more advantaged residents to stay away. We give these complexes fancy names that have nothing to do with the community while inside these “projects” walls are crumbling from mold, elevators stay broken for years and hot water is a gamble. These inequalities need to stop and it is on us to put pressure on city government to make these changes happen. Once that can be accomplished, we can begin the process of building a better and more united community that gives equality of opportunity to all of its residents. That equality will lead to better schools, better jobs and more resources to go around.

In comparison to other neighborhoods in Brooklyn like Park Slope and Carroll Gardens, BedStuy could be considered a community that is failing its residents. Programmatic and systematic needs have to be addressed if we want to see the neighborhood prosper:

1. The local school system needs an overhaul to make sure students are receiving an enriching and quality education. This includes renovating existing facilities and adding more schools. This also should include upgrades in equipment such as computers, books and other interactive tools that help children learn. Teachers should be given comparative salaries that compete with more affluent neighborhoods to encourage more qualified and experienced educators. There should also be more support in social services to address the needs of students who are dealing with a myriad of issues at home such as abuse and exposure to drug use. More training needs to take place so that teachers have exposure to alternative teaching methods and practices and there needs to be an understanding that not all children learn the same. In addition to that, curriculums need to focus more on developing critical thinking skills and focus less on standardized testing. More investment in after school and extra-curricular activities is crucial.
2. More small businesses should be encouraged to open through grants, resource support and low interest loans. These efforts should target residents who live within the neighborhood. This would help to increase employment in the area and to foster more entrepreneurship. There should also be advocacy efforts to keep out chain stores and retail giants that drive business away from the smaller purveyors.
3. There needs to be an increase in programming for adult education to address the percentage of residents who have not received a High School diploma or GED. In doing so, more residents could be encouraged to seek higher education and could pursue areas of employment that were previously closed to them. This would lower the percentage of residents who live in poverty due to underemployment and would ensure that future generations had

educated and enlightened adults to look up to. This would create a different cycle than currently exists by which children were able to use their parents as role models in the pursuit of higher learning.

4. The housing and development sector needs more regulation and oversight to guarantee that rental and mortgage rates do not serve to push low and middle-income residents out of the area into neighborhoods that are cheaper. This just creates higher concentrations of poverty in other areas and strains the resources and services of those areas. Tax breaks, grants and incentives should be available to residents who are in the lower income brackets to encourage home ownership. Rental rates should be better regulated so that landlords could only charge rates that are reasonable in relation to median income and in line with the quality of the dwellings and surrounding areas.

### **Poverty and its Effects on Health: Limited Access to Healthy and Affordable Food**

*"Eating alone is a disappointment. But not eating matter more, is hollow and green, has thorns like a chain of fish hooks, trailing from the heart, clawing at your insides. Hunger feels like pincers, like the bite of crabs; it burns, burns, and has no fur. Let us sit down soon to eat with all those who haven't eaten; let us spread great tablecloths, put salt in lakes of the world, set up planetary bakeries, tables with strawberries in snow, and a plate like the moon itself from which we can all eat. For now I ask no more than the justice of eating."*

(Pablo Neruda, *The Great Tablecloth*)

There are 216 food retailers in BedStuy and out of that number, 177 are bodegas. Out of 177 bodegas, only 1 in 10 stock fresh fruits and vegetables on their shelves and even then, it more often than not only consists of bananas or apples, with lettuce and tomatoes only being stocked for use on deli sandwiches. The majority of stocked items in bodegas are chips, sodas, candy and other highly processed snack foods.

Throughout BedStuy, there is an abundance of fried chicken and pizza joints, Chinese food and other fast food restaurants, none of which offer healthy and affordable food items on their menu. The majority of food businesses serve caloric monstrosities that are high in fat, deeply fried and/or zealously processed and 3 out of every 4 only sell take-out.



Being involved in the food access movement, I have grown to understand that “food access” isn’t just about making healthy food available in grocery stores, but changing the landscape of fast food in the neighborhood to include businesses that offer affordable and healthy ways for families to enjoy the experience of eating out when they choose to or when the necessity arises. If you were to look back to neighborhoods like Park Slope and Carroll Gardens, you would see that the fast food landscape is drastically different than it is here in BedStuy. These neighborhoods have an abundance of take-out and dine-in restaurants that offer much healthier food options than you can find at McDonalds or Crown Fried Chicken.

*The residents in this community are constantly ridiculed for their eating habits, but it wasn't their decision to put McDonald's here- or to put all these fried chicken places here. This is what's been available. This is their reality.*

- Reverend Devanie Jackson, Brooklyn Rescue Mission

(City Harvest, Community Food Assessment 2009-2010)

What is interesting about the landscape of abundant fast food restaurants and unhealthy bodegas in BedStuy is that there is also a racial element that lends to this issue. While surveying owners of these establishments for a neighborhood mapping project, my organization often asked why they had not chosen to stock their stores and restaurants with healthier food choices. The overwhelming response that we received was “black people don’t like healthy foods”. This directly contradicts all of the information I have ever received when interviewing residents of the area about what they like to eat and what food was available to them. I was left to wonder if any of them took into account the economic and systemic roots that serve to undermine the pursuit of “good food” and the desire of the community at large to be more educated on these issues and to have real access to quality food that other, wealthier neighborhoods take for granted. Through these conversations, I was also able to surmise that none of them factored in the quality of produce they offered and how that could affect the lack of interest. While talking to a focus group to gather information for the healthy food initiatives I am involved in with my organization, all of the participants mentioned avoiding bodegas because they are too expensive, the offerings are not fresh and the experiences with customer service were bad. Some participants shopped at bodegas for emergencies like milk and bread occasionally, recognizing that they paid a higher price for the convenience of having a bodega on the same block as their home. A lot of participants chose not to shop at bodegas even when they offered produce because they did not trust the quality and sources of what they offered, noting that a lot of corner store owners sourced produce that had already been picked over by higher end grocers in order to save money on cost. Most bodegas do not have the capacity or refrigeration space to properly house a quality produce selection, so produce that is already old when it arrives tends to have less than a 2-day shelf life. If your offering is sub-par, you’re bound to have difficulty selling it. One BedStuy resident when asked if they were able to afford healthy and fresh food expressed this point:



No. I was raised on farmland. I know what it costs to produce and shipped makes it expensive once it gets here. In a marginalized community like this one, we get the food that's about to go bad but has a couple more days of shelf life. When you don't get the nutrition you need, you stay hungry. I can't afford it, that's why I go to the pantry.

(Fenton Survey, 2013)

An important factor in developing effective and creative solutions in the fight to combat food justice is to understand how people view healthy food and assessing their perceptions of food access. In order to meet this challenge, my organization questioned 32 residents in BedStuy with a survey that contained a combination of essay questions and "rate this" questions. Although the findings were disheartening, it gave me a vantage point in which to structure solutions that could have a positive and effective impact on a community that is plagued by limiting education, scarce resources and an unfulfilled desire for a better quality of life.

The first question asked was "*Is it important to eat healthy food? If yes, why is it important to eat healthy food?*" Out of the 32 responses, all of the residents answered that eating healthy food was important. In addition, each respondent cited the prevention of disease or physical wellness as the main reason to eat healthy. When asked "*What do you think is considered 'healthy' food? What do you consider to be 'healthy food?'*" all respondents listed fruits and vegetables, while some listed whole grains, fish, lean meats and 1% milk. The third question asked residents to describe what kinds of things meant "healthy" or "fresh" to them, and most residents used canned, packaged and frozen foods as examples of things that were neither "healthy" nor "fresh". From these 3 questions, I was able to conclude that each resident had at least a vague idea of what it means to eat healthy and why it is important.

The next step in the survey was to find out if the subjects actually ate healthy and the reasons why they did or did not. In addition, we wanted to find out what the subjects considered "eating healthy" as a practice. We received varied responses, below are samples that represent the different types of responses we received:

1. I try to. Try to eat fruits and vegetables every day. Not everything is healthy but I try. Lots of fruits too. Don't eat healthy all the time because it's expensive.
2. Sometimes. Eating healthy all the time is boring. Eating veggies is dull. Need to throw in protein. Bananas, strawberries, apples, grapes, blueberries, in the morning. I use to eat pastries) avocados, juice, eat veggies, salad, potatoes, and meat, fish.
3. Not a lot, I have 3 sons. I would have to cook 3 separate meals for them then for me. And that's too much. Turkey, American cheese, whole wheat bread, mango juice, iced tea, no soda, and water. Rice is normal with beans and meat.

Response number 1 represents the respondents who had the desire to eat healthy but were unable to do so in a consistent manner because of money. This seems to be the largest hurdle. When faced with the reality that you have to feed a family on very little income, most poor residents choose high calorie, high fat foods primarily because of its

ability to fill you up faster and longer. Most respondents in some form listed monetary restrictions as the cause for less frequency in eating healthier foods. The second respondent seems to know what's healthy but lacks the ability to make eating healthy interesting. Our last sample illustrates one of the most common hurdles of eating healthy; this would be the demand on time as a single mother.

This past Saturday, I tabled at the BedStuy Food and Family Day event on Fulton Street and spent some time talking to residents and playing a jeopardy game to gauge the level of knowledge around food access and food justice. Out of 27 adults who played the game, only 2 knew what the acronym "CSA" stood for and only one knew what a "GMO" was.

So in addition to monetary restrictions and time constraints, education can also be listed as a contributing factor to the atmosphere of unhealthy eating in BedStuy.

### **Food Stamps and Food Habits**

*"It does not do to rely too much on silent majorities, Evey, for silence is a fragile thing, one loud noise, and its gone. But the people are so cowed and disorganized. A few might take the opportunity to protest, but it'll just be a voice crying in the wilderness. Noise is relative to the silence preceding it. The more absolute the hush, the more shocking the thunderclap. Our masters have not heard the people's voice for generations, Evey and it is much, much louder than they care to remember."*

(Alan Moore, *V for Vendetta*)

When discussing the battle against obesity and for healthy food access for low-income residents, it's imperative to understand that for most families, providing food is the primary concern and health often takes a backseat to the need for full and satisfied bellies. For most low-income residents, receiving food stamps is the only way to ensure food security for themselves and their families, but the current structure for receiving food stamps can have unintended consequences for food habits.

In the current welfare system, recipients of food stamps are issued what's called an "EBT" card with their picture and other pertinent information on it. EBT stands for "Electronic Benefits Transfer" which functions similar to a debit card linked to a bank account. Each month on the first day of that month, a fixed amount of money (which is dependent on your family and income size) is transferred to your EBT card which can then be used to purchase food and beverages at grocery stores and bodegas. Because the amount of money you receive is fixed and is only received once in the month, families who receive these benefits often find themselves developing eating habits that are locked in orbit with this monthly cycle. The Brooklyn District Public Health Office outlines this cycle in their current neighborhood report:

As we have seen, families' resources vary greatly during the month, from a short peak of plenty to a longer period of scarcity. These fluctuations — and coping strategies like taking credit and food sharing — characterize the monthly food cycle. So, families' diets vary over the course of the month, resulting in inconsistent, and often unhealthy, eating patterns. When financial resources and food are more plentiful at the start of the month, overeating is more prevalent.

Also at the beginning of the month, families eat in local restaurants and consume foods they consider to have greater social and cultural value, like meat... In the latter part of the month, families manage with less food... As resources dwindle, families also rely on inexpensive, high fat, and starchy food items — like sandwiches purchased at bodegas, Chinese take-out, cheese doodles, and cookies. Food sharing is another important coping strategy as the month progresses. Because foods from a variety of sources from family members, friends, and neighbors) come into a family's household, food sharing can set excessive expectations around food, making overeating and consuming unhealthy foods a regular part of a child's monthly (if not daily) diet. Nutrition aside, social customs make it unacceptable to refuse food — and economic needs make such refusals unrealistic. Overall, these eating patterns, shaped by the monthly food cycle, reflect urban food insecurity: families' shifting access to food leads to inconsistent eating habits...

(Brooklyn District Public Health Office, 2007)

In the report, there is a mention of the practice known as “taking credit”. This refers to the arrangement that some low-income residents are able to make with bodega owners in which they receive food on credit until they are able to pay for it. This practice is widespread and makes bodegas an important aspect of food access and food habits. Bodegas are a prominent feature in poor neighborhoods, BedStuy alone has 176 Bodegas out of the total 216 food retailers in the neighborhood and that number grows at a rate in which I find alarming. This often means that while grocery stores have a wider and healthier selection of foods, Bodegas win the battle by sheer numbers and the ability to play creditor for residents who are continuously strapped for cash. So when we are talking about changing our food landscape, it would be remiss to ignore Bodegas in the hopes of creating alternatives such as farmers markets and better grocery stores. Although those measures are surely important, they are only parts to a solution.

I currently work as the Food Access Outreach Coordinator in BedStuy for an organization called Northeast Brooklyn Housing Development Cooperation and I was brought into the organization to help implement a new community programs branch centered on healthy and affordable food access here in Central Brooklyn. Through countless conversations with other interested parties, I was able to gather that they have no real interest in working with Bodega owners as we begin our efforts in the neighborhood. In my view, this is a mistake that can completely undermine the efforts we are putting forth and it will create a situation in which offering better access of healthy and affordable foods through other venues is undercut because poor residents cannot break their reliance on bodegas when their money runs short during the latter part of each month.

I propose that in battling the unhealthy food epidemic, we target our efforts at Bodegas and work in partnership with them to change the offerings they provide to residents. There is already a program initiated by GrowNYC to offer assistance to Bodegas who are interested and willing to transform their stores into healthier venues and I believe this work needs to be expanded and continued, but in order to do this, there needs to be an effort that includes not just organizations making these decisions and partnerships, but residents willing to demand better quality and healthier food options.

Boycotts have been used throughout history to sway the decisions and practices of proprietors and I feel that this form of protest could be an effective way to push Bodega owners to bend to the will of the people. The challenge in this method is convincing the people that they can withstand the loss of services offered by Bodega owners and this will take some strategic planning and policy change within the food stamp system to make their purchasing power more evenly distributed in the month so their reliance on “taking credit” at Bodegas is irrelevant.

If we could change the current monthly distribution of food stamps into a system that issues these benefits weekly, we could ensure that families have a buffer during their entire month and can better manage their food buying habits. By doing this, we can help families towards utilizing farmers markets and grocery stores more than they utilize Bodegas. Once we wean them off of this reliance, we are in a better position to make the case for boycotting Bodegas with the intention of forcing them to rethink what they sell to residents and how their current offerings have a negative impact on their health and wellbeing.

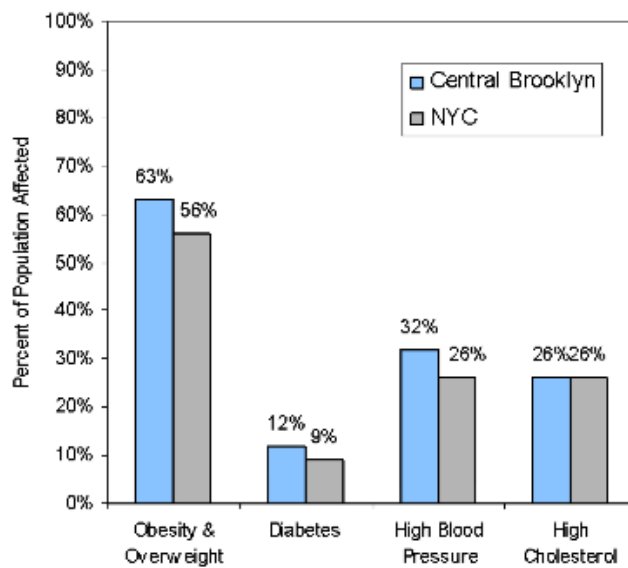
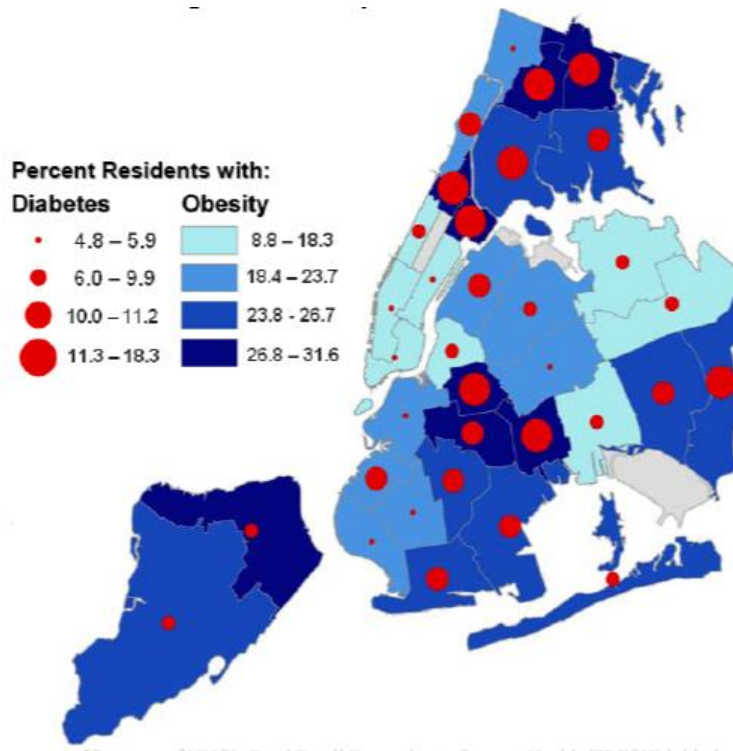
### **How Does Limited Access to Healthy and Affordable Food Affect Physical Health**

*When diet is wrong medicine is of no use. When diet is correct medicine is of no need.*

(Ancient Ayurvedic Proverb)

Throughout history, humans have recognized the need for food as medicine and it can be argued that until the industrial revolution and the subsequent breakthroughs in manufactured medicine, people maintained a close relationship to food and used it’s natural healing properties to keep diet related diseases and malnutrition at bay. In order to maintain optimum health and wellbeing, the consumption of enough fruits and vegetables is of vital importance. Not only do they contain the important vitamins and minerals, they fight against cancer and heart disease plus an array of other diseases that can be fatal, in addition to being important for maintaining energy. Fruits and vegetables are also essential for brain development in children but unfortunately, children living in areas that have a dearth of fresh and affordable produce have little access to the foods that are most important for their growth. Not having this access also means that they are more likely as adults to avoid these foods since people tend to eat what was most familiar to them from their childhood.

The environment illustrated in the section above is the prime setting for diseases like diabetes and obesity to run rampant. Based on City Harvest’s Community Food Assessment map, BedStuy holds the largest concentration of both diabetes and obesity. This data does not include cases that have not been diagnosed by doctors; therefore, we could be facing an even larger number that cannot be measured.



(City Harvest, Community Food Assessment 2009-2010)

In addition to diabetes and obesity, 32% of BedStuy residents have high blood pressure and 94-96% of residents don't eat enough produce. 26% of residents have high cholesterol and the hospitalization rate for heart disease is 10% higher in BedStuy than it is anywhere else in New York City. These issues can be directly linked to the level of poverty in the neighborhood and the limited access to healthy food.

The health disparities are even more apparent when Bedford Stuyvesant is compared to a more affluent community within the very same borough: In Northwestern Brooklyn, which encompasses neighborhoods like Park Slope, the overweight and obesity rate is 53%, 10% less than the adult average in BedStuy. A Department of Health official noted that, “Northwestern Brooklyn has a much higher median income and a much lower rate of disease.”

(City Harvest, Community Food Assessment 2009-2010)

Given that 18% of the population is uninsured and 23% are on Medicaid (New York Department of Health and Mental Hygiene), managing diet-related diseases through nature and food seems like the best and most inexpensive way to combat these chronic problems. Yet residents with these health problems are finding it difficult to make lifestyle changes that could positively impact and manage their diseases because of obstacles such as limited personal resources, lack of availability and the alluring advertisement of unhealthy food options. These issues are not only affecting adults; the rate of obesity and diabetes in children is growing at alarming rates and even without these diseases, children are facing other health and development issues:

A dearth in affordable healthy food options for neighborhoods is a serious issue that can lead to impairments in growth and cognitive development in children, while concurrently producing diet-related diseases such as diabetes and obesity at any age. The residents in these neighborhoods are four times as likely to report being in fair to poor health, and on average have life expectancies that are eight years shorter than the wealthiest neighborhoods in the City.

(City Harvest, Community Food Assessment 2009-2010)

After assessing the culmination of this research, I have been able to pinpoint the most important needs that should be addressed when attempting to improve the food landscape in BedStuy

1. Fresh, healthy and quality foods need to be made more widely available and affordable for residents by working with grocery store, restaurant and bodega owners. In addition to these outlets, we need to open more Farmers Markets in the area and also expand the existing markets to be more comprehensive and attractive for residents to shop there. This initiative needs to put a high emphasis on local sourcing and supporting small farmers.

A BedStuy Food Co-op would also be an initiative that can satisfy the needs of the community for fresh, local and quality foods. Since many residents are not familiar with this type of business model, there would have to be extensive outreach done to acquaint the community with the cooperative model. A BedStuy food co-op would not only address the need for healthier food, it would provide residents with an empowerment

that comes with ownership and a real stake in the prosperity of a community owned business.

2. Residents are in need of culinary and nutrition education. Many residents are aware that diet has a direct effect on your health but are still making choices that contradict that knowledge. This is partially a result of residents not knowing how to change their eating habits and also not knowing how to make those changes appealing to their palette.
3. Financial literacy courses and budget management workshops are needed to assist residents in developing skills to better manage their food budgets while still eating healthy. This would be especially helpful for residents receiving a fixed amount of food stamps each month.
4. Food justice education and advocacy should be an important component in any community programs. It is important for people to understand the food industry and the mechanisms that control the food landscape in their neighborhood. It is also important for them to recognize their power to enact change that suits their needs. Fighting for a common cause also builds a stronger, more resilient community.

If we are to create and maintain long term solutions to the climate of food insecurity in BedStuy, our fight for better food access has to be accompanied by nutrition and culinary education, urban farming and food justice advocacy. In addition, financial literacy and budget management are important components to ensure that residents are equipped with the tools to effectively change their shopping and eating habits. Providing better food access alone does not address the fact that families have had generations to develop inadequate eating habits and counter productive shopping habits.

Our efforts must be multi-faceted and aimed at families who are suffering under the dearth of healthy and affordable food options, inadequate education and little economic opportunity. My proposal would tap into the changing demographic of our neighborhood and would rely on total community involvement, meaning it would be dependent on residents from various backgrounds in class, race and culture. It is also dependent on businesses and organizations working harmoniously toward a common goal, which is creating a better, more vibrant and economically sound community within BedStuy.

### **Creative Solutions: Creating a Community that Overcomes the Effects of Poverty**

*In History, stagnant waters, whether they be stagnant waters of custom or those of despotism, harbor no life; life is dependent on the ripples created by a few eccentric individuals. In homage to that life and vitality, the community has to brave certain perils and must countenance a measure of heresy. One must live dangerously if one wants to live at all.*

(Herbert Read)

We have made the connection between racism and discrimination and its effects on poverty within communities of color. In addition, we have outlined the causes and effects of poverty with a focus on the neighborhood of Bedford Stuyvesant in Brooklyn,

New York. We have been able to see how cycles of poverty are perpetuated through class and race segregation and the inequality of resources across neighborhoods. Now that we have outlined all of the issues that can negatively affect residents living in poverty, it is time to explore the solutions that can solve these problems. I believe the answer for diminishing concentrated poverty and softening the blow of gentrification lies in developing solutions that defy conventional approaches through collective brainstorming by tapping into the rapidly changing landscape of diversity within the neighborhood. There needs to be an approach that addresses various inter-related issues within BedStuy and should encompass the input and work of people from all levels of the income scale.

The first step in this process should be addressing racism and discrimination since they are two root causes of systematic poverty and are easily identified enemies that can be fought both individually and collectively. If, as I outlined early on in this paper, racism and discrimination hinder one's ability to achieve self-actualization, then literature and self-expression are two ways in which we can defeat these evils. Once residents are able to reach this level of personal progress, they can then begin the process of combatting the issues of poverty within their neighborhood.

### **Literature and Self Expression as the Way to Self-Actualization**

*It doesn't matter if you and everyone else in the room are thinking it. You don't say the words. Words are weapons. They blast big bloody holes in the world. And words are bricks. Say something out loud and it starts turning solid. Say it loud enough and it becomes a wall you can't get through.*

(Richard Kadrey, *Kill the Dead*)

Art has always been the blanket of safety for those who have no shelter and has given voice to those who are choked with oppression and despair. In addressing racism, discrimination and poverty, inadequate education has always stood firmly in the forefront of the great dilemma. What better way to lend power to a population that is often deprived of a fulfilling education and therefore robbed of power for upward mobility while at the same time, providing an avenue for self-expression and an outlet to articulately release themselves from the burdens of everyday life than to provide education in literature?

I recently went to a Halloween party on the invite of a dear friend who leads nature excursions around the city by day and moonlights as a DJ by night. The party this night was teeming with a crowd so steeped in artistic enterprise that the walls seemed to sweat ideas and every interaction felt like poetry. I had the fortunate opportunity to meet a woman there who studied interpretive dance in South Africa and is currently teaching her art within middle schools around Brooklyn. In these middle schools, children are learning to interpret their environments and the implications of their plight by expressing their feelings through interpretive dance. They are exploring how their world affects them, their relationship to it and in the process, how to release those feelings in a creative way that holds value and substance.

During this conversation, I began to think of what art form added credence to my own experiences and I realized that literature, the art of writing, has always been the



avenue I related with best. Since a very young age, I have been drawn to poetry and literature as a way to understand others and myself. I used it as a way to link worlds that revolved around very different suns, but still turned and tilted in the same way. Not only was I a voracious reader, I enjoyed the art of writing as a way to share myself with others in the hopes that we could find a common thread. I found solace in pages and power in words and knew that writing could transform the world not only in the microscope of your own life, but on a national and global scale.

A man with a scant vocabulary will almost certainly be a weak thinker. The richer and more copious one's vocabulary and the greater one's awareness of fine distinctions and subtle nuances of meaning, the more fertile and precise is likely to be one's thinking. Knowledge of things and knowledge of the words for them grow together. If you do not know the words, you can hardly know the thing.

(Henry Hazlitt, *Thinking as a Science*)

There have been great Black minds that have used the power of prose and their pen to shed light on the plight of Blacks in America. This power has been the force behind resistance, revolution, inspiration and change. Langston Hughes, Nikki Giovanni, Maya Angelou and countless others have wielded words as swords to fight racism and discrimination. What I propose is starting a literary club in BedStuy, concentrating my outreach to residents who have recently completed GED courses and residents who have enrolled themselves in other community programs that offer education services. By developing partnerships with other adult education services such as the Brooklyn Adult Learning Center, the program could develop a curriculum that focuses on improving vocabulary and writing skills. Community members of color would be recruited to lead these clubs based on a belief that there is an inherent importance and validity in being able to identify people of your own color in positions of leadership and roles of nurturing within your community. In terms of reading material, this community program would put a heavy emphasis on local and contemporary voices such as Colson Whitehead and Pearl Cleage, who's writing can strike a cord with audiences who have the daily experience of being minorities in America. Just as bookstores invite authors to read their works, our literature program would invite authors as guest lecturers and encourage them to both read their works and share their experiences as writers and citizens. Field trips would also be an integral part in the program, exposure and experiences are an important part of education and there are many residents who have never left the confines of their own neighborhood, therefore have been unexposed to the larger world around them. Field trips would include local productions at BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music), Museums throughout the 5 boroughs, The New Victory Theatre and other places throughout New York. Through expanding their exposure, participants will have a wider pool in which to pull inspiration for their writing.

I would not identify these clubs as "classes", although there would be a heavy concentration in the beginning on fine-tuning grammar and expanding vocabulary. These meetings will serve as safe places for groups to explore and dissect literature without inhibitions or judgment and eventually, would gradually introduce writing as a way for residents to air their own frustrations and grievances. The culmination of these "club

meetings” would result in residents choosing causes to champion and then writing about those particular issues that would then be published. The program would roll out in yearly cycles, and eventually, I would like to phase out the need for “finding” leaders for these clubs. Ideally, each year we would be able to encourage members to take on the mantle of facilitating these clubs for new groups.

This method would serve a few purposes; not only would we be providing an outlet for self-expression, we would be empowering residents to find their voices and share those voices with others for the purpose of social change. We would also be fostering community leaders and fostering an atmosphere of power sharing and cohesion. Only through a united front can we begin to free ourselves from the shackles of systematic racism and discrimination, not just through advocating for change, but by positioning our own community into a stance of self-reliance. I always say that charity will not cure society and it is important that those of us with the education and means share that privilege with those who have not been afforded it.

After discussing racism and discrimination, mental strain was another aspect in determining the choices and factors that affect low-income residents. In offering alternatives to these problems, I think it is important to factor in economic components that can be aligned with the ideological aspect of these solutions.

#### **A Proposal to Service Agencies: Best Practices for Engagement with Low Income Residents**

*Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope... and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.*

*Robert F. Kennedy*

The first part to this solution would require agencies to incorporate compassion as a policy and not as an individual prerogative for caseworkers. In order to do that, agencies would have to create training programs that placed an important emphasis on cultural sensitivities, anti-discrimination and stress management. Cultural sensitivity training would serve to help case managers work with various cultures and religions in a way that diminished invasiveness and offensiveness.

To offer a simple example, devout Muslim women are neither allowed to talk to men, look men in the eyes or show any skin past their wrists. I once spent a day in a welfare office to hand out fliers that promoted the GrowNYC produce box program and to talk with residents about the program and its offerings. I witnessed a woman who had come alone to the welfare office to apply for food stamps and who was having a difficult time navigating the office. The anguish in her voice was telling, although her English was unpolished and unpracticed. She had tried to talk to various workers who were too frustrated and overwhelmed with caseloads to give her lack of English the patience it deserved. Finally, she was directed to a male worker who had come to help without realizing that she was forbidden to talk with him. After a minute of awkward silence and glances, I walked up to them and asked the woman if she would like me to help. The male worker began to protest since I wasn't an employee, but with her concurrence, I explained to him the reason she would not speak to him. Luckily he relented and I was

able to help by serving as an unofficial “go between” until it came time to review personal information. At that point, a female worker was called away from her work to help in that situation. If caseworkers were afforded training in cultural/religious sensitivity, that situation would not have escalated to such desperation. Once the woman entered the facility, she would have been screened and appropriate measures would have been taken to accommodate her needs. If I had not been there to witness and eventually help, the woman might have left without submitting her application and could have very well missed an opportunity to receive desperately needed aid (assuming her situation was dire). In situations such as this, I believe it is important to have fluidity in the policies and practices of agencies and that fluidity should translate into enlisting the help of community members to deal with problems of cultural and religious barriers. One caveat of seeking aid is that all applicants must actively seek employment while waiting for and receiving welfare, usually, this means applicants sit in a room all day and fill out applications for low wage work without any type of resume assistance or training for the interview process. Many applicants leave each day frustrated and with little faith in the system to help them find work. By employing this woman at least part time as a translator and “go between” for other residents in the community who are Muslim women or even men whose first language is Arabic, two problems could be solved. Not only would the woman have gained meaningful employment through the agency, the agency would gain much needed assistance in dealing with community members who’s language and religious barriers serve as a constant headache for case workers.

I believe stress management is another much needed service for workers who deal with low income and uneducated clients. I have too often witnessed workers who are overworked and overwhelmed, all while being grossly underpaid and rightfully disgruntled. These employees are often working 12-16 hour days dealing with hundreds of applicants and welfare recipients per week. Among these applicants and recipients, there are many who have their own monumental stresses and issues (poverty being the leading issue) and will often take it out on workers who are there to assist them. Every party involved is stressed in some way and this creates a cycle of misunderstandings, confrontations and loss in productivity. Workers should have mandatory, periodic trainings that would help them manage stressful encounters and situations along with available counselors or “worker groups” that would allow employees to discuss and dissect some of the stress triggers they deal with on a daily basis.

There are other ways in which aid agencies could alleviate the stress and burden of doling and receiving aid. Many families who apply for food stamps and cash assistance also apply for daycare assistance so they can seek or continue employment without the added financial hurdle of finding daycare for their children. A large portion are single mothers or fathers and therefore do not have the luxury of one parent staying home with the children while they go through the time consuming and headache inducing process of procuring food stamps and other government aid. I have seen welfare offices teeming with crying, bored and fidgeting children while parents struggle to drown out the noise, focus on the task at hand, and keep a short reign on the little people running to and fro. If agencies offered on-site daycare services, this would likely speed up the process for applicants who have to juggle focusing on young children while spending hours in a government building trying to navigate the system. Since financing is a constant struggle for government agencies, the development of a daycare center within the facility is

probably an idea that will never truly become reality. For this reason, I would suggest developing a daycare cooperative managed by parents who are either in the process of or who are already receiving government help. If agencies could provide the space within their buildings, parents could work together to build a cooperative of daycare providers. Just as the Muslim woman could be employed with meaningful work, so could other women. What would be different in this scenario is that these residents would be creating their own jobs through building a cooperative business. In order to do this, the group could enlist the help of Green Workers Cooperative, which is a Bronx based organization that helps groups build cooperative businesses. Traditionally, the organization focuses on businesses that want to make a positive environmental impact but they are also open and available to mentor other groups in different areas of business. If residents were able to build a cooperative daycare, not only would that solve the dilemma of children being dragged along the arduous task of receiving aid, it would solve the much larger issue of vast unemployment by equipping residents with the ability to start their own businesses in partnership with others and the support of welfare agencies.

Lastly, agencies would do good to update their systems to a completely electronic form to cut down on the paperwork loads and time consumed in processing applications. This would in turn, enable them to schedule more appointments for the early part of the day so that clients would no longer have to miss entire days and sometimes multiple days of work. For shift workers, this is especially beneficial because missing hours at work cuts into their paychecks. An added benefit of this switch would be addressing the fact that mental strain increases throughout the day and earlier appointments could minimize the amount of angst and conflict that occurs in aid offices.

The literary club can play a vital role in advocacy, education, economics and community building. The plan I have outlined specifically targets adults in the area who have been undereducated but I feel that the club can also encompass any resident in the neighborhood that is dedicated to the pursuit of enlightenment and understanding. I advised service agencies to provide culture sensitivity training to its workers and possibly employ Muslim women and men to serve as translators and liaisons for that section of the population who are applying for welfare services. If part of the curriculum had a focus on selecting authors from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, the literary club could serve as an effective conduit to raising awareness around the discrimination faced by these groups. The club members could then take on the responsibility of spreading that awareness and could develop a program that engaged agency workers in the neighborhood around building more understanding and sensitivity.

If all of these practices were implemented together, the strain of seeking aid would in part be minimized for both workers and clients and the process of welfare aid would lose a lot of its stressful associations. By doing this, both workers and clients could have a better experience and it would also encourage more families who really need it to seek aid. In addition to improving the conditions of social service agencies, these programmatic changes would provide a few areas of economic opportunity for residents who are the most in need.

## Economic Security through Good Food Jobs

*“One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.”*

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

On October 17<sup>th</sup> of this year, I had the honor of attending the *Fall Forum on Growing Good Food Jobs* at the New York City Policy Center at Hunter College. On this panel sat Lesley Hirsch of the *New York City Labor Market*, Ben Master of *Fast Food Forward*, Beatriz Mises of *Hot Bread Kitchen*, Luis Vasquez who is a fast food worker at McDonalds, Diana Robinson of the *Food Chain Workers Alliance* and Nicholas Freudenberg who is the Professor of Public Health at CUNY School of Public Health and Hunter College. Needless to say, the auditorium was packed with some of the most creative minds of the food justice movement there to hear these distinguished guests discuss the problems and potential solutions for creating good food jobs here in New York City.

To be clear, I'm fairly new to the food justice movement. When I was a teenager, I had very specific ideas of where my life would take me and none of those dreams included spending my days in public forums listening to people speak about good food jobs and the need for a better food system. I would finish high school, study fashion design, and eventually become a famous designer who's clothing would be worn by the most idolized names in America. After graduating high school, I studied for 2 years and landed my first job designing plus sized clothing for a company called *Chico's* and boy was I in for a slap in the face! Not only did I find myself spending the next 6 years designing for a host of mass-market brands with a few higher end gigs sprinkled in between, finally realizing that my high school pipe dreams were just that; I woke up one day understanding that the world of fashion was never my true calling. So many people that I encountered in that industry were self absorbed, superficial and completely disconnected from the grim realities of this world. I felt like I was being slowly suffocated by the smoke spiraling up from my lungs, the smoke from a fire that I could not control; a fire that was fed by my animosity towards the people all around me. My unhappiness was so tangible, so obviously it's own living and breathing entity, that my bosses and coworkers could smell its perfume; every day walking into the office was a battle of will so I decided to leave and never look back.

After much soul searching and understandable panic, I decided that food and social justice would be the motivation and guiding beacons of my career path. I enrolled at NYU to major in Sociology with a minor in Food Policy and began to carve out a reputation for myself in these two fields through my community initiatives and growing resume. Two years later on October 17<sup>th</sup> of this year, as I settled into my seat at the *Fall Forum on Growing Good Food Jobs* at the New York City Policy Center at Hunter College, I looked around the auditorium and realized that I had so much to learn from all of these people who have been leading and maintaining the food justice fight for so many years.

Before I begin extolling the amazing works of these players in the movement, I'd like to first share the story of Luis Vasquez who was invited as a guest speaker to share his experience as a fast food worker. Mr. Vasquez hails from the Dominican Republic and currently lives with his single mother who's unemployed and his 5 siblings. His

family relies on public assistance and he helps to support them by working at McDonalds, which pays the current Federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. Mr. Vasquez described the daily struggle of having to choose between buying food, buying metro cards to commute to work or paying bills. Oftentimes, metro cards and bills trump food even as he goes to work everyday to feed other people.

His story is not unique and there in lies the overall problem. According to the NYC Food Policy Center's "Jobs for a Healthier Diet and a Strong Economy" report, approximately 250,000 people in New York City are underemployed, without benefits or actual paid sick days and are living under the poverty level despite being employed. Fast food jobs don't necessarily have to be bad jobs, if we were willing to increase the Federal minimum wage from its current \$7.25 per hour to \$10.10 per hour, which was an increase recently proposed by Congress, it would only cost each American citizen \$0.10 per day. I'd like to push the envelope further than that; I think the minimum wage should be increased to \$11 per hour and I believe this increase can be achieved with minimum disruption to the profits of large corporations who regularly take advantage of their low wage employees. We should also push for regulation to end practices such as "shift swapping" to substitute for actual paid sick days so that employees have the ability to take necessary time off without having to worry about making up their shifts or not getting paid for those days off. Employers of low wage earners should also be held responsible for providing their employees with job trainings and programs that are geared to prepare them for opportunities to move up the employment ladder. By doing so, employers would not only be contributing to improving the circumstances of their workers, but helping to remove the stagnation that the job market has found itself in. If you are a regular shift employee at a retail chain and you never receive the training and skills to move from that position, you are more likely to hold that same job for an extended period of time and in turn, your lack of upward mobility keeps that position locked away from new entry level employees such as teenagers entering the work force for the first time or college students looking for part time work to finance their education. Employment should have ebb and flow so that people begin in an entry-level position and continually move upward while leaving room for others to enter that field. This doesn't just apply to corporate careers; this should apply across the board to all sectors of the job market.

Although I admire all of the panelists that spoke that day, I was most impressed with Beatriz Mieses who is the training director of *Hot Bread Kitchen*. Located in east Harlem on 116<sup>th</sup> street, *Hot Bread Kitchen* is a bakery that employs women from east Harlem and bakes goods from all around the world, tapping into the knowledge of women from all around the world who have come to settle in east Harlem. In addition to providing jobs, the bakery has a program called *The Project Launch* that not only trains women in making artisan breads but also provides leadership and language training. There is also a separate program called *HBK Incubates* that allows small food producers to build their business inside the kitchen. The idea is to encourage these women to move on from *Hot Bread Kitchen* to open up their own businesses within the food industry and in turn, have the ability to hire others in the neighborhood. There are currently 38 businesses within the incubator program and all proceeds from the bakery go towards supporting the training programs. In support of local communities and economies, *Hot*

*Bread Kitchen* uses local ingredients as much as possible and this creates a closed loop cycle in which local businesses support other local businesses.

This model is something I think can be more widely adopted around New York City and especially in Bedford Stuyvesant where gentrification is rapidly leaving behind all of the residents who are on the lower rungs of the economic ladder. In providing solutions to the problem of good food jobs, I propose that more groceries stores need to be established and retained in neighborhoods that are underserved. There are about 144,000 residents currently living in BedStuy and 12 supermarkets that serve the area. The amount of grocery stores in the area needs to be more than doubled in order to adequately serve all of the needs of our population and potential owners could take advantage of the Food Retail Expansion to Support Health initiative run by the New York City Department of City Planning. This initiative creates financial incentives for grocery stores to open in underserved neighborhoods like BedStuy. The idea is to have 30 grocery stores in the area and each should be an average of 20,000 square feet to avoid over crowding and quality of service issues. If this is accomplished, we could bring at least 1,000 new jobs in just that area of the food industry. If each new grocery store mimicked the model of *Hot Bread Kitchen* and also paid living wages above \$10 per hour while providing fresh, healthy and quality foods, we could begin to combat the issues surrounding both the lack of jobs and food insecurity.

While building these new grocery stores, the agenda should also be improving the existing grocers in the area. Organizations like City Harvest and GrowNYC have initiatives that offer support to grocery store owners to improve the quality and offerings of their stores. Some of these support mechanisms include helping to redesign the store so produce and healthy food is up front, creating better displays that put an emphasis on promoting the healthier options in the store and providing training in better customer service for employees. I think this initiative can be expanded to offering recipe cards throughout the produce section to help residents incorporate more fresh and whole foods into their diets. Community Chefs that have been trained by the Just Food Community Chef program could be hired to do cooking demos and sample tastings in these grocery stores to not only provide nutrition education, but to employ more residents in the area.

Aside from new grocery stores, we should utilize the abundance of abandoned buildings and factories to build more food processing facilities in Bedford Stuyvesant that can process foods for local growers. So much of our food is shipped in from areas far outside of New York City, which drains resources and makes food more expensive for stores to stock and residents to buy. If we could make food processing local, we could employ hundreds of residents in the area while at the same time, promote and encourage residents to buy from more local businesses.

### **A Cure Called Urban Agriculture**

*Many people are good at talking about what they are doing, but in fact do little. Others do a lot but don't talk about it; they are the ones who make a community live.*

Jean Vanier, *Community And Growth*

In May of 2011, a group of people began mapping and tracking vacant land in Brooklyn. This group eventually turned into 596acres, an organization that advocates for

vacant public land to be utilized by the communities in which they are located. The name came about through the discovery that there was 596 acres of unused vacant space in Brooklyn alone. In 2011, vacant space in Brooklyn amounted to 11 acres more than the size of Prospect Park and thanks to tremendous organizing, outreach and sweat, the collective acreage has dwindled a bit with the founding of new community gardens and green spaces. With this amount of land, we could deeply and positively influence the local food landscape while at the same time, provide opportunities for low-income residents to reconnect to the land and stabilize the economic environment of the neighborhood.

BedStuy has an abundance of unused, vacant space that is not currently being developed on. Before speculative investors come in and snatch up all of that land, I propose that the City of New York designate the spaces that are appropriate to urban farming initiatives. In this, I do not propose community gardens, although I see an immense value in open community spaces. Since SNAP already has a work program to push food stamp recipients into employment, why not fund training in urban farming practices and entrepreneurial skills for unemployed residents?

First, enrolled residents would go through an intensive 2-year program in farming and this can be run by organizations such as GreenThumb, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Just Food and other partners. After the 2-year training, residents would then intern for 3 months at one of the existing community gardens or urban farms in the area. After the first phase was complete, the program would transfer these students into another intensive program in business ownership and management that would last one year. For this, we could utilize partners such as Hot Bread Kitchen in Harlem, Red Hook Market or Reconnect Café, all of which already have existing training programs in the field of business ownership and management.

Once training was complete, graduates from the program would be linked to small business resources and additional support as they transitioned into starting various urban farms in the area. Once these farms were up and running, they would then begin the process of developing a coalition in which all of the farms were linked and could share resources and ideas, develop agendas that advocate for not only urban farms, but local food businesses and could even possibly begin to influence city policy towards zoning, land access, community support and small agriculture. These farmers would also develop a BedStuy farmers market which is a much needed asset in the community since there are only a handful of farmers markets in the area and none of them are sufficient in size and capacity to truly meet the needs of the local population.

Some graduates of the program might not be interested in farming and this group could open a brick and mortar grocery store that would be cooperatively owned and managed by its workers. The worker's co-op is a different model than a member's owned model such as the Park Slope Food Co-op and it would allow for all community members to shop there without the hassle of membership and the commitment of working shifts, which is a hurdle for residents with busy or inflexible schedules. The grocery store would source its produce from the urban farmers exclusively depending on what each farm chose to grow. For example, if one farm specialized in brassica vegetables, the grocery store would only source those items from that specific farm. They could then supplement what could not be found from the group of urban farms by buying locally



from farms in the tri-state area. This would boost the local economy first on the micro level and then on the macro level.

Another step in this process might be to develop a delivery service for elderly and disabled residents similar to a model such as Fresh Direct. Since the population of elderly who use the Internet is small in BedStuy, there would be a hurdle in figuring out the best way for residents to order food for this delivery service. One possibility might be to have a regularly updated catalog in which residents could then order over the phone or personal shoppers could be employed for disabled and elderly residents through federal or state subsidy funding that would be linked to Medicaid and Medicare like Homecare Attendants. They would be trained in healthy shopping and cooking practices and could assist residents in this capacity and could work closely with Homecare Attendants for this purpose. In addition to training personal shoppers, the grocery store itself could host cooking workshops in house by Community Chefs, shopping tours for residents who struggle with food budget management and tastings to encourage residents to try new foods and recipes.

If this comprehensive plan was employed, it could potentially create at least 2,500 new jobs within the Bedford Stuyvesant area. The benefits of this would be a stronger local economy, more local employment and community building through the development of more cooperatives and local coalitions. We would be building a self-sustaining community and diminishing the reliance on benefits assistance by not only employing residents, but also building business owners who have a true stake in the community. Since we cannot combat gentrification, the idea is to combat its negative effects by providing opportunities for low-income residents to take part in the changing landscape of the neighborhood instead of being left behind or pushed out into other neighborhoods with less economic viability and vitality.

### **A Defiant Solution: Tying it all Together**

*Heroes didn't leap tall buildings or stop bullets with an outstretched hand; they didn't wear boots and capes. They bled, and they bruised, and their superpowers were as simple as listening, or loving. Heroes were ordinary people who knew that even if their own lives were impossibly knotted, they could untangle someone else's. And maybe that one act could lead someone to rescue you right back.*

*(Jodi Picoult, *Second Glance*)*

In the previous sections, I have outlined solutions that specifically address each problem raised during my research. Each piece is a stand-alone resolution that offers a specific alternative to what currently exists in the neighborhood. So how do all of these solutions fit together and how can they work cohesively to change the landscape of BedStuy from one of division and need to one of unity and vitality? The answer is simple; all of the offered solutions need to be implemented simultaneously in order to effectively enact change. Each program or initiative should work in conjunction with the other, and can tap into the same audience on different levels. The hope is that residents would take the lead on spreading the word and enthusiasm, and that the circle of networks will continue to expand until it has touched the lives of at least 70% of residents

in the area. This is a lofty goal but I believe that it can be achieved with enough perseverance and commitment.

Here is a summary of the culmination of this work, and what we can do to thwart the effects that poverty has on the neighborhood of BedStuy:

1. Racism and discrimination are still two determining factors in American society that affect the economic security of Blacks. Starting a literary club that fosters community activists and leaders could help to encourage people toward the goal of self-actualization, bring awareness and activity against these issues and can help establish future politicians that truly represent the diverse demographics of our nation.
2. Primary education has a tremendous impact in determining the economic future of individuals. The school system needs a complete overhaul to ensure that students are not being left behind and are provided a quality education comparable to more affluent neighborhoods. This includes better resources, more money, invested teachers and revised curriculums. There should be a greater emphasis on extra curricular activities such as art, music, home economics and nature exploration.
3. Disconnected youth are giving up and dropping out of school because they lack the support systems needed to help them overcome their environment. These youth need to be engaged in activities that boost their self-esteem and highlight their strengths. This should include job training programs, neighborhood clubs and supplemental education programming. There needs to be an avenue that allows more mentorship across generations to occur, giving youth positive role models to push them into more productive directions.
4. New small businesses should be encouraged to establish themselves in the area through tax incentives, lowered rent rates and resource support. This could lower the employment rate significantly, combat the dearth of services and encourage more residents to shop locally.
5. Current grocery stores need to be improved and new grocery stores need to be opened to meet the needs of this large community. Grocery and bodega owners need to be supported in making changes to their stores that promoted healthier eating in the neighborhood such as layout changes, inventory adjustments, better displays and recipe cards/cooking demo's to assist residents in making those choices.
6. Vacant land is blight and decreases the property value for struggling residents. These properties should be designated by the city to be developed as urban farms and other types of green spaces. This would address the need for more locally grown, fresh and healthy foods, build community through collective hard work, bridge the communication between residents of different backgrounds and provide job opportunities for residents. In addition, it would serve to incorporate more natural exercise for community members that are in the most need of healthy lifestyle changes and could provide spaces for disconnected youth to learn personal responsibility and give them a safe space to explore themselves and the world around them.
7. Nutrition education needs to play a crucial role if we are to reverse the effects of long standing habits. Residents need support through programs that teach healthy

- family meal planning and preparation, proper food budgeting and finding healthy alternatives to foods they currently consume. By training Community Chefs to do this work, we are boosting employment while improving the health of residents.
8. Community gardens play an important role in BedStuy; this work has always been a fantastic aspect of the neighborhood and should continue to be supported by residents, officials and organizations.

When I first began writing this paper, I had no idea where it would take me. I knew my passions and I knew my interests, but I couldn't figure out how to fit them all seamlessly into a research paper. I spent hours trying to figure out which topic was most important to me until I realized that the answer was all around me. Bedford Stuyvesant is where both my paternal and maternal great grandparents settled after moving from the south and became best friends, where my grandparents ironed out an existence for themselves in a neighborhood that was slowly being forgotten; where my parents ran the streets and fell in love during an era of heartache and crack and where I now live with my husband and son working tirelessly to revive a neighborhood that deserves so much and gets so little. BedStuy is my home; I am 5 generations deep into it with no intentions on desertion. This project is a project of love and survival, a project that goes beyond the research and requirements and sits well cushioned in my heart.

Every solution I offer here is a solution that I have either become a part of, begun to implement or have plans to implement and I hope that this will inspire others to take a closer look at the people and places around them. We are responsible not only for ourselves, but for the impact we have on others around us through not only our actions, but also our inactiveness. When you chose to live in a community with others, you are subjecting yourself to a team sport; if one player fails, we all fail. So this is a plea to all the people who see themselves as an island and cannot grasp their ability to change the world around them, lend yourself to the idea that we can build solidarity and unity and I guarantee the world will be a much different place than it is now.

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