Daily life for the Brothers is far less circumscribed than it is for the Hallway Hangers. Active, enthusiastic, and still in school, the Brothers are not preoccupied with mere survival on the street. Their world extends into the classroom and onto the basketball court, and it extends into the home a great deal more than does the world of the Hallway Hangers, as we shall see in the next chapter.

NOTES

1. All temporal citations with the exception of the Postscript have as their reference point March 1984, when the first draft of the book was written. Thus, "presently" and "currently" refer to late winter 1984 and "graduated last year" means June 1983. The present tense is used throughout the book, and no developments after February 1984 are included as part of the research.

2. Lower class, as the term applies to public housing residents, is not used in this book as an analytical construct but as a descriptive term that captures their position at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Similarly, the term upper classes is used to refer to all those whose position is higher on the socioeconomic scale; middle class refers more specifically to white-collar workers, including professional and managerial personnel.


THE INFLUENCE OF THE FAMILY

As the focal socializing agency, especially in the early years of a child's life, the family plays a crucial role in the process of social reproduction. In this chapter, we consider the particular circumstances of each boy's family and how the family influences his expectations for the future. In describing the families of these boys, we must be attentive to a number of factors, such as the presence of a father in the household, the occupational histories of parents and older siblings, and the length of the family's tenancy in public housing.

All families living in Clarendon Heights are lower class. For a family of four to qualify for federal housing projects, its annual income must not exceed $14,000; for state housing developments the limit is approximately $1,500 lower. These are, of course, the upper boundaries; the annual income of most families living in Clarendon Heights is well below the limit.

THE HALLWAY HANGERS' HOUSEHOLDS

Chris lives with his white mother and two younger sisters. Their father, who is black, moved out of the house a few years ago. "I kicked my father out," boasts Chris in a group interview. Chris also has two half brothers and one half sister who live on their own. His brothers work in unskilled, manual labor jobs; his sister is a part-time secretary. Chris seems to have free run of the household. His mother, a kind, friendly woman who has never married, has been pleading with Chris for two years to attend school regularly, but to no avail. Although she does not work regularly, for much of the year she babysits in her home for one and sometimes two young children from working-class families. In exchange for her labors (nine hours per day), she receives a small wage.
Chris’s family has lived in Clarendon Heights for sixteen years, prior to which his mother lived with her other children in private housing.

Boo-Boo also has lived in Clarendon Heights for his entire life. He and his older brother have a different father than his younger brother Derek (a member of the Brothers) and his younger sister. Derek’s father is dead; Boo-Boo’s father has lived out of state for the past five years. Their mother, a high school dropout, nevertheless has stable employment assembling computer and electronic parts in a nearby suburb. Boo-Boo’s father, who graduated from high school, has been in the merchant marine “for a long, long time.” Boo-Boo’s older brother has a drug dependency problem. He dropped out of high school a few years ago, recently has joined the army reserves and is struggling to acquire a General Equivalency Diploma (G.E.D.) so that he can join the army.

Stoney’s mother’s occupational history is a modest success story. She attended St. Mary’s Catholic High School in the city but had to drop out during her freshman year to find work after her mother died. She subsequently earned a G.E.D. as well as a secretarial degree and has worked her way up to a supervisory position as head secretary of a department in a state welfare office. Stoney’s father’s experience has been altogether different. Confined to the county house of correction a year and a half ago for passing a bad check, he broke out with only a month remaining on his sentence. With no place to go and unable to see his family, however, he subsequently turned himself in. After serving the remainder of his sentence plus some additional months for the escape, he has now found short-term work cleaning carpets. But like so many others from Clarendon Heights with a criminal record, Stoney’s father probably will have a difficult time securing stable employment and is likely to end up back behind bars. Stoney’s family moved to the Clarendon Heights neighborhood only three years ago; before that time they lived in Emerson Towers housing project, where Stoney’s mother grew up. In contrast to the rest of the Hallway Hangers, Stoney’s mother has a strong influence on him. A strict disciplinarian, she sets a nightly curfew for him, which he respects with diligence.

Frankie’s family lived in the Heights for thirty years, and although his mother recently moved to another project in the city, Frankie spends nearly all of his time in the Clarendon Heights community. His mother and father both grew up in separate working-class neighborhoods in the city. Frankie’s father attended City Tech for a few years before quitting school. He died when Frankie was seven years old. Frankie is the only Hallway Hanger whose mother graduated from high school; she currently works full-time at a camera factory. His sister also graduated from high school, but none of his seven brothers has earned a diploma. As mentioned earlier, all of Frankie’s brothers have served time in prison; four of them presently are scattered around the state in various institutions. When out of prison, they find work in construction, landscaping, or painting. One of his brothers tends bar at the local pub.

where recently he was shot trying to break up a fight. Most of Frankie’s brothers work irregularly; at any given time, one or two may be unemployed.

Slick and Steve are the only members of the Hallway Hangers whose family has moved recently to public housing. Although their mother grew up only a few blocks from the Heights, the family lived in a neighboring city until they moved to Clarendon Heights about six years ago. Their father has never lived with the family, his background is hazy, and Steve’s feelings about him are ambivalent. “I haven’t seen that bastard for a long time. … I think he got put away when he was a kid.” Neither parent graduated from high school. “My mom quit in the ninth or tenth grade. She quit cuz she had to put money in the house. And, y’know, she was on her own by the time she was eighteen,” declares Slick. Currently out of work due to ill health, their mother, an aggressive and strong-willed woman, usually is employed as a nurse’s aide. Slick and Steve have a brother and sister, both younger.

Jinks, like Frankie, is part of a large family that has lived in Clarendon Heights for close to thirty years. Both of his parents grew up in the city and are currently employed full-time. His father has worked for the city maintenance department for nearly thirty years, while his mother has been employed at a hotel as a chambermaid for six or seven years. Neither parent graduated from high school, nor did five of his six older siblings, including his only sister. The one high school graduate is in the navy; of the other three brothers, one paints houses, one works in a factory assembling clothes racks, and one is unemployed, having himself completed a stint in the navy. Jinks’s fifth brother died of natural causes at the age of sixteen. His sister recently obtained her own apartment in Clarendon Heights; she has a small daughter to look after and consequently does not work. Given that the largest apartment in Clarendon Heights contains only three bedrooms, Jinks’s family must have been very cramped before his sister and her daughter moved out. Even now, six people live in the unit.

Shorty’s family is even larger. He has ten older brothers and sisters, three of whom have graduated from high school.

SHORTY: I got seven brothers. We lived here for thirteen years. … I mean, we been through the riots and everything. My brother Joe had to quit school when he was sixteen years old, just because my father was an alcoholic. He had to go out and get a job. My [other] brother, he was a bikeys; he had to sell pot. But Joe was out gettin’ a job at sixteen to support all the kids. … He [went back to school and was subsequently employed as] a cop for two months; he got laid off. He was working at the weapons lab as a security guard. You ask him. He’s our father. That’s what he really is—he’s our father. My father got put away for nine months. He didn’t live with us for six years. Every fucking penny that my
brother got he threw right into the family, right into the house. Cuz my mother can't work. She almost died three times; she has a brain tumor.

Aside from this account, information on Shorty’s family is very sketchy, as he will very seldom speak about his home life. In a separate interview, however, Shorty did mention that with the exception of Joe, all the boys in his family have at one time or another been in the military service, as was his father.

Despite the difficulty inherent in generalizing about such diverse family histories, it is clear that the Hallway Hangers share certain family characteristics that may affect their aspirations. Foremost among these are the duration of these families’ tenancy in public housing. With the exception of Slick and Steve, all the Hallway Hangers and their families have lived in the projects for many years. Shorty for thirteen years, Chris for sixteen, Boo-Boo’s family for at least eighteen, Jinks’s family for twenty-seven years, and Frankie’s and Stoney’s families for thirty years. Like most of the project residents, the educational attainment of these boys’ parents and older brothers and sisters is very low; of their parents, only Boo-Boo’s father and Frankie’s mother graduated from high school. The sporadic employment record of family members is another common characteristic. For those who are able to find employment at all, it is typically menial, low-paying, and unstable. Other less widespread commonalities between the families of these boys include the fathers’ absence from the household, the large size of the families, and the numerous encounters of family members with the law.

**THE BROTHERS’ FAMILIES**

Super’s family has lived in public housing for eighteen years. The family moved to Clarendon Heights only five years ago but prior to that lived in a large housing project in a nearby city. Super's mother and father came to the north from South Carolina and Tennessee respectively in the early 1960s. Neither graduated from high school. Super’s mother does not work; his father is a general laborer in construction but currently is unemployed, a typical predicament for low-level employees in the seasonal construction business. Super has two younger sisters and an older sister who attends a Catholic high school. Super has left home repeatedly, citing his parents’ strict and inflexible disciplinary code as the reason. Although many parents in Clarendon Heights use physical intimidation when disciplining their children, Super is the only boy discussed in this book who admits he is abused physically by his parents.

Details about Mokey’s home life are scarce. Mokey is not sure whether or not his parents graduated from high school. Apparently a heavy drinker, Mokey’s father is a custodian in an office building in the commercial and financial district of the city. Although his father moved out of the house at least four years ago, Mokey frequently meets him at work to help with the evening cleanup, especially during the summer. His mother works part-time at a nearby day care center. He has a brother who is two years younger than he is and a five-year-old sister who has just entered kindergarten. His family lived in a very small public housing development before moving into Clarendon Heights.

James has lived in the Clarendon Heights community for his entire life. His mother, who is originally from Georgia, quit school when she was in the eighth grade. She is unemployed temporarily because she injured her shoulder about six months ago, but she usually works as a nurse’s aide for the elderly. James’s father graduated from high school and currently works in a factory that manufactures zippers and buttons. When asked if his father lives in the household, James shakes his head no, but adds, “He didn’t really move out. He comes and he goes.” James is the oldest child; his two younger sisters are excellent students, but his thirteen-year-old brother has a much more lackadaisical attitude toward his education. As noted previously, James’s approach to school recently has undergone a dramatic change from ambivalence to commitment.

Craig’s family came to this country from Haiti about eleven years ago and has lived in the Clarendon Heights neighborhood for six years. Although the educational system is somewhat different in Haiti, both his parents attained the equivalent of a high school diploma. His mother works part-time as a “homemaker”; she prepares meals, cleans, and performs other domestic chores for an elderly couple. Craig’s father works as a janitor for an engineering company. Craig took pains to explain to me that his father has worked his way up to a supervisory role in the maintenance department.

**Craig:** I think he’s a supervisor.

**Jen:** So what exactly does he do?

**Craig:** Before he used to do it himself—cleaning—but now he makes sure others do it.

Craig lives with his parents and six brothers and sisters. “Actually, I got four brothers and sisters, right? But since my father was messin’ around, I got six brothers and sisters.” The half siblings as well as his four full brothers and sisters all live in the household. His two older sisters have been very successful academically; there seems to be a supportive atmosphere for academic achievement in his home. His brother is in his second year at a technical college. One of the older sisters, who was a straight-A student in high school, is studying medicine at a local college.

Juan’s family is also from the West Indies, in this case the Dominican Republic. His mother and father were divorced there, at which time Juan’s mother came to the United States. Juan and his younger sister
came to join her ten years ago; their three brothers preferred to remain in their home country. At some point, his mother remarried, and the family of four moved into Clarendon Heights in 1978. Juan's stepfather is presently unemployed.

JUAN: He can't find a job.

JM: What's his trade?

JUAN: He used to work in a hotel, like in management—a boss. He decided to quit, and then he went to another hotel. Then the same thing happened: He decided to quit. Don't know why.

Juan's mother does not work either. Both his stepfather and mother graduated from high school in the Dominican Republic. He sorely misses his older brothers and hopes to return to his homeland in the near future.

Mike lives with his unmarried mother and grandmother. His father, an Italian immigrant, was a very successful professional wrestler, but Mike knows of him only from television. Mike has lived in public housing since he was two years old, first in Emerson Towers and, since 1977, in Clarendon Heights. His grandmother retired from her work in a local factory a few years ago. His mother, a high school dropout, has held a series of jobs. Most recently, she worked at Woolworth's and subsequently on the night shift at a large hotel. She found that job physically draining and currently is employed as a homemaker who takes care of elderly people. Neither woman has much success disciplining Mike; periodically, however, his uncle is brought in to help with the task, which Mike loathes. A navy veteran, Mike's uncle is the stereotypical tough, no-nonsense, blue-collar worker. His uncle recounts stories of painful encounters with his own father when his self-discipline slipped perceptibly and threatens Mike with the same type of punishment.

UNCLE: When my father said something, he meant it. When he said to be in at eleven o'clock, he meant eleven o'clock. I can remember being out with the boys one night and running all the way home—got in at 11:05. My old man was sitting there waiting for me. He looked at me, looked at the clock, and that was it. He knocked the shit out of me.

MIKE: (grimacing) That's crazy. Jay, tell him that's crazy.

UNCLE: It worked. And it'll work on you too. Damn right it will.

Indeed, the approach does have the desired effect, for now his mother exercises more control of Mike by intimidating him with the threat of summoning his uncle.

In general terms, the Brothers' families are typical of lower-class households and are much like the families of the Hallway Hangers.

Family structure is not of the conventional nuclear type; most are "broken homes." Educational achievement is low, and employment, for those who have a job, is typically in nondescript, uninteresting, unskilled work. There are, however, some differences between the families of the Brothers and of the Hallway Hangers in these areas. Whereas among the Hallway Hangers only Jinks's father lives regularly in the household, three of the Brothers have a male authority figure living with them. Nearly half the parents of the Brothers have graduated from high school; of the Hallway Hangers, only Boo-Boo and Frankie have a parent who has obtained a high school diploma. With the exception of Derek, all the Brothers are either the oldest male sibling or have older brothers and sisters whose educational achievement is significant; for the Hallway Hangers, on the other hand, it is more typical to find an older sibling has been sent away to prison. In addition, all the Brothers' fathers work except Juan's, whereas among the Hallway Hangers, only Jinks's father works regularly. Moreover, the Hallway Hangers' families have lived in public housing for at least twenty years, and some are second-generation tenants (Stoney's, Jinks's, and Frankie's). The Brothers' families have lived in public housing for five to thirteen years (the exceptions are James, whose family has been in public housing for sixteen years, and Derek, who is Boo-Boo's brother). An even more pointed contrast arises when we consider how long the families of each peer group have lived in the Clarendon Heights neighborhood. Of the Hallway Hangers, only Steve's and Slick's family has moved to the area within the last twelve years. The opposite is true of the Brothers. Only James's family (and, of course, Derek's) has lived in Clarendon Heights for more than six years. In analyzing the feelings of hopelessness, immobility, and stagnation that plague the Hallway Hangers, this contrast will prove important.

The subjective side of these structural elements also shapes the boys' aspirations. Although rejection of parental authority is a common attribute of adolescent subcultures, the Hallway Hangers seem to respect the views of their parents, even though their parents do not play a large role in their lives. What we see in most cases is an unspoken but mutually accepted limitation of the parental role. At sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen years of age, these boys have gained a maturity from years of hard living on the street that is incommensurate with their chronological age. It appears that both they and their parents respect the notion that parental authority is incompatible with this maturity.

The boys' comments point to the limited role their parents play in their lives. In describing his mother's influence, Frankie says, "She wants me to do what I want to do." But, although she has little direct control of her son and does not exercise much authority, Frankie respects her wishes. He knew, for example, how badly she wanted one of her sons to graduate from high school. For reasons that will become clear in the next two chapters, Frankie wanted to leave school. "The only reason I
got my diploma wasn’t for me; it was for my mother. My mother wanted a diploma.” The limited influence Slick’s mother had concerning the same issue is apparent from the following exchange.

(in a discussion with Slick and Shorty)

JM: So did she [his mother] pressure you at all to stay in school when you decided to quit?

SLICK: No. She wanted me to stay in high school, but at the time, things were tough, y’know?

SHORTY: She knows his attitude is all right.

SLICK: She knows what I want, and she’s not gonna stop me from getting it my way.

This type of interaction is typical of the relationship between parent and son among the Hallway Hangers.

The respect these parents have for the autonomy of their sons extends to the way in which they influence their sons’ occupational aspirations. When asked about the effect their parents have on their ambitions, the Hallway Hangers are unanimous in their declaration that such a determination is left up to them alone. Indeed, even Stoney’s mother, the most authoritarian of the parents, does not feel it is her place to sway Stoney’s aspirations. She thinks it inappropriate to foster high aspirations in her children, fearing that unrealistically high goals only will result in disappointment, frustration, and feelings of failure and inadequacy. ‘It’s not like he’s growing up in the suburbs somewhere. Sure, he could probably make it if everything went right for him, but lemme tell you, the chances aren’t great. He’s got his goals, and they’re probably good, realistic ones. I personally think he should’ve stayed in school. I think he fucked up by dropping out. But he didn’t think it was worth it, and what the hell, maybe it isn’t.’

Other parents also are hesitant to encourage hefty ambitions in their children; as the Hallway Hangers tell it, there is little stimulus from home to raise their aspirations.

JM: What kind of work does your mother [do your parents] want you to do for a living?

(all in separate interviews)

BOO-BOO: Anything. She doesn’t really care, as long as I’m working.

FRANKIE: She don’t fucking care. I mean, I’m sure she cares, but she don’t push nothing on me.

SLICK: She wants me to make a buck so I can move for myself.


JINKS: They don’t talk about it. They hardly ever talk about it. Just as long as I’m not out of work. My mother hates when I’m unemployed.

If such an attitude is widespread among parents in Clarendon Heights, then the conventional sociological wisdom requires revision. The premise that lower-class parents project their frustrated ambitions onto their children in an attempt to reach their goals vicariously is a widely accepted notion among social psychologists and one to which Robert Merton alludes in his essay “Social Structure and Anomie.” Citing work he and some colleagues undertook on the social organization of public housing developments, Merton reports that a substantial portion of both black and white parents on lower occupational levels want their children to have professional careers. Before we challenge the sociological perspective on intergenerational mobility, however, we should consider the attitude of the Brothers’ parents toward this issue.

In contrast to the Hallway Hangers, the Brothers’ parents exercise a good deal of authority over them. All the Brothers have a relatively early curfew, which they conscientiously obey. They are expected to perform up to a certain standard at school, both in terms of academic achievement and discipline. Furthermore, they are expected to respect prohibitions against smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, and using drugs. Failure to meet expected standards of behavior invariably results in punishment. In these instances, the youth is confined to his family’s apartment for specified times during the day. Sometimes one of the brothers will be restricted to his room after school, occasionally for periods as lengthy as one month. By their obedience and consent to these restrictions the Brothers acknowledge the control their parents exercise. Comparable manifestations of parental authority are altogether absent among the Hallway Hangers. In fact, Craig explicitly made this point in comparing the differences in attitude and behavior between the Brothers and the Hallway Hangers. “I guess our parents are a lot tighter than their parents. Y’know, at least they tell us what to do and stuff. From the very beginning, ever since we were born, y’know, they’d always be telling us, ‘Do this; do that.’ Always disciplining us. As far as their parents go, I can’t really say their parents are bad, but their parents aren’t helping any.”

Parental influence on the Brothers’ aspirations accords with Merton’s findings. James, for instance, feels that his parents project their own frustrated educational and occupational ambitions onto him.

JAMES: My father had to quit school when he had to go to work. But he went back to school. He was one of the top people in his class; he could’ve went to college. But he didn’t have the money to go to college. He had to go to work. So now he wants us all to go to college.
(later in the same interview)

JM: What do your mother and father want you to do for a living?

JAMES: They wanted me to be a lawyer when I was a little kid. They wanted me to grow up and be a lawyer.

James also attributes his dramatic turnaround in school performance to his father's influence.

JM: So how'd you get back on track then? Why've you started working hard now? This year.

JAMES: I decided I need to have good marks, so . . .

JM: Did anyone help you decide that or just . . .

JAMES: Yeah. My father.

JM: Yeah?

JAMES: He didn't hit me or anything; he just talked to me. Told me I wouldn't be able to go and do what I want to when school's over. Wouldn't be able to get no good job.

Other members of the Brothers indicate that similar processes are at work in their families.

SUPER: One thing I know they want me to do, they're always sayin' is finish school. They want me to go to college.

JM: They want you to finish high school and college?

SUPER: Uh-huh. . . . They want me to get a good job; I know that. And not no job with hard labor, y'know, standin' on my foot; they want me sittin' down, y'know, a good job, in an office.

Derek, Juan, and Craig also mention that their parents have high hopes for them. Craig's parents were the key figures in his decision to try becoming an architect. Juan's father wants him to get a job where "you can keep yourself clean." Derek's family nurtured hopes their son would enter a professional career. "They wanted me to be a lawyer. Ever since I went to Barnes Academy."

In addition to the Brothers' accounts, we have further evidence from the parents themselves. Mokey's mother, for instance, feels that her expectations heavily influence Mokey and undoubtedly will play a large part in whatever he decides to do. She insists that he pursue a career "which gives a successful future," such as management or ownership of a small business. She also believes that Mokey should "plan to be a success and reach the highest goal possible. The sky's the limit. That's what my mother told me, and that's what I tell my children. The sky is the limit."

Thus, the Brothers present a significant contrast to the Hallway Hangers with respect to their parents' influence in their lives. The Brothers' parents wield a substantial degree of authority, both in the present and in shaping their children's educational and occupational aspirations. These parents may be projecting their own unfulfilled occupational ambitions onto their children by nurturing in them high hopes for the future.

Some of the Brothers also have older siblings who serve as role models. Craig, Super, and James all have older brothers and sisters who have achieved at least moderate success in school. These three boys see that the path to academic achievement can be followed. Juan, Mokey, and Mike have no older siblings; they see a path that is as yet untried. In contrast, the Hallway Hangers, with the exception of Stoney and Slick, have older siblings who have failed in school; thus, the Hallway Hangers see a tortuous path that is difficult to negotiate. The Brothers all may not have older brothers and sisters who are high academic achievers, but, with the exception of Derek, at least they are not confronted exclusively with examples of academic failure, as most of the Hallway Hangers are. This difference between the two peer groups also has a significant impact on the boys' hopes for the future, which are the subject of the next chapter.

NOTES

1. The sociological literature on delinquency and deviance cites the absence of a male authority figure as an important factor in the socialization of teenage boys. That the absence of a father figure affects boys' (and girls') upbringing and development is beyond doubt, but the tendency to view single-parent families as pathological must be resisted. Familial structures are culturally and historically specific. Lower-class and black family structures are often not conventional, but, as Errol Lawrence argues in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' The Empire Strikes Back (London: Hutchinson, 1982), the conventional nuclear family is not the natural or universally applicable form of household organization. Rather, the nuclear family is the specific achievement of the white bourgeoisie (p. 120). To maintain that households headed by single women are inherently weak or unstable is to assume that women are incapable of raising children on their own, a view I do not share.