

## “What Do You Want to Tell Me about This Picture?”

On a bright spring day, ten middle schoolers from the Latino and African American communities in South Central Los Angeles,<sup>1</sup> ranging in age from twelve to fourteen, sit around an oval-shaped desk in a dimly lit second-floor classroom on the campus of the University of Southern California (USC) staring at a photograph of a railroad track (see Figure 1.1) featured on a PowerPoint slide. These middle schoolers are participating in the Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI) tutorial program sponsored by USC.<sup>2</sup> Twelve-year-old Cesar, who has taken the photo, waits a few minutes before he speaks up: “It’s about that we can choose our path, the dark or the light; we can choose.” Thirteen-year-old Manuel likes that idea: “Yeah, the tracks are a road to somewhere.” Cesar shakes his head in agreement and says, “The tracks will get us away from the ghetto.”

The other kids have a different view of the railroad track photograph. For thirteen-year-old Juan, “those tracks are in a dirty area.” Fourteen-year-old Wynette agrees: “The railroad is in a bad environment.” Six of the kids nod when thirteen-year-old Kyle adds, “It’s ugly. That’s what I see every day. . . . We live in the shadow, and no one sees that we are here.” By the end of this two-year study, fifty-four kids have shared their experiences of living in the “ugly” South Central area. I also hold interviews with a smaller group consisting of twenty-one college students from USC, three teachers, two psychologists, the directors of NAI and the Willard Center, and fifteen

NAI parents—bringing the total to seventy-nine participants, all of whose perspectives I include in this book.<sup>3</sup>

Not every area of South Central can be considered ugly. But there are certain streets where the Bloods, the Crips, and the Mara Salvatrucha (M-13) gang dominate; where drive-by shootings occur regularly; and where drug dealers sell to school dropouts. In other words, South Central has a reputation as a community of kids that have little regard for law and order. Many kids are doing the “right thing,” attending school and not joining gangs or using drugs, but that group is largely ignored. As a result, the “ugly” image many people have of South Central creates a division in terms of race, ethnicity, and class between ordinary South Central kids and USC students, who keep their distance from other residents.

Occasionally these two worlds meet, if ever so briefly, in classrooms of local schools when a group of USC students tutors kids, or when USC students jog past the kids on a run along Vermont Avenue, or at Ralph’s or Superior Supermarket’s checkout counters—two of three supermarkets that serve a population of fifty thousand in what some consider to be one of the densest areas in Los Angeles and the United States.<sup>4</sup> These meetings do little to spark change in these groups, and so the inner-city kid world remains hidden, covered by a fear-provoking “ghetto thug” image.

The social distance between these two groups of South Central residents is made quite clear in my discussions with a class of twenty-one USC students who reside in student housing on or near the USC campus. I ask them if they are aware of the popular assumptions about kids like Kyle. Adam, who spent his childhood in a small Montana town, answers first: “Ghetto thug. I think most people see inner-city kids as poor, lazy, struggling, ghetto types who live in crime- and drug-ridden neighborhoods and who have bad parents.” Several students nod in agreement. The rest remain silent. I do not suggest that all the college students hold these views. In Chapter 5, several college-student NAI tutors give us another perspective.

Nonetheless, the overriding image of inner-city kids’ neighborhoods is far removed from Adam’s description of the “comfortable” and “safe” neighborhoods of his childhood. Another student, Theresa, who rushes off to her family’s home in Orange County every chance she gets, sums up her childhood years: “My middle school experiences were great because I went to a good school in a safe area, and my neighborhood had a similar dynamic. I was around good people with strong values.” What impression did the USC students have of the railroad track photo and the area surrounding USC?

Theresa, who speaks up more than the rest, puts it this way: “Why would anyone want to live there? I’m terrified to walk off campus.” All the students plan to leave the area after they graduate.

For middle-class students like Theresa, even if they do live down the street from these kids, the kids are made visible only when USC’s campus police send out an e-mail alert that a USC student has been robbed by a hood-wearing troublemaker or a Black or Latino kid riding a bike. The USC students share the prevailing view of South Central. Therefore, the assumption that inner-city kids all end up in gangs, in prisons, or on drugs makes sense to them.

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Three days a week, Kyle, Emma, and Maria rushed from their school classrooms to another class where they had to read another set of books and receive instructions from another group of teachers. I wondered what these kids, who were trying so hard to keep up with all of that work, had to say about the stigma of being an inner-city kid. In an attempt to examine this group of inner-city kids’ lives both structurally and individually, the larger questions for me concern the following: How do these kids experience and react to the social problems associated with South Central? What do they think about their living conditions, family life, peer relations, and academic achievement in South Central, with its high concentration of social problems? How do they negotiate the challenges of living next door to the drug dealers, the gang members, and the friends who have dropped out of school? And why do they attend after-school programs when they could “hang out” with their peers?

### The Neighborhood Academic Initiative Program

Some of the questions I raise in this book really began to take shape in 1997, when I had a chance to interview a group of kids in my position as a consultant for NAI.<sup>5</sup> The director at that time asked me to interview the kids to get their perspective on the program. I published the results of those interviews in an article titled “It’s Going Good?: Inner-City Black and Latino Adolescents’ Perceptions about Achieving an Education.”<sup>6</sup> That study raised a number of questions about kids’ perspectives of inner-city life that are explored in the current study, particularly those of kids who did not fit the stereotype of the ghetto thug. In that study, I suggested that adults often do

not regard adolescents as having much interest in shaping the world they are going to inherit. Not so, I argued. These NAI kids were C students at risk for dropping out of school until their teachers took notice of their potential and recommended them for the tutorial program that would help them upgrade their math and English skills. The kids wanted to succeed academically and transcend their inner-city backgrounds.

The Neighborhood Academic Initiative, a seven-year college preparatory program, was established in 1989 at USC and was created to prepare low-income neighborhood students for admission to a college or university.<sup>7</sup> The Pre-College Enrichment Academy provides enhanced educational services to middle and high school students with the goal helping them acquire the academic skills they need to flourish in a college or university setting. The sixth-to-twelfth-grade program is composed of basic class material, tutoring, SAT tutoring, college counseling, supplementary material, and, in some cases, social worker support.

According to Robert Halpern, there is much consensus on what constitutes a good after-school program, though not necessarily a great one. Namely, a good after-school program needs an adequate number of staff to ensure individualized attention to children, an adequate level of staff literacy to help children with learning-support needs, adequate facilities and equipment to allow a measure of variety and choice in activities, and nutritious snacks for children. Important process attributes include warm and supportive staff; a flexible and relaxed schedule; a predictable environment; opportunities to explore ideas, feelings, and identities; avenues for self-expression; exposure to both one's own heritage and the larger culture; and time for unstructured play and fun.<sup>8</sup>

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I began the research for this book in 2007 as a way to answer questions raised in the earlier study about kids' perceptions of life in South Central. I started my research by holding a focus group consisting of three minority USC students who could reflect on their early years living in the South Central community. This is an ideal group to interview because they have had a few years in which to gain a perspective on life in South Central. Yet they were still close enough in age to the kids in this study that they would be able to easily recall their kid years living in South Central.

I met two African Americans, twenty-year-olds Terry and Alicia, and Victor, a twenty-two-year-old Latino, at a café where they shared stories

of their adolescent years over coffee and tea. I began by asking them questions such as the following: “What was it like for you growing up in South Central?” “What do you think of those experiences now that you are older and no longer living here?” They spoke for more than two hours, sometimes interrupting each other as they thought of more to say about living in South Central. Terry shared his view of growing up in South Central: “I think for myself, what I went through were experiences that most kids don’t have. Like, I don’t want to sound like the typical *Boyz n the Hood* drama story, but I actually had bullets whiz through my room when I was like four years old living in Watts.” Terry’s story about life in the inner city was confirmed by all of the kids who became part of the official study.

My next task was to seek out Black and Latino adolescents ages twelve to fifteen who lived in the South Central area, grew up in low-income working families, and would be considered average kids attending the local schools and not involved with drugs or gangs. I included a group of thirty-nine NAI kids in this study.

As a way to expand the pool to non-NAI kids who might have a different perspective of life in South Central, I contacted the Willard after-school program, another neighborhood program. I met and interviewed fifteen Willard kids ages fourteen to fifteen. This after-school program did not provide tutorial services or require parents to sign contracts or attend meetings. As with many after-school programs, Willard mainly served the kids as a safe place where they could receive homework assistance, play video games, and watch television. No other inner-city tutorial programs in the local area can match the NAI program’s resources and commitment. The final group of kids who participated in this study consisted of fifty-four Black and Latino kids ages twelve to fifteen.

For this book, I conducted several focus groups and in-depth interviews with thirty-nine kids ages twelve to fifteen. Most had been in NAI for one to two years. All the kids came from families with annual incomes of \$8,000 to \$16,000. Half of them had brothers who were involved in gangs, and a few had sisters who were teenage mothers. The NAI kids’ families must sign a contract stating that they will commit their families to the goals of the program by abiding by all the rules and attending a Saturday morning workshop offering new strategies related to issues concerning middle schoolers who, because they are in a demanding program, will face new challenges. If they stay in the program, graduate from high school, and earn passing SAT scores, they will be offered a financial aid package from USC, or they can

apply to other university programs. According to NAI's Graduate Survey 1997–2011, over a sixteen-year period, an average of nearly forty NAI recipients per year graduated from the program; out of 635 graduates, 621 graduates went on to postsecondary education and 513 enrolled in four-year colleges (216 enrolled at USC).<sup>9</sup> Others were accepted in the UC and state systems as well as community colleges.

NAI also provides counseling services to help the kids and their families deal with changes in schoolwork habits and their relationships with parents and peers. According to the middle schoolers, NAI surrounded them with a combination of academic and nonacademic support services that profoundly affected three major areas of their lives: academic, social, and personal. These qualities instilled in the kids a feeling that they could work long and hard to achieve success, that they could be trustworthy, and that they were responsible to their teachers and peer members to develop the “habit of mind and character,” qualities that Deborah Meier suggests are essential for overall educational success.<sup>10</sup> As twelve-year-old Cesar put it, “The program made our behavior into a more positive type of thing.”

### The Kids

None of the kids in that study conform to the views advanced by John Ogbu, who uses the concept of a “blocked opportunities framework” to explain why African American kids do not achieve academic success. Ogbu's study found that minority kids have a difficult time accomplishing much in life because they have developed a defiant attitude that actively rejects mainstream behaviors. That attitude has resulted in an “oppositional culture” effect, in which minority students who succeeded in school were considered to be “acting white.”<sup>11</sup>

In Ogbu's study, African American high school students did poorly in school because they feared being accused of acting White by their peer group. Ogbu traces the roots of the problem of institutionalized racism within American society, which he contends led Blacks to define academic achievement as the prerogative of Whites and to invest themselves instead in alternative pursuits.<sup>12</sup>

The kids in this current study challenge Ogbu's “acting white” perspective. Many of them have made a commitment to complete all of their regular school demands as well as to do the extra schoolwork required by NAI both during the week and on Saturday mornings, which most middle schoolers would rather spend playing games or going to the movies with friends.

## Thirteen-Year-Old Kyle

Late one afternoon, Kyle, one of the first NAI students to sign up to participate in this study, sits down to talk with me and to share photographs he has taken of his community, school, and family. He is a cheerful person who smiles widely when he talks about his school and his neighborhood. Kyle lives with his physically disabled mother and nine-year-old sister in a rented one-bedroom house on a street dotted with single-family homes and three-story apartment buildings in a South Central neighborhood, a mile past USC on Vermont and 32nd Place—a few blocks past a small grocery store plastered with “Don’t Forget to Vote” signs in English and Spanish on its front door.

Kyle, a tall, lanky African American, flashing a bright smile, disagrees with the “ghetto thug” assessment by “outsiders”—a term used to describe people who live outside South Central. Like most other Latino and Black kids I talk to, Kyle thinks most people have a negative view of him. It is hard for someone like Kyle, who is growing up in an impoverished inner-city neighborhood, to understand that his world, through the NAI program, is linked to privileged college students who are able and willing to share valuable social resources. Kyle and the other fifty-three kids say that getting an education is uppermost in their minds. They also say that spending time after school in a positive environment where they can “hang out” with other students like themselves and not on the streets is also important.

Kyle is proud of his home—never mind that the photographs he spreads around the table show a one-story house in desperate need of paint and repair (see Figure 1.2): “I like my house and block. I know everybody. That’s good about where I live—it’s not wealthy, but I can play basketball and ride my bike about because there are no gangs near my house.” His response to the general perception of inner-city kids?

Most people see kids like me as inner-city gangbangers. I don’t wanna be a gangbanger. That judges me and how I act. I don’t do that stuff. It makes the community look bad. Um, like some people say that, like where you live, says how smart you are or how dumb. But I don’t think that’s possible because I live in, like, a pretty bad neighborhood, but I’m still, like, a bright kid. I take all AP classes.

Kyle has plans. They differ from those of the college students who plan to study history, or “major in soc,” or become a social worker. Kyle, a handsome





Figure 1.2

ninth grader, plans to play professional basketball or become a mechanic. When pressed about his future plans, he says he is good at basketball and “wants to make lots of money like Kobe Bryant.” If that plan does not work, “I’m good with my hands, so I can become a mechanic.” He says he is “very good in math,” but he has no plans to use that skill in the future.

There are times, Kyle admits, when he does not feel safe on some of the streets in his neighborhood, like the time Emmi, a petite fourteen-year-old who sits next to him and faintly smiles whenever he speaks, warned him as he walked her home: “The Crips and Bloods live down the block from me and across the street from each other. So I don’t walk down that street.” Although Kyle likes his neighborhood, Emma admits being afraid to play outside and says that if she rides her bike outside, she stays alert to drive-by shootings by the violent street gangs that often patrol her street.<sup>13</sup>

Kyle also fears the pit bull owned by the next-door neighbors. According to Kyle, one day the dog jumped over a fence that separates his house from that of the neighbors. “The dog rushed at my mother. She was scared. But we got her into the house right away and the dog didn’t get her. There are a lot of those dogs in this neighborhood. If he comes after my mother again, I will beat him and kill him.”<sup>14</sup> Ironically, these kids, who are commonly assumed to be “ghetto thugs” but are involved in a tutorial program that promises a



way out of poverty, live in fear of the same South Central neighborhoods that scare the college students.

### Studying Inner-City Youth

Sociologists have examined many aspects of inner-city life, including its effects on kids who have had to deal with drugs, gangs, unemployment, and low academic achievement.<sup>15</sup> These classic ethnographies have revealed a world of street youth in which unemployment is rampant, teenage pregnancy is common, and social and educational achievement is viewed as “acting White.” These studies show that institutional racism is a major factor in this condition and the behavior exhibited by inner-city kids. They also demonstrate that one’s race, ethnicity, and social class have a massive influence on where one lives, the kind of school one will attend, and where on the social hierarchy one will end up. Although a few studies include kids who are successful in school, most focus on the lives of kids who are flunking in school or have quit altogether.

These thought-provoking studies are the impassioned inside story of how America looks from the bottom and have added great insight into the lives of inner-city kids. Although as Jay MacLeod<sup>16</sup> and Mitchell Duneier<sup>17</sup> point out, social mobility is possible, the overall structure of class, race, and ethnic relations remains unchanged. Duneier suggests in his book *Sidewalk* that “through a careful involvement in people’s lives, we can get a fix on how their world works and how they see it. But the details can be misleading if they distract us from the forces that are less visible to the people we observe but which influence and sustain the behaviors.”<sup>18</sup>

Still, I think there is more to be said about these kids. Perhaps it was my own experience as an inner-city kid growing up in Harlem, considered to be the first Black ghetto, or perhaps it was my previous study of a group of South Central kids, that led me to believe that we do not know enough about these kids.

### Where One Lives Matters

“Negative images of inner-city kids are not new. If you grow up in the South Bronx or South Central Los Angeles or Pittsburgh or Philadelphia, you quickly come to understand that you have been set apart and that there’s no will in this society to bring them back into the mainstream.”<sup>19</sup> I grew up in Harlem, an area considered the first Black urban ghetto. During the 1940s,

Harlem was the place to go nightclubbing for rich White sophisticates. By the time I reached my teen years, the glamour of the Harlem Renaissance had long been replaced with the blight of urban ugliness. During the 1960s, Harlem began to decline socially, economically, and culturally. Heroin sold by such notorious drug lords as Bumpy Johnson and Frank Lucas found its way into the community.<sup>20</sup> Prosperous and middle-class Blacks moved out of Harlem to other areas of New York City and its suburbs, leaving poor and working-class Blacks to live in rented, crowded tenements. Mostly, Eastern European immigrants owned the mom-and-pop businesses in the community.

Harlem may have been a ghetto to some, but to many of its residents, it was home. The children there also found fun things to do. They jumped rope and played Simon Says, dodgeball, and basketball while cars whizzed around the players. “Outsiders” were often quite disdainful of inner-city residents, whom they considered low-class, criminal types who were too dumb or lazy to do anything but live in poverty. I remember the murmured comments from outsiders: “Those kids,” they often said, applying a culture-of-poverty rationale, “who are playing street games today will be out robbing you or taking drugs tomorrow.”

“Those kids” may have been handed a bad rap by outsiders, but they did have an advantage over South Central kids. While Harlem might have seemed like a segregated community to many analysts, it was not as isolated from the larger city life as South Central, a car-dependent community. Every week, the renowned Apollo Theater played to sold-out racially mixed audiences to hear legendary artists such as Miles Davis, James Brown, and Aretha Franklin or to dine at Ethel’s Southern Quarters, a popular soul food restaurant. In warm weather, parents sat on front stoops to escape their hot apartments, watch the children play, and gossip with friends.

In recent years, Harlem has changed. Now you can take a tour bus to visit former president Bill Clinton’s suite of offices on 125th Street, where you will also get caught up in a crowd of Black, Latino, and White kids and their families shopping at the Gap or buying hamburgers from McDonald’s. It would be quite easy to conclude that if poor and scary Harlem can change, other inner cities will follow suit. Actually, Harlem’s physical layout—being located close to midtown Manhattan—means that most public transportation (buses and subways) has to go through Harlem. Many people use the public transportation system, since parking is limited and parking lots cost anywhere from \$10 to \$25 an hour. Anyone using public transportation to go to the Bronx or downtown Manhattan has to pass 125th Street. It is also

easy for Harlem residents to use public transportation to go into midtown or downtown Manhattan. In fact, so many people take the train to and from Harlem that the directions were immortalized when composer and orchestra leader Duke Ellington gave directions to his collaborator, Billy Strayhorn, who promptly wrote them down as lyrics for “Take the A Train,” a song that became the signature of the Ellington orchestra.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, it is much more difficult to avoid or hide the Harlem ghetto than it is to hide the South Central ghetto. The only people to see musical artists in South Central tend to be other inner-city residents. If they want to hear Carlos Santana, Los Lonely Boys, or Jay-Z, they have to see them at Staples Center or some other large entertainment arena, not in South Central. Manhattan has more geographically compressed urban areas like Harlem; Los Angeles’s sprawl and dependence on cars mean that the city is likely to be far removed from the world of inner-city kids. One has to have some reason to travel into South Central. Still, Harlem’s history of drastic socioeconomic changes—of moving from wealth to poverty—is similar to that of South Central.

The earlier NAI study raised questions about the experiences of South Central kids who live in an area so synonymous with urban decay and street crime that the city council tried to change its image by changing its name.<sup>22</sup> While this book also examines inner-city life from the perspective of those at the bottom of the class, race, and ethnic hierarchy, it goes further than previous studies. In this study, a group of South Central inner-city kids examined their own lives both structurally and individually by exposing their living conditions, family life, peer relations, and academic achievement in South Central. In their view, we have failed to grasp the problems they confront on a daily basis or to understand the extent to which they feel shunned, hidden, forgotten—by a society that has reduced them to a pejorative, to being less than human, therefore reinforcing their feelings of being socially isolated from the larger society.

My focus on kids who have the desire to succeed and who receive a great deal of social support, particularly from USC’s tutorial program, situates this group far away from the gang-involved, violent, or abused kids who dominate the literature on inner-city kids. Cesar, Kyle, Wynette, and the others present an alternative to the limited view of these kids as being losers. Their stories challenge the popular view that inner-city kids are primarily dysfunctional, worthless, ghetto gangsters. They present a unique take on their world, one that gives deep insight into what life is like for many inner-city kids. Kyle and others in this study face an ongoing struggle with feelings

of ambivalence about their lives, as first expressed in their analysis of the railroad track picture.

### Poverty of Relationships

Structural issues are essential in this story. But also important to consider is the other story that the kids seem intent on telling us, which has to do with their sense of worth, or, in this case, their sense of worthlessness that comes with the tag “ghetto thug” (as described by Adam, the USC student quoted previously).

Along with the ghetto thug myth, I try to dismantle a number of other myths about inner-city kids, the principal one being that all inner-city kids’ behaviors are encouraged by parents with bad jobs and bad attitudes who act as role models for their kids’ bad behaviors. I argue that these kids need a better-funded community. But they also need stronger relationships with members of their community. They need parents like most in this book, who go to great lengths to protect their kids. The kids in this book say that they need teachers and an educational system in general that understand adolescence as a special time of life—one in which they begin to think about that all-important question “Who am I?”<sup>23</sup>

The questions I raised in another study are also relevant here: What happens to interpersonal relationships when adolescents and their families are trying to leap a fence and instead find themselves still stuck in stereotypes whose main function is to keep them rooted in their assumed place in society? What kind of strategies do they develop to compensate for the loss of societal support? I suggest that, in general, these kids suffer from a general sense of the loss of connections (1) with their community and (2) with the larger society. The sociology of emotions is key to understanding how significant relationships are to our emotional well-being. Sociologist Norman Denzin argues in his book *On Understanding Emotion* that it is important to examine the personal, psychological, social, and cultural aspects of human emotion—how people experience joy and pain, love and hate, anger and despair, friendship and alienation—in order to understand human experience and social interactions.<sup>24</sup>

I propose that we tend to give little thought to the impact of relational poverty on the lives of kids who do not have society’s support. In my book on teenage mothers, I used the term *poverty of relationships*. That term also applies to these kids’ sense of alienation and isolation. The poverty-of-relationships theory suggests that institutional oppression does exist and is

played out in a relational framework in which these kids develop strategies to form and sustain relationships with their peer groups and others who lend them support during a time of life when positive relationships are key to their sense of self. In other words, it is important to emphasize how the kids grapple with their emotional feelings about their status in society. They develop their own strategies to compensate for their sense of not having a place in the larger social world. Studies show that kids become involved in gangs and teenage girls have babies as ways to make up for the social support missing in their lives. Understanding this concept of poverty of relationships and how it applies to the kids links it to Denzin’s sociology-of-emotions theory in this way: These kids may be seen as “striver” kids, as NAI director Kim Thomas-Barrios, suggests. But even as strivers, they feel so isolated and alienated that the only safe havens they think they have are these after-school programs. Being an inner-city “striver” does not pay off, at least psychologically as one would hope, since most people still perceive them to be ghetto thugs.

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*“We Live in the Shadow”* offers new insights and strategies to address the social and emotional problems of inner-city kids and makes explicit the complexities specific to academically oriented inner-city minority kids. Throughout this book, the kids protest the idea that they are hood-wearing “ghetto thugs” who live on the wrong side of the railroad track; these teenagers are working hard to become productive citizens. Despite that effort, everything they encounter seems to be working against them: the school system, the perspective that they are losers, and the disorderliness of their neighborhood. All seem designed to make them fail. These teens, instead, actively pursue another view of themselves to counter the negative one.

This book is organized around the major idea that the inner-city kids in this study have developed a complex way of seeing society. They see society as making them feel isolated from and alienated by the larger mainstream society. They bring a strong sense to this book that their lives and the streets they live on are disorderly and sources of distasteful and worrisome encounters that they must endure because they live in South Central. As one person put it, these kids are “floating just above water.” In the end, the kids will say, in the words of comedian Chris Rock, “Don’t hate the player; hate the game.”