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## **“I’m Still Waiting On That Golden Ticket”: Attitudes toward and Experiences with Opportunity in *The Streets* of Black America**

**Yasser Arafat Payne\***

*University of Delaware*

**Tara Marie Brown**

*University of Maryland*

*Fifteen residents (20–48), formerly of the streets and/or criminal justice system, were organized into a street participatory action research team to conduct a street ethnographic community needs assessment of the Eastside and Southbridge neighborhoods of Wilmington, Delaware. This article is primarily a qualitative analysis of the educational and employment experiences of a community sample of street identified Black men and women between the ages of 18–35. This secondary analysis is guided by the question: How do street-identified Black men and women frame their experiences with educational and employment opportunity? Mixed methods were employed to collect data in the form of: (1) 520 surveys; (2) 24 individual interviews; (3) four dual interviews; (4) three group interviews; and (5) extensive ethnographic field observations. All data were collected in the actual streets of Wilmington, Delaware (e.g., street corners, local parks, barbershops, local record/DVD stores, etc.). Two core themes emerged in qualitative coding for schooling opportunity, which include institutional removal and student–teacher interactions. Also, three subcodes emerged out of the student–teacher interactions theme: (1) lack of academic preparation, (2) lack of cultural competency, and (3) home/neighborhood conditions related to schooling experiences. Further, two subcodes emerged for the core theme employment: (1) neighborhood isolation and (2) employment after incarceration.*

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\*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Yasser Arafat Payne, Sociology and Criminal Justice Department and The Department of Black American Studies, 313 Smith Hall, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716. Tel: +302-831-6815 [e-mail: ypayne@udel.edu].

According to national economic and educational indicators, such as income, employment, and high school graduation rates, Blacks consistently lag behind other racial/ethnic groups. These disparities, which are far greater for Blacks living in low-income urban communities, are, undoubtedly, even more acute among street-identified Black populations who often rely on extra-legal means to survive and, as a result, become disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system. While there are no nationally representative studies on street-identified Black Americans, relevant research indicates they face a particularly debilitating structure of opportunity. Despite severe challenges, however, this population is often ignored in national debates about improving means for upward mobility.

As described in the introduction to this special issue, political discourses on opportunity in the U.S. have shifted to include not only inequality, but importantly, increasing barriers to upward mobility among all but the wealthiest Americans. These barriers are particularly acute among the most educationally and economically disenfranchised among us, particularly those who are street-identified. We believe this is due to the long-standing and widely held perceptions about “the undeserving poor” (Katz, 2013) and the belief that low-income Blacks in urban communities, especially those who break the law, are culpable for their own socioeconomic marginalization (Gilens, 2000). Such beliefs are reinforced by depictions of these individuals as lazy, irresponsible, criminally inclined, hypersexual, and disdainful of middle-class values and behaviors and conventional means for upward mobility. Because these stereotypes are deeply embedded in the public’s consciousness and street-identified individuals often lack political power, civic and political leaders are often reluctant to advocate for greater opportunity for this population (Alexander, 2010). As reflected in President Obama’s 2012 state of the union address focusing on economic opportunity, political and public sympathies lie with those Americans who are believed to “work hard and play by the rules” (The White House, 2012, January 24). This article challenges the notion that street-identified Black populations are to blame for their lack of opportunity and frames a street identity as an adaptive means for coping with disenfranchisement. Drawing on these perspectives, we examine participants’ attitudes toward and experiences with formal education and employment. Study findings show structural barriers were foundational to participants’ socioeconomic marginalization; they wanted to be educated and gainfully employed, but their opportunities for doing so were severely limited.

### **Demographic Profile of Opportunity**

Low-income urban Black Americans lag behind other racial/ethnic groups on numerous measures of academic success. For example, among Black K-12 students in large cities, only 10% are proficient in mathematics and only 11% in

reading, as compared to 47% and 41% of White students, respectively (Curto, Fryer, & Howard, 2011). Further, while high school graduation rates have risen across racial/ethnic groups in the last decade, Blacks are significantly less likely to graduate than both Whites and Latinos (Balfanz et al., 2014), and in cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Detroit, less than 30% of Black male students earn a high school diploma (The Schott Foundation, 2014).

Also, Black Americans have poorer outcomes than other racial/ethnic groups on virtually all economic indicators. In 2012, Blacks' median household income was only \$34,598, as compared to \$40,963 for Latinos and \$58,270 for Whites (Economic Policy Institute, 2014). More dramatically, the median household wealth for Whites was 12 times that of Blacks, and while White wealth has increased since 2010, Black wealth has steadily declined since 2002 (Kochhar & Fry, 2014). Official unemployment rates among 16- to 19-year-olds were even more disparate—31.7% for Blacks, 21.2% for Latinos, and 14% for Whites. Sum (2013) reports a staggering 95% jobless rate for low-income, Black 16- to 18-year-olds who dropped out of school. Blacks with a high school diploma or GED, fair somewhat better; 29.1% of 16- to 25-year-olds and 15.9% of 25- to 40-year-olds are jobless (Alberti, 2013). Research indicates that labor market outcomes are particularly poor for Blacks in underresourced urban communities—especially those who are young and male—for several interrelated factors, including education levels, labor market conditions in inner cities, hiring discrimination, and incarceration.

### **Theoretical Framing: Sites of Resilience (SOR)**

SOR theory provides an alternative framing of a street identity or involvement in crime as an expression of resilience and resiliency (Payne, 2011, 2013). This study applies this theory to better understand how street-identified Black men and women acquire their social identity as a function of individual and structural conditions. “Street” identity, “street life,” or “the streets” is phenomenological language used by persons active in a life of crime, as an ideology centered on personal, social, and economic survival. Further, street life is also a system of behaviors maintained through bonding and illegal activities. Both dimensions of street-identified persons' experiences are important to recognize in that they force analysis to contend with the humanity and complexity of street-identified people. Bonding activities, which reveal rich expressions of social cohesion, include attending or sponsoring social events. Examples of illegal activities include use/sales of narcotics or armed robbery, for instance.

SOR theory is bolstered by structural violence theory which explains how structural institutions and systems prevent individuals, groups, and communities “from meeting their basic needs” through policies, laws, and other regulations (Galtung, 1969, 1971). Structural violence often metastasizes in insidious,

pernicious, and lethal ways so much so that this form of violence has left and continues to lock generations of Black communities in permanent economic poverty. A street identity emerges as a racial-ethnic and socio-cultural based site of resilience in response to a context of persistent structural violence.

### Literature Review

Extensive research documents the poor quality education low-income Black students receive in K-12 public schools, which includes exposure to unqualified teachers, remedial curricula, and inadequate academic support (Milner & Lomotey, 2014). Researchers cite racialized views about Blacks students' abilities and behaviors as significant to why they are disproportionately tracked into remedial classes and disciplined in school (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Skiba, 2001). Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) found as compared to Whites, Black students were punished more often, more severely, and for more subjective reasons. Ferguson (2001) describes how among White teachers, who make up the majority of the K-12 teaching force, Black boys' "misbehavior is likely to be interpreted as symptomatic of ominous criminal proclivities" (p. 89). Moreover, Morris' (2012) research shows teachers often view Black girls as loud and defiant. This reflects broader societal views of Black males as criminally inclined and Black females as unduly aggressive (Brown, 2013; Oliver, 2003; Thompson, 2008). In conjunction with zero tolerance disciplinary policies, such perceptions have led to the overrepresentation of Black students among those suspended, expelled, arrested, and those who are considered "dropouts" (Morris, 2012; Smith, 2005; Smith & Harper, 2015).

Street-identified students are more likely to become excluded from school given how they are perceived and treated in school, conflicts between schooling and street life, as well as out-of-school factors. Street-identified youth often face environmental conditions that hinder their school success, such as family poverty and parents who are overburdened or absent from the home (Brown, 2016; Vigil, 2002). Valdez's (2007) study of 150 gang-involved girls reported violence and substance abuse in their households, and other studies show that street-identified youth are often exposed to community violence (Jones, 2010; Spano, Pridemore, & Bolland, 2012). These conditions cause distress and lead to in-school difficulties, which are sometimes exacerbated by school staff. For example, Dance (2002) found teachers perceived street-identified Black male adolescents as "irrationally disruptive and uneducable" (p. 47). Similarly, Rios (2011) found school personnel viewed street-identified Black and Latino male youth as threats to the school environment, rather than as learners. In both studies, participants' troubles with school were met with distain and sanctions rather than empathy and support. This is also indicative of the fact that many K-12 teachers are unprepared to work with these youth (Howard & Milner, 2014).

Schooling difficulties of street-identified youth have been attributed to a criminal culture, which is framed as placing no import on or outright rejection of formal education (Anderson, 1994; Ogbu & Fordham, 1986; Stewart & Simons, 2010). However, we part from this dominant argument by asserting street life is a response to educational and socioeconomic marginalization and that street-identified youth do in fact value learning and education (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Jones, 2010; Payne & Brown, 2010; Payne, Starks, & Gibson, 2009; Rios, 2011). Payne and Brown's (2010) study of 156 street-identified Black male youth reported participants actually held "positive attitudes toward education and learning" (p. 326). However, disrespect from teachers and poor quality instruction hindered their belief in the efficacy of schooling. Mateu-Gelabert and Lune (2007) report similar findings in their study on street-involved students in an urban high school. They found "The concerns expressed by the students were not that educational attainment in general would not pay off in life, but that the education that *they* got was not worth the effort" (p. 183). Research reveals students of color often resist schooling processes which they feel violate their intellect, culture, identity, or personal dignity (Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theoharis, 2009; Ferguson, 2001; Rios, 2011). Thus, rather than rejecting education, many street-identified students are likely skeptical of the value of the education to which they have access in school and resentful of the terms and conditions under which it is offered.

Illegal street activity, both inside and outside of school, increases young people's likelihood for incarceration as well as the probability that they will receive poor quality schooling or be cut-off from formal education altogether (Fader, 2013; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Smeets, 2014). While administrators' primary response to such activities is exclusion (Payne & Brown, 2010), research indicates that schools are complicit in these activities through institutional collusion with sustaining overly punitive as well as underperforming and underresourced learning environments. Payne and Brown (2010) found students are more likely to engage in street activity in school when they are not being adequately prepared for college or employment. It should be underscored that street-identified youth do value learning; however, they face significant barriers to opportunity, throughout the educational pipeline, which have grave implications for their access to employment.

### **Employment Opportunity**

Wide-scale deindustrialization in the U.S., beginning in the 1960s, prompted an exodus of manufacturing firms from cities with large Black populations, especially in the Midwest and Northeast, resulting in drastic declines in decent-paying jobs for Black men without a high school or college degree (Anderson, 2008; Wilson, 1996). Concomitantly, there was a marked expansion of the service industry, and some assert low-income Black men lack the skills to perform jobs in

this “new” service-oriented economy (Edelman, Holzer & Offner, 2006; Wilson, 2009). However, Edgell (2012) points out that many rapidly growing occupations, such as cashier, fast food worker, and nursing assistant, require little skill or experience. The U.S. Department of Labor (2015) projects that of the 10 occupations expected to have the most job openings through 2022, seven require less than a high school education. While a lack of education and skills play a role in Black male unemployment rates, hiring discrimination is also a significant factor. Employers often view Black men as hostile, lazy, and irresponsible, and they prefer to hire Black women, men and women of other races/ethnicities, and immigrants (Edelman et al., 2006; Fernandes & Alsaeed, 2014; Mong & Roscigno, 2010).

For Blacks with low levels of formal education in inner cities who are able to find work, it will most likely be what Kalleberg (2011) calls a “bad job.” There is little disagreement that the quality of low- and semiskill jobs in the U.S. has deteriorated over the last four decades, in terms of real wages, stability, and benefits (Anyon, 2014; Gautié & Schmitt, 2010). While federal and state governments have instituted various job training programs for lower skill workers over the last half decade, Grubb and Lazerson’s (2004) research found that “With its focus on low-skill labor markets, the economic benefits of job training have consistently been paltry” (p. 117).

Job prospects for individuals who have been imprisoned are even bleaker within current labor market conditions. Given employment is one of the most significant factors in reducing recidivism (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011), vocational training is an important aspect of reentry programming. However, research suggests the accessibility and quality of vocational training, both inside and outside of correctional facilities, is woefully inadequate. Although, vocational training is offered in most federal prisons, it is provided in only about half of state prisons and 6% of jails (Brazzell, Crayton, Mukamal, Solomon, & Lindahl, 2009; Coley & Barton, 2006). Overall, reentry programs do not adequately meet former inmates’ needs around employment, as reflected in studies showing their significant difficulties in finding work, particularly that which pays a decent wage (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Pager, 2007; Payne, 2013; Visher et al., 2011). The Pew Charitable Trusts (2010) reports the effect of incarceration on employment causes “substantial and lifelong damage to the ability of former inmates, their families and their children to earn a living wage, move up the income ladder and pursue the American Dream” (p. 2).

Individuals with criminal records, especially felonies, are legally barred from many types of employment, such as jobs in education, health care, and human services (American Bar Association, 2013; Thompson, 2008). Former inmates’ difficulty in locating work has also been found to be a racialized experience. Pager (2007) examined the experiences of Black, White, and Latino male job applicants reporting comparable education, job skills, and experience. Among the men reporting a felony, Blacks were least likely to be called back, granted an

interview, or hired for entry-level jobs. Even more dramatically, Pager found Black men without a felony record were less likely to be considered for employment than White men with a felony record.

Some scholars suggest economically poor Blacks, especially those who are male and street-identified, do not want to work—that they will not accept low wages or are unwilling to do what is required to find and keep a job (McWhorter, 2000; Patterson, 2015). The assertion that low-income Blacks are disproportionately unemployed due to their lack of willingness or effort, however, is not firmly substantiated. Researchers have actually found to be that Blacks are just as or more willing to accept low-wage jobs than Whites and Latinos, including immigrants (Wilson, 2009) and that a higher proportion of Blacks than Whites in the labor market are looking for work (Austin, 2010; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014b). Further, studies show that street-identified individuals do want jobs (Black, 2009; Clear, Rose, & Ryder, 2001; Payne, 2008, 2013). Thus, as with education, there is no evidence that a street identity precludes the valuing of or participation in formal employment. However, street-identified Black men and women in underresourced communities face a debilitating structure of employment opportunity. The present study examines the following question: *How do street-identified Black men and women frame their experiences with educational and employment opportunity?*

## Methods

### *Research Site*

This study was conducted in Wilmington, Delaware. Wilmington's total population is approximately 71,000—nearly 60% of which is Black and 32% White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). Study data were collected 2010–2011 in two predominantly Black neighborhoods: the Eastside, which has about 5,000 residents and Southbridge, which has about 2,000 residents. At the time of the study, median household incomes for Eastside and Southbridge were \$23,375 and \$20,221, respectively (Payne, 2013). The poverty rate for Blacks in Wilmington was 30.2%, more than double for that for Whites (13.2%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b). Jobless rates were even more disparate. Unemployment among Whites in 2010 was 4%, and for Blacks it was nearly five times higher at 22%.

On average, 40% of Black 10th-graders in Wilmington score below standard in reading, and 54% score below standard in math (Svatos, Doucette, & Minni, 2004; Wilmington Education Advisory Committee, 2015). Furthermore, there is a 60% dropout rate for Black youth and 65% dropout rate for Black male youth, and for several consecutive years, no Black males residing in Southbridge graduated from high school (Payne, 2013; Porter, 2010; Taylor & Porter, 2009).

Also, Wilmington has relatively high rates of street crime, including illegal drug trafficking and physical violence. In fact, Wilmington is the third most

violent city of its size in the U.S. (Chalmers & Parra, 2011; Jones, 2014), and its per capita homicide rate is higher than that of Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles (Payne, 2013). Given the crime, arrest, and incarceration rates, many poor Black residents, especially men, have a criminal record, which is a significant barrier to educational and employment opportunity.

### *Street Participatory Action Research*

This study was organized through a street participatory action research (Street PAR) methodological framework (Bryant & Payne, 2013; Payne, 2006, 2008, 2013). Street PAR explicitly organizes low-income persons, active in or closely identified with the streets and criminal justice system to document the lived experiences of street-identified people of color primarily in local street communities, schools, and correctional facilities. Street PAR extends out of the traditional participatory action research (PAR) literature (Baum, MacDougal, & Smith, 2006; Lewin, 1946; Stukas & Dunlap, 2002) in that PAR is a methodological framework in which members of the population under study are included on the research team. PAR members are included in all phases of the research project, including development and execution of: (1) research questions/hypothesis; (2) theoretical frameworks; (3) methodological designs; (4) data collection and analysis; (5) formal publications; (6) formal presentations; and (7) training in sociopolitical organizing in response to data outcomes. Also, PAR members are monetarily compensated for all efforts contributed to the project.

### *Organizing the Street PAR Team*

This study was conducted in partnership with three local universities and four nonprofit organizations, and it received funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. One of the participating organizations issued a citywide call for residents to apply for a position on the *Wilmington Street PAR Project*. The project sought to employ Wilmington residents who: (1) resided in an underserved neighborhood, (2) were formerly involved with the streets and/or the criminal justice system, and (3) wanted to create positive change in Wilmington. The partnership was adamant about selecting applicants who wanted to acquire a research skill-set and return to school, particularly college, or work in a research-related field. Approximately 150 applicants applied, and after an extensive vetting process, 15 were selected to join the research team. They included 12 men and three women who ranged in age from 20 to 48 years at the time of recruitment. Research methods training for the team took place over three months. Team members met three to four times per week in 18 workshops that lasted from three to five hours across a two month period. The third month focused on an intensive review of the material.



## Survey Design

### *Survey Subsample*

The study's survey sub sample consists of 520 mostly street-identified Black Americans, 210 men (40.4%) and 310 women (59.6%), between the ages of 18–35. The survey design represents a quota sample based on 2000 Census data on the Eastside and Southbridge sections of Wilmington. Also, according to the 2000 Census data, these two neighborhoods had 1, 584 Black residents between the ages of 18–35, thus, our project collected survey data ( $N = 520$ ) from nearly one third of the total population in these two neighborhoods. Sixty-four percent of those surveyed lived on the Eastside and 23% in Southbridge. Thirteen percent lived outside but reported frequenting these two neighborhoods. Additionally, three age cohorts were identified based on established census age groups: (1) 173 participants between the ages of 18–21 (33.3%); (2) 205 participants between the ages of 22–29 (39.4%); and (3) 142 participants between the ages of 30–35 (27.3%).

### *Survey Instrumentation*

The Wilmington Street PAR team organized an 18-page questionnaire that spanned across at least nine domains including: (1) attitudes toward psychological and social well-being; (2) attitudes toward employment, education, crime, and prison reentry; (3) attitudes and experiences with law enforcement; (4) experiences with violence; as well as (5) demographic information on education, employment, housing, arrest, and incarceration as well as medical/healthcare history. For this article, quantitative analysis only involves descriptive analysis of employment and educational items.

### *Procedure: Community Sampling*

During research methods training, the Wilmington Street PAR team mapped out street communities of interest into street locations classified as: (1) *cool sites*—low street activity; (2) *warm sites*—moderate street activity; and (3) *hot sites*—high street activity. A snowball sample was organized and with the permission of identified, on-the-ground community residents, we entered the street community to collect data. All participants received a consent form, \$5 per completed survey, and a resource package that highlighted potential employment, educational, and counseling opportunities. Surveys took participants approximately 30–45 minutes to complete.

## Qualitative Design

Qualitative data were collected on mostly street-identified Black men and women between the ages of 18–35 in the forms of: (1) 24 individual interviews; (2) four dual interviews; (3) three group interviews; and (4) extensive field observations. A total of 48 participants were interviewed for this project. The average age of interviewees was 27.4 years. Interview topics included the significance of formal education and employment, the nature of schooling and employment in the local community, and participants' own schooling and work experiences and those of their children, when applicable.

### *Individual Interview Subsample*

Twenty-four individual interviews were conducted for this study. Individual interviews allow for more personal, intimate, and revealing discussions, and thus, were used to explore sensitive or extremely personal subject matter. The average age for this subsample was 26.3 years.

### *Dual Interview Subsample*

Dual interviews were conducted with two participants within a single interview. Four dual interviews were conducted ( $N = 8$ ). Mostly women opted to hold dual interviews. Originally these female participants were scheduled for individual interviews but decided they would be more comfortable conducting their interview with a friend. Three dual interviews were with women, and one dual interview consisted of a male and female participant. The average age for this subsample was 33.1 years.

### *Group Interview Subsample*

Four group interviews were conducted ( $N = 15$ ). Group interviews are the least intimate of all interview methods; however, such interviews offer a group analysis. Two group interviews were with all males ( $N = 7$ ); one group interview was all female ( $N = 4$ ); and a final group had both male and females ( $N = 4$ ). The average age for this subsample was 30.9 years.

### *Procedure: Data Collection*

All participants received consent forms, \$10 per completed interview, and a resource package that highlighted potential employment, educational, and counseling opportunities. Interviews took approximately 1–2 hours to complete. Also, all interviews were video recorded and most were held in the Hope Commission's

**Table 1.** Interrater Reliability Coding Process

Core code	Alpha	Subcodes	Alpha
Institutional removal	.55	N/A	N/A
Student–teacher interaction	.80	Lack of academic preparation	.89
		Lack of cultural competency	.95
Employment	.100	Home/neighborhood conditions related to schooling experiences	.87
		Neighborhood isolation	.80
		Employment after Incarceration	.90

Hope Zone (located in Southbridge, Wilmington). Two individual interviews were conducted in private homes, four were conducted in a local business, and two in a park.

#### *Procedure: Data Coding Process*

The first author and four members of the Wilmington Street PAR team used a content analysis to generate codes for this study. This coding group met two times a week for approximately 3 weeks in a conference room located in the Department of Black American Studies at the University of Delaware. Coding sessions lasted for approximately 2 hours. Street PAR members coded interview transcripts in relation to the study's theories: (1) SOR (Payne, 2008), (2) Structural Violence (Galtung, 1969, 1971), and (3) Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

#### *Interrater Reliability*

Two undergraduate and two graduate students were selected to be raters for qualitative analysis. Raters were organized in a conference room and each rater was given a total of five transcripts—each of which, were approximately five pages. Raters were instructed to highlight all passages perceived to be congruent with codes defined for the raters. The interrater reliability coding exercise lasted approximately an hour. Each rater's transcript was scored against a master copy. All raters were given \$25 to participate in this exercise. A reliability alpha coefficient was generated for the core code, *Institutional Removal* (.55). Also, reliability alpha coefficients were generated for the core code, *Student–Teacher Interaction* (.80) as well as its three subcodes: (1) lack of academic preparation (.80); (2) lack of cultural competency (.95); and home/neighborhood conditions related to schooling experiences (.85) (see Table 1). Furthermore, reliability alpha coefficients were generated for the core code *Employment* (1.00) as well as its two subcodes: (1) neighborhood isolation (.80) and (2) employment after incarceration (.90).

## Results

### *Experiences with Education*

Most participants demonstrated positive attitudes toward formal education but this level of optimism did not necessarily translate into school success. Forty-four percent of survey participants had not earned a high school diploma. Moreover, 42% reported their mother had not graduated from high school, and 60% reported their father had not graduated or that they did not know their father's level of educational attainment. Thus, findings suggest high school noncompletion is an intergenerational problem among Black residents of the Eastside and Southbridge.

### *Leaving School*

Participants sharply reframed common understandings of the conditions under which students leave school. Most participants interviewed reported being removed from school through suspension or expulsion and subsequently labeled a "dropout" thus supporting the growing school-to-prison pipeline argument, which asserts that schools actively remove students deemed to be academic and behavioral challenges through disciplinary and other exclusionary practices. Khiry (age 18) discussed how school officials are not equipped to effectively work with low-income Black children from Wilmington. As a consequence, he noted the default response to behavioral troubles used by the principal of the high school he attended was simply to "suspend" or expel students. According to Khiry (18), his former principal admitted, off the record, that he did not know how to create a productive or positive learning environment for economically poor Black children. When asked if teachers in his former school were sincerely interested in educating Black youth, Khiry (18) responded,

Not really . . . I just think they're [school officials] there just to be there . . . my [principal] told me . . . he really don't know how to deal with . . . African American kids (or) like the urban kids. So . . . he just don't like tolerate it, he just like get rid of them and he was like other principals. If you . . . like to fight he probably talk to you or something, but [if] you got in a fight, he'd probably just like suspend you for like the maximum days he could . . .

Mike (age 27) echoed similar cultural concerns that school staff, particularly young White teachers, are not prepared to work with low-income Black children and are even complicit in facilitating the disproportionate suspension of these youth. He emphatically believed teachers "don't care." Mike (27) also argued many White teachers, who make up the majority of the teaching force, hold cynical and antagonistic attitudes toward these children. Mike (27) believed that for many White teachers, teaching low-income Black children is simply about a "check" or getting paid rather than helping children to reach their full potential. Mike (27) discussed how students recognize disingenuous teaching and that this

problematic educational practice actually prompts misbehavior by students, as a response to and an expression of dissatisfaction with a substandard education. Mike (27) said:

The teachers are young, White and they don't care so they figure well, 'I ain't got to put up with this, so I don't give a damn if you learn or not . . . that's up to you or you gonna get suspended,' and them kids know that [teachers' true intentions] . . . a lot of the teachers, they don't want to deal with nobody else's kids . . . They come to get a check and that's it. If they can get you out of their classroom in order for their class to run smooth that's what they're gonna do. So now you're losing out on learning . . .

Kevin (age 35) worked as a janitor in an elementary school in the Riverside neighborhood of Wilmington. Like Khiry (18) and Mike (27), he also underscored how school staff members lack the necessary sociocultural and class competencies to effectively teach low-income Black children. Kevin (35) noted "they [teachers] can't relate" and that teacher training does not adequately prepare educators "how to even teach a Black child," which ultimately leads to a breakdown in relationships between educators and students as well as the undereducation of economically poor Black children from Wilmington. Kevin (35) said:

So what does it look like for the kids? It looks real grim because the teachers now don't understand it, they can't relate. So I go through all these classrooms throughout this building and I'm seeing a teacher teaching but they don't understand how to even teach a Black child. It's a method; it's a strategy. You just can't come in here with your book knowledge. Book knowledge is not working. You have to have that feel, that understanding of the child, the community and the families.

Many women agreed with the men in the study about how children are perceived and treated in school. Disrespect and contempt for economically poor Black children characterized participants' narratives about their educational experiences. As they described, teaching is sterile and perfunctory, and there is very little genuine care exhibited by educators. Gloria (age 35), like many of the men, said: "the [teachers] come in, get a check and they leave. They clock in and they clock out . . ." However, the women were more likely to express concern about their own children's educational opportunities and overall experiences. Dionne (age 29) for instance, talked about her preference to send her children to "White" schools because, "I know they are going to get a better education . . . the curriculum is different." She and other female study participants perceived predominantly White schools to be better resourced and more academically rigorous, and they wanted their children to receive the same quality education. Dionne (29) believed school officials and politicians were very aware of the disparities between schools that serve economically poor Black children and those that serve wealthier White students, which she attributed to what she framed as the "politics" of education.

Lanise (age 34), a devout Sunni Muslim, is the mother of four Black boys who resides in the Southbridge Housing Development with her children. She noted how teachers routinely disrespected, underprepared, and contributed to hostile learning

environments for the children they serve. Lanise (34) believed this was due to racist and classist attitudes held toward economically poor Black people. For Lanise (34), teachers' advanced degrees meant very little when working with her community's children. Lanise (34) said:

when you live in a certain area [low-income neighborhoods] you're gonna be treated a certain way by the teachers, whether they... have PhDs, Masters, Bachelors... they automatically assume they [children] have no values, they have no moral conduct, they're not being raised right, they're outta control, they're unruly... that's just not the case for all of the children in this environment... because this environment is impoverished... they [teachers] automatically treat and have a lack of patience... for the children in these school districts... there's some disrespect. But for the most part, I don't think that they're [students] taught adequately.

### *Home Conditions and Homelessness*

Participants discussed how parental drug addiction leads to chaotic and unstable home environments and how this parent/home nexus negatively impacts children's schooling experiences. For example, Louis (age 31) said he "grew up in a crack house," and his mother struggled with a crack-cocaine addiction. The emotional strain he experienced as a function of his mother's addiction was exacerbated in the school environment. Teachers read about a "drug raid" at his home in newspapers and inappropriately handled this information, embarrassing Louis (31) among his classmates and making it difficult for him to focus academically. According to Louis (31), the reporting of his mother's addiction led students to routinely make fun of him, which led to fights and disciplinary problems at school. Describing the conditions of his childhood home, Louis (31) said there were,

Holes on the wall. Um, clothes everywhere. And I came from a clean family but addiction... will break anything down. ... paranoia [and I had]... no trust [in school officials]. ... you're, going to middle school and your teacher has a newspaper with your mom's name on it: 'A Drug Raid!' ... that's embarrassing... coming out of school on the bus and coming home and people point at you, 'Ain't that your mom right there buying drugs?'

Louis' (31) mother's addiction and his emotional and behavioral problems at school increased after they witnessed his father being killed in front of their home. Louis's (31) familial and social challenges eventually led him to leave school in the 10th grade. Louis (31) said he never felt school was a supportive place for him or the emotional challenges he struggled with. He recalled teachers being very "disrespectful" and explicitly saying that he would not be "successful [in life]." More troubling were his reports of physical abuse by teachers, which went unreported because he did not have adequate support at school or home. Louis (31) said:

a lotta my teachers... were disrespectful. Some teachers, told me that... I wouldn't be, 'successful [in life].' ... I've always been a very smart, educated kid. I had good grades and everything but, uh, I would always get into it with teachers... I've even been hit a

couple times. I've been choked by teachers. I've been hit. I've been disrespected . . . And I wouldn't say nothin' to my mom or nobody (about it). I would just take it to the chin.

One of the most heartbreaking examples of difficult home conditions was the case of Byron (age 20) who explained how his father denied paternity and mother told him he was a “mistake” when he was 11 years old, causing him to contemplate suicide. After years of poor treatment, Byron's (20) mother kicked him out of the house on a rainy night, at the age of 13, with only the shorts and tank top he was wearing. Thereafter, Byron (20) was homeless and, as he described, he often resorted to “anger and aggression” to cope with the severe psychological distress caused by his parents' rejection and to his need to survive on the streets. Not surprisingly, Byron (20) became completely disconnected from school. He said:

Experiencing homelessness at the age of 13, sleeping in the park . . . I had to go to the store every day, dog, and steal just to eat . . . sleeping on my people's back porch, asking for covers and blankets, you know what I'm saying? That shit hurt. Real talk, it hurt. . . . that's why I be ready to put a nigger under [kill someone] with no problem, no remorse, 'cause I done been through it, you feel me?

Aaron (age 29) was formerly involved with the streets but decided to positively change his life after his cousin “J. R.” was murdered. He eventually became a schoolteacher and at the time of this interview taught in a charter school for 6 years. As an educator, he was better able to understand that schools are ill-equipped and, to some extent, resistant to properly educating low-income Black children. Aaron (29) poignantly spoke about hungry children arriving to his school with unwashed or dirty underwear, socks, and school uniforms. Many of these children had parents struggling with drug addiction.

Aaron (29): sometimes you will have kids come to school and tell you that they didn't have lights on or they didn't have food or, uh, their mother or father didn't come home. Or all week they wore the same uniform to school for a week because they couldn't get their clothes washed. They didn't have clean underwear and clean socks to wear.

### *Experiences with Employment*

Social conditions participants struggled with, including substance abuse, neglectful and abusive parenting, hunger, substandard living conditions, and failing schools, were born out of widespread unemployment. A staggering 64% of survey participants reported being unemployed. Women fared slightly better than men. Notably, 68% of men reported being unemployed, 57% of whom were actively looking for work, and approximately 63% of women were unemployed, 54% of whom were looking for work. Most employed survey participants held low-paying jobs in low- or semiskill employment sectors. Fifty-one percent of jobs reported by survey participants included manual labor, retail cashier, and clerical work; nearly one third were in food service, healthcare, social work, and domestic work. Due

to inadequate wages or hours many struggled to meet their day-to-day material needs, which contributed to a perpetual cycle of debt and economic poverty.

Richard (age 19) discussed some of the reasons for high unemployment rates, particularly in the Southbridge neighborhood of Wilmington. He pointed out that Southbridge, which was separated from the rest of the city by the Christiana River, is connected by three small drawbridges—only two of which can be used by residents to travel into larger Wilmington. Richard (19) argued that neighborhood isolation significantly contributes to unemployment among large numbers of Southbridge residents, and as a result many of its young Black men resort to the streets to provide financially for themselves and their loved ones. He also described how most residents were so economically poor that they did not have Internet access, preventing them from applying for jobs online and completing school-related assignments. Richard (19) said:

[In] Southbridge... I could name... two people [who] got computers in they crib [home]... have working internet... it's hard to look for a job when you ain't got no money, you gotta get on a bus, you gotta go here and there to fill out applications... when I lived in Southbridge, I never left Southbridge... [there are] no real good payin' jobs unless it's in the middle of the city where you workin' in a big building or whatever, or construction...

Participants found it nearly impossible for economically poor Black men in Wilmington to secure quality legal employment, which would enable them to meet the cultural expectation that they be a provider. Contrary to widespread perceptions, street-identified Black men in this sample were driven by the need to provide financially for themselves and loved ones. Their dignity, as men, was dependent on their ability to achieve the status of central provider. In the absence of quality employment, the streets are a viable pathway to realize their cultural expectations of a Black masculinity (Payne, 2006, in press). The need to fulfill this obligation of manhood is so vital, that the men believe it is worth risking physical injury, incarceration, or death to provide.

Louis' (31) interview illuminated the intersection of masculinity and unemployment as he poignantly described the challenges facing Black men in Wilmington. Alarming is the expectations held by the men and their loved ones that they must find a way to provide financially even without access to quality employment or any employment at all. Remarkably, lack of opportunity is not considered a valid reason for the men's inability to provide, and this unreasonable cultural expectation of manhood pushes men with poor or no job prospects into the streets as way to meet this obligation. Louis (31) said:

When your stomach's touching your back [you are very hungry] and you can't find a job but you really are tryin' to find a job, and you're about to get kicked out 'cause you don't have your rent paid on time, and your child support is due or your baby's cryin' for diapers and milk. And you're sittin' at home lookin' stupid because you know deep down inside you tryin' to get a job but it ain't comin' fast enough. And if you do get a job you gotta wait two or three weeks to get your first check. And then when you do get that check... it's..



minimum wage. . . . [then] people do what they gotta do [or go to the streets]. . . . it's a risk sometimes. People say . . . it's a positive risk, sometimes. But that positive risk might . . . land you in jail or dead.

### *Criminal Records and Employment*

Yadira (age 31) and Anthony (age 26) noted how a criminal record is highly predictive of unemployment rates, subsequent involvement in the streets, and recidivism. Yadira (31), a mother of two small children, argued that the state of Delaware plays an active role in preventing individuals with a felony background from reentering the legal economy. She said that this was the case for her children's father and for many Black men in Wilmington. Yadira (31) believed that many street-identified Black men wanted to "be rehabilitated" or change their lives, but lack of employment and educational opportunities permanently lock them into economic poverty. Yadira (31) said:

No, I [don't] think [the men in my community have] — no, uh, he has no resources. He can't find a job! . . . you know he's in jail or whatever. He may want to be rehabilitated and want to change his life, but when he gets out into the community, where is he gonna find a job? Where is he gonna go to get the education because once you're labeled a felon, that's it, in the state of Delaware.

Anthony (26) talked about how he reentered the community from correctional facilities at least 10 times and that, in each case, lack of employment opportunity was his most difficult challenge to avoiding recidivism. Anthony (26) noted that employment is the only safety line within the context of deep economic poverty and physical violence. Employment was so important to his ability to change his life and yet, so evasive and uncertain, that Anthony (26) likened job hunting to playing the lottery. Anthony (26) said

Every time I reenter I kept doing the same things that got me in jail . . . Last time I got out of prison.. I waited for that job to come . . . and it was hard. I wanted to go back to hustling . . . I knew then if I didn't do what I used to do, I'd be all right. And I'm saying to you if you hang in there . . . it'll come to you . . . I ain't going to tell you it's easy; it's hard. And I always tell myself . . . a lot of people get killed, there's more bodies being dropped for like little crazy stuff, you know? I've been looking for a job for four or five months now. *I'm still waiting man, I'm waiting on that golden ticket!*

### **Discussion**

Study findings strongly suggest or reveal a synergistic and compounding effect of educational and employment barriers, which lock many low-income Black residents in Wilmington into a pattern of intergenerational economic poverty. Survey and interview participants reported their own parents had inadequate schooling and employment, which left them struggling to provide their children with the conditions to thrive, particularly in school. In combination with their own poor quality

schooling experiences, this resulted in many participants leaving and being forced out of school before graduating. Those without a high school diploma struggled to find work within the context of poor job market opportunities in Wilmington. In the absence of legal work, participants used illegal means to meet their basic needs. This was particularly true for the men, reflecting the fact that job prospects for low-income Black men with low levels of formal education are particularly bleak (Wilson, 2009). As a result, many male participants had a criminal record, which exacerbated their employment difficulties in ways that were permanent and severe. Given the structural obstacles they experienced, both men and women—but women more so, in the study expressed concern about the life chances of their own and other children residing in economically poor Black communities in Wilmington. And for many male participants, it is a choice between engaging in crime and its collateral effects of physical injury, incarceration, and death or simply doing nothing to resist extreme economic poverty. Many of the men in this study have selected the former, which explains why so many of them are rearrested and reincarcerated.

Study data corroborate prior research showing that inadequate schooling is a significant obstacle to mobility among Black residents in low-income, inner cities. At present, there is a focus on addressing this problem by improving teacher quality, particularly teachers' content knowledge and instructional strategies. As reflected in this study, however, many educational practitioners do not have the sociocultural skills to work effectively with low-income Black students. In teacher training and professional development programs, inadequate attention is given to helping educators to understand the experiences of, empathize with, and support and advocate for these youth (Milner & Lomotey, 2014). The mistreatment many study participants experienced and witnessed strongly suggests this problem is not limited to a few "bad actors." Creating a nurturing learning environment for low-income Black children requires systemic changes in the policies, practices, and cultures of K-12 schools and the institutions that train educational practitioners.

Also, participants described how drug addiction impaired parents' ability to adequately supervise and provide for their children and, as a result, some youth turned to the streets to meet their material needs and to cope with emotional pain. Under such conditions, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for young people to focus on schoolwork, and interview data indicate that schools were largely unprepared to effectively support students who were struggling with troubled home environments.

*Study Limitations:* Study limitations include challenges with generalizability particularly for our qualitative data from which much of this secondary analysis draws. Our qualitative data were collected from a convenient sample using snowball sampling techniques. Survey data, however, were organized as a function of a quota sample based on neighborhood level census data. Survey-based random sampling of a community sample of active street-identified Black people was

determined to be unethical. However, it should be noted that much of the interview results echo, compliment, and contextualize our survey results.

*Study Implications:* More and better quality education and employment training can help to improve the job prospects of Black inner city residents. For example, career and technical education, as described in Schwartz's (2016) paper in this issue, holds promise for providing residents with marketable job skills in face of current barriers to college enrollment. However, as reflected in this study, there are deeper structural issues which need to be addressed. For example, legalized and discretionary hiring discrimination significantly limits or nullifies the benefits of education and training for individuals with criminal records, who make up a growing proportion of inner city residents. Individuals with low levels of formal education in these communities, both with and without criminal records, have an immediate need for quality employment. Their need to provide for themselves and their families cannot be suspended while politicians and social service professionals figure out how to provide them with further education and job training. If we are truly committed to upward mobility for all, we must ensure that the most disenfranchised among us have access to jobs with livable wages. This will require a shift away from blind faith in capitalistic "market forces" toward a belief that all citizens have value in contributing to the progress of the nation.

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YASSER ARAFAT PAYNE is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice as well as the Department of Black American Studies at the University of Delaware. Dr. Payne completed his doctoral work at the Graduate Center-City University of New York where he was trained as a social-personality psychologist. Also, Dr. Payne completed a postdoctoral fellowship funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIH-NIDA) whereby he worked on a reentry and intervention-based research project in New York City's largest jail, Rikers Island—a project designed to reduce: (1) recidivism, (2) drug use, and (3) other risky behavior leading to HIV/AIDS. Dr. Payne has organized a street ethnographic research program centered on exploring notions of resilience and resiliency with *The Streets of Black America* using an unconventional methodological framework entitled: *Street Participatory Action Research* (Street PAR)—the process of involving members of street identified populations on the actual research team. Challenging the dominant arguments in the literature, Dr. Payne asserts that all of *The Streets of Black America* are in fact, resilient. Also, his research program focuses on Black racial identity, street identity, physical violence, Gangster Rap music and culture, as well as the topic of street participatory action research.

TARA M. BROWN is an Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park. She holds a doctorate degree in education from Harvard University and is the recipient of a Spencer Research Fellowship and a Jacobs Foundation Dissertation Fellowship. Tara is a former classroom teacher in secondary alternative education. Her research focuses on the experiences of low-income adolescents and young adults of color served by urban schools, particularly as related to disciplinary exclusion and dropout. She specializes in qualitative, community-based, participatory, and action research methodologies.

# Street Participatory Action Research in Prison: A Methodology to Challenge Privilege and Power in Correctional Facilities

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Yasser Arafat Payne<sup>1</sup> and Angela Bryant<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This article presents a prison research model grounded in street participatory action research (Street PAR) methodology but programmatically facilitated in an Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program class. Street PAR's nine tenets were adapted to a prison setting, and we demonstrate its promise with a brief case study of research projects at one prison location. This article also explores the challenges scholars and incarcerated persons as researchers may face in correctional facilities. Street PAR and Inside-Out can improve prison environments and successful transition to local communities as a function of equipping incarcerated persons with reading, writing, and analytic skill sets.

## Keywords

street participatory action research (Street PAR), participatory action research (PAR), Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, prison research methodology

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<sup>1</sup>University of Delaware, Newark, USA

<sup>2</sup>The Ohio State University, Newark, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Yasser Arafat Payne, Departments of Sociology & Criminal Justice and Africana Studies, University of Delaware, 337 Edward Laurence Smith Hall, Newark, DE 19716, USA.

Email: [ypayne@udel.edu](mailto:ypayne@udel.edu)



## Introduction

Quality educational and vocational opportunities inside correctional facilities improve an incarcerated person's likelihood of program completion (Fine, 2013; Halkovic, 2014; Karpowitz, 2017; Marquez-Lewis et al., 2013; Patton, 2012; Torre & Fine, 2005). Furthermore, these programs are predictive of securing employment upon release from prison<sup>1</sup> (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013). According to the RAND Corporation, every dollar invested in prison education will result in approximately US\$4 to US\$5 in future savings, primarily as a function of lower rates of recidivism (Davis et al., 2013). Research also reveals that 25% of incarcerated individuals who participated in postsecondary education programs recidivated in 3 years following their release, a reduction of 50% compared with the recidivism rate of those who did not participate in postsecondary education courses (Batiuk, Lahm, McKeever, Wilcox, & Wilcox, 2005; Erisman & Contardo, 2005).

Special issues of *Qualitative Inquiry* (2014, Volume 20, Issue 4) and *Social Justice* (2009-2010, Volume 36, Issue 4) call attention to the dearth of contemporary ethnographic prison-based research and the need to "do prison research differently," with particular attention to participatory action research (PAR) methodologies and activist scholarship. The 2014 American Society of Criminology President, Joanne Belknap (2015), has also addressed and called for the need for more activist criminology. Critical criminology scholars (Belknap, 2015; Dupont, 2008) call for moving beyond traditional, institutionalized (in both the academy and criminal justice agencies) paradigms of understanding and solutions to address the U.S. incarceration binge.

This article calls for street or prison ethnographers to use street participatory action research (Street PAR) methodology within the context of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Street PAR is a comprehensive research-activist program designed for those who are street-identified and/or involved with the criminal justice system to participate in empirically evaluating the lived experiences of other individuals or groups involved in crime (Bryant & Payne, 2013; Payne, 2006, 2013; Payne & Brown, 2016). Higher education opportunities in prison (especially joined with conducting research) are an effective means for reducing recidivism and the prison population (Batiuk et al., 2005). The *Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program* is a national and international prison-based program that brings college students and incarcerated individuals together as peers in a classroom within a correctional institution. Together, Street PAR and Inside-Out offer a sturdy context to perform high quality research that captures the voices of persons incarcerated by providing an infrastructure to operationalize research-activism agendas inside prisons.

In addition, we address how Street PAR is an appropriate methodology and educational intervention to positively engage persons who are incarcerated during and after release. After a review of PAR projects and Inside-Out research, we demonstrate the promise of Street PAR with Inside-Out course research projects at one prison location. Last, nine dimensions of Street PAR are provided for aspiring scholars to extract from a framework or a set of principles to organize their respective projects inside correctional facilities.

## Theory and Research Design

The term “action research” was first coined by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946), and the conceptualization and implementation of this methodology has widely evolved since its inception. PAR is understood by Lewin (1946) and generations of subsequent scholars to be a methodology that incorporates marginalized voices to more fairly guide analysis and activist-based agendas. There are dozens of established PAR iterations, and each, in some respects, has its own theoretical, methodological, and empirical standards. Current examples of action research include PAR, youth participatory action research (YPAR), community-based participatory action research (CBPR), participatory geography (PG), and participatory art (PA).

Generally, PAR requires investigators to include members of the population under study on the research team and throughout the research process (Baum, MacDougal, & Smith, 2006; Brown, 2010; Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Payne, 2017). However, PAR projects greatly vary in how or to what extent they involve everyday people in research. Most PAR projects enlist local residents as community consultants/advisors for guidance and as assistants to collect community-level data. In some instances, local residents are actually recruited to assist with all aspects of the project, including data analysis, formal presentations, and co-authorships.

We advocate for the most aggressive definition of PAR, particularly when working with criminal justice populations or issues related to this demographic group (Brown, 2010; Morgan, Pacheo, Rodriguea, Berg, & MSchensul, 2004; Payne, 2017; Payne & Brown, 2016). Specifically, we argue for PAR members to be involved in all phases of the research project, including the development of (a) research questions/hypotheses, (b) theoretical framework, (c) methodological design, (d) data collection and analyses, (e) co-authored publications, (f) formal presentations, and (g) “action” or social activism. PAR members are equitably compensated and PAR projects are expected to develop institutional partnerships (e.g., non-profit and civic leadership). Community stakeholders provide PAR projects with the institu-

tional support needed to offset unforeseen barriers unique to local environments or institutions.

Furthermore, we recommend Street PAR as the *particular* PAR methodology to be used for prison-based research as people of color are highly over-represented in U.S. prisons. Street PAR is a methodological framework and a phenomenologically based research orientation that requires a deep appreciation and full respect for men and women of color who hold a street identity and/or are involved with the criminal justice system. Street PAR ultimately calls for culturally competent and comprehensive analysis of street-identified people of color through an agency-structure theoretical, methodological, and empirical paradigm.

Street PAR projects also reflect the following three features: (a) research orientation, (b) intervention for Street PAR members, and (c) a vehicle for action or activism that extends to local community members. Street PAR assumes there are not enough well-resourced programs/interventions designed for street-identified people of color; and as a result, this methodology understands itself to be an aggressive, empowering, and liberating intervention designed to provide Street PAR members with high quality employment and educational opportunities.

## **Street PAR and Sites of Resilience (SOR) Theory**

SOR theory inform Street PAR designs by framing a street identity as a psychological and physical “site” of resilience for street-identified people of color (Payne, 2011, 2013). Low-income people of color active in the streets and/or criminal justice system often engage in illegal activity to cope emotionally and financially provide for themselves, immediate family, and other loved-ones. SOR theory is also bolstered by structural violence theory (Bobichand, 2012; De Maio, 2015; Galtung, 1969, 1971; Parsons, 2007) given low-income Black and Brown people are disproportionately blocked from quality economic, educational, and political opportunities.

SOR theory and Street PAR privilege phenomenology by threading *their language* and assumptions throughout all aspects of the project. Phenomenological language is considered by those involved with crime to be an empowering mechanism that can be used to challenge mainstream classifications of their behavior which are typically considered to be deeply offensive (e.g., deviance, delinquency, pathological, etc.; Payne, 2011; Rios, 2011). “The streets” is a type of colloquialism first developed by low-income Black men but eventually co-opted by many other persons or groups. The streets specifically represent a social identity, physical locations, and tangible activities. We use this language to explain how low-income persons or

groups of color internalize street life, a street identity, and/or crime as a social identity—an identity grounded in an ideology of personal, social, and economic survival (Payne, 2011). Also, many in the streets conceptualize their social identity as being far more complex than just their experiences with crime. Like other social or professional identities, a street identity is also a multi-dimensional experience. These men and women, for instance, are also parents, siblings and friends to many inside their communities. Their street identities are central and foundational to their worldview and thus most of their lived experience are filtered through this street identified frame of reference. In addition, SOR theory considers a street identity to be activity-based given this identity typically manifests in *illegal* and *bonding* activities.

Street PAR privileges the worldview of street-identified populations of color as “expert” indigenous knowledge, epistemology, or theory. Street PAR as method also seeks to organize these men and women to empirically document the lived experiences of other street-identified people of color primarily in local street communities, schools, and correctional facilities (Bryant & Payne, 2013; Payne, 2006, 2013; Payne & Brown, 2016; Payne, 2017). Persons, active or formerly involved with the streets, are best poised to critically examine the culture or habitus of street populations. Last, Street PAR projects are required to engage in “action” or social activism in the local environments out of which the research is conducted.

### *PAR in the Streets and Prison*

PAR as method has been mostly used by educational and public health scholars, and both literatures have confirmed that schools and local communities are excellent sites to carry out PAR work. A number of PAR studies have also examined the link between educational and health outcomes by examining questions related to children’s and students’ rights, public health issues, and other social-political concerns (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Lewis, 2001; McIntyre, 2000). Although relatively fewer in comparison, there are some examples of PAR work conducted *with* criminalized populations (Brown, 2010; Bryant & Payne, 2013; Frank, Omstead, & Pigg, 2012; Long Incarcerated Fraternity Engaging Release Studies [LIFERS], 2004; Marquez-Lewis et al., 2013; Mishne, Warner, Willis, & Shomaker, 2012; Payne & Brown, 2016; Piché, Gaugher, & Walby, 2014; Price, 2008; Shomaker, Willis, & Bryant, 2014; Torre & Fine, 2005; Van den Eynde & Venó, 2013).

Payne led an institutional partnership of three universities and four nonprofits to work with local residents to examine notions of physical violence in the Southbridge and Eastside neighborhoods of Wilmington, Delaware. After

reviewing 150 applications, conducting a half-day interview with 70 applicants and individual interviews with 30 applicants, the partnership selected and trained 15 Black men and women (ages 20-48), formerly involved with the streets and/or criminal justice systems across 18 research methods workshops to become Street PAR members (Payne, 2013; Payne & Brown, 2016). After completion of the workshops, Street PAR members entered the Eastside and Southbridge to collect data from a community sample of street-identified Black men and women (ages 18-35). Data were collected through the following multi-media design: (a) 520 survey packets, (b) 24 individual interviews, (c) four dual interviews, and (d) three group interviews. Survey participants had relatively low levels of direct experiences with physical violence yet high levels of exposure to physical violence. Positive attitudes toward economic well-being were also found to be predictive of fewer experiences with physical violence. In addition, all Street PAR members received employment earning US\$17 per hour at the end of the project's funding period. Six Street PAR members enrolled in college. Two members graduated with a bachelor's degree, and three enrolled in graduate school. These same three members completed their master of arts degrees, and two enrolled in doctoral programs.

The unique insider perspectives of people in prison have been found to enable practical solutions to daily correctional problems (Bryant & Payne, 2013; LIFERS, 2004; Ross, Zaldivar, & Tewksbury, 2015). Persons who are incarcerated are able to accurately critique misinformed outsider perspectives, and they can dispel negative perceptions of corrections. Given the barriers persons who are incarcerated face with access to technology, information, and professional feedback required for scholarly publications, Ross et al. (2015) argued that scholars must work *with* persons who are incarcerated as co-researchers to produce and publish research that can fulfill the vision of convict criminologists. The LIFERS (2004) are a scholarly and activist-based group of men sentenced to "life" but have remained determined to offer their analysis and recommendations for addressing the individual and structural conditions behind street culture. The LIFERS (2004) said,

... it is unrealistic to think that any serious efforts to address the problem of drug addiction could be successful while simultaneously excluding drug users, who consume illegal substances and drug dealers, who market them, from such efforts. It is logically inconsistent, therefore to expect a reduction in crime simply by galvanizing law enforcement, legislators, and a few select community groups, while excluding those deemed to be criminal elements from the process. (p. 51)

Torre and Fine (2005) conducted a 4-year PAR project of a prison-based college program to document the consequences of higher education for women in prison and after they were released. They documented how higher

education transformed participants and communities, reduced crime, and produced cost-savings by providing college to persons who are incarcerated. Participation of persons who are incarcerated as researchers enhanced their study's overall validity and, therefore, Fine (2013) argued that the entrenched academic position of studying and developing policy for others is a form of "epistemological violence." Marquez-Lewis et al.'s (2013) PAR parole project legitimized the data produced by persons who are incarcerated by documenting how they took full responsibility for their crimes and worked tirelessly to transform themselves and their prison communities. Project findings were used to educate and collaborate across audiences, including the public, criminal justice reformers, and scholars.

## **Doing Inside-Out Research**

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program is an international initiative directed at transforming ways of thinking about crime and justice ([www.insideoutcenter.org](http://www.insideoutcenter.org)). Established in 1997, this program brings college students and incarcerated individuals together as peers in a classroom setting that emphasizes dialogue and critical thinking. The logistics of the course includes an in-person screening process to determine the appropriateness of the student's participation in the course, a strict set of institutional and classroom rules, semi-anonymity (first names only), and a strict no-contact rule upon completion of the course for both inside and outside students. Classes are typically weekly, 3-hr sessions at the prison site. Enrollment generally includes 10 to 15 undergraduate "outside" university students and 10 to 15 "inside" incarcerated students. All course participants write a minimum of six reflection papers. Papers require students to observe, reflect, analyze, and integrate the information in the readings with the prior week's discussion. Student papers reflect on their own process (and that of the group), and further analyze social issues raised by the course. Final group projects designed to utilize empirical research to guide specific criminal justice policy recommendations are presented to all participants at the public closing ceremony.

Allred (2009) conducted a survey and an analysis of her Inside-Out students' reflection papers focused on one particular week's topic (what are prisons for?) to determine how students ranked the importance of the structure of the class (icebreakers, large group brainstorming activities, and small group activities), the content of those class discussions, and the readings for that week. She found students learned most from the course structure (followed by content and readings) because it created a critically nurturing intellectual environment for inside and outside students to genuinely learn from one another. Second, Allred, Harrison and O'Connell (2013) examined

self-efficacy by conducting a pre-/post-survey design across three Inside-Out courses. On the precourse scale, outside students had significantly higher levels of self-efficacy than inside students; however, at postcourse administration of the survey, only inside students experienced a significant increase in self-efficacy. Allred et al. (2013) suggested measures specific to academic skills (e.g., knowledge attainment and/or abilities to apply critical thinking skills to course readings) and other specific domains may result in similar significant shifts for both groups of students.

Inside-Out strongly encourages students to avoid the perception of themselves as passive objects; and instead, emboldens and resituates them as active subjects. Students develop critical consciousness, personal agency, and active collective responsibility. The second author of this article also conducted an unpublished ethnographic content analysis of Inside-Out participants' reflection papers to document and understand both the contextual and individual factors that influence students' construction of self, others, and the U.S. criminal justice system. All students who completed the course in autumn 2009 were recruited in spring 2010 to utilize their course papers for analyses. The final sample consisted of 17 (nine outside university and eight inside incarcerated) students. University students consisted of three White males, one Black male, and five White females. Inside students consisted of four Black males and four White males. Inductive analysis was deeply informed by literature reviews, our own experiences as researchers in this topical area, and new knowledge gained throughout the coding and analysis process (Ryan & Bernard, 2000; Weston et al., 2001). Intercoder reliability revealed an average of 80% agreement between three coders for each transcript (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The context and structure of Inside-Out classes were found to deepen students' knowledge about the criminal justice system, shift perceptions of themselves and others, and allow students to critically evaluate the theory and realities of punishment and rehabilitation in corrections. Most Inside-Out students (10 out of 17 students) remarked how this course enhanced their understanding of the criminal justice system.

This class made me more aware of the criminal justice system and gave me more knowledge than I could even imagined up to this point. . . Now I can leave S.C.I. with the knowledge and tools to further enhance my capabilities to be an upstanding citizen in my community. (Inside 11)

I have learned how the criminal justice system works from a textbook standpoint, but we questioned far beyond what a textbook could hold. For example, we read a lot about what America considers criminal. Before this class, I never would have questioned such things, or considered that they might

be harming more people than helping. After reading the text and the class discussions, I realized how blinded my train of thought really was. (Outside 4)

Inside students commented about how little they knew about why things happened the way they did in their particular cases, and many described moments of clarity after reading course material and discussing it in class in terms of understanding the context of the decisions that were made (see also Mishne et al., 2012). Inside-Out students also questioned whether the criminal justice system achieved the desired goals of punishment and rehabilitation. All 17 students concluded prison was designed to punish and warehouse offenders rather than rehabilitate and prevent recidivism. For most university students, this course was the first time they encountered people in prison and it is through the context of the Inside-Out class that change occurred in attitudes of who we incarcerate, what purpose prisons serve, and the realization that most people in prison are more similar to than different from free persons (see also Hilinski-Rosick & Blackmer, 2014). Similarly, for most inside students, this course was the first prison educational experience where they felt their voice or informed opinions mattered. The context of holding class inside prison walls, the pedagogy of equal participation and dialogue,<sup>2</sup> and the interactions with each other as classmates in small group and large group activities has lead many inside students to develop a more critical understanding of the realities of the criminal justice system.

## **Challenges With Conducting Street PAR in Prison**

Van den Eynde and Veno (2013) drew attention to the methodological concerns of emotional safety for ethnographers involved in research projects with criminalized populations. Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs's (OMC) PAR project created an inside–outside team built on “complementary dissimilarity” to mitigate the emotional costs the insider faced conducting intense fieldwork (Van den Eynde & Veno, 2013). Reiter's (2014) work on supermax prisons in California demonstrates how even with cross-disciplinary and institutional-networked approaches, scholars must also document the emotional challenges (as data) they face when negotiating institutional collaborations and the likelihood the research itself could contribute to unintended policy consequences. Scholars must move beyond reflexivity or purely confessional accounts and, instead, empirically document the emotional challenges of prison-based research (Bryant & Payne, 2013; Leibling, 2014). According to Piché et al. (2014), scholars are essentially research-facilitators of prison ethnography as a method to foster trust and circulation of power during the



research process. Piché et al. (2014) argued that both critical and collaborative ethnography still privileges the standpoint of the academic as “knower,” whereas “researcher-as-facilitator” privileges the standpoint of the incarcerated person and promotes their written words, the model adopted by the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons (JPP)*, and initiatives like the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program.

Price (2008) documented how “paradigm wars” in academia play out similarly in criminal justice organizations in that both institutions support dominant or positivist paradigms over participatory research. Price’s (2008) study of an alternative-to-incarceration program was dismissed as valueless because it lacked objectivity, was perceived as anecdotal, and did not provide solutions to problems. In line with the tenets of Street PAR, Price (2008) argued that the accounts of those hit the hardest by the criminal justice system are a necessary and fundamental source of knowledge production:

. . .doing research on people convicted of felonies for the purposes of an institution fundamentally dedicated to surveillance and monitoring of young people of color seemed to contribute to a repressive apparatus. . . Not all approaches to research can fulfill that role or function equally well. Although our attempts at participatory research may have piqued the interest of the more liberal or democratic sensibilities alive in the organization, they fundamentally were at cross-purposes with the organization’s implicit mission within the criminal justice apparatus. (p. 406)

Bourke (2009) reflected on her own experiences across three health PAR projects and challenges some of the assumptions of PAR such as “maximal participation” and “shared power.” Participant involvement was described as vacillating between low participation and a strong desire for more immediate results and actual change as opposed to developing and sharpening a theoretical understanding of a social challenge. Furthermore, given communities are not homogeneous, it is not a surprise that at times consensus cannot be achieved and dominant voices may attempt to silence minority views. Power in PAR is complex and it is always a negotiated process, thus generally forcing PAR projects to have longer timelines in comparison with traditional research (Bourke, 2009; Bozalek, 2011).

## **Blueprint for Prison Research: Rethinking Street PAR Using Inside-Out**

Street PAR and Inside-Out are separate programs, but are theoretically and methodologically aligned in spirit or mission to street-identified populations.

When possible, we encourage phenomenologically based prison research programs to organize their projects as a function of both Street PAR and Inside-Out paradigms. Inside-Out offers a sturdy teaching and research context while Street PAR provides a theoretical, methodological, and analytic research orientation grounded in nine core dimensions (Bryant & Payne, 2013; Payne, 2013). These nine principles were identified to evaluate and guide the focus of Street PAR projects. Also, these nine principles are conceptualized within the framework of two subareas: (a) project organization and (b) community and activism.

### *Project Organization*

This subarea is responsible for fleshing out all technical and operational features of the project. This larger organizational principle charges Street PAR teams with critically thinking through use of resources, power dynamics, project design, and the ethical implications of the project. Project organization is also guided by the following five dimensions: (a) project identity, (b) ethics, (c) resources and incentives, (d) timeline, and (e) methodological design.

*Dimension 1: Project identity.* This first dimension focuses the purpose and goals, operational structure, and overall identity of the project. The crystallization of a Street PAR study begins with a well-organized research methods training. Formal research methods trainings precede the implementation of Street PAR projects and are ultimately used to properly prepare Street PAR members for the study. Methods trainings are conceptualized as a function of the institutional climate or cultural context of the respective correctional facility. Correctional facilities are extremely varied in terms of geographical location, resources or technology, accessibility, gender, and level of offense, and, as a result, developed curricula for methods training and the execution of Street PAR studies inside correctional facilities vary tremendously.

Research methods trainings provide at least two additional functions. First, Street PAR members concurrently *learn about* and *assist with* informing the study's theory, methodology, and analysis plan during research methods training workshops. Data collection begins after training is complete. Second, workshops elicit and ensure group cohesion among the Street PAR team as well as foster rapport between formal research members (i.e., principal investigator [PI], graduate students) and Street PAR members. Group rapport is vital to the success of Street PAR projects. Research method training workshops are ground-zero for creating safe or supportive learning environments, unified and empowered Street PAR teams, and successful studies.

Workshops allow all members to learn about each other in a different and deeper way. These trainings are also spaces in which projects first forge an overall identity. Street PAR projects have been found to creatively distinguish and/or adorn themselves so as to uniquely situate their Street PAR project's identities (Payne, 2013). For instance, project names, insignia's, colors, or clothing (e.g., t-shirt) can be selected to represent and promote the project's purpose as well as unify team members. In fact, teams are encouraged to be as creative as possible with fashioning their respective social and professional identities.

In addition, it is during research methods training that members of the formal research team can identify strengths and interests of Street PAR members to later assign them to subteams organized within the larger Street PAR study (Payne, 2013). Subteams are smaller more focused and specialized units of individual members from the larger Street PAR team. Payne's (2013) Street PAR study titled "The People's Report" organized their 15 Street PAR members into four subteams: (a) literature review subteam, (b) data collection subteam, (c) data analysis subteam, and (d) action subteam. Street PAR members worked in their respective subteams over the course of the study. Every 2 weeks, all subteams met for a 2- to 3-hr period to inform the larger team of their various activities.

The last major component of Dimension 1 involves the research team holding discussions on the "power dynamics" of the team. Street PAR (like any other form of PAR) is not a "pure democracy." "Good" Street PAR teams require firm guidance, strong leadership, and clear directions offered in a respectful and culturally sensitive way. Formal leadership also must establish an agreed-upon process in which Street PAR members can respectfully challenge and overrule decisions made by the project's formal leadership.

*Dimension 2: Ethics.* Research methods curriculums address ethical notions as function of traditional and nontraditional discourses on ethics. By *traditional*, we mean that Street PAR teams are taught the formal process of seeking university and prison institutional review board (IRB) approvals to conduct research. In fact, Street PAR teams slowly review the actual IRB applications approved for their project. Conscientious reviews of the IRB process and actual IRB application allow the team to be informed of their legal and moral rights while working on the project and the rights of study participants. *Non-traditional* discussions of ethics include critically reviewing the literature and other credible and creative sources on how low-income people of color have been egregiously exploited by the academy. Street PAR teams also address how most research operates from the perspectives, assumptions, and interests of those who conduct the research—interests that oftentimes are not in line

with the value system of those being studied. Continued discussions of power and who and how scholars benefit from the research endeavor are critical. In line with notions of power, Street PAR teams explicitly determine *who owns the project* (especially the data) and what *ownership* means to various members on the team. Definitions of ownership will vary as function of those involved on the project (e.g., inside students, outside students, faculty, and prison authorities). Finally, Street PAR projects are mandated to engage in activism or change. As a consequence of this charge, it would be unethical not to organize and execute instances of advocacy or “action” throughout prison-based Street PAR projects.

*Dimension 3: Resources and incentives.* Open conversations about the structuring and resourcing of the Street PAR project are held during methods training. Street PAR members are also made aware of how research projects often attract other funding and other forms of resources. In addition, Street PAR members, particularly those on the inside, are informed of how college students and faculty benefit from research through continued publications, entrance into graduate school, tenure and promotion, financial payments, and other employment opportunities. With this said, formal researchers are mandated to incentivize inside members of the Street PAR project. Types of incentives depend on the correctional facility but can include college credit, access to literature and books, or co-authored publications, for example (Fine, 2013; Mishne et al., 2012).

*Dimension 4: Project timeline.* Street PAR projects sometimes struggle with time given the inherent complexity of these studies. Clarity of a timeline upfront and throughout the course of a project’s life determines how ambitious goals become. Street PAR projects also become more efficient with its time when formal researchers *find time* to build relationships with people who are incarcerated prior to the project’s start. Rapport building hastens team cohesiveness once the study begins which in turn gives the team *more time*.

Furthermore, the end of the project and what the end of the project looks like is discussed at the beginning of the study. *The project will end!* Although there may be ways for the team or the project to evolve in different forms, it should be underscored the project in its initial form will end at some point. How the team stays connected is something to be determined throughout the project.

*Dimension 5: Methodological design.* PAR is not tantamount to a *single* research method and PAR is not synonymous with qualitative methodology. PAR is a methodological framework and epistemological orientation that can house most theoretical, methodological, and empirical designs (Bryant & Payne,

2013; Payne, 2017). PAR methodological designs are diverse given that they address a wide variety of topics. At their core, PAR projects are unified by involving members of the population under study in the research process and activism-based agendas. However, PAR projects deviate in the development and execution of their respective methodological designs. Resources, institutional access, and timeline will determine the project's parameters or methodological possibilities.

Torre and Fine (2005) utilized quantitative and qualitative methods for their 4-year PAR project that evaluated the impact of higher education inside of prison and upon release: archival analysis of college program data, individual interviews of incarcerated persons on the impact of the college program, focus group interviews with incarcerated persons based on varying status within the college program, individual interviews with postrelease women who were in college, participant observations of the prison-based college program, individual interviews with correctional administrators and officers, focus groups and surveys with educators, and a quantitative recidivism analysis of women who did and did not complete the college program. Marquez-Lewis et al. (2013) utilized a longitudinal quantitative analysis of re-incarceration rates for men and women and also conducted postrelease individual interviews with a subsample of these men and women to understand return rates for those convicted of violent crimes, the effects of parole denials and long sentences on return rates to prison, and the personal narratives of those directly affected by parole decisions. These two examples illustrate each PAR project's methodologies are driven by research questions and, thus, are often varied.

### *Community and Advocacy*

This subarea focuses on grounding the project in the spirit, interests, and culture of the local correctional facility based on which the study is being conducted. This subarea is guided by the following four dimensions: (a) local history, (b) audience, (c) the PEOPLE, and (d) action plan.

*Dimension 6: Local history.* A historical analysis contextualizes current attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, thus offering a broader way to understand the social phenomenon under study. If the study is not centrally historical in focus, then Street PAR projects must organize a historical component that remains committed to tracing the history of the topic in relation to the local street-identified population under study. For instance, if a study seeks to examine the mental health policy of the respective correctional institution, then selected team members can organize a historical analysis of mental health policies used by the correctional facility. An historical analysis of

phenomena or policy within a correctional facility can be done in a way that appropriately challenges the institution.

*Dimension 7: Target audiences.* During research methods training, Street PAR teams identify target audiences to continually inform them about the project's status. Multiple audiences are ideal and two-to-three target audiences are recommended for Street PAR projects. Target audiences generally fall under two categories including *professional* (e.g., academic, policy makers) and *community audiences* (e.g., incarcerated persons, family, community residents, college student community). It behooves Street PAR projects to organize products (e.g., report, journal article, photo-essay) as a function of audience.

*Dimension 8: The PEOPLE.* Nonrandomized Street PAR projects find ways to assess how the larger community (beyond participants) views the study. It cannot simply be assumed that the community identified to be affected by the project experienced the project in a positive way. If the project determines it constructively impacted the larger community, then the project has to also provide evidence of how the community beyond the Street PAR team and study's sample supported the project. McDougal (2014) makes the argument that adherence to the principle of "ontological authenticity" is paramount. To what extent the project is received by the larger population is also about knowing "how well the research allows members of the setting to gain a better understanding of their social conditions" (McDougal, 2014, p. 273).

*Dimension 9: Action plan.* "Action" or social activism is required by Street PAR projects and action products, mostly due to the study's context, can range considerably in their expressions (Payne, 2013; Payne & Brown, 2016; Payne, 2017). Successful social justice projects organized inside correctional facilities are only successful if done with and through the authorities of prison environments. Correctional-based action needs to be conceptualized in ways that benefit the institution without comprising the integrity of the project. To carry out action, we recommended organizing an "action subteam" of selected Street PAR members. This subteam is responsible for developing and executing an "action schedule" throughout the life of the project—an action schedule that has to first be approved by the larger team and correctional institution. Action schedules are also best guided by formal theories of social justice as related to the project's findings (Payne, 2006). Social action theory efficiently streamlines the action goals by remaining transparent and adhering to a concrete timeline. This theoretical approach with action prevents the project from evolving into unfocused forms of activism.

Group projects, which are required by Inside-Out courses, are an excellent way to exact notions of scholarship and policy-based activism. For example, each Inside-Out class spends the last 4 weeks working on a group project of their choosing that utilizes data to guide prison policy recommendations. The 2012 Inside-Out cohort's group project focused on recommendations for the implementation of evidence-based practices for reentry programs geared at the prison's reintegration dormitory. One key recommendation advocated a partnership between the prison and the university to enable college students to co-facilitate some of the needed reintegration dorm programs to address staff shortages and budget cuts at the prison. The prison site was very receptive to the plan and the pilot initiative was implemented in spring 2013. Eight college students enrolled in a college internship course and were trained by both the prison and faculty member to co-facilitate four different programs for approximately 80 men housed in the reintegration dorm. University students gained the educational and career benefits of working in a correctional environment, and incarcerated men gained the educational skills developed through the programs and completed hours necessary toward employability certification. The prison also implemented required reintegration programs without incurring additional costs and this initiative was designated a "best practice" by the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC).

## Conclusion

Educational programming inside prisons increases the likelihood of acquiring educational and employment opportunities upon release thus greatly reducing their chances for recidivism. Correctional facilities are overcrowded with mostly low-level non-violent offenders and at least 95% of nearly 2.5 million persons incarcerated will be released at some point (Alexander, 2010; Halkovic, 2014). In fact, correctional facilities release approximately 700,000 incarcerated persons each year to local communities (Carson & Golinelli, 2014). Given opportunity is the greatest predictor of reducing recidivism and improving overall public safety, it behooves larger society to equip returning men and women with a professional skill set so that they are able to function in a modern society.

Street PAR is a comprehensive program that provides social-cultural, educational, and economic capital to incarcerated people. Street PAR is also a phenomenologically based research orientation and methodological framework that establishes a reciprocal university–community partnership for all participants involved with prison-based research to benefit. The Inside-Out program aligns well with Street PAR by offering an infrastructure to operationalize this research-action enterprise inside prisons. *Time* is perhaps the

biggest challenge Street PAR faces inside prisons even if these studies are organized through the Inside-Out program. We strongly recommend using the Inside-Out principle of *group projects* as a way to deliver Street PAR inside prisons. Group projects should be conceptualized across two semesters rather than one, which will give the Street PAR *more time*. Ideally, the first semester course should be to developed and train Street PAR members in the five dimensions of project organization (project identity, ethics, resources and incentives, timeline, and methodological design) and the second semester course should focus on the four dimensions of community and advocacy (local history, audience, the PEOPLE, and the action plan).

Street PAR is an effective and ethical methodological framework that enhances contemporary prison-based research. This research paradigm considers social advocacy as an important component for implementing short- and long-term solutions to community-defined social problems, as well as building the necessary social-cultural, educational, and economic capital for Street PAR participants. In sum, Street PAR with Inside-Out *provides an adequate context for continued evolution* of prison-based research.

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### **Notes**

1. The link between higher education and recidivism for people in prison is *only one justification* for offering higher education classes in prison. For a much richer discussion of the arguments for higher education in prison, see Lagemann (2016).
2. The power dynamics in institutional settings of prison impact the ability of inside and outside students to truly have equal voice and/or be viewed as college student peers by standard terms. For further discussion of the challenges of teaching Inside-Out, please see Van Gundy et al. (2013).

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### Author Biographies

**Yasser Arafat Payne**, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, University of Delaware. His street ethnographic research program is centered on exploring notions of resilience and resilience in street identified Black populations using *Street Participatory Action Research* (Street PAR) methodology. Dr. Payne's research program also focuses on street identity, physical violence, structural violence, as well as Gangster Rap music, and culture.

**Angela Bryant**, PhD, is an associate professor of sociology at The Ohio State University, Newark. Her activist research agenda focuses on the organizational contexts of juvenile and criminal courts, racial/ethnic, gender, and class disparities in case processing decisions for offenders, and the implementation and consequences of juvenile/criminal justice policies. Recognized and awarded for her Inside-Out work, she serves as the instructor liaison to the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) for all Inside-Out courses offered in Ohio.