Families with dead sons

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This report is based on current on-going ethnographic research of the socio-economic context of drug use and commerce (1). The research site is located in a predominantly Hispanic, highly deteriorated neighborhood on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The theme which I would like to explore in this brief report is the relationship between adaptive strategies employed by poor households for survival and the high rate of homicide deaths of young males in the neighborhood. Our research at present indicates that high unemployment rates compounded by inadequate welfare assistance cause adaptations in household structure and strategies. One of the strategies used by households to cope with incomes below the poverty level is to deploy their members into various additional resource gathering activities. Of these activities, the highest in potential profits, but also risks, is participation in drug commerce. Many households in our neighborhood tacitly allow one of their sons to engage in this pursuit, thus potentially, and temporarily improving the economic status of the household.

The reason for this tacit permission is that young males are a great economic burden to poor households. Because of their class and ethnicity the young men's options for pursuing legally approved careers through conventional channels are severely restricted, their caloric requirements are unusually high, and their chances of obtaining public assistance are nil. Young females, on the other hand, are an economic asset to the household in several ways. First, they are more likely to be encouraged by the schools to complete their education, and are more likely to be hired for, and remain in low wage positions. They can also be an
economic asset to the household by obtaining public assistance through their reproductive function. Thus, by comparison, young males of the poor working class are minimal and sporadic contributors to their households except when they enter into the high risk drug commerce and other allied "illegal" professions.

I do not mean to suggest that families conciously scheme to sacrifice one of their sons for a potential household gain. When a young man begins to drift into these highly dissapproved professions, household members display a great deal of ambivalence which is expressed as scolding and deprecation of the boy's character. Nevertheless, his increased contributions, often in the form of needed cash, clothing and furniture are eagerly accepted, without too many questions being asked. But at the same time as his status in the family and neighborhood rises, the chances increase that he will either end up in jail or die a violent death. When the latter occurs the extended household is convoluted by grief and guilt. In spite of the fact that the entire neighborhood usually shows its understanding and sympathy by attending the wake and the funeral, and often by a collection of money for the funeral expenses the family usually moves away, and avoids contact with its former neighbors. I will explore these themes below with reference to two particular families, but I hope that you will keep in mind that this is a neighborhood-wide phenomenon.

The U.S. Department of Labor in 1975 reported that "Among 15-44 year olds, 30 percent of all deaths of Puerto Rican New Yorkers were a result of accidents, homicides and suicides. In the total population of this age group only 18 percent died of these causes" (1975 Regional Report, no. 46:49). There is little doubt that among young male residents of poor neighborhoods the percentage today is considerably higher. For example, a study of 1,954 autopsies of victims of violent death investigated by the Chief Medical Examiner of New York City shows that this "sample-population" can be characterized as "predominantly black or Hispanic men, less than 45 years of age, who lived and died
in Manhattan" (Haberman and Baden, 1978:24). More specifically a recent Fordham University study of the health problems of Puerto Rican New Yorkers shows that:

"For the Puerto Rican born population homicide is the greatest killer accounting for almost twenty percent of all deaths in this age group (15-44). The average annual rate for the Puerto Rican born population (58.3 per 100,000) is more than twice the rate for total population (28.5 per 100,000)" (Oscar Alers, 1978:7).

And as the author indicates, the percentages would be even higher if statistics were available for second generation Puerto Ricans.

Throughout the initial phases of our research on the Lower East Side we had been aware of the high rates of murders connected to the competition for drug dealerships in the area. Not a week passed without news of another homicide within a block or two of our office. And we could not help but notice the expensive cars with out-of-town licence plates arriving daily to transact their business in drugs and pick up the merchandise. In the late afternoons the corners were crowded with street vendors of drugs and their multi-ethnic customers. At the same time, the family life on the block proceeded normally, almost divorced from the business activity. Children played, the mothers shopped and conversed, a normal sociable block, except for the gutted street, piled up garbage, and delapidated houses. And at first we interpreted the murders as the high risk penalties for participation in the drug business, of unconnected and rather aberrant individuals. We had very little sympathy or understanding. It was not until we were personally affected that we began to search for a causal explanation for the killings.

On November 22nd 1977, an eighteen year old boy was brutally murdered. We knew him and his family well. Jose was a gentle person. A high school dropout he lived with his family in a fifth floor walk-up apartment in the same building where our storefront office is located. The family consisted of his old ailing father, his mother, one older and two younger sisters and a younger brother. The
mother received supplemental aid for the three youngest children but the income was insufficient to support the entire family. The father obtained occasional low-paid work as dishwasher, Jose contributed with odd jobs and physical help but the mother was most instrumental in obtaining additional income.

In the mornings she took care of a baby in her home for pay and in the afternoons she sold home cooked food on a street corner, a few blocks away. The daughters took over the baby sitting in the afternoons and evenings, while Jose, sometimes with the aid of his father, helped set up and dismantle the street vending business. Everyday we saw him carrying a shopping cart which was loaded with food, pots, a grill and charcoal down the five flights of stairs and into the street. He would then wheel it to an empty lot a few blocks away and set up a makeshift stand. She sold hot food to men who played dice while waiting for some "business" connection in the lot. She had a brisk trade when the weather was nice, but she seldom earned more than ten dollars and sometimes returned home empty-handed. In an interview tape-recorded before his death, Jose spoke about his mother's work. He said,

"(...) we put it into a little carriage, and we bring it down from the fifth floor ... all the way down it has to come, a heavy load, about 90 pounds, 90 pounds ... oil, ollas (pots), we have to carry it to cook outside. She carries some rice, some chicken, pork chops, ribs (...) She cooks you know. She goes out there on 8th street (...) she cooks. She makes pasteles, she makes alcapurria, bacalao. Yeah. She cooks good. If it's a nice day they're playing dice, you know. Those people that play dice for big money? And they come to my mom's to buy her food, because you'd be playing dice and you get hungry. They get hungry (...) when she goes up there, about four, five she comes out about eleven, or twelve. One sometimes ... Sometimes she sells nothing at all, and she has to be there most of the time, you know. Wasting time, be sitting down you know, waiting for people to come, you see. But people come, once in a while, they come. Once in a while. Yeah" (2).

Jose's contributions to the household during the year preceding his death were the following:
summer employment as a street sweeper, occasional furniture moving jobs with his friend and delivering groceries. During the last few months of his life he was selling marijuana cigarettes on the street. This last job was the most lucrative, but he averaged about thirty dollars a week, and most of it was given to his mother. There are indications that his death was connected to his dealing activities. The alleged murderers, two adult brothers employed as superintendents in ours and the adjacent building ostensibly killed him because he owed them fifteen dollars. We have since gathered some evidence that the brothers were involved in cocaine and heroin trade on a low eche­lon level. Jose's body showed signs of torture. A "lesson" perhaps for other young men attempting to move into the trade without having the prerequisite "toughness" and connections. The brutalization included cigarette burns on his face, needle punctures under his fingernails and on his hands, regular ascending knife slashes on both arms and a broomstick pushed up his rectum. His head had been severed at the back with a knife. The wound was so large that at the open casket wake, the funeral director had to repeatedly change the stained pillow supporting Jose's now unrecognizable head.

People from the entire neighborhood visited the funeral parlor to pay their last respects to Jose and to keep vigil and pray with the family. The combined force of praying mourners it was said would help Jose's soul to ascend from purgatory to heaven. Small children and mothers sat gravely in front of the casket. His mother and her relatives wept. Adolescent boys, some of whom had attempted to rescue Jose while he was being tortured and murdered came quietly in small groups, stared silently at the corpse, and silently left.

A collection undertaken in the neighborhood helped to pay for the funeral expenses and for a head­stone. A few weeks later the family moved away. Within a year his fifteen year old sister gave birth to a baby boy. He resembles Jose so much that he was named after him. A few months later the seventeen year old sister gave birth to a daughter.
Both sisters are contributing their public assistance support to the income of the household, while sharing baby sitting and cooking with the mother. The father is once again unemployed and assists his wife with her street vending. It is a little easier now to carry the loaded cart because they live only one flight up. The oldest sister finished high school, joined the Pentecostal Church, got married and moved away.

The story of Jose and his family is not unique. Most of the families we have come to know well have lost a young male relative in the drug commerce, and the homicides continue on a regular basis in the neighborhood. A few weeks after his death another neighborhood friend lost her two step-sons in a double murder-execution. The two young men had been high school drop-outs and had performed a variety of jobs to help support themselves, their very young wives, their children and their parents. They became involved in the cocaine trade only a year before their death and had earned a great deal of money by Lower East Side standards; approximately thirty thousand dollars. For one year their family enjoyed a degree of material comfort which they had never enjoyed before. Soon after their murder, the father also died. The mother, the two daughters-in-law and the four young children moved to another state. The money was spent on funeral expenses and on the move. They now subsist on welfare. The New York Times had printed a short factual account of the murder, noting that drugs had been involved. A year later their stepmother, gave an assessment of the murder and its emotional consequences. It is worth quoting at length.

"(...) I guess one of the things, aside from the whole thing being such a tragedy that kept haunting me... you read the paper about their murder and it said that drugs were used... and I know that if I read such a story in the paper I would be cold to the story, because the impression I would have, that these people weren't doing such a good thing anyway... What was so difficult for me was to remember them as little boys, particular J., he used to say to me... he was, ah... such a... interested in people, interested in things, and he would
come to me and he would say 'Janie, the junkie - he doesn't love his mother'. And he saw all the terrible things drugs did to people. I lived with them for two years and they would visit me quite often afterwards, and then over the years I would constantly run into them. We had a very good relationship. But I really didn't pick up on the fact that they were really into dealing, and they had made a lot of money. I think it was after we'd seen the bodies, I hugged their mother and I said 'you know the New York Times should know about this, their lives, (since) they wrote about their death...' And she looked very strange, and she pulled away from me, and she called the other children over, and spoke in Spanish, and I realized, what I found out later was that the parents had a key to the safe deposit box where the money was.

See, when they grew up drugs were not so prevalent. I know in talking later on with people that they grew up with, people who are now young adults, their whole thing was just to get enough money to buy a house in Puerto Rico... (drugs) was something that they did not approve of. They were kids who knew what went down and they did not like it. See, that was so hard for me to figure out - what happened to their heads that they would do this - unless it just was, after all their trying, it was the only thing that would give them any options. Well, I'm sure it is.

Its economic it also is the fact that the neighborhood is so isolated, that the things can become so... I'm sure there are a million other things they could have done, but there was nobody there to connect with them. Do you know what I mean? I feel that if I had only known I could have turned them around. I believe that. I have a feeling though, that their family, because of the great money they were making... that they were buying their family things and helping people out, paying doctors bills and this and that... when you're faced with that kind of misery and that kind of poverty... Well, I don't know what else to say at this point. I found it terribly painful for a long time... and in my life-time... I kind of had a feeling that if you work hard enough you can make things right. And that to me was the most tremendous unfairness and I just couldn't come up with any kind of rationalization to make any of that all right. Its just... how terribly unfair this world is. And of course if you didn't know them as children, and didn't know them as people, just the news-
paper article about their death, it would be just, you know, you know... They were really fine young men. They were very gentle, very gentle. They were not, as children messing with the gangs at all. In fact, their friends even said that's one reason they got killed. Because sometimes when you're mean, or you hang out with mean people... they were known to be very gentle young men and they didn't have a lot of mean friends, so that as victims they were easier targets. I have such a cute little boy and that saved it, saved me. But I just worry so about his future and part of what keeps me going here is to work for a better future".

The murders can only be understood in the context of the social economic and political forces of the larger society which effectively constrain the lives of the people in the neighborhood. The unemployment rates among adults of working age in illicit occupations are approximately sixty percent, and among adolescents as high as eighty percent. There is a scarcity of jobs, and those which are available are very low paid and insecure. The local schools play a large role in not preparing the populace with any sort of skills. While most of the adult males do engage in menial or "scuffling" (Comitas, 1973) income gathering activities, most of the adult females avail themselves of income maintenance (welfare) to support themselves and their children. As a result of political pressure the State Welfare Department established in 1969 a "standard of need" which was barely adequate for sheer survival (Task Force on Welfare issues, 1979:3) since then, the budget has been increased by 11.8 percent while the cost of living has doubled (ibid.). Thus, under the current standards, a family of four receives approximately 6,500 dollars a year. Forty to fifty percent of that budget is spent on rent, often through a "two party check" (3). Approximately 3,500 dollars a year remains available for the purchase of food, clothing, furnishings, transportation, appliances and the payment of high utility bills. The Department of Consumer Affairs of New York City estimated that for the week ending March 30, 1979 the cost of feeding a family of four was $88.66. Thus food alone will cost a family of four approximately $4,500 annually in 1979.
The U.S. Department of Labor estimated that a "lower budget for a four person family" residing in New York City required $11,155 dollars annually (Bureau of Labor Statistics, USDL 78-393, 1978). And finally, criticizing official "poverty lines" standards, Kenneth Keniston of the Carnegie Council on Children proposed a budget based on a realistic assessment of price and need (about $3.00 higher than the prevailing mandated levels). He writes:

"Such is the poverty line we are proposing - the line below which one out of every four American children is currently growing up. To the best of our knowledge no official agency has tried to draw a credible scenario for living at such a marginal level... Below this level the economic pressure of the family becomes highly prejudicial to children's chances to grow, develop and take advantage of opportunities that normally lead to a productive adulthood" (Kenniston, 1977:30-31).

It is obvious that if families were indeed trying to live on the miserly grants mandated by the State the scenario would include death from starvation of millions of children. As it is we are already witnessing in our research signs of malnutrition among the younger neighborhood children (4). The fact that there is no widespread famine is due to the ingenuity of the families which employ a variety of strategies to make up the approximate 3,000 dollar annual deficit in their incomes. A description of some of these strategies follows.

The real household composition and income are closely guarded secrets. In reporting to official agencies (welfare, food stamp, hospitals, census takers etc.) most of the households in the neighborhood represent themselves as female headed and at some point in their history they are. However, the findings of our research indicate that approximately eighty percent of the households are composed of common-law couples and their children. The women contribute with their public assistance grants such basic necessities as rent payments, medical services for themselves and the children and half of the food budget and basic clothing. The males supply the money for the additional half of the food budget, and the utility bills, they
supply additional clothing, pay for gifts, recreation and ceremonial events, household furnishings and their own clothing, grooming, medical and work associated "expense account" costs.

Although many of these partnerships endure for years, there is an institutionally constrained potential instability and tension. Marriage is financially prohibitive because most of the women would be ineligible for public assistance if it were discovered that they were married even though their husbands' jobs are low paid and insecure. A newly instituted computer cross-check system between the marriage licence bureau and the Human Resources Administration makes that inevitable. Thus the men are structurally related to their households of procreation in a quasi-permanent manner. This structural feature makes it easier for them to back out or be forced out when they lose their jobs and become a drain on the already inadequate household income. On the other hand the potential withdrawal of a male from the household economy, impels mothers to develop strong links of economic interdependence with their children. This dynamic has the further effect of reinforcing the male's marginal position and enables a smoother transition of the household into a matrifocal one. At any given time approximately twenty percent of the households are headed by single females, although within a very short period of time the composition of any specific household may shift to nuclear, to vertically or horizontally extended, then to the matrifocal form again.

Because of the insecure low wage labor of the males, the inadequate public income maintenance levels for females and children and the consequent predictable connubial instability, mothers develop their children's potential and talent for economic deployment when needed. From an early age children are trained to contribute to the households' income gathering activities. By the time they are twelve, most children are either working or contributing to the households' survival. The youngest work in packaging food for customers in supermarkets, and sometimes make deliveries. They
also run errands, help sweep and clean stores and baby-sit for pay. Older children, depending on sex and talent, perform "advocate" work with institutions (see Wojcicka-Sharff, 1979 for a discussion) others may have part time "off the books" jobs with local merchants. Some older female children begin the work of reproduction by the age of 14, and contribute their small welfare grants to a pooled household income. If the family can afford it a promising child will be encouraged to complete high school for future licit upward mobility.

But every family rears at least one "street representative". These young males aid their mothers and protect their sisters' reputations and the safety in the neighborhood. They are the ones who are tacitly allowed to drift into illegal occupations to augment the household's income. They are also the ones who are more likely to begin using drugs as an analgesic to pain and stress. They run the highest risk of becoming addicted, or being incarcerated, or murdered. These young men are victims of an abusive profiteering society which has no use for their productive labor but consigns them instead to furtive, pandering outlaw business in which they may, and do lose their lives.

Notes

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2. The interview with Jose was tape-recorded by Paul van Linden Tol a month before Jose's death.

3. A landlord of a building even if it is dilapidated and has uncorrected, certified violations, can nevertheless request that a tenant who has been withholding rent, be put on a "two party" rent check system which means that the check is issued in the names of the tenant and landlord both. Although Federal guidelines provide that no more than 10 percent of a county's case load be allowed to use
this method of guaranteeing the landlord's profits, Senator Daniel Moynihan was able to obtain an exception to the ruling for New York City, thus raising the ceiling to 20 percent. Effectively this procedure has had the effect of inhibiting the welfare tenants participation in cooperative strikes and other ventures to improve their housing conditions. Fortunately, in the last few months this, the tenants only weapon or redress has been given some consideration by welfare rights groups. Until now, the welfare officials granted the landlord's request automatically without inquiring into the condition of the living space and the services provided.

4. Ronna Berezin, a nutritionist consultant to the project is currently completing a study of the nutritional level of the neighborhood's children.

References Cited

Oscar Alers, Jose, Puerto Ricans and Health: Findings From New York City, Bronx, N.Y., Hispanic Research Center, Fordham University, 1978.