Aspiring to “Make it Work”: Defining Resilience and Agency Amongst Hispanic Youth Living in Low-Income Neighborhoods

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Aspiring to “Make it Work”: Defining Resilience and Agency Amongst Hispanic Youth Living in Low-Income Neighborhoods

by

Sara Arias-Steele

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Anthropology with a concentration in Biocultural Medical Anthropology

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Dedication

To Nia and Jordana,

May you one day see that all things are possible, that glass ceilings can be broken, but never without some sorrow and a whole lot of resilience. You come from generations of women who have gotten back up and forged ahead with a relentless strength that resides in our blood. I love you both so much.

To the young women and men who shared their stories,

Thank you for your trust and your friendship during such difficult and turbulent moments in our lives. Sharing together made the burden easier. May these stories lead to justice for those youth that come after.
Acknowledgements

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how Hispanic youth (ages 13-21 years) living in low-income neighborhoods of Florida defined resiliency and expressed agency navigating personal challenges and neighborhood adversity in pursuit of success. From the standpoint of the participants, this study focused on how youths: 1) judge the quality of life in their neighborhoods and the opportunities available for them, 2) identify personal aspirations for themselves and 3) identify what resilient factors allowed them to face the challenges and barriers of their daily lives to pursue this aspiration. This study takes into account the structural barriers that create inequities to examine how personal assets (e.g., familial and cultural values, self-esteem, and life experience) and external resources (e.g., social support, neighborhood resources, and political climate) affect youth behavior and resilience. Despite the participants living in similar neighborhoods with similar opportunities, the relationship between resources and assets exposed varying levels of resiliency, self-confidence (i.e., self-esteem), and agency against personal and structural challenges in their lives. Drawing from a critical medical anthropology (CMA) theory and resilience theory to examine both agency and resilience, this study designed a model called the “Youth Agency and Resiliency model” which consists of two perspectives: 1) the foundational assets (e.g., life experience, self-esteem, personal talents) and resources (e.g., social support, political climate, neighborhood environment) that contribute to an individual’s sense of agency, defining an aspiration, and perception of their surrounding and own self-worth and 2) how that sense of surrounding and self-worth affects their ability to take action (i.e. agentic action) and sustain resiliency to reach that aspiration.
Participant observation took place over two years (2016-2018), focusing on youth from two adjacent low-income rural communities in Florida. Using community-based participatory research methods, a total of 127 Hispanic youths were included in this study who participated in only one data collection activity. In total, forty-eight participants completed semi-structured interviews, forty-three participated in four focus groups, and thirty-six completed community perception surveys that included questions about neighborhood, opportunities for youth, challenges and barriers, and self-described plans for attaining goals.

This study revealed that out of 127 participants, 18 (14%) were able to both identify a long-term personal aspiration and actively were working towards that goal (displaying resilience) or were close to achieving that goal (“positively resilient”). The improvements youths identified as needed to improve resilience and success included strong social supports (e.g., presence of role models), recreational spaces, and increased educational/ economic opportunities geared towards youths’ interests. For the 18 Hispanic youth who self-identified as resilient and were actively working towards their goals, the factors with the strongest correlations to positive resilience were: 1) access to opportunities (both academic and economic); 2) strong social support from family and mentors and; 3) high self-esteem that supported agentic action to pursue their goals. Youth violence involving fighting was revealed to be a hidden resilience in a large majority of youth studied, enhancing self-esteem and expressions of resilience. All these resilience-enhancing factors played a protective role in overcoming the negative influences of peers or challenges faced within their own neighborhoods and influenced agency and self-esteem amongst youth to take action. The study also examined the individual-level challenges that inhibited resiliency in most of the youth in this study. A sense of hopelessness was the strongest factor that kept many youth from formulating or pursuing a long-term goal, with factors such as lack of opportunities and resources to support those goals (structural), lack of familial support (resources) and low self-esteem (individual
capacity), coupled with underlying mental stress and emotional trauma. This study contributes to the literature on resilience and agency amongst minority youths by adding new resilience-enhancing factors to consider when working within disadvantaged neighborhoods. The study made the distinction between family support and family cohesion, with the former being a stronger resilience enhancer when it coincides with youth’s goals and aspirations, a distinction not made in any resilience literature. This study added a holistic and youth-perspective approach to how youths navigate hostile environments in their own defined resilient ways. This study was also the first to fuse resilience theory and critical medical anthropology theory to create a new youth agency and resilience framework model for working with young minority groups.
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Resiliency and agency are broad concepts, which can be applied differently depending on the context for which they are used and from what perspective they are examined (e.g., individual level vs. community level). In this study, individual-level agency and resiliency is explored to see what factors influence Hispanic\(^1\) youth’s decision-making in the face of neighborhood and personal challenges and opportunities. By using a critical medical anthropology lens in this study, an individual’s assets and resources are examined within the context of structural resources and external factors (e.g., political climate, gentrification, economic shift, neighborhood violence, legal status, neighborhood resources) and personal assets (e.g., family and peer support, personal aspirations, life experience, self-esteem). How youth are affected by factors influencing them personally and their community affects their future-making decisions and confidence in their own power to succeed.

The aim of this study is to examine individual agency and resiliency among Hispanic youth (13-21 years old) living in a critically underserved community in Florida. The research focused on four major topics: 1) youth’s feedback on opportunities available to them (both academic and job-related) and the presence of youth spaces (i.e. recreational outlets, youth programs, gathering spaces) within their neighborhood; 2) their personal aspirations or future-oriented goals to success; 3) the structural barriers or personal challenges limiting their success or ability to access these opportunities and; 4) if applicable, their ability to resiliently face those challenges and still work towards those goals.

\(^1\) Latinx, the gender-neutral, non-binary plural form of Latin people gaining popularity in media culture in 2014, was not used in this study. As most participants originated from Central American and preferred regional identities (i.e., Puerto-Rican, Mexican, Nicaraguan), the term Hispanic was used uniformly throughout the study.
This dissertation primarily took place in rural agricultural towns of Wachoosa\textsuperscript{2} and Riverton\textsuperscript{3} in Central Florida. Through focus groups, walking interviews, surveys and active participant observation, Hispanic youths were asked to reflect on what future goal they wished to pursue and any opportunities they saw in their neighborhood that could help the achieve that goal. This was followed up with youth identifying the resources available in their neighborhood and their own personal capabilities. This study unraveled multi-faceted factors, both personal and external, that influenced Hispanic youth decision-making (individual agency) and the resilience-enhancing factors that led some youth to demonstrate sustained resilience in their progress towards these goals while others were overburdened with personal challenges and structural adversity.

This study is the first to combine resilience and critical medical anthropology theory to create an agency-resilience framework to identify resilience enhancing factors in youths. The findings supported previous resilience research by identifying family cohesion, self-esteem and the quality of available opportunities as enhancing resilience. Fighting and having the reputation of being a good fighter was one unique resilience-enhancing finding that is only recently being acknowledged as an atypical coping strategy and possible hidden resilience (Ungar 2004) in recent resilience literature (Wang and Petula 2007). Amongst the vast majority of participants who identified no future goals or lack of agency to work for those goals, lack of support and access to opportunities, coupled with psychological trauma leading to hopelessness, inhibited their ability to react resiliently to their circumstances.

\textbf{Defining Resiliency}

In the past ten years, resilience investigators have recognized the narrow individual focus past resilience research had and are seeking to broaden their investigation of the ecological and cultural factors involved in shaping individual development while also collaborating amongst varying discipline (psychology, education, urban planning, anthropology, social work) to provide a more holistic perspective.
framework in understanding resilience processes (Lerner and Overton 2008; Ungar 2008; 2011; Elliot et al. 2018). It is because of this broadening in focus that defining resilience remains very ambiguous and complicated. Resiliency has many connotations and definitions depending on whether it is measured at the community or individual level, and the type of crisis (e.g., food-related, climate-related, war-related). Resiliency has been defined as a process or an ambitious characteristic to succeed or achieve, as a capacity to thrive under adverse situations, and an adaptability to risks and threats in one’s surroundings, all while enjoying good outcomes despite high risk (Masten et al. 1990; Condly 2006; Miller and Daniel 2007; Ungar 2002). However, resiliency cannot be defined arbitrarily without considering the power and the agency of the researcher (often the one defining) and the participant (the one being defined) or the context from which resilient actions are formulated. Therefore, for this study, the definition of resilience was associated from a study that specifically worked with marginalized youths with a youth-centered perspective. The American Psychological Association’s Task force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents (acronym TFRSBCA) defined resilience as “the interaction between an individual’s strengths, resources and risk factors within a context across space and time” (American Psychological Association 2008:16). This task force focused on the protective factors that are essential to the display of resiliency, the prevention or reduction of vulnerabilities, and the promotion of optimal development in the form of social supports and healthy coping strategies.

This definition is one of few that represent the adolescent voice and the perception of their communities as a means to capture who they are and how they survive in adverse situations (Ungar 2002; 2004). This is particularly true with resiliency studies involving Hispanic and African American youths, whose risk factors (defined as “barriers,”) include exposure to poverty, discrimination, negative stereotyping, low expectations, acculturation stress, traumatic migration experiences with mixed status families (i.e., those that include both documented and undocumented members), flawed educational and judicial system, and inadequate health care (Ungar 2004). Therefore, providing context from a young person’s perspective was crucial in this study as it offers an insider perspective into the assessment of
contextual factors, influences, and barriers rather than relying on an outside researcher perspective (Dean 2011; Coulton et al. 2001; O’Campo, Salmon and Burke 2009).

This study was a holistic examination of the personal influences and structural resources informing agency, future oriented goals, and subsequent actions. Using qualitative methods, this study sought to define the context surrounding this marginalized group’s perspective, noting the persistent risk-factors, the role that family and community play as protective factors (e.g., social support), and the unique role that self-esteem (i.e. confidence in one’s ability) and being a “strong fighter” (i.e. being respected by fellow peers for not backing down from a fight, as described by study participants) play in developing resiliency. Coming from similar environments and upbringing, some youth faced barriers and made things work in their favor (making it work) while others could not. The study demonstrates how resilience-enhancing factors create either strong buffers against barriers or promote positive resilience in some youths and the factors inhibiting resilience in others.
CHAPTER TWO:
LITERATURE REVIEW

As this study is an anthropological focus on individual agency and resilience amongst Hispanic youth, an understanding of prior anthropological studies on youth and childhood agency is required, and particularly studies that define agency and resilience amongst youth. As minority Hispanic youth were the main study participants, in this chapter I reviews the status of Hispanic youth in the United States, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, the opportunities among this group of youth, and the structural barriers that increase inequities in education, mental health, neighborhood safety. Comparative studies exploring how structural inequalities amongst Hispanic minorities in low-income neighborhoods affect their relationships with their parents, their peers, their community, and their path towards personal goals and resilience were examined in this chapter.

Childhood Agency

An analysis of power is critical when understanding voice and agency in children and anthropological studies have long provided insights on this topic. Agency is defined as an individual’s power over, and choice in, the larger circumstances or structures in which people find themselves (Davis and Sondheimer 2005). When trying to describe an individual’s agency, there is a tension between an individual’s desires and power and the constraints of society (Fingerson 2005). Children, as Corsaro (2000) argues, do not mimic parental culture, but appropriate aspects of the adult world into their own unique peer culture, while reinventing and reproducing aspects of their larger social world. John and Barbara Whiting’s study on child rearing practices and child development encompassed six different cultures conducted by an anthropological team from the 1950s-1980s. The six cultures studied were the following: the Nyansongo: a Gusii community in Kenya (Robert A. LeVine and Barbara B. LeVine 1996); the Rajputs of Khalapur, India (Leigh Minturn and John T. Hitchcock 1966; Vol 3); Taira: an
Okinawan village (Thomas W. Maretzki and Hatumi Maretzki 1966; Vol 7); the Mixtecans of Juxtlahuaca, Mexico (Kimball Romney and Romaine Romney 1966); Tarong: an Ilocos barrio in the Philippines (William F. Nydegger and Corinne Nydegger 1966); and the New Englanders of Orchard Town, USA. (John L. Fischer and Ann Fischer 1966). While these cultures were all intrinsically different in terms of a child’s authority and the amount and type of nurturing received, children universally imitated the actions of adults and parents around them, practicing and adapting these “imitations” to fit their “peer culture” and passing down these newly learned “skills” to younger siblings (Whiting and Whiting 1975; Weisner 2010). Many of the stages of childhood focus on a child’s interpretations of the adult world around them, imitating what they see, and testing their level of influence in that adult world. Examples include influencing food-buying choices and other factors related to food in their social and physical environment (Himmelgreen et al. 2012). Adults hold an influential role to their children’s lives and, at the same time, are highly influenced by the needs and desires of their children. An example of this is children influencing their parents in buying brand name food items, urged by child-focused marketing, which may be more expensive or highly caloric. Adults will, in turn, often use these child-preferred food items as an incentive to get children to accept adult-preferred food items or decrease unwanted behavior. This negotiating tactic and cross-generational influence on each other demonstrates the interdependence between children and adults. However, the dominant role is held by adults, and children’s roles must universally transition into adulthood. The management of this role change is what differs cross-culturally and the way agency-influencing factors expands in the adolescent stage. Stuck between the crossroads of childhood experiences and adult responsibilities, adolescent decision-making (i.e., individual agency) becomes molded by various familial, socio-cultural and environmental factors that influences how they interact with their environments.
Youth Agency, Bounded Agency and Influences Behind Individual Agency

Adolescence is a key period for building social capital, independence, and self-directed decisions and action. It is also a period that is shaped by family, exposes vulnerabilities in the community, and builds protective factors that can impact youth health, assets, and long-term well-being (Masten et al. 2009; Paradis et al. 2011; Viner et al. 2012). In the social sciences, agency is defined as an action independently taken based on one’s beliefs and capabilities. (Barker 2005). Adolescent agency has been examined within the context of psychological development (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000), social development (Frost and Hoggett 2008), gender (Benjet and Hernandez-Guzman 2001), and a socioeconomic framework known as “bounded agency” (Evans 2002). “Bounded agency” refers to social changes occurring to an individual lacking in socioeconomic resources and human capital, which likely leads to the individual becoming more marginalized or “bound” by limited resources (Evans 2002, 2007; Bynner 2000). An example of bounded agency could be a youth lacking the financial resources to pursue higher education or a student failing a class lacks access to tutors or educational resources to get a passing score. Shanahan and Hood (2002) defined agency within a lifecourse framework, as an individual’s capacity to formulate and pursue future-oriented plans, with changing circumstances and social change interfering with those plans. How youth navigate these social and structural conditions for their own personal development (whether in education, family, or work) demonstrates what John Clausen (1991) termed as “planful competence.” Within Clausen’s model of psychological development, planful competence is a personality characteristic related to the individual’s self-confidence, intellectual investment, and dependability, all of which have long-term relevance to lifecourse outcomes (Clausen 1991). Yet, Clausen believed that timing is critical and that adolescents who displayed planful competence within the ages of 15-18 years had greater success in acquiring goals, marriage stability, educational attainment, and career stability (Clausen 1991). Simply, if adolescents adopt the adult role early in forming life goals (planful competence) and experience less difficulty transitioning from childhood’s lack of responsibility to adult-like planning for the future, they will have more power
(agency) to achieve their personal goals and desires. However, this theory ignores the social structures that often oppose agency and the resilience needed to overcome adversity. Planful competence proves irrelevant if one’s options are limited due to low socioeconomic background, gender restrictions, and social status.

Recent work on bounded agency and resilience amongst young people demonstrates that bounded agency can describe the processes and decisions employed by youth in extremely adverse situations and can refer to ways in which marginalized young people control their circumstances when resources and options are limited (Munford and Sanders 2015). Implication of social change and the range of options available to an individual are reflections of society’s broader structures and individual’s status in society. For example, students in lower to middle socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to discontinue education if there is an expansion in the job market compared to upper socioeconomic students who will continue-and have the economic means-to pursue higher education (Shanahan, Miech and Elder 1998). Pain and Levine (2012) view these actions as necessary tradeoffs that many vulnerable populations make. Due to the high level of insecurity and risk in their neighborhoods, where stable work is not guaranteed, long-term planning for the future is not always possible. Therefore, short term gains and short-term visions must be adopted. Among Hispanic youth, where family is culturally important, choosing between pursuing a student loan for personal growth versus accepting a job immediately to benefit the family as a whole is often a difficult choice. From something as traumatic as being deported, getting pregnant and needing to drop out of school, or a family member getting sick and needing to take up extra shifts to put food on the table, instability leads to difficult choices. Among marginalized communities in general, any shift in their landscape adds more risks, further limits their autonomy, and can force them to constantly focus on short term gains, which is a survival strategy that is often employed.

As this dissertation sought to explore the role of individual agency on youth behavior, the focus shifted towards identifying those short-term or long-term goals youths had and their capacity to formulate and pursue those goals. Within that context, all the external influencers (i.e., family, peers, close
relationships, neighborhood resources, opportunities) that shape future gains, empower and influence
decision making (agency) and subsequent resilience in the pursuit of those goals was explored.

**What is Resiliency?**

Stemming from various disciplines such as psychology, urban planning, education, social work
and anthropology, the definition of resiliency further differs if used for a systems-centered approach or a
people-centered approach. In broad terms, resiliency has been described as “the capacity of people or
‘systems’ to cope with stresses and shocks by anticipating them, preparing for them, responding to them
and recovering from them” (Humanitarian Policy Group 2011:5). Rudkin’s (2003) more people-centered
definition defines resiliency as the capacity to overcome adverse events while also having the ability to
develop oneself. Lately, more studies are drawing from the more people-centered approach in referring to
resiliency as the capacity to withstand risk and challenges in life to maintain competence despite adversity
or to improve because of challenging life experiences (Williams and Merten 2014; Luthar et al. 2000;
Masten 2011; Masten et al. 1990). In part, agency is often seen as an enabler of resilience that emerges
from social injustice or a failure of the social environment to meet the needs or suppress the rights of an
individual (Lee 0212; Liborio and Ungar 2014; Seymour 2012). Agency in many ways is expressed by
action, but more importantly exercising “internal resilience-enabling resources, such as belief in the self,
cognitive reappraisal of the experience, and a future-oriented focus” (Hafferjee and Theron 2019: 696).
This explains why agency and resilience are often intertwined in resilience research as resilience cannot
exist without agency being present. This dissertation sought to find what that future-oriented focus (in this
study defines as personal aspiration) was for Hispanic youth and what decisions or actions were
undertaken to express agency and resilience.

However, not all youth are able to express resilience, or their expressions of agency and resilience
are not considered “positive” by societal standards. For example, selling drugs to make quick money to
help provide for your family is considered resilient to that person but not to society. Therefore, the
definition for resiliency in this dissertation needed to be more individually-centered approach, rather than people centered. This study used TFRSBCA (American Psychological Association 2008:16) definitions which focuses less on the outcome being positive or negative, and more on the interplay between an individual’s strengths, resources, and risk factors in the context of their neighborhood environments. When considering marginalized societies where risk factors are prominently interwoven into everyday lives and decision-making, resiliency and individual agency are contributing to how the individual’s own strengths, resources and motivations help them “survive” and work with what opportunities are available. This varies widely from other definitions that focus on the limiting ecologies (i.e., lack of resources, low quality of life) present in low-income neighborhoods that keep disadvantaged and oppressed populations from “thriving” (Ungar 2004; 2015) which puts pressure on the social ecology needing to change in order to improve resilience. Both definitions are valid in focusing resilience on the individual capacity and socio-ecological environment. However, it remains contested where the emphasis should be placed to understand expressions of agency: individual capacity or ecological factors. Recently, resilience literature (Hafferjee and Theron 2019; Theron 2020; Holtge et al 2021; Unger 2004; Denov and Maclure 2006) has adopted the “bounded agency framework” (Evans 2002), which places more emphasis on the individual’s capacity to express agency and respond (positive or negative) to constraints, creating opportunities and drawing from social supportive relationships. With both social ecologies and individual capacity playing a huge role in expressing agency and resultant resilience, the deciding factor was based on focusing on whose voice and perspective this research would highlight. As a society and as adults, youth decisions are judged either positive or negatively resilient according to societal standards. Little attention is given to the context from which these decisions arise, the resources and knowledge youth draw on to make these decisions, and how youth define what resilience means to them. This made the TFRSBCA (American Psychological Association 2008) definition of resilience the most likely to capture minority youth voices. With so many subjective viewpoints, the definition of resilience is often subjective, which leads to the other problem of measuring it.
Defining the point at which a person is considered resilient is difficult due to its subjectivity based on perspective (the viewer or the subject), as discussed. Resilience research is beginning to show how resiliency skills develop early in life, but most agree that having a “hopeful future orientation” in the face of adversity is a statistically significant predictor of both adult and youth resilience (Goodman et al. 2017; Boyden 2013; Maholmes 2014). Since “hope” or personal aspirations are subjective, most researchers tend to avoid the use of fixed measurements and statistics to define resilience and recognize the fluidity and uniqueness of this trait in each individual as he/she interacts with the broader environment, community, family, and peers (Gabriel et al 2010, Foxen 2015). There is no “one-size fits all” or direct measurement for resiliency, which therefore necessitates examining all the factors and social actors involved in an individual’s life at that specific time in their development and in their own words. Therefore, instead of focusing on the subjective presence of hope, this study sought to identify the presence or absence of immediate personal goals and any subsequent agency expressed to achieve it.

**Resilience-Enhancing Factors**

Resilience studies demonstrate the importance of protective factors (peers, family, mentors) that strengthen what the individual identifies as their social source of resilience. By taking a people-centered approach that recognizes individuals as social actors having agency to perceive and respond differently to risk factors from the collective community, the study looked at how these differing perspectives (individual vs community) transform individual life experiences and enhance resilience (Bohle 2009). This study intentionally focused from a youth’s perspective who they identified as social sources of support (i.e., peers, family, institutions), and what youth insisted was needed to achieve sought-after opportunities to achieve long-term gains. For example, Theron (2020) found vast differences in what Black adolescents identified as resilience-enablers in the face of structural disadvantage compared to adults who work in youth intervention programs and youth services. While adults (and most resilience youth research) focus on family support and character building, youths strongly focus on educational
pathways and mentorship, which is concerning and indicative of how important youth-voices should be in
the creation and success of youth-supporting programs.

However, from a macro-perspective, great care needs to be taken to understand the drivers of
resilience operating at multiple levels, such as community and national policy, over which households and
individuals have no control. While one may assume increasing employment can improve livelihoods at
the household level and increase individual resiliency through financial stability, this may not always be
the case if these job opportunities are minimum wage. As Pain and Levine stated:

There is an urgent need for empirical research and critical analysis to illuminate the conditions
under which these processes do or do not play out in this way. There is a need too to understand
whether, in different situations, the increasing resilience of a state or a community supports or
detracts from the resilience of different households, and the extent to which the various desired
outcomes (peace, growth and poverty reduction, resilience) are genuinely mutually reinforcing or
even compatible. (2012:11)

Individuals vulnerable to structural inequalities experience “geographic hazards” (i.e., flooded streets,
impaired roadways, and limited street lighting), community tensions, lack of resources in numerous
domains, and persistently high levels of stress and frustration (Boo et al. 2004). It is important to note that
these structural inequalities refer to unequal distribution or lack of resources present in a community,
which in turn, can create inequities amongst individuals living in that same community. Inequities,
different from inequality, refers to the unfair and unjust distribution or access to those resources as a
result of discrimination, cultural exclusion, and oppression. Communities are multi-faceted in
experiencing structural inequalities differently depending on which social and cultural group is being
examined. Within Hispanic families, where family and community are strong influencing factors, there is
limited research on how community-level inequalities and inequities influence Hispanic youth in their
formation of individual-level agency and expression of resilience.

**Resilience in Low-Income Communities**

Community abilities to adapt to adversity and their collective attitudes toward individual futures
can shift radically when undergoing rapid commercialization, gentrification, or shifts in economic trade.
Those communities on the cusp of being gentrified are generally comprised of poor minority neighborhoods experiencing what Solis (2003) calls “general disinvestment” or socioeconomic disinvestment where little to no funding is given to preserve or improve the quality of local assets and resources for the low-income local residents. This in turn affects resident’s mental health and ability to respond in resilient ways. Cahill (2007) sheds light on how the “violence of disinvestment,” as termed by Cahill, and poverty affects the mental attitude and resilience of youth in gentrifying neighborhoods. This violence often takes the form of police targeting minorities, physical acts of violence, hostility among residents, and a feeling of “relative deprivation.” With no ability to afford a home in their own neighborhood, and with consistently inadequate resources, limited youth programs, poor housing, failing public education systems, and lack of choice and opportunity, the experience of relative deprivation is amplified, leading youth to feel as if they are not worthy of public investment (Cahill 2007). The violence of disinvestment is most dangerous when youth internalize the message and “take responsibility for failing institutions that under-serve and under-educate them, leading to a personal sense of failure” (Rios-Moore et al. 2004: 9). One of Cahill’s teen participants echoed this shame and vicious cycle resulting from internalizing this message:

> Like, when kids have nowhere to go, they’re left with the option of staying home and doing nothing... peer pressures for sex and drugs kick in. And they’re forced to make the decisions on their own and sometimes they make the wrong ones. This is when they fall into the stereotype of the pregnant teen—the unemployed pot smoking drop-out. All they need is attention! Or a challenge every now and then. The cycle of not having enough. (2007: 214)

The lack of support, coupled with a lack of places for youth to gather and receive guidance or attention, further drives their feelings of neglect and disregard. Without significant social capital, displaying any form of positive agency and resiliency is challenging. This is where aggression and violence become more frequent and even viewed as functional and socially adaptive within disinvested communities, where self-defense is a valued survival trait (Duque et al. 2005).
Violence as a Form of Resilience in Low-income Communities

Poverty in and of itself means people are working with differing levels of social capital, and limited social and cultural resources with which to negotiate their life and express resilience. This increases multiple risk factors, and, in some instances, leads to an increased incidence in violence where the person is either a victim or a perpetrator (Ness 2004). Anderson (1999) found that marginalized communities respond to these factors of injustices by adopting a retaliatory attitude as a means of protection called the “code of the street”- their own defined resilient response to residing in hostile environments. The “code of the street” theory is a set of informal rules adopted in communities with high discrimination, poverty, and stresses associated with urban areas. The “code” revolves around the idea of respect, self-protection and establishing one’s reputation as someone who retaliates if provoked, which has been corroborated in both adults and adolescent research. In viewing the code as part of their normative beliefs, children as young as 4th-5th graders express an acceptability of aggression in daily life (Copeland-Linder 2012; Ness 2004; Anderson 2000; Huesmann and Guerra 1997). While these retaliatory attitudes oftentimes lead to higher levels of aggressive behavior as youth grow up, it is also a way youth cope with the social uncertainty and threats against them. Being known as a good fighter is the “most reliable social resource” available to girls in disadvantaged environments (Ness 2004: 38).

The bulk of research concerning youth violence revolves around poverty and structural neighborhood factors perpetuating youth violence (Aceves and Cookston 2007; Sharkey 2006; Spano et al. 2006; Nofziger and Kurtz 2005; Markowitz et al. 2001; Morenoff et al. 2001; Velez 2001; Bellair 2000; Wikstrom and Loeber 2000; Sampson et al. 1999; Sucoff and Upchurch 1998; Bellair 1997; Farrell and Bruce 1997; Sampson et al. 1997; Elliott et al. 1996; Kirvo and Peterson 1996; Wilson 1996; Sampson and Groves 1989). Youth violence is most common in low-income communities. Within school property, approximately 13% of high school seniors report having been in a physical fight at least once in the preceding year, and more than 4% admitted to carrying a weapon to school during the previous month (Grunbaum et al. 2004). Fear of being targeted at school has been high since 2000 for 33% of both boys
and girls, a number which is probably higher today due to the rise in recent school shootings. These fears and worries of being victimized at school, either through direct violence or indirect bullying by peers, has severe social and academic consequences for school-age children (Bulach, Fulbright, and Williams 2003; Osofsky and Osofsky 2001).

The Olweus method, which informs the many anti-bullying policies in schools today, recognizes that bullying is about the imbalance and abuse of power, but fails to consider the different ways that power is experienced, expressed, and channeled in a sexist, racist, and homophobic society, or the subtlety of girl-to-girl aggression, which is not always physical, and instead verbal and emotional (Brown 2004). Brown’s (2004) work with girl-to-girl aggression revealed the more nuanced and culturally-mediated motivations, such as misplaced anger and aggression about mistreatment in school, sexual harassment, and jealousies over boys. For many, these public performances (i.e., fighting, sexual dominance) were for visibility and power, designed to garner respect and popularity amongst their peers. Aggressive reactions to confrontation directed at themselves or their close friends ensured protection and survival in violent environments. In this study, first-hand experience and conversation with participants unintentionally revealed many of these nuances of power and dominance in relation to how the male and female participants perceived youth violence in the context of resilience and the relationship between fighting and self-esteem.

Factors Defining Youth Violence

Due to the high prevalence of youth violence observed in this study, there was a need to contextualize it in regard to resilience. Why was this type of agency expressed? What motivations or structural factors cause youth to react in violence? Ness (2004) and Jones (2004) are two of the few researchers that linked youth violence to resilience using in-depth ethnographic methods to understand violence amongst low-income inner-city adolescents and how they displayed resilience by adopting the “code of the street” in parallel ways. In their research, violence was found to be a means for girls to
achieve powerful femininities and boys to achieve powerful masculinities in response to adolescents feeling “closed out of white, middle-class America and abandoned by the failing institutions meant to serve them” (Ness 2004: 36). Media representations of female violence often portray white girls as nonviolent but “sneaky and mean” compared to Hispanic and African American girls portrayed as “in your face” tough due to increase incidents of physical fighting, which “masculinizes” them and strips women of color of their femininity (Chermack 2006). Therefore, many women of color have redefined femininity in their own resilient way. This femininity is rooted in their own neighborhood context and beliefs, which in violent neighborhoods, means a “code of the streets” tough girl image.

The role family plays in youth violence is an important factor to consider. For those with a criminal record, many of the cases revealed a history of family violence or domestic abuse. Parents who adopt a “code of the street” mentality with their parenting, are characterized by harsh discipline, hostility, physical and verbal abuse, antisocial behavior, and child neglect, otherwise called “street parenting” (Stewart and Simons 2006; Stewart et al. 2002, 2006; Brezina et al. 2004). Stewart’s et al. (2002) research linked street parenting to youth violence, or teens adopting street code values. While some children raised to avoid the “street life” are more likely to seek out friends with similar non-violent perspectives, legitimate jobs, organized sports and pursue further education, it is not always guaranteed they will not partake in street violence (Anderson 2000). Anderson warns that a “child must go with what groups are available, and a child from a decent home can easily be sucked up by the streets” (2000: 98). Despite a good upbringing, if all a child has to interact with are violent peers who have adopted the street code, then the child is more likely to adopt these codes as normative beliefs and display higher levels of violence (Stewart and Simons 2006; Brezina et al. 2004; Drummond et al. 2011). This is especially true in neighborhoods with a high presence of gangs and youths in gangs.

Gang presence is a key contributor to the culture of violence in poor neighborhoods. A study by the Pew Hispanic Center found 31% of young Latinos (16-26 years of age) had a friend or relative involved in a gang (Pew Hispanic Center as cited by Foxen 2015). For youth already feeling as “other”
and disinvested by their own community, the allure of gangs becomes heightened for the sense of belonging, protection, and identity offered by the gang group. This is especially true for youth who feel excluded at school and have no other alternative sources of support within their own community. Therefore, the attraction of gangs can be very strong in communities where youth feel marginalized, employment prospects are low, and family cohesion and parental engagement is weak— a problem observed disproportionately amongst immigrant families (Foxen 2016). Oftentimes, gang recruitment at school was one of the enticements that keep youth in poor neighborhoods from continuing their education. All this stems from the structural inequalities present in under resourced communities surrounding minority youths, which oftentimes leads to violence (Sampson and Groves 1989; Anderson 2000; Aceves and Cookston 2007).

Lastly, youth violence leads to higher cases of hopelessness, defined as an individual having a negative perception of their future (Drummond et al. 2011). Hopelessness has also been defined as “an expectation that highly desired outcomes will not occur or that negative ones will occur ... and that nothing is going to change things for the better ...” (Joiner and Wagner 1995: 778). Children living in impoverished and violent neighborhoods with limited resources and no youth-focused outlets (e.g., parks, recreation centers, gyms, youth programs) may believe that nothing in their neighborhood exists for them and may turn to risky alternatives. These youth oftentimes harm themselves or others and may see little reason to care about the outcome if they feel powerless to change things for a better future outcome (Lorion and Saltzman 1993; Lau and Lau 1996). Research has shown that hopelessness plays a major role in the adoption of street code, with youth reporting a greater sense of hopelessness before even adopting the street code, as shown in longitudinal studies (Hopf et al. 2008; Hemphill et al. 2009; Resnick et al. 2004). While not all who experience this sense of hopelessness succumb to the street code, researchers need to discuss what this “hopelessness” means to youth and how it defines their decisions (individual agency) and their ability to act on those decisions (resiliency) (Drummond et al. 2011; Bolland 2003; Bolland et al. 2001, 2005; Joiner and Wagner 1995; Durant et al. 1994; Lorion and Saltzman 1993).
Hispanic Youth Navigating an Inequitable Path to Education.

In the last three decades, the Hispanic population has become one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States (US), outnumbering African American/Black groups since 2003 (Humes et al. 2011). “Hispanic” refers to anyone of Spanish-speaking origin or ancestry, encompassing all Latin American and Caribbean emigrants residing in this study’s region of Florida. “Latinos/Latinas” refer to those of Latin American descent and is used predominantly in Census data collected (Humes et al. 2010). For the purposes of this study, both “Hispanic” and “Latino” terms will be used in accordance with how the cited author uses them, but the participants for this study identified as Hispanic, Latino or from the country of their origin or families’ origin (e.g., Mexican, Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, Puerto Rican). Surprisingly, the term Latinx, the gender-neutral, non-binary plural form of Latin people, was not overheard while working amongst the youth in this study, despite this term gaining popularity in media culture in 2014, close to the time of this study (2016-2018).

The 2010 US Census data show an estimated 50.5 million self-identified Hispanics (compared to 35.3 million 10 years ago), accounting for more than half the nation’s population growth. Currently, Latinos/as comprise 3% of the population under 18 years of age and have been projected to represent close to 25% of the total 18-29-year-old age group by 2020 (Humes et al. 2011). Though the number of Latinos attending college and earning bachelor’s degrees has continued to increase, this can be attributed to population growth, not to the closing achievement gap. In 2005, Hispanic students were still the most likely to have dropped out of high school compared to those from other ethnic minority groups. The most common explanation for minority student dropouts was the lack of financial resources, or family obligations impeding successful completion of school. However, the main barrier is not the student, but the circumstances of their environment, and the lack of quality schools and youth programs aimed at intervention and prevention, with its effectiveness receiving much criticism (Magee-Quinn et al. 2005).

The educational challenges Hispanic youth face have been widely studied and show a disproportionate gap between graduation and performance at every level of education (Mather and Foxen...
In low-income neighborhoods, schools are generally understaffed and run-down, and suffer from overcrowding, underpaid staff, and low-quality instruction. Unengaged and often down-trodden teachers and instructors, coupled with a lack of rigor in the classroom, can further lead Hispanic students to feel isolated and alienated, while robbing them of the basic tools to succeed and land higher opportunities (Ryans 2011; Anderson 1999). Racial and ethnic discrimination is common among Hispanic youths, contributing to poor mental health (i.e., depression, anxiety, low self-esteem), negative health and educational outcomes, and lack of trust (especially amongst Hispanic boys) towards authority figures (i.e., teachers, police, society). Teen pregnancies amongst Hispanic teenagers continue to also be three times the rate compared to White non-Hispanic teenagers (Ryan 2011, Child Trends Data Bank 2014). With these kinds of challenges affecting Hispanic youths, a critical examination of the personal assets, resilience skills, and support networks within the context of racially marginalized and poverty-stricken neighborhoods is needed. It is also critical to understand how neighborhood segregation, in limiting resources and opportunities to youth and families, is handled in their struggle to break generational poverty (Massey and Denton 2007).

But what about those Hispanic students who, from similar marginalized backgrounds, do reach a solid measure of success? Few studies examine resilience factors, specifically amongst Hispanic youth. One of the few that link resilience factors with Hispanic students is Patricia Foxen’s (2015) NCLR report on the Resilient Latino Youth, which captured the life stories of 10 Latino college-bound adolescents from impoverished communities of East Los Angeles and Chicago. Her report framed resilience as a complex developmental process around the individual’s abilities to cope with stresses, and outside factors such as environmental nurturing and interactions with multiple persons and institutions. For some of her participants, resilience was a fairly linear path. For others, harsh experiences led youth to act out and make poor choices, often due to feelings of vulnerability, anger, and hopelessness within a negative environment. Particularly for the latter group, youth programs and mentorship were key components in increasing their capacity and resiliency.
Foxen (2015) observed those resilient youth as possessing certain personal characteristics, such as long-term vision, optimism, strong work ethics, ambition (interchangeably described as “grit” by the author), social skills, refined communication (referring to the lack of “slang usage” when speaking to others outside their own peers, otherwise known as code-switching), high levels of empathy, self-awareness, and a desire to break the negative cycle. However, grit is not to be confused with resilience, which the author used interchangeably. Grit is defined as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth et al. 2007: 1087). It involves working rigorously toward challenges and maintaining consistent effort and interest over a period of time, regardless of whether one is faced with adversity or even if one may fail at times (Duckworth et al. 2007). While grit may be a form of resilience, it is distinguished by the fact that it is not a response to adversity. Instead, it is a drive that exists, and continues to exist whether adversity is present or not (Rudkin 2003).

Some of the strongest influencing factors Hispanic youths attributed to their resiliency in Foxen’s study were a strong connection to family, adherence to traditional values, and connection to culture (Foxen 2015). However, these cultural strengths, as Foxen phrased it, came with challenges of living within immigrant households. There is a reversal of power dynamics between immigrant parents and their children raised young or born in the United States, wherein parents are dependent on their children to translate the language and social customs of their new country. Meanwhile, children of immigrant families face the added responsibility of acting as a bridge for their parents in a new country, and thus face barriers when adopting new gendered behavior, dating, clothing style, manners and values, and, sometimes, receive little support or engagement from parents regarding higher-level education (Foner and Dreby 2011; Hovey and King 2009). The inability of parents to understand the demands of school, jobs, work-study programs, and important extracurricular activities while dealing with many of the environmental, cultural, and familial difficulties described above, can be frustrating, and even hurtful, for their children (Foxen 2015). This becomes even more difficult upon entering the college years where some Hispanic students have parents expecting financial and familial commitment from their children.
The most often-seen scenario is Hispanic students attending a nearby community college and becoming less likely than their White counterparts to be enrolled full-time and complete a bachelor’s degree (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). But aside from cultural and familial constraints, poor neighborhood resources, limited opportunities, and poverty count as the biggest barriers to college for many young Hispanic youth (Foxen 2015; Massey and Denton 2007).

**Mental Health amongst Hispanic Youth**

Inequity in low-income neighborhoods is evident in its access to resources and viable opportunities for Hispanic youth, which has various effects on their mental well-being and self-confidence. Mental health and self-esteem correlate closely with the ability to make decisions and display resiliency. Similar to resilience studies, mental health studies amongst youth, particularly minorities, require an understanding of the complex interrelationship among mental health symptoms, external factors (i.e., family, peers, individuals, neighborhood) and macro-level factors related to discrimination and violence (Abrams et al. 2005; Beam et al. 2002; Gutman and Sameroff, 2004; Prelow et al. 2006).

Research suggests that Latino adolescents, specifically Latino girls, have the highest rates of depressive symptoms compared to all ethnic groups at 47% vs. 33.4% (Eaton et al. 2006; Joiner, Perez, Wagner, Berenson, and Marquina 2001; Siegel, Aneshensel, Taub, Cantwell, and Driscoll 1998). Despite having the highest rates of depression-related symptoms, Latinos also have a high rate of under-utilizing mental health services. This may be associated with cultural factors such as the fear of stigma, lack of trust in mainstream mental health services, or the lack of Spanish-speaking and culturally appropriate care for Hispanics (Foxen 2016). Consequently, Hispanic youth in need of mental health services are significantly less likely than non-Latinos to receive professional care, or to receive the kind of quality care that produces sustainable positive outcomes (Foxen 2016). Understanding Hispanic mental health factors requires the study of both human interactions and development within a culturally informed perspective (Bernal et al. 2006). A Foxen (2016) study of mental health amongst Hispanic adolescents
revealed a heightened awareness and desire for cultural connectiveness and setting a “good example” helped to combat negative Hispanic stereotypes. Along with strong family support and family cohesion, this seemed to aid Hispanic youth in boosting self-esteem and reduce risky behavior.

**Parent-Child Relationship and Mental Health amongst Hispanic Youth**

Family cohesion and familial support were significant drivers for Hispanic youth in displaying resiliency and high self-esteem in Foxen’s 2016 study. Other studies have corroborated the importance of family and parent-child relationships in the Hispanic culture in general (Halgunseth et al. 2006; Smokowski and Bacallao 2007). How youth perceive their relationships with their parents has been determined to be a key factor in the development of self-esteem and mental health (Jasinskaja-Lahti and Liebkind 2001). When youth perceive their parents reflecting warm and affirming messages as family support, this can boost youth self-esteem (Felson and Zielinski 1989; Patten et al. 1997). Many studies with Mexican American youth (Amato and Fowler 2002; Benjet and Hernandez-Guzman 2001; Ruiz et al. 2002) and Latino youth in the United States (Bámaca et al. 2005; Plunkett et al. 2007) have correlated parental support with youth self-esteem. Substantial evidence continues to show that parental support is central in the prevention of adolescent depression and in the promotion of a sense of cultural stability and psychological well-being, particularly for youths living in high-risk communities (Jasinskaja-Lahti and Liebkind 2001; Patten et al. 1997; Sheeber et al. 2001). This study sought to understand what role family support played in both resilient and non-resilient youth.

**Comparative Hispanic Resilience Studies**

The role that neighborhood risks play in the lives of Hispanic youth in the development of their mental health and self-esteem has been observed in different parts of the United States involving Hispanic populations in Midwestern, middle-income, largely white population (Bámaca et al. 2005) and high poverty, ethnically homogenous Latino populations (Behnke et al 2011; Foxen 2016). But none have
taken a deeper look at how Hispanic youth defined resilience in their own lives, explained what is needed to overcome those challenges, and evaluated their ability to respond to a rapidly changing community.

The resilience displayed by Foxen’s (2015) study group was due in part to their enrollment in a community-based program called NCLR Escalera Program serving low-income Hispanic communities with job training, educational interventions, social services, prevention programs, and mentoring programs. All the youth in Foxen’s study came from this mentoring program. Therefore, all the youth in her study cited community-based programs and mentors as playing a central role in fostering their resilience and offering critical support to them and their parents. Mentors and community programs were attributed to bridging the gap between immigrant parents and their children, teaching youth skills and knowledge, supporting immigrant parents in their need to understand their children, and providing emotional and psychological support for the youth (Foxen 2015).

While building resilience through access to educational and vocational training builds personal capacity, Foxen’s study also found a necessity to build “cultural resilience.” Cultural resilience considers how cultural background (i.e., culture, cultural values, language, customs, norms) assists an individual and community to overcome adversity- with less focus on individual characteristics and more on the sociocultural factors that help communities as a collective come together to face adversity (Clauss-Ehlers 2004). Foxen proposed the need for promoting family cohesion and integration of cultural values and customs amongst Hispanic students to strengthen marginalized immigrant families (Kirmayer et al. 2012; Ungar et al. 2005).

The examination of individual resilience characteristics, particularly with Hispanic populations, necessitates including cultural connectedness, interpersonal interactions (such as family and peer support), and community interactions. However, Foxen’s study on resilience recruited participants from a community youth program already fostering these protective factors, asking them to consider what their college life would’ve been like without this program. Key variables missing in Foxen’s research include the lack of a control group of teens not involved in this program or asking participants about their life
before enrollment in this community program. The study would have benefited from including youth who had no access to resilience-building programs, whose community interactions were limited or of a negative nature- and yet still made it to college. Would this “control group” of teens identify the same resilience-building factors as those Hispanic youth from the program? More comparative research is needed to illuminate the role neighborhood resources, mental health and self-esteem, and familial and communal relationships have for Hispanic youth before and during the formative “college years” in other low-income communities.
CHAPTER THREE:

THEORY

Anthropology’s focus on understanding people and systems of organization offers a unique standpoint in viewing resilience, which is a difficult concept to define as it is unique to each individual and community response to disaster and stress. Anthropological critical theory has yet to be used in relation to resilience, even though the anthropological theory could offer insights into the major contributors of resilience, the influences behind agency, and spotlighting the stress and circumstances surrounding an individual. However, anthropological critical theory can miss viable alternatives or unconsidered “resilient responses.” These alternative responses may shed a light on our own biases in what are considered acceptable or positive resilient responses. This chapter outlines resilience research theories, particularly those involving minority youths. In reviewing competing resilience theories, critical medical anthropology theory can provide a unique lens in understanding those influencing agency factors and individual stress barriers to create a new youth-focused, strength-based model of resilience create for this study.

Theoretical Frameworks in Resilience and Agency

The original aim of this research was to focus on individual youth agency, particularly with Hispanic youth, in how they choose to define body image ideals and how those ideals, in turn, affect eating habits and physical activity patterns. However, once the conversations with the participants took a turn to include not just their views on neighborhood barriers and their physical bodies but also their personal ambitions, aspirations, and personal flaws, a re-examination of the research question and approach was needed. It also became apparent that the choices youths felt were available to them and how they reflected on their ability to even act on those choices spoke more about their resiliency as well as
personal agency. Therefore, the original framework, which focused merely on looking at agency and its influencing factors, had to be expanded to now encompass the resiliency that develops as a result of those choices. The new framework begins with the factors influencing individual agency (personal aspirations and personal self-esteem), the barriers or vulnerabilities affecting agency (neighborhood and personal barriers), and the resultant choice or resiliency displayed.

Upon researching resilience theoretical frameworks, the definition of resiliency varies greatly depending on the context for which it is used (commonly for disaster research, risk assessment, a process to stability) and the population being studied (i.e., individual, communities, vulnerable populations or systems). Most resiliency-agency frameworks focus mainly on community responses after massive exposure to crisis or disaster (environmental or political disaster) (Li et al. 2015, Bellingham et al. 1995, Flynn et al. 2015, Cai and Song 2017). From an urban planning framework, the RIM Model (resiliency inference measurement framework) below (Figure 1) focused specifically on damage and recovery of a group/ community setting within the context of a natural disaster. What is unique about the model is that it frames resilience based on two relationships: vulnerability and adaptability (Lam et al. 2015). For Lam and colleagues (2015), the higher the vulnerability, the greater the damage to a community, family, and ultimately an individual’s self-esteem and resilience. This results in a decreased likelihood to recover mentally and physically, decreased adaptability to further exposures, and increased vulnerability to further assault. For those with a low level of vulnerability, the ability to adapt and recover is higher, which increases their level of self-esteem and resilience against further psychological assaults. Lam (et al. 2015) tied this connection between adaptability and resilience in a quantitative perspective: a high vulnerability/low adaptability ratio is considered low resilience, whereas a low vulnerability/high adaptability ratio is considered high resilience.
A challenge to this model from an anthropological viewpoint was offered by Barrios (2016) who critiqued the results of resilience research in assuming that communities want or should return to their pre-disaster stable condition. He argues that it ignores the communities’ own agency, the political economy and ecology, and overlooks the vulnerability of minority community members that may not benefit from returning to a pre-disaster state. Barrios’ perspective reveals the number of assumptions made by community resilience research and calls for anthropologists to offer not just critiques of models but viable and applicable solutions for policy formation and disaster recovery that is equitable for each community group, rather than one solution for all.

Adolescent-specific resilience research differs slightly from risk research like Lam (et al. 2015) by focusing less on the level of adaptability and vulnerability and more on assets and resources that enable youth to overcome negative effects of risk exposure. Resilience theory therefore takes on a strength-based focus in analyzing the individual “asset” factors such as competence, coping skills, self-efficacy, and the external “resources” such as parental support, adult mentoring, and community resources that promote youth development (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005). By emphasizing the external and social
environmental aspect of “resources,” resilience theory moves away from just focusing on the individual and considering the ecological context from which youths operate and make choices.

A comparative study that also tackled resilience and agency amongst minority youth was conducted by Sadiyya Haffejee and Linda Theron (2019) with adolescent African girls who had been sexually abused. Using Ungar’s (2011) socio-ecological resilience theory (SERT), agency is seen as an enabler of resilience (Haffejee and Theron 2019: 684). With an analysis of the context, the individual’s interaction with the environment, and individual’s specific traits- the focus of this theory is on how the environment provides resilience-enabling resources and how the individual exercises agency to acquire those resources. SERT was used by the authors to see how limiting ecologies (or barriers) led to expressions of agency or “agentic action” in this group of abused girls who “activated resilience-enabling resources” such as believing in themselves, forming a future-oriented focus (or personal aspiration), and utilizing supportive social ecologies such as teachers, relatives or case workers who aided them in their resilience journey (Haffejee and Theron 2019: 696). The authors also explored the theory of bounded agency (Evans 2007) where extreme adversity makes it impossible for an individual to reach for personal goals with limited resources.

The results of Haffejee and Theron’s findings, however, did not fit well with either the SERT or bounded agency theory. Unlike SERT and bounded agency theory that put the pressure and focus on the socio-structural resources enabling and disabling resilience processes, those abused girls were not passive victims of their social ecology but active agents emerging because of having such constrained and limited supportive ecologies. In the face of no family support and continued abuse, these girls made a decision to choose to remove themselves from the abuse, form a positive belief in themselves and identify a future goal, and actively seek an intervention program despite continued adversity impeding access to resources (e.g., relatives and law enforcement ignoring evidence of abuse or continued injustice). In the context of extreme adversity, agency was not bound but further ignited, contradicting Evan’s (2007) notion of bounded agency and resilience by drawing from individual’s capacity to act rather than supportive...
ecologies (i.e., opportunities or supportive peers). One drawback noted however, is that the recruitment process focused on a small group of seven girls from an intervention facility and those with “positive sense of self, exhibited through positive behaviors” and active support systems (Haffejee and Theron 2019: 689). Despite this, this study demonstrates that resilience is far too complex to fit a single theory or model but requires a more holistic approach that includes the adolescent’s voice in its recommendations, an inclusion that could lead to greater youth engagement in intervention programs. Theron (2020) revisited her earlier findings on resilience but this time she included the feedback of adults who worked in youth intervention services. Theron sought to understand the differences between what youth intervention adults identified as resilience-building factors and what Black adolescents identified as important to them for resilience-building. Interviewing 385 Black adolescents and 284 adults, Theron focused again on the presence of future-oriented actions (i.e., personal aspirations) to establish resilience. Hope was noted as being intertwined with agency, with its presence being the most statistically significant predictor of adult resilience (Goodman et al. 2017) and a strong individual trait for youths. Unlike the 2019 finding with Haffejee, personal strengths and family support did not account so prominently amongst youths as resilience building. In this study, the quality of education to improve their circumstances (a socio-ecological factor) was more important for resilience, the complete opposite of what was observed with the abused girls in Theron’s previous study.

Seeing how complex resilience is, a critical anthropological perspective could offer a different insight in how individual vulnerabilities and negative exposures affect individual decisions and viewpoints concerning their “assets” and socio-ecological “resources,” usually not critiqued more under resilience theory. This allows for a deeper examination of the context from which these “assets” and “resources” emerge and operate. It allows one to see how each youth experiences these barriers and vulnerabilities, and the macro-level influences of politics and discriminatory circumstances that limit agency in many vulnerable populations. Using a critical medical anthropology lens with resilience theory
allows a look into their motivations and personal ambitions, and whether youth feel resilience is evident in how they negotiate their “assets and resources” to achieve those ambitions.

It has been noted that youth resilience studies and resilience theory focus on adapting or recovering from adversity. Resilience theory encompasses the select few in a collective community with the supports, assets and resources to thrive, rather than critiquing the inequitable access of such supports to the community in general. Resilience is not often defined by the youth but by the success of achieving a future orientation or returning to a “normal state” after a negative life-altering event. Few studies have critiqued this return to a “normal state,” which may not be conducive to long-term resilience or lead to the same cycle of adversity. An example would be Hafferjee and Theron’s (2019) abused girls having their abusers jailed but remaining in a family that permitted that abuse and would continue to permit it if given further chance. There is also a lack of critique of theories separating assets and resources as independently important and impactful to resilience, as observed with bounded agency theory (Evans 2007) and SERT (Ungar 2011). Few resilience studies exist that measure resilience throughout the life course, as it may change with age, shifting resources, and levels of adaptability. Critical medical anthropology provides that unique holistic perspective missing in these resilience studies in demonstrating the relationship between individual assets and resources, and the context surrounding adversity, while also spotlighting the individual’s definition of resilience. CMA also critiques the effect these decisions, based on individual; life experience and social capital have on their mental health. While CMA’s focus on individual health has its benefits in this type of research, it also brings drawbacks that may explain why it has been rarely considered for youth resilience studies.

**Critical Medical Anthropology Lens: Benefits and Drawbacks for the Study of Resilience**

Resilience studies generally have not used critical medical anthropology (CMA) theory, a unique feature of this study. Resilience is linked to recovery and adaptation to adversity that affects one’s livelihood, mental health, and even physical health, which is why CMA theory compliments it so well
through its focus on mental and physical health. However, the reason resilience and CMA have rarely 
been linked may be due to the fact that resilience studies often focus on those anomalies who escape 
suffering or overcome disparities, while critical medical anthropology overfocuses on the suffering and 
disparity in a community. Using a CMA approach allows the researcher to examine the individual within 
“socially constituted categories of meaning and the political economic forces that shape the contexts of 
daily life” (Singer and Baer 1995: 184). One of the primary areas of CMA focuses on the sufferer’s 
experience within a framework of hegemony and resistance. During the 1980s when HIV/AIDS became 
more prevalent, medical anthropology was confronted with a disease that not only affected the 
individual’s health and lifestyle, but also stemmed from political, ecological, social and cultural 
components that affected this community of individuals (Singer and Calir 2003; Nguyen and Peschard 
2003). A new framework was required to analyze the political-economic and socio-cultural factors 
involved in this syndemic that affected poor, minority, and vulnerable populations more aggressively 
(Baer 1997). The critical medical anthropology takes a more holistic look at the context of suffering-
where, what, and how suffering manifests. However, critiques of CMA have revolved around its 
obsession with the “suffering slot” (Herrick 2017: 533) that situates “whole communities within a 
discourse of victimization” (Panter-Brick 2014: 439). By medicalizing individual suffering, not much 
focus is given to human agency and the less approved forms of resistance and resilience, such as any 
pleasure-seeking behavior like alcohol consumption or recreational drug use (Herrick 2014).

Resilience, in theory and as a definition, reflects that “resistance” to socially constructed 
injustices that pose a risk to vulnerable populations, particularly with the minority youth being studied in 
this research. In other words, in communities suffering from disparities where vulnerable populations are 
predominantly affected in a negative way, those who display resilience are the anomaly or the small 
percentage that defy this expectation. It is the reason why there is no research that particularly uses CMA 
in the context of resilience, as it does not focus on the resilient minority that overcome adversity. Instead, 
it spotlights the adversity, the negative effect on communities and the social services recommended. CMA
has a tendency to focus on the lack of resources, the players responsible for that lack, and the social services recommended to address that lack, supported by narratives of those who are suffering or further marginalized due to the conditions created by that lack. When expressions of agency are observed, this can be problematic if an individual turns to pleasure seeking instead of medical or public health options. An example is non communicable diseases like obesity. Herrick (2014) observed that despite public health warnings about the chronic health consequences of alcohol consumption, the suffering did not outweigh the short-term attraction of day drinking and consumption of processed, high caloric foods, often used to alleviate suffering temporarily (Herrick 2017; Ragland and Ames 1996). In the context of global health research, suffering can often be self-inflicted through unhealthy behavior and then further exacerbated by short-term pleasure seeking, a coping mechanism and agentic response to suffering. Scheper-Hugues (1990: 70) noted that people tend to medicate pain and poverty with alcohol and numb the uncertainty of illness with fast food.

While CMA cannot always account for people’s choices compounding suffering, it’s commitment to exposing the structural conditions behind suffering and adversity is necessary in understanding whether resilience-building factors are even present. To see all the factors that influence youth resilience, a holistic understanding at how poor neighborhood resources and the lack of economic opportunities influence an individual’s decision-making and future goals is needed. CMA theory allows an examination at how race and discrimination are embodied and influence daily life decisions, and how these structural inequalities affect mental health. By applying a CMA lens, it allows for a critical analysis of the effectiveness of “promotive resources” such as schools, youth programs, and neighborhood resources for at-risk youths and exposes the flaws in such intervention systems. There is no single factor that can be pinpointed to explain how some youths are able to overcome adversity, develop and maintain positive self-esteem, and achieve high social accomplishments. While resilience interventions in the form of school-based or community programs play a role in promoting positive mental and social well-being in these youth, no conclusive evidence states that these interventions are sufficient to close the gap in mental
and physical health (Khanlou and Wray 2014). Coupled with adversities posed by race, ethnicity, culture and gender, choices and personal agency are further constrained (Khanlou and Wray 2014). However, variations occur and, despite similar disadvantaged social circumstances, some individuals do tend to “beat the odds,” demonstrating considerable heterogeneity in outcomes and resilience factors.

As observed by other resilience and adolescent studies, taking a youth’s perspective in identifying what promotive factors study participants identified as being effective in their journey towards achieving their personal aspirations was key (Haffejee and Theron 2019; Theron 2020; Ungar et al 2005; Ungar 2011; Evans 2007). Whether these promotive factors are influenced by the socio-cultural influences, individual character, presence of hope, political climate, or perceived usefulness of the resources present, CMA allows a critical exposure of those structural disadvantages and how youths navigate them to formulate a future goal (i.e., personal aspiration), express agency and action towards that goal, and judge their outcome as resilient or not resilient. Being able to understand why and what factors were involved in some youths expressing resilience and others not being able to express resilience can reinforce policy change and action to “change the odds” and reduce differential exposure to adolescents throughout the same community, rather than reinforcing the same structural disadvantages by continuing to research ways youths should “beat the odds.”

**Developing a Youth Resiliency Model with a Critical Medical Anthropology Lens**

Agency-based studies and resilience discourse focused on a people-centered perspective, recognize the social actors and their agency in how they transform their livelihood in resilient ways (Bohle et al. 2009; Berkes et al. 2003; Etzold et al. 2009). The result is to empower individuals to identify and pursue viable opportunities or strengthen their resilience skills through social sources of support (peer, family, institutions) to succeed in later adulthood.

Informed by the CMA approach that analyzes the factors influencing the assets and resources associated with resiliency at multiple levels, a new model was created that takes into account life
experience (e.g., gender and ethnicity), familial and cultural level influences, peer influences (e.g., school, social media and church youth group), and the political climate affecting the individuals and families in this study (Figures 2 and 3). Communities are multi-faceted and individuals experiencing structural community inequalities experience what Boo (et al. 2004) identified as geographic hazards, community tensions, lack of resources in numerous domains and persistently high levels of stress and frustration. There is limited research on how community factors influence youth capacity and there is a need to understand how community-level barriers and resource availability interact with individual agency (Williams and Merten 2014). This study yielded insight in how minority youth viewed themselves on a personal level (self-esteem), a social level (family, peers, culture), and a community level (life experience and political status) and how they feel other agents view and treat them in return. These perspectives have a direct impact on youth’s ability to aspire (personal goals), to act (individual agency), to adapt (resiliency) and surmount (positive resiliency) those daily barriers to reach their goals (See Figure 2).

**Youth Agency & Resiliency Model**

![Youth Agency and Resiliency Model](image)

*Figure 2. Youth Agency and Resiliency Model focuses on the influencing factors behind Agency and Resilience. Assets and Resources influencing youth’s agency and future goals, their ability to act, the opportunities and ability to act that allow for resilience, and whether their goals are met to achieve positive resilience.*
Drawing from resilience theory and CMA theory, the Youth Agency and Resiliency model was created to focus on the foundational assets and resources contributing to individual agency, their sense of the world and themselves, and subsequent resilience (Figure 2). This model shows the factors directly influencing agency, which shapes what future goal or aspiration youth identify for themselves. The ability to act towards those goals is dependent on youth’s self-confidence and self-capability (i.e., how youths view themselves) and their sense of surroundings and the challenges facing them. A combination of opportunity (external resources) and ability (internal confidence) allows them to continually act towards a goal and demonstrate resilience. This resilience stage takes the longest as youth may have to continually adapt based on available opportunities or re-evaluate their aspirations based on changes in their assets/resources. Opportunities can change or be lost, and their self-confidence can falter. So long as continued action is taken towards a goal, resilience is still displayed. For example, a youth may identify a higher paying job as an aspiration and may know of an opportunity (a recent job opening). But the youth need a resume and transportation to the interview and to the job (barriers). The youth can choose to let the opportunity go or have enough self-esteem to believe themselves capable of the opportunity to act resourcefully in finding a ride to get the interview and continually finding ways to get to work (displaying resilience), until he has saved enough for a car leading to greater opportunities (positive resilience). This new model fuses individual-focused resilience theory (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005; Haffejee and Theron 2019; Theron 2020; Ungar et al 2005; Ungar 2011; Evans 2007) with a CMA examination of all the overarching exposures that influence why youths act and what shapes those actions and the context surrounding those structural barriers.

The Agency portion of the model depicts the specifics of what “assets” and “resources” represent, and the exposures that influence individual youth agency. ‘Assets’ in this study represented youth's sense of self-esteem, their familial and cultural values as Hispanics and immigrants, and their life experience as a result of being a minority in a low-income neighborhood. ‘Resources’ focused on the micro-level (i.e., individual) exposure to social support from family and peers, to their interaction with schools and
religious or secular youth functions, and finally to the macro-level influence of the political climate affecting minorities, particularly immigrants in this study. There are numerous adolescent and youth agency research studies supporting the impact of life experience, familial and cultural values, social supports (acknowledging peers as a strong influencer at the youth stage), social environment, and the political climate on household and individual agency in marginalized communities. But very few take into account all of these together from a youths’ standpoint or tie all these factors together holistically in how it shapes individual’s self-defined goals and capabilities (Masten 2011; Masten et al. 1990; Elder 1998; McCabe and Ricciardelli, 2005; McCreary and Sasse, 2000; McKinley, 1998).

Assets and resources, combined, have a significant impact on how youth view their surroundings and opportunities, as well as on self-reflection on their own self-worth and capability of succeeding in their environment. This significantly influences what youth aspire to, what goals and futures they define for themselves as achievable. Based on youth’s perception of viable opportunities to pursue and internal self-esteem, youth may decide take action towards those goals, display resilience in their continued pursuit of those goals, and reach a level of adaptability where they feel a goal is now achievable and challenges not so adverse as when they started.

To date, anthropological studies have not taken this type of critical medical anthropology approach to resilience and agency, especially among youth in general. Few individually-oriented resilience studies have focused on the role culture, neighborhood, and politics plays on an individual’s definition of resilience. Neither of these schools of thought (anthropology or resilience theories) has incorporated an agency-resiliency study from a strength-based perspective and a minority youth’s perspective on their own self-perceived level of resiliency. This Youth Agency and Resilience model enhanced the assets and resources aspect of resilience theory with critical medical anthropology’s holistic approach. Exploring how Hispanic youth express individual agency, identity, and power within their environment, as well as their lived experience as minorities, allowed for the further understanding of how this structural framework from which they cope and strategize affects their transition into adulthood.
Using this CMA lens for resilience, this approach helped in re-thinking who defines resiliency and provided critical insights on where the strengthening focus should be (Assets, Resources, both, or the Action stage) to empower youth to move forward in a positive direction.

With this new model informed by CMA and resilience theories, this study aims to holistically examine how youths: 1) judge the quality of life in their neighborhoods and the opportunities available for them, 2) identify personal aspirations for themselves and 3) express resilience in their own way to face the challenges and barriers of their daily lives.
CHAPTER FOUR:
POPULATION AND METHODS

Wachooṣa⁴ and Surrounding Area: The People and the Place

Wachooṣa (place name changed for anonymity) is an unincorporated rural town of 25 square miles in Central Florida. For the past 50 years, Wachooṣa has remained stagnant with no county money flowing in for basic road maintenance, sheriff presence, recreational park maintenance or public transportation routes. Wachooṣa’s current population of 6,373 (US Census 2010) consists of 73.4% Latino (mostly of Mexican origin), 18.8% White, and 6.2% African Americans. Among its residents, 25.7% are foreign born individuals, 57.6% speak a language other than English (compared to 27.3% in Florida overall). Reports indicate that 37.4% of the population live below the poverty line and in 2011 had a per capita income of 12,296 (less than half of its county’s $26,733).

Wachooṣa is unique in that it has a rich history stemming from its agricultural roots and the original African American residents that made up the farm labor in the region. Upon the abolition of the Jim Crow laws in the 1960s, African Americans migrated out of Wachooṣa for blue collar jobs and migrants from Mexico and Central America took up most of the farm worker labor work left behind by the African American residents. While most neighboring communities view Wachooṣa as a Mexican migrant town with its largely Hispanic-speaking population and Hispanic-owned businesses, migrant workers only make up 10% of the population with most of the Hispanic population consisting of generations of Hispanic families living in the region. This is a community where blood relations live on the same street, where the local teachers have taught two or three generations of youth, and where most

⁴ Name of towns changed for the purposes of anonymity of the people interviewed and organizations mentioned in this study. Any resemblance to a real site or city is purely coincidental.
people know each other’s families and attend the same Churches and gatherings. However, this is also a community lacking in resources such as the police station (referred as the “sheriff’s station” by locals), local clinics or medical services, bilingual tutors and teachers, sidewalk access in community neighborhoods, and adequate street lighting and paved roads. Coupled with mixed status families and high incidents of street violence due to gang activity, residents had concerns regarding their families and their futures.

**Researcher’s Past Fieldwork in Wachoosa: Groundwork that Inspired the Research**

I first entered Wachoosa, FL in late 2013 with a Hispanic non-profit agency looking to engage the community in an assessment of their community resources to inform policy changes Using community-based participatory research approaches (Himmelgreen et al. 2014), I organized a team to train the local community residents in data collection methods (e.g., collecting surveys, conducting interviews, using photovoice methods) assess the quality of their health clinics, the elementary schools, the road systems, and the quality of food stores in the region with their fellow residents. I facilitated several focus groups to get a full picture of resident needs and perceptions of what their city needed to thrive. This project concluded in September of 2014.

From 2013-2014, only Walmart existed on the outskirts of the town and several bodegas that residents claimed sold expired food items and slightly moldy bread. I saw first-hand, the flooding conditions whenever it rained, and children were being dropped off and picked up in busy major highways by the school bus. I saw firsthand children under the age of 10 holding hands to cross a major highway and walking along the grass (as there are no sidewalks) to get to one of the trailer homes off the side of a major highway road. I spoke with health clinicians who worried about the lack of preventive care, the rate of teen pregnancies (the youngest was a 12-year-old), the high rate of alcoholism, and teenage suicide rates and drug abuse in the region. I spoke with teachers who lamented the fact that their schools are considered “training grounds” for freshly graduated teachers, many of them not bilingual, who promptly moved on to other school districts in the middle of a semester. These teachers acknowledge the
lack of tutoring available in Wachoosa. Some teachers stayed late to care for large number of children until their parents can get a ride from the fields to pick them up, teachers who admitted to buying snacks because these children are coming to school hungry. I spoke with the various Christian pastors and non-profits who felt generally frustrated with the community only participating in charity events offering free food or donations, but never to political gatherings or community hearings. To those non-profits serving these communities and working to uplift them, the community’s lack of participation gave the impression that Wachoosa residents were not interested, not caring, and “living off the system,” as one non-profit employee commented.

Being an immigrant Latina and, at the time pregnant with my twins, my invitation and reception by these community residents and fellow mothers and grandmothers was completely different. Over chatting with the fellow mothers about my upcoming first pregnancy and bowls of nopales (cactus) salad and rice and beans to assuage my constant morning sickness, I sat at their tables to conduct my “surveys” in their homes but ultimately ended up hearing their stories. From them, I heard stories of these women coming home and learning that their spouse was deported by ICE, about being chased away from the bodega with a bat for complaining about the expired milk being sold and asking for their money back. I saw bullet holes in the walls from a stray bullet going right through their children’s bedroom and almost hitting a couple’s child in the night. I cried with the mother of a 3-year-old girl, who drowned in a pond that had formed after heavy rain formed a flooded pothole in front of their street and their daughter had fallen in while playing outside. I spoke with mothers who admitted not knowing how to read and relying on their older children to translate medicine bottles so they could take the appropriate dose of prescription. These communities admitted to fearing the police and ICE officials far more than the local gang members selling their drugs and firing their guns every night. Parents mentioned working in the farm from 5am until the sun goes down and they “cannot see the fruit anymore” (as one 18-year-old migrant youth commented), coming home to pick up their younger children from a neighbor’s house or “unlicensed” daycare, and only have roughly $100 a week combined to show for their labor. The result of
these parents being overworked, due in part to the poor economy in the region and limited opportunities, meant many of the youth at home grow up unsupervised.

Yet, despite these risk factors, resiliency is still evident. Women, not knowing how to read or knowing any English, ran tamale businesses selling food after Church on Sundays, making enough to provide for their children while their husbands were away either working “up North” (Michigan if they were migrant workers) or deported. On pantry days, family members would supplement their food supply by going to different pantries to gather enough to feed their family. Many had an entrepreneurial business selling donated church clothes, doing custom tailoring, providing “unlicensed” childcare in their home, cutting hair, selling fruit juices from the bruised unsellable fruits leftover from the fields. One mother even had a mobile elote (Mexican corn) and churros stand from the back of her van, bringing her school-age children along after school to translate in English and use their cute smiles to get customers to buy something while teaching her children how to exchange money and change. Many of these children of self-starter entrepreneurs grow up business savvy, surrounded by close tight-knit families (either related by kinship or friendship), and learn to navigate their social spheres with the tools learned from their parents. But at the same time, in this social media environment, youth are also socially aware of what’s missing in their communities and opportunities do not present in their community due to poverty. This investigative project concluded in September of 2014. The findings and needs were identified as the following: the lack of safety, poor educational resources for Spanish-speaking parents and children, lack of recreational outlets for children and youth, poor access to medical facilities, and no access to public transportation. The need for policy change and community activism led to several faith-based and non-profit organizations to focus their work in Wachoosa to address these concerns and organize the community in an initiative to change existing policies. The results of this initiative also increased the number of grants and local government funding to non-profit social service agencies to address the issues identified in this region.
During my consultant year with this Hispanic organization from 2013-2014, I organized a focus group with youth, asking them the same questions I had asked the adults concerning neighborhood issues, the quality of schools and lack of parks in the region. While it was not surprising that these youth were very aware of the poverty within their community, their knack for thinking of innovative solutions and willingness to take initiative to fix many of the issues the youth saw (one teenage boy said he could clear a run-down field to make it into a soccer park with his dad’s equipment) was very different than the adults’ responses. It was this difference in perspective and this hopeful note from the youth that prompted me to return in 2016 and remain for two years working in a local non-profit to create a platform for youth to find their own voice and collect their perspectives on solutions for their community and their lives.

How do youth navigate the same barriers that affect their parents, how do youth respond to the daily stressors of living in community limited in youth spaces such as parks, and how do youth navigate a way to not only cope but thrive. These questions were at the core of what drove this study to occur.

Two Years Later: Returning to Wachoosa

In 2016 when I re-entered the community, there had been a rapid increase in commercial and real-estate development in the region with the construction of three gated housing communities with houses ranging in price from $220,000 to $500,000, an Amazon distribution warehouse in the adjacent city of Riverton⁵, a Wawa’s and Aldi’s (2 commercialized grocery chains) built on the boundaries of Wachoosa, and two other gated housing developments in construction at the time with homes in the $400,000+ range. Currently, there are no plans to include affordable housing for the numerous residents who live below the poverty line and could never afford these homes, despite efforts from local community development groups since 2016. Being an agricultural town, Wachoosa has large plots of privately-owned land that is currently being sold or bought by major housing developers for less money than equivalent plots in more urban regions. This is leading to the displacement of many of the migrant

⁵ Name of city changed for purposes of anonymity. Any resemblance to a real location is purely coincidental.
community trailers that housed families of farm workers who put down payments to rent these trailers
during their seasonal work in the region. While this was corroborated with conversations with local
residents, social service agencies in Wachoosa, and community meetings by residents, not enough
attention was given by local news outlets on the matter of displaced migrant residents by real estate
contractors for the development of new homes.

Currently, the presence of large corporations like Amazon, Aldi, Wawa, and Walmart have
increased the number of wage-earning jobs for Wachoosa residents paying residents 9.56-$12 an hour,
higher than most of the wage jobs nearby such as daycares and store clerks. Florida minimum wage was
$8.05-8.25 from 2016-2018 at the time of the study, increasing to $8.56 in 2020 and with a state bill
passing in 2020 to rise to $15 by 2026 (Florida Department of Economic Opportunity, October 2019).
Renting a one-bedroom apartment ranges from $750-$1,000 a month in the most affordable apartment
complex in Wachoosa, while a Wachoosa 1–2-bedroom house currently ranges from $1,650-$2,000 a
month. Therefore, even with a full time $15/hr. position, the ideal 30% monthly income for rent would
only reach $720/ month, which forces many family members to pool their money to afford small living
space. Unfortunately, these are the local opportunities available to residents with limited transportation.
With corporations paying more than the Florida minimum wage, this often entices a younger population
of employees, many without a diploma or GED, who then find themselves in these low paying jobs
without any means of earning enough income to pursue higher education or higher skilled positions. With
Wachoosa students attending middle-school and high-school in nearby Riverton, and the high school
being across the street from a county community college, access to higher education is not always
accessible despite being across the street. Over 50% of the Wachoosa/ Riverton students don’t graduate
high school in the region. The local Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps with offices in Central
Florida and local corporations (Amazon, Wawa, ALDI) seeking minimum wage employees do the
heaviest recruitment at high school campuses and are extremely attractive options for youths whose
families live in poverty. These issues affecting youths were revealed at a youth-only focus group I
facilitated back in 2014 with the Hispanic non-profit and was the catalyst that propelled my dissertation to focus on the voices of young people, particularly since their testimonies were barely mentioned or taken into account once the final results were discussed at community initiative meetings. One of the goals of this dissertation is to give the youths a platform to speak, to engage in dialogue to reveal the reasons behind their decisions concerning their future, their perspectives on the challenges they face, and their own versions of what the community needs.

ETHICS: IRB and Recruitment of Core Study Group

To properly begin my research as it involved youths, considered a vulnerable population requiring special attention, an application was submitted to the University of South Florida’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee. Approvals for the research questions, study protocol and consent forms were obtained on May 17, 2016 with an approval number of PRO#00025751. Recruitment consisted of youths of Hispanic origin, ages 13-21 years of age, and living in the surrounding community of Wachooza and Riverton, as these two communities share boundaries and many youth-related spaces (both educational and recreational). Stakeholders from the Hispanic agencies operating in Wachooza were contacted and introductions were made with local faith-based missionaries and church leaders in the region that held bible youth groups or youth nights. Only one faith-based mission held consistent youth bible sessions and permitted me to attend in 2016. In exchange for volunteer hours at their weekly local pantry, I was given permission to attend the youth bible sessions every Wednesday night. There, I was introduced to the youth pastor in charge of the group and to the ten to fourteen youths that made up the youth group (nicknamed YG). The hour-long sessions began with the youths eating and gossiping amongst themselves with the pastor usually on his computer, a 15-minute session where the pastor attempted to have them read a bible verse or hold a jeopardy game (observed once) or speak about his life. The youth “pastor” was a 70-year-old, retired Puerto Rican man with some preaching experience but not an ordained clergyman, who spoke exclusively in Spanish while the children answered predominantly
in Spanish with some English words he translated for them. While the youth group was normally led by an ordained youth pastor, the position remained unfilled and a retired member of the congregation was given the position to occupy the youth until that position was filled, which did not occur during my tenure there from 2016-2018.

Research Aims

The three aims of this research were to understand: 1) how youths perceived the quality of life and youth-related resources in their neighborhood (neighborhood perception); 2) the personal aspirations or future goals they identified as achievable based on current opportunities; and 3) how they navigate any barriers or challenges that keep them from achieving their goal (presence of resilience). In order to achieve those aims, two main research questions were formulated (Table 1):

1) How do youth view the quality of youth-related resources available in their neighborhood (Neighborhood Perception) and how do they respond to neighborhood-related barriers (Resilience)

2) What goals or opportunities do youth see for themselves (Personal Aspirations) and how do youth plan to achieve those goals based on available opportunities (Resilience)

Based on these two questions, clarifying questions were developed with simplified language (e.g., using the term “opportunities” or “goals” instead of future-oriented goals or aspirations) for interviews, focus groups and surveys. The focus of the first set of questions always revolved around speaking of the neighborhood (external resources) and the positive aspects of their neighborhood and resources around them before leading the conversation to how the neighborhood directly affected their life and the negative aspects of their surroundings. This would lead to the second set of questions focused on youth identifying their goals and self-reflecting on their abilities, strengths and struggles to respond to the daily negative aspects of living in their neighborhood and achieving their goals (internal assets).
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<td>How do youth view the quality of youth-related resources available in their neighborhood (Neighborhood Perception) and how do they respond to neighborhood-related barriers (Resilience)</td>
<td>• What do you love about your neighborhood/town?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you dislike about your neighborhood/town?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o What are those barriers that affect you personally?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o How do you respond or work around those barriers? (Resiliency)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What does your town Need to make it better?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What goals or opportunities do youth see for themselves (Personal Aspirations) and how do youth plan to achieve those goals based on available opportunities (Resilience)</td>
<td>• What are your passions and skills?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What opportunities do you see for yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What are those personal barriers challenging you from achieving those opportunities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o How do you respond or work around those barriers? (Resiliency)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For this study, the methods employed were the following: semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and surveys. While I had permission to attend the youth nights, no interviews or focus groups were conducted until parental consent was acquired. For the YG youths, their parents either attended the Church on the same night or were picked up by the Youth pastor in the van. During the first few days, I made it a point to introduce myself, describe my research, and distribute parental consent forms, which they took with them to read and return signed with the youth. Even after the consent forms were signed, only participant observation occurred on the topics youth discussed amongst each other during bible study nights, their interaction with Church adults, the athletic activities they engaged in while waiting for bible study, and the various gossip concerning other peers and family. Field notes were written during the bible verse readings, when all the youth were preoccupied, or in my car after sessions. Interviews and focus groups did not begin with the youth until rapport was established after six months. For youth recruited from community festivals, church youth groups, or gatherings, parental consent forms were sent with them with my contact information to set up a time for interview and answer any questions. For those participants 18 years or older, the research was explained and a consent form taken prior to an interview or survey was conducted. Without the rapport established with
the youth group (YG), challenges in recruiting outside the YG required me to adjust my recruitment strategies.

**Challenges and Adjustments to Recruitment**

Recruitment of youths occurred at various gathering places in the Wachoosa/Riverton region, such as church youth groups, school bus stops, and recreational areas. Unlike the youth group (YG) participants, where rapport had been established over a year, and snowball sampling had led to interviews of a few close friends of the YG, youth recruited within the community were extremely skeptical about speaking with me. Two strategies were developed to mitigate this issue: 1) recruiting “gatekeepers” or local Wachoosa youth for assistance and 2) engaging the assistance of local organizations with access to youths to participate in the study.

With the support of the non-profit where I worked, I was able to successfully engage community stakeholders, faith-based leaders, non-profit organizations, and local universities to introduce my research to youths in their region and connect me with youth meetings. I trained two volunteer staff in community-based research methods and had them assist me in recruiting and interviewing teenagers throughout the Wachoosa/Riverton region for the summer. With one of my volunteers being a 23-year-old Wachoosa native, she was able to recruit from her own network of friends, inform students at the local high school in Riverton about this project, and reach out to the various local Church youth groups with whom she had connections. Despite being passionate about having the voices of youth heard, she also had trouble in getting youths motivated to speak about the barriers they faced in their community and the changes they wished to see.

**Participant Observation**

In order to adequately obtain data from this marginal group of youth and examine the socio-cultural structures and experiences that affect their individual agency and abilities to respond to
neighborhood and social challenges, ethnography was used (Holmes and Castañeda 2014). Burton (1988: 2014) describes ethnography as a way for “researchers to get inside the black box” and share the experience first-hand. Ethnography is defined as the study and research of people, particularly the nature of their social structures and behaviors, using a variety of methodologies such as interviews, focus groups and participant observation (Bernard 2011). Through participant observation, the researcher can observe individuals and their behavior within their own environment and social structure. While observing the participants’ behaviors and their feelings, and responding to participants’ lived experiences, the observer transforms into a full participant, gaining context to issues and noting personal perceptions from an emic (insider) perspective (Bernard 2011; Rich and Ginsburg 1999). Active participant observation is also an essential way of building rapport with youth, giving them time to build a relationship with the researcher, whether as an older friend, non-threatening adult, or an outsider that can ask “ignorant” questions (Best and Tyler 2007).

Active participant participation in the form of attending weekly youth nights, chatting regularly with the YG before and after bible study, and listening to their struggles at school and home and relating to their stories with personal stories started May 2016 and lasted until January 2018. I attended local church youth groups, community events, local parks, youth meetings, and local sporting events where youths gathered, writing my field notes and conversations overheard after these events. I frequently recorded first-hand the neighborhood environment as part of my non-profit duties which began in May 2016, became acquainted with the residents through regular participation in community meetings and providing services at a community center, and built rapport with community members and “gatekeepers” (i.e., adult youth leaders and parents) to youth groups. Daily reflections were written or recorded and later transcribed on what I had seen and heard from youths’ parents, and caregivers mentioning their teenage children, and issues affecting the family and community. Much of my work at the community center, which began in June 2016 and lasted until March 2018, focused on neighborhood needs and disparities faced in Wachoosa. As an anthropologist, I focused on collecting insights and testimonies from local
Wachoosa residents and social service providers to inform the center-based programs and grant-funding conversations. These insights and testimonials were also written down to increase my understanding of the economic and structural circumstances affecting minorities in the region. While there were challenges to working with youth, particularly with recruitment, participant observation was key in the success of building rapport with the youth in this study and gaining a better understanding of their situation that influences their decision making.

Establishing Rapport with The Youth Group

Establishing rapport is one of the key goals of active participant observation. This section outlines the specific details and months of work establishing that trust and rapport with the core group of participants that contributed the most detailed data and insights behind their decision-making and personal struggles. In May 2016, a farmworker ministry granted me access to their Church youth group in exchange for volunteering in their food bank distribution on site. Their youth group met twice a week at night, where weekly participant observation took place for a period of 12 months. During the first few months, rapport was built with this youth group (hereafter “YG”). The YG was comprised of 15 youths (5 boys and 10 girls) ranging in ages from 13 years to 21 years. The church youth group was informal, as it was led by a retired senior volunteer (70 years of age), with no ministry background who only spoke Spanish. While he tried to incorporate 15 minutes of bible study or analysis of a bible quote, it was clear that the rest of the hour and a half was dedicated to the youth eating and generally “hanging out” and talking about school issues, fights, relationships, and upcoming Quinceañera (a girl’s 15th birthday party) practices. Normally, the youth ate pizza, candy, and sugary beverages that were brought by the church staff or leftover from the food bank distribution. My role remained initially in the periphery, observing participant conversation at YG, and their behaviors towards each other and their youth leader, who was usually the eldest in the group. A few of the kids asked me general questions about who I was and what my role there was. To gain rapport, I was transparent as to the topic of my research and reiterated my
policy of confidentiality regarding anything I heard or wrote in my notebook. These explanations were met with cool indifference and general disinterest to engage in further conversation by most of the youth. It took a month of actively participating in their YG bible activities, joining in the prayer circle, and talking with the older group of girls before they all felt comfortable speaking with me directly. The two popular girls of the group (15 and 18 years old, respectively) engaged me in the most conversations concerning boys and relationship troubles and after two months, these two girls ended up vouching for me to the rest of the group. After some comments from the girls to the rest of the YG, such as “Guys, she’s cool. You can tell her anything and she won’t snitch” (15-year-old girl) and “I ask her lots of things, she gives good advice” by the older 18-year-old woman, who was considered the popular leader of the group. I was able to sit closer to the group and contribute to their conversations. I was asked about my opinions or thoughts on a particular issue (e.g., relationship trouble, arguments with their parents, issues at school), asked to join bible study trivia or group prayer where everyone holds hands in a circle (whereas before I remained outside the prayer circle), and asked deeply personal questions of my life, which I answered as transparently as I could. I believe it was the informality with which I carried myself, my ability to laugh at their inappropriate jokes along with them, my unoffended response to their merciless teasing, my readiness to tease back, and generally “not acting like a stuck-up adult” that helped them become comfortable with me and accept me as “cool!” Openly sharing pictures and stories of my growing toddler daughters, and groaning alongside the girls about issues with men (in my case, just my husband), made me someone they could relate to as an older sister, a “titi” (i.e., aunt), or “second mommy” as some girls nicknamed me, and trusted female adult to confide in.

Coaxing the YG boys to freely converse with me remained difficult as I had to find ways to relate with them. For this challenge, active participation during my observation days was key in showing these youth, especially the boys, that I was not an aloof adult but someone they could consider a laid-back friendly female acquaintance. For one shy migrant boy (15-years-old), it took exchanging workout routines for building arm and back muscles, which was his goal for the summer before school started. On
a slow day while we were both volunteering at the food pantry, I demonstrated what my trainer called “spiderman lunges” and then we challenged each other over who can do the most push-ups, even inciting an older male staff to join us. After that, he would come up every week to ask what new routine I had learned at my gym to teach him. This, of course got the other boys interested and they began to share their stories of muscle building at the gym and their workout and feeding routines. Relationship talk from the boys was still only discussed privately amongst their own male group unless they were teased by one of the females into revealing some “story of some chick.” Because the girls had embraced me as part of their group, it remained difficult to ever integrate myself fully amongst the male YG group.

While I was gaining confidence with the YG throughout the summer of 2016, I also gained permission to observe the middle school soccer team at the local charter school for children of migrant parents. The soccer team consisted of three young coaches (ranging in age from 17 to 21) from the Wachoosa area and a group of 12-15 migrant children ages 11 to 14 years. Apart from one other mom with her small daughter, I was the only other adult present to cheer for their team at practices and local games. Most of my interaction was with the coaches. None of the middle school kids ever felt comfortable interacting with me despite numerous “small talk” invitations on my end, mostly because all our interactions took place during practice or at a game. I also cannot claim any athletic ability and could not join them during practice time without slowing the entire team down or completely missing a soccer pass.

Despite the equal amount of time spent with the YG and the middle school young teenagers for a period of six months, a deeper rapport was developed with the YG due to the strong connection established early and the environment within the YG that encouraged conversation. Therefore, when it came time to ask for informal interviews, the YG members were open to having long conversations concerning how they felt about their neighborhood, what was needed to improve the neighborhood for youth like themselves, and what personal goals and challenges they experienced. Almost all the
conversations got deeply personal when discussing their own aspirations and the barriers and aspects of their neighborhood that made it difficult to see a life beyond high school for many of these youth.

**Interviews**

The advantage of collecting data through interviews instead of surveys is the more natural flow of conversation and the ability to explore a topic through further questioning instead of being restricted by a script or survey language (Bernard 2011). Interviews give “voice” to the participants to express their viewpoints, producing detailed descriptions of lived experiences in the Wachoosa/ Riverton area that complement data from participant observation, which allow youth to describe their own thought processes, beliefs, motivations, and challenges more fully regarding their personal aspirations. All interviews were conducted utilizing a form of multi-sited ethnography, called “walking ethnography” by Dean (2011) or “walk along” method (Kusenbach 2003), which entails conducting in depth qualitative interviews with a participant while walking around a familiar environment or community neighborhood, rather than sitting down for an interview. These “walk along” interviews occurred in various neighborhoods where youths lived and community-gathering venues (i.e., rental hall, community parks, local taquerias, food venues, school grounds, sports fields, and churches) in Wachoosa and Riverton. This allowed the youth in this study to feel more comfortable and aids in having a natural conversation, allowing them to point out aspects of their neighborhood space as related to the question. This method has proven very successful with adolescents (Dean 2011) and adults in resource-poor communities (Sharkey and Horel 2008; Carpiano 2009).

In this study, the youth (ages 13-21 years) were approached and asked if they would like to be part of a study asking for their opinions on their neighborhood and opportunities available for other young teenagers and youth. The consent forms were sent with them to be signed by their parents with my contact information to set up an interview date and location. Interviews were usually conducted at a site that the youths regularly frequented or their neighborhood town. These interviews were always conducted outside
as we walked the grounds and chatted around their neighborhood, such as the participants’ homes, nearby parks, church youth group nights, community events, school bus stops, local eateries, and at my work office adjacent to the local mission in Wachoosa. With a recorder in hand and my clipboard of questions, the participant and I would walk outside and walk around while I asked questions (See Appendix C) based on the research being explored (See Table 1). Without the formality of a sit-down interview and the need for eye-contact, these youth seemed to relax after the first few questions regarding their neighborhoods and appeared more comfortable towards the end of the interview. They talked about more personal aspects such as their personal goals, family challenges and personal challenges. Most interviews ended with youth commenting on how easy the whole process was, with a smile, and personally recommending other teenage friends for the study, allowing for snowball recruiting where one participant can lead to multiple participants through their peer network (Bernard 2011). Another advantage of utilizing this methodology is that it allowed the person time to think about their answers and view their neighborhood before answering questions regarding their neighborhood perspective and personal aspirations. This method seems to work better with the group of youth with whom I worked, particularly since it appealed to their restlessness and need to move around, especially for some of the more intimate questions regarding their own personal struggles.

Safety Concerns regarding Semi-Structured “Walking” Interviews

Since this study focused on the youth’s perceptions regarding their neighborhood, walking interviews were employed to allow both the researcher and youth the ability to point out aspects of their neighborhood. Shortly after receiving consent forms, a meeting date was set with the YG participants to meet before or after Church youth night or at their homes. The first few interviews in Riverton occurred in the homes where the participants commented on their neighborhood, the routes they took to walk to school or to run for exercise, and where they hung out with their friends. The Riverton participants, for the most part, lived in well-maintained home communities. Some participants mentioned how the walk...
was very soothing and a 15-year-old Riverton girl explained how good it felt to “get things off [her] chest for a minute.” She added, “like, no one has ever asked me what I want or really listened without trying to tell me what to do”. However, during one interview in Riverton with a female YG in a more low-income housing community, we received too much attention from men passing by with their cars and from drunk men sitting outside in their front porches. We also witnessed an attempted carjacking of my parked car, which led to the decision of discontinuing interviews at the participant’s resident neighborhoods in front of their homes both for their safety and mine. Particularly for the Wachoosa participants who lived in very rural and unpaved sections in trailers with minimal street lighting, walking outside in their neighborhood was not recommended by any of the participants, either male and female, due to drunk men or known gang members loitering outside, loose dogs, and no sidewalks in busy streets. As a stranger in the community, I was advised by most of the YG members to conduct interviews during Church youth nights while walking the surrounding Church grounds and middle school. I deferred to their wisdom and generally had youths describe their neighborhood in detail or mention the road so I could observe the neighborhood at a later time.

Focus Group and Free Listing

Focus groups were arranged, with the assistance of facilitators and gatekeepers at the following: local community center, a church youth group meeting, and at the soccer field behind a local school. Two co-ed focus groups discussed topics pertaining to the neighborhood, opportunities for youths, challenges and improvements (See Appendix C for questions and format). These two co-ed focus groups also utilized an additional anthropological methodology called free-listing (Bernard 2017), where participants were asked prior to sessions beginning to list on poster sheets hung throughout the room all the things they loved about their neighborhood, all the things they disliked, and their favorite youth gathering spots. This free listing technique is useful in large group settings and allows everyone a chance to list all their ideas concerning a topic for later group discussion. One male-only focus group and one female-only focus
group discussed the same topics as the other focus groups but sought to hear more gender-specific challenges that affected youth. A total of four focus groups were organized and 43 youths participated. Recruitment was made possible through community connections with gatekeepers and inviting church youth groups. With the incentive of a youth gathering and free food, word of mouth spread, and the two coed meetings attracted many participants (18 and 16 youth, respectively). While the conversation was rich in data, there was the challenge of certain voices being heard more than others in the discussion on neighborhood needs. The free-listing technique allowed me to bring up each of the ideas listed by participants into discussion, often asking the least vocal of our participants to share why they listed a particular neighborhood “like or disliked” feature. The third focus group (male only) and fourth focus group (female only) followed the same format as the co-ed focus groups and were smaller in number (four and five youth, respectively) with the intention of allowing participants more comfort to identify gender-specific challenges (See Appendix B). The free listing technique had to be adjusted with the male focus group due to its location outside. Instead, the four male participants were asked to shout out topics related to neighborhood likes and dislikes for me to write down as an ice breaker before beginning the questions.

**Focus Group Agenda**

Focus groups took place at the local women’s center where I was employed, two local Wachoosa churches, and at a soccer campground in a nearby school. The agenda (see appendix C) followed the same format in all 4 focus groups conducted. Questions began with a round of introduction and ice breaker facilitated by me with the assistance of 1-2 volunteers, holding recorders and taking notes. The ice breaker was a free-listing technique which consisted of poster boards hung in various sections of the room with one of the themes of the conversation written on each one: What do you love about your neighborhood, What do you dislike about your neighborhood, What do you wish your neighborhood had, List Favorite local food locales, List local teen hangout spots. Participants were invited to take a marker
upon entry and write on each of the poster boards their answers before the focus group began. This activity allowed the participants, including the very shy quiet ones, to voice their opinions before the group discussion occurred and provided a platform for discussion.

The focus group questions (see Appendix C) followed the ice breaker activity asking the youth to reflect on their neighborhood, basing much of the discussion on the answers they listed in the ice-breaker activity. They were given green “thumbs up” cutouts and red “thumbs down” stickers and asked to go back to the posters that listed the dislikes in their neighborhood and place an agree (green thumb) or disagree (red thumb) symbol. This allowed everyone a visual of which neighborhood “dislikes” were most frequently agreed upon as affecting the group of youth present. At the time, this was meant to mirror thumbs up and thumbs down emojis used in the social media platform Facebook when friends comment on each other’s pictures and posts on the social media platform. Major themes were identified regarding what they felt their neighborhood was missing, what they disliked about their neighborhood, the positive aspects of their neighborhood, and what improvements they wished to see in their own neighborhood. Because the discussion revolved around their own ice-breaker answers, and no adults were present in the room, the youths felt more comfortable voicing their opinions on adults and figures of authority in their lives and the neighborhood. The second half of the focus group agenda involved the personal aspiration research questions. Participants were asked to split up in their own quiet corners alone, without their friends, and reflect on their own personal goals using a printed “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats” (SWOT) matrix (Humphrey 1960) with volunteer facilitators present, one a local Wachoosa girl and the other a college student interning at the same place I worked (See Appendix D for SWOT template). Participants were instructed on what the acronym meant, with examples provided by me and the facilitators on each of the four categories for clarification. Participants were given 15 minutes to quietly reflect on what strengths and weaknesses they believe they possessed, what opportunities they saw for themselves or wanted to pursue, and what threats or barriers existed that keep them from pursuing those opportunities. Afterwards, all the participants were asked to return to the group and asked to share
one of their examples from each of the categories. The SWOT matrices were collected from all the participants.

The final section of the focus group revolved around youths identifying and brainstorming improvements for their neighborhood or what they wish to see to make it a better place for their generation. Each participant was given a $1 million dollar paper bill and asked to write three solutions that they believed would help youths in their community or improve the community in general. While some expressed that $1 million dollars was not enough for the improvements, I encouraged them to think bigger and without limitations on what would be needed to make the community a better place for them.

Survey

A survey was created using a condensed version of the questions for youths who consented to participate in the study but did not have the time to commit to a full interview that required a minimum of 45 minutes. Once the consent form was signed and emailed or returned to me, the survey was administered via phone or in-person, usually taking 10-15 minutes (See Appendix E for survey template). For youths who were unacquainted with me and my local resident volunteer, a local Wachoosa girl and fellow colleague, agreeing to hour-long interviews was not always possible or they were too shy to speak with us directly in person or via phone. Therefore, surveys were generated through “Survey Monkey,” using a condensed version of the interview questions. The survey link was shared on my local volunteer’s Facebook page and messaged to her Facebook Friends who lived in the nearby Riverton/ Wachoosa area. This method of using social media did not prove successful in generating feedback since the answers were mostly a few words and did not yield the richness of data that an interview does. So the approach was changed from recruiting through online social media to recruiting door-to-door in Wachoosa and Riverton’s housing complexes, pitching to youth the mission of this study, and having them fill out a survey and engage in casual conversations about the topics. Those who were 18 years and older were given a consent form to sign before administering the survey which took anywhere between 5-15 minutes,
depending on the youth’s comfort level in engaging in conversations about these topics. These conversations were not nearly as lengthy as the semi-structured interviews, but were recorded and transcribed. This approach with two major subsidized housing complexes in Wachoosa yielded 36 surveys.

**Data Triangulation**

In order ensure multiple viewpoints were collected for this study, data triangulation was implemented using the various methodologies: participant observation, focus groups, free listing, interviews and surveys. While my background work in Wachoosa had yielded information regarding the community resources and the concerns adults had in the region, the youth community was a very private group and no local organizations had ever worked with youth in this region. Participant observation at the onset of this study was crucial in order to understand youth spaces, youth needs, and establish rapport with adult gatekeepers in order to begin recruiting. With the exception of the YG, community youth bible study groups were approached to arrange focus group meetings. Free-listing methodology was employed first as a pilot data-collection method to see what youth would reveal concerning their perception of their neighborhood (e.g., what did they love, dislike, and want to see in Wachoosa). This provided conversational material for the focus group, where even the shyest individuals were asked about what they had written in the free list. From this focus group, a different set of youth was recruited for the interviews to avoid any repetition of conversations discussed in the focus group and any influential factors from what was discussed in the focus groups.

Information drawn from participant observation, free-listing, and focus groups, influenced the type of probing questions asked during interviews and facilitated an understanding of the context of what youth revealed concerning the neighborhood. As the study progressed, a greater understanding of how youth utilized the resources around their neighborhood and what youth-related spaces existed was possible.
For the community perception survey (See appendix E), the first section started with the same questions utilized during the free-listing exercise. These questions were easily answered by youth during the focus groups with minimal explanations needed, which made these questions a good starter to a survey. As for the follow up questions regarding barriers, examples were listed based on initial data gathered via focus groups and interviews. These surveys were given to youth who had not participated in any of the previous methods.

By gathering data from various sources and having independent groups recruited in each methodology, the purpose was to include multiple sources to yield rich data and reveal any nuances and variations amongst Hispanic youth regarding their neighborhood resources and resilience-enhancing factors.

**Participant Demographics and Analysis**

A total of 127 Hispanic-identifying adolescents between the ages of 13 and 21 participated in the study using the above methodologies. Demographics for the 127 participants are given in Table 2. Table 3 shows the total number of unduplicated participants who participated in each method is in Table 3.

*Table 2. Sociodemographic of Study Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Participants ages 13-21</th>
<th>127 (Average age of 17)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>52% (n=66) Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>48% (n=61) Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>78% (n=99) Wachoosa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22% (n=28) Riverton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>100% (n=127) Hispanic or Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>11% (n=13) Black or African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22% (n=27) White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>67% (n=87) Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Number of participants who participated in each method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods Utilized</th>
<th># of Participants in each session</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walking Interviews</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Groups 1 and Free List</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 2 and Free-List</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female-Only Focus Group and Free-List</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male-Only Focus Group and Free-List</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All qualitative data such as interviews, focus groups, free-listing, surveys, and participant observation were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using MAX-QDA 2017-2018 mixed methods data analysis software. On the first review of the data, relevant phrases were categorized and labeled by assigning a code based on emerging themes. Upon second and third review, similar codes were condensed or turned into sub-codes until prevalent major themes emerged from all the qualitative data. Due to my position at a non-profit within the Wachoosa area for 2 years, observations of the community continued past the 15 months of active fieldwork from 2016 to 2018 during which any relevant updates concerning the youths from this study or Wachoosa/ Riverton were documented. Descriptive statistics were generated by MAX-QDA software, quantifying the number of times major themes came up within the qualitative data, and assigning it a percentage. Relationships amongst the major themes were analyzed using code cooccurrence analysis which quantifies the number of times major themes coincide in the same conversation.

Ethical Challenges Conducting Research with Youth
Throughout the study and implementation of the methodology, there were several ethical challenges that arose as a result of working with youths. My positionality as an adult, Latina researcher was the first one in hindering my ability to gain rapport with the YG youth. At first, the YG members mistook me for a younger woman in my mid-20s, which helped me greatly in being a part of their conversations during bible study and hearing the gossip concerning romantic relationships, issues with family and peers, and concerns around their lives. The youth were often suspicious of my assurances of confidentiality and would test me by making inappropriate remarks about their casual drug use or promiscuity (the latter being mostly form the male participants). As trust began to develop over several months and they began to see me more as an adult friend, the youth were more accepting of my presence during very tough conversations they had amongst each other regarding disagreements with their parents, thoughts of running away, fears of parental reactions and repercussions, and issues of bullying at school. As an adult, I tried my best to advice the youth on what I would do in their situation or from my own personal experience in similar situations. However, it was clear that in situations where intervention was needed, these youth had no one they trusted enough to share their problem to gain some advice. In these moments, speaking to a youth Church leader, parent or any other adult would have violated the privacy and confidentiality I had established from the beginning with these youth.

Incidents of extreme bullying and retaliation, or contemplating running away from home required me to sit with them and really draw upon my role as an adult who can empathize with their feelings and give trusted advice. For those who feared parental reactions, I reminded them of my role as a young mother and how I would feel if my children could not trust me with their problems and coaching them on how to redirect their parent’s anger towards the fact these youth are coming to them for support and protection from further bullying. For those times when I was not sought out and I noticed an escalation of risky behavior, I relied upon the trust established within the YG to seek those the youth would respect—the older YG members. Whether it was a side conversation with these trusted YG members to check up on certain individuals or having an intervention meeting where I was present but silent, while the
tormented youth spoke with the YG elder youth member of their problem- this was one of the few ways I was able to continue to respect and maintain the privacy and confidentiality of my participants while still being able to help them during extreme circumstances where their safety and mental health were at risk.
CHAPTER FIVE:

DATA RESULTS

In this chapter, all conversations, participant observations, and information gathered from the 2016-2018 from Hispanic adolescents in the Wachoosa/ Riverton region were presented. Qualitative analysis identified various key themes based on the frequency they were mentioned by youths. These major themes were then organized in their relation to the three major research questions being asked: 1) How do you view your neighborhood? (Neighborhood Perception); 2) What goals or aspirations do you have for yourself and your community? (Identify Aspirations); 3) How do you view your ability to reach your goals or respond to challenges? (Resilience). Each section includes figures displaying the frequency in which the theme was mentioned in conversations and relevant quotes from youth concerning the topic.

The neighborhood section starts with themes identifying all the positive and negative qualities of their participants’ neighborhood. The most prevalent topics included youths identifying all the improvements that were needed to make their neighborhood better. These included more recreational facilities and parks, more businesses, and cleaner infrastructure such as better roadways, more streetlights and sidewalks, along with better job opportunities and youth mentorship. These improvements were in direct response to all the negative neighborhood qualities and what participants identified as barriers to living and succeeding in their neighborhood. This was followed by the personal aspirations where youths revealed their own personal struggles, sense of hopelessness and lack of motivation, and lack of social and financial support. For some, it was past traumas such as sexual abuse, drug use, emotional abuse, and unhealthy relationships that fueled their self-doubts. For others, it was their undocumented status and the increased fears and discrimination brought on by the 2016 Presidential election and President Trump’s abusive rhetoric of immigrants and migrants. The resilience section focused on the small group of 18 (of
127 youth) that were able to voice a personal goal and actively pursuing this goal. The role of social supports, motivations, and role models was discussed.

Final analysis looked at the interconnection between themes, using code co-occurrence that maps the frequency of themes being coded together in all the qualitative data. Resilience was frequently coded alongside themes related to social supports, presence of role models and identifying opportunities for work or achieving personal aspirations. The theme of hopelessness and lack of motivation was frequently coded alongside themes related to lack of social support, self-esteem, discrimination and racism, and risky behavior or history of abuse.

Analysis of Major Themes

Based on the 127 conversations consisting of 48 interviews, 4 focus groups, 36 surveys, and two years of participant observation, several themes emerged from the youth participants and other community members. After transcribing all these conversations, qualitative analysis was performed using software MAX-QDA to code all the transcribed data. These codes were condensed into 12 major themes, each with its own sub-themes. The percentage next to each theme was quantified by MAX-QDA system and was based on the frequency with which this topic was mentioned throughout all the qualitative data (see Figure 5).
These major themes reflected the dominant reflections and ideas youth had regarding the three main topics of inquiry: neighborhood perception, aspirations, and resiliency. The themes regarding body image, group dynamics, kids now vs past, and religiosity (see figure 3) were based on conversations overheard during participant observation and did not prove relevant to the three main research topics and are not discussed in the following chapters. For those remaining themes, each one is discussed under the subheadings of external neighborhood factors, internal personal factors, and personal aspirations and resilience.

Beginning by analyzing how youths described their neighborhood environment, the first section will focus on the challenges and opportunities they see for their community, and the political climate that led to many of the themes surrounding discrimination and illegality. As with the interviews, the next section will focus on the personal aspirations and personal challenges youths described, touching on the culture surrounding youth fighting, and incidents of trauma. In each section, supporting quotes from youths in the study and field observations will be presented.

**Neighborhood Perception**

This chapter relates to the first research question “How do youth view their neighborhood (Neighborhood Perception) and how do they respond to it (Resilience).” Youth focused on the
improvements and opportunities needed in their neighborhood. Many of these improvements were meant to address some of what is lacking in their neighborhood such as parks or youth programs. When describing the challenges and negative aspects of the neighborhood, youth described how these challenges directly affected them in their lives. These findings were supported by observations in the field and conversations with local community leaders and adults in the region.

Every conversation with youths asking them to reflect on their neighborhood started with this set of questions: How do you view your neighborhood? What do you love about it and what do you think could be better? The question was asked as neutrally as possible to get their perspective, whether positive or negative, of how youths felt about where they lived and interacted with their friends and family. During interviews, focus groups, surveys, and casual conversations, the youths spoke about neighborhood improvements, the many structural challenges and lack of resources in their neighborhood, as well as how they perceived where they lived as a place they could succeed and thrive as youth. A word cloud (Figure 6) captured all the major themes that came up in our conversation regarding the neighborhood.

![Word Cloud](image)

**Figure 4.** Word cloud of all major themes and related sub-themes regarding the neighborhood which included: Proposed neighborhood improvements, neighborhood barriers and threats, and neighborhood perception.
Referring to Figure 4, the conversation regarding neighborhood was predominantly on the positive aspects of their neighborhood, especially from the local Wachoosa youths, who displayed local pride of where they lived. But once the conversation focused on improvements, recreational spaces and the presence of crimes and gangs dominated the conversation. Each of these aspects will be analyzed below.

**Proposed Neighborhood Improvements**

This theme was the most frequently mentioned by youths as they defined what their neighborhood was missing, what was needed to make the neighborhood more community-friendly and attractive for youths their age, and what would make the neighborhood “better” as defined by them.

![Proposed Neighborhood Improvements](image)

*Figure 5. Major Theme "Proposed Neighborhood Improvement" and its related sub-themes mentioned by youth participants. The Y-axis percentage is the frequency in which the theme was mentioned in all the qualitative data in this theme.*

As evident from Figure 5, youths predominantly focused on the need for more recreational spaces and parks in the region (69.4%). With only one park located in the region used by the local Boys and Girls Club and only open to the public on the weekends or after 5pm, youths wanted more places to practice sports and hangout with friends. “A park with basketball court, soccer field that’s open to the public, swings, slides, softball or baseball field, volleyball. Kids love sports here. Like a designated spot would make a difference but you gotta be careful with open fields because it can quickly turn into a let’s
hangout and drink there...Parks bring people together with different interests” (21-year-old Wachoosa girl). “A game center for all ages that way they’ll have something to do after school and they’ll be with kids their age because it’ll be like electronic games or old school games or a pool open to the public” (18-year-old Riverton boy). For the five young moms, having a park or gym nearby to gather with other fellow moms was important to them. One Wachoosa mom with a 4-year-old daughter mentioned “I feel like they should get a gym. Or a place for little kids because sometimes gyms have little kid’s areas. We need more kid friendly stuff here in Wachoosa so that you don’t have to drive too far.” “We go mostly to a park 30 minutes away. I wish we had one here so we would not drive so far. Maybe even a mommy and me type thing or zumba classes. I know there’s one in Riverton, but I cannot drive there every day” (Wachoosa 19-year-old mom of a 3-year-old boy and 3 stepchildren under the age of 7). For many other youths, parks were an essential outlet to keep them out of trouble or even to get better at a sport and have a potential opportunity to do better. A former gang member (21 years) from Wachoosa mentioned the importance of the park:

I got kicked out of school, I went the wrong route, way left. Everything I was not supposed to do, that’s where I was at. I did not have a childhood; I don't remember a lot of cartoons, but I had the park back then. That's what I think helped a lot that was the park. They don't have the park now, it's gonna make things worse cause the kids don't got nothing to do.

The male focus group was made up of all soccer coaches who mentioned the benefit of having a soccer field and sports available to the public. “I feel like if we had something here, you know, a nice soccer field...that would be a big help cause the kids know that we’re trying to help them out and they would have a place to go.” -21-year-old coach from Wachoosa. This was also mentioned by another resident Wachoosa man:

I know a lot of people here, there's so much talent here, so much potential. Bring clubs that people can actually make it somewhere. Because my little brother plays soccer here in Wachoosa but was like ‘Oh I'm not gonna go anywhere with this right here in Wachoosa.’ We got our own little league but ain’t nobody scouting them, nobody’s looking. And then right down the road in (next city located 20 minutes north), you have top of the line, people scouting, looking for the best player and you can actually be something. Here, it’s like we’re off the map.
This feeling of being forgotten and their youth spaces disappearing or being overlooked was felt by many of the youths as they saw over the years the soccer fields and public parks, they grew up with now closed or given over to land developers to make more housing complexes.

Yet new housing complexes brought more commercial businesses into the area like Wawa’s and Aldi’s that generate job opportunities for many of the youth. Most of the participants in both interviews and focus groups mentioned getting a job there, with one participant actively training for an Aldi’s manager position. Many of the participants mentioned looking forward to this commercialization bringing different opportunities to earn money which is why the second most important improvement identified by youths was the need for more opportunities (38.9%) in the form of jobs, afterschool programs, and work-force training. These conversations often coincided with the need for mentorship or role models (27.8%).

After School programs both athletic and academic. Tutors so that the kids don’t get discouraged in school and athletics to get them doing something productive instead of being on the streets. I want them to not be privately funded because I know as a kid, I wanted to be in all of these after school programs, but my parents did not have any money to pay for it, so I was never in it. (20-year-old DREAMer attending community college).

Many commented on the need for more afterschool programs to really develop their interests, demonstrating that education was a highly valued interest and need for these youth. “Growing up, I knew a lot of kids like sports, but I really loved science. So if there was something like an afterschool program that solely taught the stuff that you wanted to learn, you're gonna learn because you want to know more about it” (18-year-old girl). The difference between what youth saw in the major city less than 30 miles away with various colleges and professional institutions compared to their rural community. “I wish we had more colleges around here. I feel like it would also change our environment because more college kids would be coming here. Like Tampa there are so many college kids out there that also brings things like restaurants and more jobs” (19-year-old Riverton woman). One 20-year-old young father said “Basically, I just want for people to know that Wachoosa’s not a bad place. It is a good place. I just wanna achieve, have a better life, because everybody wants a better life. Trying to find opportunity to
make that happen for them.” The opportunities referred to the desire for more jobs, scholarship opportunities, tutoring (which was non-existent even at the elementary level from 2016-2018), and training in technical/associates positions that can lead them straight into the workforce. But even with opportunities, resilience is not always possible. One 20-year-old mom mentioned “I want to go back to school, I want to get my degree. But every time I go, no one can help me. I don’t know about FAFSA or what papers I need or, when I get there, what classes to take. No one wants to help” The need for mentorship and guidance was mentioned often due to the lack of information most youths felt on what path to take regarding getting into college, finishing high school, making legitimate money (as opposed to selling drugs), and receiving some support regarding their aspirations. During the co-ed focus group, a 20-year-old woman who currently works with social services referred to this need for guidance. She stated that “sometimes in our poverty ridden communities, it’s what we see, we see everybody in the streets, they get their money through dealing drugs, doing this and doing that, and not understanding that the way to get out of that is school/education to get a better job.” A 19-year-old college man that grew up in Riverton has been working his freshman year as an ambassador for the local community college to try to get more kids from the high school to apply for college. He recounts how his motivation came from his exposure to good influence both in his life and at school.

Think education is a big thing. My grandparents did not finish school, probably up to third grade but they taught me the importance of education. As a kid I never questioned how educated they were because they were always wise. It was just me, my mom and my brother growing up. They always pushed me even though they did not know the process to get into school. Community college is very affordable. Going to a university, everyone stresses that it's the best way to go and community college is looked down on. Think that everything comes from exposure. When someone sees something different, they need someone or a group to guide them to stay that way. I did not have that many bad habits growing up...it’s normal to fall back quick to do things out of habit. Out of all my friends I grew up with, except my brother, I was the only one to graduate high school and go to college. The rest either dropped out or just worked. - 19-year-old Riverton college man

This college student really touched on the importance of experiencing something different than what they see every day, the experience and possibilities that colleges offer (whether community or University) for other youths growing up in small towns with limited possibilities. Having grown up in Riverton, he
stressed the importance of exposing youth to more opportunities outside what their community could offer. College and education were one aspect that, via his family’s support and insistence, he was able to expand his resources and access to more opportunities. For those who are able to find opportunities, having the combination of a mentor or role model increases the likelihood of continuing to pursue their goal. For those for whom opportunities did not include college, the boom of new businesses and commercialization held great appeal for workforce training and higher paying jobs.

The third most important improvement (36%) youths wanted to see in their neighborhood were new businesses (e.g., recreational facilities, rehabilitation centers, police stations to monitor the safety of growing businesses) and more commercialization (e.g., better transportation system, cleaner roads). In their words, the boom in real estate and rapid housing developments in Wachoosa is “a good thing, it’s positive cause it means more jobs” according to a 21-year-old woman during a focus group. Another 20-year-old man in the same focus group stated, “We’re getting homes around here, so we need actual stuff to do like restaurants, pool tables, businesses.” With all the new developments that had sprung up in Wachoosa in just the last year, the youth actually embraced this change and were hopeful for the modernization of their small agricultural town. Besides Mexican taqueria stands, there is no other type of ethnic restaurant in the region and only a Dollar General amid family-owned businesses. When asked what they would like to see in Wachoosa using the free-list method, many listed a mall, a movie theatre, a public library or internet café with free WIFI, public transportation since the HART bus line doesn’t run through Wachoosa, a laundromat so families can stop using the ones at the two subsidized housing complexes, and restaurants with healthier food items other than the fast-food outlets surrounding Wachoosa. As one 13-year-old boy mentioned “It’s just Mexican food here all the time.” This positive vote towards the rapid development of Wachoosa and Riverton was in direct opposition to the Wachoosa adults who opposed gentrification of their neighborhood. With the high prices of these homes, ranging from $250,000 to $500,000, many current residents do not make enough to afford these homes and are starting to see the neighborhood makeup changing with more working professionals moving into the
region. The youth, on the other hand, were more optimistic about the changes. However, none of the youths ever mentioned wanting to live in these homes or being able to afford these homes in any of the conversations. Some youth felt their parent’s homes were secure and mentioned wanting to be closer to take care of their aging parents. “I cannot leave my parents, they’re viejitos (old), someone has to take care of them. My brother is leaving, he’s gonna go for college but someone needs to stay and take care of them”- 19-year-old Riverton girl who later became pregnant and currently lives with her boyfriend and son in her parent’s home. For some, living with family makes more economic sense. “We got a taxi business together, my pops and I, we take people anywhere, to Texas, Canada, Mexico. I don’t wanna leave (girlfriend) home alone with our son. It makes sense that she lives there with my mom, that way they ain’t lonely and we can all help out. The bills are no joke.”- 21-year-old Wachoosa dad.

Overall, the improvements youths wished to see revolved around opportunities to improve their circumstances, which involved having recreational outlets, educational and training opportunities, role models to guide them in a better pathway, and businesses to bring on more economic opportunities. Unfortunately, there are many neighborhood challenges and threats, not just the lack of these much-desired resources. The following section explores these structural disadvantages that youth in the region face daily.

**Neighborhood Barriers and Threats**

When youths were asked about what they would improve on their neighborhood, the conversation would naturally turn to listing and describing all the negative aspects of living in Wachoosa and Riverton, along with the constant barriers and dislikes youths had concerning their neighborhood. Whether these dislikes posed a challenge to them directly or indirectly in being able to feel safe, get an education, live in their neighborhood, achieve their goals, or directly impeded them from being able to do something, this
was noted under the theme “neighborhood threats” with various sub-coded themes that emerged (See Figure 6).

Figure 6. The theme "Neighborhood barriers and threats" with related sub-themes mentioned by youths when reflecting on the factors that make it challenging and difficult to live and succeed in their neighborhood.

As shown in Figure 6, the top concerns mentioned by youth revolve around the lack of safety felt due to the crime and gang activity, presence of drugs and guns in their neighborhood. The lack of transportation was also a major challenge as this affected both youths and adults alike in being able to commute to jobs and school. Each major barrier was explored in more detail in each section of this chapter, with the youth’s own words and impressions on how these personally affected their life and goals.

**Crimes, Gangs, and Guns**

The top neighborhood threat cited by 50% of respondents (see Figure 6) is the presence of gangs, gun violence, and crime in the region of Wachoosa/ Riverton. Gang signs from the Latin Kings and other rival members were commonly found across school grounds, recreational parks, and dilapidated houses.

*The fact that I live with a lot of gang people down my road. Like there’s a trap house down my road so that’s why sometimes I don’t like going outside because right in front of my house lives one of the kids and sometimes he has...I remember one day I went outside, and I was in mini shorts and a tank top cause that’s how I’m at my house. I go outside and there’s about 20 kids in front of my house they all turned their heads and I’m like nope. I go back inside”*- a 13-year-old YG girl.
The youth were always aware of gang members gathering in their neighborhood, few of them actively recruiting within their schools, or knew a family member or friend within one of those gangs. “You just knew who everyone was. Like before you even joined a gang, you were already friends with them so even if they go away- ‘you still my friend regardless.’ If they see you, they take care of you and all that,” stated a 21-year-old Wachoosa dad.

The soccer coaches often accredited these kids joining gangs due to the lack of family at home.

*We’re here until 5 o’ clock. That’s pretty late but still, you see these middle schoolers, they don’t go to sleep or they sometimes go hungry or out on the streets because they don’t have their parents at home- they still at the fields working. So, they resort to that, and they go to the gang violence to, you know, the people that are gonna help them and say, “that they’re gonna help them.” I know a lot of them go to the Wachoosa field to play soccer, all the kids go there. You see em. - RCMA coach, 21-year-old.*

[Figure 7. Example of Free-List Method used in Focus Groups as an ice breaker for youths to list their opinions. In later discussions, participants were given green "thumbs up" and red "thumbs down" to place next to the opinions they agreed with.]

[Figure 8. Example of Free List method used in Focus group for youth to voice opinion. The red "thumbs down" was meant for youth to disagree with a topic but they used it to denote strong feelings towards a certain topic.]
Gun violence was an everyday occurrence and normative reality for many residents of the region, with frequent gunshots heard every night and especially on Fridays (aka “pay day” according to residents). “It’s a payday celebration, they just start shooting at the sky when they get drunk.”- 21-year-old Wachoosa local. “You just hear shots ringing out, and all the kids, they hear it all the time, so they don’t flinch or anything...we’ll have them playing soccer and recess and they keep playing and all you hear is ‘boom boom boom.’ They’re the big guns not no little 9’s or nothing like that”- RCMA coaches from male focus group. I witnessed first-hand a practice soccer game between the Wachoosa local soccer league and a team from a nearby town playing when gunshots were heard nearby in broad daylight at 5:30pm. The opposing team (and their families) dropped to the ground while the Wachoosa players merely kept on playing, completely desensitized to any imminent danger. Gunshots were also heard first-hand during my late nights at YG past 6 p.m. on select Friday nights. New Year’s Eve 2017 was viewed as being the worst one by numerous Wachoosa residents and YG kids claiming automatic rifles were being fired into the air all that evening keeping them awake.

New Years was terrible here this year, like fireworks and metralletas (machine guns), going patpatpat. On New Year’s Eve, you used to be able to stay out like really late like 2 or 3 in the morning, now with all the gunshots...like the other years, it’s like moderate (gunshot noises), but this year it was ridiculous. It sounded like they were like fighting each other.... I feel like I’m just accustomed to it. Like I know you, you know me so don't shoot me, coz. I mean, you might risk it because I know back a few years, then it was bigger. Like where you had different gangs and the gang from one part would come over here and do a drive-by and stuff like that. A situation came down like that a year ago. - 19-year-old Wachoosa woman.

Crimes were public knowledge thanks to media and word of mouth in such small communities, usually involving drug raids, sometimes meth or cocaine, and domestic violence situations escalating to murder. As one participant stated: “Where I live, there’s been two deaths already- one of my uncles was killed right next to my house and another guy was shot. There was another lady across the street who was shot by her own husband in front of their child...my other uncle got robbed and stabbed, yeah there's a lot of incidents that happened in Wachoosa”- 17-year-old Wachoosa girl. One 16-year-old girl recounted an incident of two men fighting during her friend’s quinceañera party and a guy taking out a gun and
shooting the other man. Two incidents of rape of a minor by a religious official and a school official occurred during my two years working in this region. During my stay, I witnessed the aftermath of the victims coping with the tragedy, particularly the minors involved joining the YG group, and the general community response to those officials’ characters (some even defending the moral character of these individual’s) and the subsequent cover-up of these scandals by school and church individuals. These will be discussed at a later chapter when speaking of the types of abuse and personal threats identified by youth.

Drugs and Alcohol Use

Drug and alcohol use (16.8%– see figure 8) relate to the crimes observed as drugs were a major source of income by youths, both related to gangs and not. Within this community, it was a common form of business amongst youth and adults. “Sometimes in our poverty ridden communities, it’s what we see. We see everybody in the streets, they get their money through dealing drugs, doing this and that, not understanding that the way to get out is school to get a better job”—18-year-old DREAMer Wachoosa woman. Most of the YG group could point out the alcoholic “drunkies” that loiter in the streets or in front of restaurants, the drugs present in the schools or the parking lots where drug transactions, and places where most kids go to smoke marijuana outdoors. Two YG siblings pointed out an entire street in Riverton they avoided because they see constant traffic of cars driving by very slowly and a lot of different men passing by there at night. One of the RCMA coaches pointed out the “drug scene at the park” which a few of the YG confirmed as a popular spot to obtain drugs or by the railroad tracks or behind the Amazon warehouse. One 15-year-old Wachoosa girl avoids the park, the only one partially available to the public in Wachoosa, because of the drunks that are there. She recounts how she avoids certain parts of her neighborhood.

The playground, I don’t go there no more and the back of my neighborhood because that’s where people drink. I was like 10 or something, and these people were drunk and got beer bottles and smashed it through my window while me and my brother were sleeping. They smashed it through
my parent’s window and my older brother’s window. And when we woke up, we had like glass all over ourselves. My parents were in the sala (living room) and my brother said he heard something, and they went to check my room and woke me up and I had glass all over myself...I felt something sharp in my thigh, but I thought it was Junior (her younger brother) or something, then they woke me up and glass everywhere, all over Junior...there’s just certain spot where kids hang that I just don’t go.

One terrifying incident did occur with one of the YG boys overdosing on prescription medication, bought by a local dealer, and meant to be an attempted suicide, which we learned after the incident. This led to his hospitalization, visits from the YG pastor, and his subsequent removal to Texas to live with his father, much to the sorrow of all the YG kids.

**Transportation and Infrastructure**

Transportation/ Road Issues (15%- see figure 8) refers to the lack of infrastructure in Wachoosa, with no sidewalks outside of the main road that bisects Wachoosa. There is also no transportation at all as the public bus only stops one block into Wachoosa’s border. Of the 35 square miles, there is no public transportation system within Wachoosa which forces most of the population to ride share or walk the miles to school or the main bus stop at the edge of the Wachoosa border to head to work, grocery store or to the clinic. For the youths in this study who attend middle and high school, their schools are not even located in Wachoosa but in Riverton, which forces them to rely on caregivers or friends to get to school. This was frequently spoken of by the middle school coaches who would pick up kids for practice and drop them back off at home. This was also observed in the ride sharing occurring for all the YG youths to bible study, and their conversations at bible study over who’s mom would be driving a few the youth to school the next morning.

**Lack of Safety or Police Presence**

With all the incidents of gunshots and crime, lack of safety was a common feeling felt by youths, particularly even the lack of police presence for these incidents. Lack of safety and police presence
(11.6% see Figure 8) was mentioned by many of the youth with comments such as “the police never come around here. You can call but they’ll never come” (18-year-old Wachoosa mom). For some, the police were viewed with mixed feelings of fear, especially by those youths who were undocumented or lived in mixed status homes.

Both, in aspect as that whenever people see police here, they get scared especially here, immigrants, you know. So, people see cops and get scared so in that aspect I would say that’s good but bad because, I’m not trying to say that (Wachoosa) is a bad place but there are some activities that, you know, the fast driving, the- you know, late at night, there’s kids on the road- especially here in the apartments- 18-year-old man from co-ed focus group.

One YG girl, 14-years-old, recounted a story of being harassed with her sister by two drunk men at a local bodega when they were buying food. Their father was outside waiting for them, but they did not feel safe saying anything because this girl and her father were both undocumented. This 14-year-old girl viewed the police as a greater threat than the two drunken men in front of them that kept trying to pinch their bottoms and follow them through the store.

Other Threats and Barriers

The last few sub-codes, lack of institutional support (9.8%), recreational space, and afterschool programs (6.9%), referred to the lack of funding youths often heard in being able to afford any changes in parks, recreation centers, or road improvements. Many of the youths felt deep resentment towards where they lived due to the lack of youth-related resources. “A lot of people here do soccer. They don’t have leagues. You don’t see leagues here. They have things going on at Riverton Park. They have people that gather up. They do have basketball tournaments. It seems like all they don’t have anything-all you have here is hope”-18-year-old boy. Having no outlets to pursue a hobby or skill due to the complete lack of recreational centers or organizations in the region that serve youth (except for pregnant teen moms by a local non-profit), many engage in unsafe practices involving drugs or stay home. As one young 19-year-old mom mentioned “There is nothing to do, nothing to get you out. That’s why these kids turn to drugs, turn to the streets. I don’t wanna raise my kids in this. But I don’t have any help to get ahead.” Many of
the youths mentioned the lack of tutoring in the area, which was substantiated by conversations with parents in the region.

**Positive Neighborhood Perceptions**

Before starting interviews with the negative aspects of their environments, youth were asked to reflect what they loved or appreciated of their neighborhood, the place they called home. Admittedly, the negative factors of crime and lack of safety overwhelmed the neighborhood portion of the conversations, including the factors that kept them indoors and provided few outlets to develop skills or talents academically (i.e., tutors, after school programs) or physically (sports leagues and scouts). However, those local youth who resided in their neighborhood felt strong local pride for the positive aspects of their neighborhood. Where families can live for generations in those communities, strong attachments were observed in youths wanting to see change in their community.

**Figure 9. The Theme “neighborhood perception” referring to the positive aspects youths identified of Wachoosa, in, which had the least amount of resources for youths and the local youth gathering places in their neighborhood.**

Youth were asked in interviews and in focus groups using the free-list method to identify what they loved about their neighborhood. The purpose of this question was to try to get an overall picture of the positive interactions youth have with their neighborhood and to gain a better understanding of their feelings towards their neighborhood environment, not just focusing on the negative aspects. Their
responses are presented in Figure 9. When youths were asked during focus groups about their favorite hangout spots where local youth hung out, 90% of locales were outside of Wachoosa/Riverton area near major cities. When pressed to name local regions within Wachoosa/Riverton, these favorite places consisted of local food locales such as the Wachoosa bakery, various taqueria (taco) places with their special dish item, the local Wachoosa fruit truck that sells fresh fruit with lime and chile (Mexican style), the parking lot behind Amazon warehouse in Riverton (usually the spot where plenty of teen fights occurred), or some of the hiking trails near the Southern Wachoosa border for kayaking where they usually met a significant other. This encouraged lively conversation in focus groups where youths would shout out rival taquerias that claim had the best local Mexican cuisine or best fresh fruit smoothie, “better than Smoothie King” (15-year-old Riverton girl).

When youths compared Wachoosa and Riverton, there was a marked difference of opinion between the local Wachoosa youths and Riverton youths. Both towns were viewed as consisting of a mostly Hispanic neighborhood and racial tensions were felt by youths in both areas, with comments from neighbors of “This is America, learn English” being constantly used against their parents. Riverton was viewed as more suburban by youths, much more diverse in its Hispanic population consisting of various immigrants throughout Central and South America and consisting of more middle-income housing communities. On one hand, Riverton was also mentioned as being quieter and safer due to less gunshots being heard, possessing more resources in terms of parks, gyms and both middle and high school, but not easily accessible as everything requires a car to get to places. This made it less than ideal for many of our youths without their own vehicles.

Wachoosa, on the other hand, was viewed as more accessible by youth due to everything being within walking distance (referring to the main 301 Road bisecting North and South Wachoosa); however, it was not viewed as desirable by many of the Riverton youth. Many Riverton and Wachoosa youth were clear to point out the lack of soccer leagues or parks and gyms, with nothing to do in the area. In terms of diversity, Riverton youths’ perspective of Wachoosa is mostly “Mexicans live there.” (18-year-old
Riverton boy) and “very poor and dirty, with only taquerias to eat and nothing else” (16-year-old Wachoosa boy). None of the Riverton youth truly hung out willingly in Wachoosa unless it was to attend Church or their youth group. But for those local Wachoosa youths, while completely aware of the problems and challenges in their neighborhood with guns and crime, had clear love for the things that made Wachoosa unique unlike Riverton or in any major city like Tampa.

**Wachoosa- Through the Eyes of Its Local Youth**

When Wachoosa youth were asked to list the positive aspects of Wachoosa, phrases such as “humble families” (Free list response at co-ed focus group), sense of community “where everyone knows everyone or their business, and everyone is someone’s cousin or tía (aunt), or family member,” (15-year-old Wachoosa girl) where people are generous “always helping each other out (18-year-old Wachoosa dad)” and there was an entrepreneurial spirit where it was possible to get ahead in other ways. As one participant put it:

> What I liked about Wachoosa, though, is that people kind of have the stereotype about it, I guess? That it’s not too friendly, kind of dirty and dangerous but it’s really not. It’s all kind of the opposite. Everybody waves to me, and they know me, like it was very diverse. It did not matter who it was they were still waving. I don’t know, it seems like it’s slower, a little relaxed. There’s also a very unique history in that community. There’s a lot of things that I like about it. (Male Participant, 20)

For youths who lived and grew up in these neighborhoods, Wachoosa represented a big family community full of people who have lived here for generations or a community of hard workers who “provide for their kids, they just want what’s best for them,” according to a 19-year-old Wachoosa teenage mom. The older Wachoosa youth reflected on teachers or the principal who had grown up in the same neighborhood and had seen generations of families and siblings attend their classrooms and grow up. These family ties and long history made the community very tight-knit and extremely generous towards their own. Cookouts at the park would be attended by complete strangers who were welcomed to food and games. A Quinceañera party invitation for one of the YG girls was once left at the religious
mission newsletter board for any from the mission Church to attend, of which I was an attendee. The YG attending told me it was normal that people would crash these parties and bring extra people. “No one cares, it’s a party. Everyone’s welcome—there’s always food and booze”—said one 15-year-old YG boy. If there was frozen meat being passed out at the local food pantry, I saw people in line would pull out their cell phones to call family members and friends to stop by or picked up food items for extended family members. Youth mentioned the agricultural roots of people where both migrants and permanent residents worked the fields or sold produce and food items on the side of the road, mentioning the various produce they had experience picking (i.e., tomatoes, oranges, peppers, blueberries, strawberries, squash, zucchini etc.). Many of the youths felt a great amount of pride for Wachoosa’s culture of immigrant families and the cultures from their native homeland. “It’s the humble families, it’s what I like most about Wachoosa. Everyone watches out for everybody else.” 21-year-old Wachoosa woman.

Despite big business and commercialization seen as a desirable improvement, one 21-year-old Wachoosa man mentioned his worry over big business and incoming residents not only displacing the local bodegas and taco stands but affecting the cultural makeup that is Wachoosa.

Making sure that our culture is preserved because expansion happens that’s a worry. That big businesses would be coming in here and running out the family businesses. And I’d make sure of that. Yeah, it’s really close and I’m wondering how much expansion is gonna happen if things like that are gonna start taking over. As much as it’s good that we’re being “put on the map” I would be sure that the culture would not be lost to the best of my ability.

This culture of Wachoosa he spoke of is largely Spanish-speaking where speaking English isn’t necessary to shop at the local supermarket or bodega. As one participant stated “A lot of people here are close. A lot of people who own these stores they know you by name. Everybody knows everybody. Yeah, that’s what I love about it. Everything owned is privately owned. You don't see franchises, other than Dollar General” (18-year-old Wachoosa dad). The entrepreneurial spirit was very notable in the community as many of the youth talked about their parents, who were self-made entrepreneurs themselves. One of the former gang-members spoke of the need for parks to keep the youth off the streets. This man was able to open his own barbershop, despite his criminal record that prevented him from
getting any higher paying work or a business loan. His story of success is discussed in the later resilience section. “In this age of YouTube”, as one participant (18-year-old Riverton female) put it “you know how to use technology you can actually earn a lot of money – youtubers, hackers. There is opportunity with this technology we have nowadays; it’s quick to make money. Quick money.” For these youths, the idea of making quick money by learning a trade through YouTube or technical school, and opening their own business was a valued goal, but many did not take into account the long-term financial and personal investment needed to start any business.

While many of the neighborhood barriers noted in this section were threats to the youth’s sense of safety, the focus of all the conversations was on the improvements that could be made to make Wachoosa and Riverton a better place for youth to thrive. Despite the challenges of having no recreational outlets, limited academic programs and sports leagues, and limited opportunities to pursue training that appealed to them, youth demonstrated hope when mentioning the rise in commercialization and businesses bringing more attention to their community. The job opportunities these new businesses bring and entrepreneurship opportunities is something youth could visualize as a personal aspiration or future goal, with the right guidance and mentorship. These aspirations stemmed from what they saw around them, what other peers were doing, and from what opportunities they saw available in their neighborhood. But being able to pursue those aspirations required a deeper examination of their personal motivations and resilience.

**Personal Aspirations**

This chapter focuses on the questions surrounding what personal aspirations and future goals youths had. Resilience literature strongly argues that the presence of a personal aspiration or “hopeful future orientation” in the face of adversity is a significant predictor of both adult and youth resilience (Goodman et al. 2017; Boyden 2013; Maholmes 2014). After youth were asked to discuss their neighborhood, the focus turned towards their own personal needs, goals, and struggles. Youths were
asked directly what passions or skills they had or what goal they were working towards. While most were able to answer this first question, when asked the probing questions of what steps they had taken so far to achieve that goal or to really foster that skill into a career or job, only 18 of 127 youth (14%) were able to give concrete answers. While neighborhood limitations were noted by these resilient youths as they had grown up, they were able to identify opportunities or leverage the minimal neighborhood resources to work for them in their pursuit of their goals. If these same neighborhood resources were present for all youths to use, then personal motivations and limitations were examined asking youth to reflect on what was keeping them from moving forward with their goals.

Figure 10. Word cloud of all major themes and related sub-themes regarding the personal factors examined which included: Personal aspirations, Personal barriers and challenges, Signs of Abuse or Destructive Behavior, and incidents of racism or discrimination. Generated using MAX-QDA 2020 with larger text representing higher presence of theme within the 127 conversations.

As shown in Figure 10, related themes and subthemes focused on personal aspirations, challenges and threats were analyzed in terms of frequency amongst all the conversations and observations, the word cloud highlights the most frequently mentioned subthemes. Despite the neighborhood limitations youths frequently noted on the lack of resources, opportunities in Wachoosa and Riverton for youths did exist and were identified. Whether this was in the form of work-force training, job opportunities, scholarships or internships, youths were aware that these services existed. However, the
lack of motivation and feeling of hopelessness pervaded many of the conversations I had with them over why they did not pursue their goals. Those who displayed resiliency often also noted role models and identified a strong passion or skill they wished to pursue. Other personal threats unique to this group, as illustrated in Figure 10, was the sense of discrimination and fears over “illegality” fostered by their documentation status and the 2016-2018 rhetoric against immigrants. These personal struggles felt by many of the youth, along with those aspirations they identified, are explored further before examining more closely the factors involved with promoting resilience with the 18 youth.

**Personal Aspirations Identified**

When asked what their personal aspirations, future goals or where the youths saw themselves five years from now, a good majority of youths could identify a passion or skill they were good at or an opportunity to enroll in a training class or get a job (see Figure 11).

![Figure 11. The Theme "Personal Aspiration" and related sub-themes referring to opportunities and skills youth identified in relation to their personal goals, the consistent resiliency involved in working towards that goal, and the helpful factors involved to assist in achieving that goal.](image)

Some of the youths mentioned wanting to be painters, going to college, getting into the army, buying a car, getting a Masters, becoming YouTube stars, or starting their own business such as a cosmetology school. However, when I asked them what steps they were taking to reach that goal or if they were actively working towards it using whatever means (e.g., people, resources, programs, extra jobs) to get
them there, many of the youths were initially stunned by the question. Perhaps because no one had ever asked them that question or because the question required reflection on where they were in their journey towards that goal. After the initial pause, only 18 (14%) of the 127 youths interviewed could give a definitive answer.

When it came to identifying opportunities (70% of the youth—see figure 11) and any skills or goals they had (58% of the youth—see Figure 13), the responses were predominantly for more educational or workforce training and entrepreneurship. Those that expressed interest in entrepreneurship were often inspired by their own family’s hard work to develop and work in business. One Riverton girl mentioned her older brother learned how to fix cars by watching videos online saying, “he’ll find these cars randomly for a good price but there’s always something wrong with them that no one can figure out, so he gets them at a lower price, fixes it and sells it for more money.” Another Wachoosa 19-year-old man who had dropped out of school, started lifting weights and reading everything he could on nutrition and muscle building, even building his own small gym out of his garage and training some of the neighborhood teens. He was actively working towards taking certifications to become a personal trainer and said the following:

Owning my own house, owning my own business, owning my own tiendita too, and I already have my permission, my permit to have my own little store now too... I remember when I first came in here for the first time, I came in here with a purpose. I always felt like I had an ambitious mind to make profit out of something. I’ve never liked to work for other people. I mean I do because I have to, but I think that would be my ultimate goal. To make my own income. - 20-year-old Wachoosa Male

A few participants mentioned educational goals, and these were always linked to motivation and social support from their family to pursue these academic goals. At a female focus group, 21-year-old Wachoosa young mom spoke up about working in a local social service agency and was actively seeking a master’s degree in social work. Her goals were strongly supported by her family. “I was fortunate to have parents who really pushed education...I was able to get a scholarship for $4,000 from the mission. Then my work gave me an extra $2,000 since it’s for social work so that’s $6,000. I have to work it out with my classes so they’re all in the evening so I can still work.” Her best friend, age 21 years old, relates to the same
support offered by her parents. She recounted the social support that was crucial for her success and resilience in school.

*My mom, she did not know what FAFSA was and could not help me. She would be like ‘I do my taxes and you do your part’ and would drive me to these classes (FAFSA and financial literacy) on Friday and I would dread going but she said I’d be thankful one day. And today I am thankful. They (parents) ended up paying for most of my tuition. My mom was my support and my brother with all the emotional support whenever I needed him. I got my first major in communication studies.*

13-year-old Riverton girl was able to get into a tutoring program at the local YMCA so she could take advanced math classes and computer coding. She then turned it into her own business by having her classmates pay her to do their math assignments and projects.

However, the vast majority could not even give an answer or had never thought about the topic because no one had ever asked them or made them believe that it was possible. “When you can tell somebody ’hey go to school’. In their mind, their like ‘I cannot do that because I come from this place.’ But I feel like because they come from this place, they can do it” (21-year-old Wachoosa male).

**Resilience- Defining what it looks like**

A non-profit CEO in Wachoosa whose organization offered entrepreneurial and adult education classes would often describe the adults who came to the center as having “cement feet” referring to their inability to act at times to lift themselves out of their situation. In her mind, “If you don’t see success and don’t know what it looks like, how can you envision it for yourself?” The need for guidance was evident and, in a small community, the tunnel vision regarding what opportunities or possibilities lie beyond what they see in their surroundings is evident in the many comments from older youth.

*It’s a little town. I’m telling you, it’s too small… people don’t see beyond here. I don’t wanna be the girl that just stays stuck here pregnant with my husband. Because I think that just happens since it’s such a small town. It’s typical because there’s not much else to do, unfortunately getting pregnant is a big accident that is most likely to happen. half the girls I graduated with. I know them, they already have a baby. I feel like, like I said, they’re limited to their minds. They don’t think ahead to what’s out there, there’s definitely more out there, but unfortunately getting caught up in here. Or, just getting caught up in the popularity as well because once you become popular around here, I mean, obviously you feel like it’s the world because everybody knows each other.*
If they know your name, know who you are wherever you go, then yeah. I mean you’ve made it in Riverton and Wachoosa I guess. 21-year-old Wachoosa woman and DREAMer

In one heated discussion on the merits of entrepreneurship versus college education, the YG youths (all 13-17 years of age) noted how their parents were doing great financially as plumbers and technicians and never had to go to school or get a degree. They saw formal education as a waste of time when they knew people who taught themselves through YouTube how to fix computers and make money in advertising.

So what distinguishes the few youths (nicknamed “the Resilient 18”) who clearly display a high level of resiliency and motivation to succeed compared to the 86% of youths from the same community and from similar circumstances that only display hopelessness in their view of the future? Some of their stories are summarized below to highlight their journey displaying resilience and the factors they drew upon for support.

**Mateo’s Story**

I met Mateo, a 21-year-old Wachoosa business owner and former gang member, clearly by chance during one of my lunch breaks at a local taqueria in Wachoosa. There was only one table at this establishment, and I decided to sit with a colleague chatting about the latest interviews we had done and any insights we had gained. That day, the team and I were discussing how many of the boys lamented the loss of all the parks and youth programs. A few of the older boys mentioned how those programs had kept them out of trouble. Mateo and his cousin had been sitting at the same table eating lunch, overheard our conversation, and began asking questions. I asked him what he did in Wachoosa, he mentioned owning his own barbershop business, and I started talking about my fieldwork involving youth and asked what they felt was needed in the community. In return, he told me his story which was inspiring in its humbleness and resourcefulness.

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6 Name Changed to preserve anonymity. Any reference to a real person or place is purely coincidental.
While the presence of public parks and playing sports were one of the few outlets youth his age had, Mateo joined a gang in his teens because most of his friends were involved in one and he saw it as a way to make quick money. Eventually he was imprisoned for some time and upon release, he came out dedicated to turning his life around but faced the challenge of starting over with a criminal record. As he stated:

*I was doing construction because they don’t ask for background check. Everywhere I went, I had violent drug charges, a few different things, anywhere I go they won’t hire you for either or regardless. I cannot get a job. It’s hard to rent somewhere because they check your background…. I got my own apartment under my mom’s name. I get a car with my mom’s name and I’d pay for everything doing construction. My oldest brother, he grew up here, his life was way worse than mine, his track record was ridiculous, but he did a 360. Now he has a roofing company but before, he worked for a roofing job because they did not do a background check and he just worked to save money.*

Mateo’s aspiration was to own his own barbershop, so he taught himself through YouTube how to cut hair and began making money cutting hair for “$10 a head out of ma’s front porch where I stayed at.” A few years later, he made enough to rent a space in Wachoosa with his cousin, whose name is used for the lease, and opened his own barbershop business where he spends most of his time mentoring young boys of the community and guiding them away from the life he had. That guidance is what he feels is crucial for youths today and what kept him on the path to his goals.

*Alot of these young, from what I see, they need guidance. They have the right energy and the right move, but they don’t got it in the right places, you know? When you can tell somebody ‘hey got to school.’ In their mind, they’re like ‘I cannot do that because I come from this place.’ But I feel like it’s because they come from this place, they can do it….They’re not using their motivation properly. And you need to guide them in the right direction Even if it’s a trade school, whether you go to school for welding. Have a nice little job that pays you well. You living better off, you know, feel like the motivation is there…My homie (cousin and business partner) invited me to that guidance level. Nobody was there to guide us, so we guided each other.*

He mentioned how the gang presence has actually decreased significantly, since “the kids aren’t as involved in the gangs as before, the old rivalries are not as important, and the youth are more involved in social media and making money from YouTube.” This was corroborated by a number of youth who mentioned friends and close relatives involved in gangs mostly because of their friends joining, viewing it as a social group and a way of making quick money. While the gang activity may be viewed as
threatening, the gang itself was not viewed that way by the youths as most had a cousin, a close friend, or someone from school in that group- a very different perspective compared to adults and parents who still viewed gangs as a public menace. But speaking with coaches, former gang members, youths, and even current gang members, they all mentioned the lack of any gathering places or recreational outlets in Wachoosa as a strong factor in making kids susceptible to the gang life, which for many is a straight pipeline to prison if not a loss of life.

Emma’s Story

Emma was a 21-year-old Riverton woman who worked for a social service non-profit serving the Wachoosa/ Riverton area. She attended community college in the region under the DREAM act and lived with her parents who all had undocumented status. She was one of the few examples of a former community member coming back to the community and serving as a mentor to the young girls in the region. While she was open about her struggle going to school and working without any documentation status, that never stopped her momentum. As she states:

*I was fortunate to have parents who really pushed education. Even though they don’t have papers. Which I also did not have until I got married. So my dad had to pay for my college tuition, and he has a bachelors in Mexico. So in my family, education was always first. Like Whenever I got with my ex he (the dad) was like disappointed. My mom told me that he had told her “oh she’s not even going to finish school” and that’s what pushed me more. I love my dad and I want him to be proud and I’m gonna show him that I did finish…I was not raised believing I had barriers for not having papers. And then I got married which gave me my papers and I got a job. But I was fortunate to have the support of my parents.*

With the support of her family in her endeavors, along with the opportunities to pursue her degree, despite the challenges of having a young child, she was able to finish her degree, get into a Master’s in Social Work program while working for a local non-profit helping youths and teen moms. These success milestones gave Emma the courage to divorce her husband and, with the support of her family, continue with her studies while her son stays at home with the grandparents.

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7 Name changed to preserve anonymity
Eduardo’s Story

I met Eduardo (20-year-old Wachoosa entrepreneur) through helping his wife (19-years-old) obtain her GED. Eduardo and his wife, along with their two-year old son represent the typical young Wachoosa family trying to succeed the best way they can. They started dating in high school and within a month, his girlfriend became pregnant and could not finish her GED because she dropped out to raise her child. Eduardo married her and was able to finish high school but, unfortunately, did not find anything other than low-wage jobs that would not yield enough to support his family. So he turned to selling drugs in order to make ends meet and was caught by police and sent to jail for eight months. In a moment of epiphany, he says he stopped all his gang associations when he realized that he did not want to raise his son from jail. Coming from an entrepreneurial family, he had plenty of inspiration with his father owning a transportation business, despite being illiterate, and his ex-gang member cousin who owns a barbershop business (Mateo). With his family as his inspiration, Eduardo turned to YouTube to learn how to install solar panels and currently has a side business installing panels for new homes in the region, buying the parts wholesale. Working in his father’s transportation business, similar to the ride-sharing Uber, he was able to stabilize himself enough to find another trade to support his family. With assistance through a non-profit organization, he was able to apply for a year-long paid community leadership training opportunity through a religious foundation providing community activist training. I also assisted Eduardo and his wife in enrolling their son in Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) so that the wife could attend school to finish her GED. Through a combination of part-time jobs, entrepreneurial opportunities installing solar panels or connecting people to resources, and being an active member in the community, Eduardo found his own level of resilience to support himself and his family.

8 Name changed to preserve anonymity
Nuria’s Story

Nuria was a 19-year-old from Mexico whom I met when she enrolled in a childcare certification class being offered at the non-profit where I worked. As the one managing the program, I interviewed her for the limited seats we had and got to know more about her life and why she wanted to take the class. Nuria was a young mother of a 3-year-old girl and a 6-month-old son. She also had three other stepchildren under the age of 12 with her husband. Her main motivation was to get out of working in the fields and be able to provide for her family with a higher paying job. She was taking night classes to finish her GED and was hoping this certification would lead to a small family childcare business with her mother-in-law. Every Wednesday night for 12 weeks, I watched her come to a four-hour class, bring the baby in his carrier, and diligently take notes and work with the family support specialist to help her with her GED. She was able to complete her courses and become certified. Yet, when she moved to applying to a childcare center, her background check revealed some past record from five years prior. Worst of all, her mother-in-law backed out on the idea of running a business with her and made Nuria, with her kids, move out of the room they were staying in because her son was late on the rent. Three months later, I reconnected with her as she asked for my help in writing a resume. As we chatted, she mentioned that she was working on getting her commercial license to drive a forklift and heavy machinery. After the family found another place to rent, she and her husband began to plan out how they could earn more money working on the construction sites with all the new housing developments occurring in Wachoosa. With a commercial license, she could make more hourly and the construction companies happened to be hiring, which is why she needed the resume. With the support of her husband and relatives, who would watch the younger children while she went to training, she achieved this goal and was hired for the position in six weeks at the higher hourly wage she wanted.

9 Name changed to preserve anonymity
Caleb’s Story

Caleb was referred to me by my local Wachoosa volunteer who also worked in the same organization as me. She mentioned she knew a friend who ran his own gym from his garage in Wachoosa. The Wachoosa YG boys were said to have gone to lift weights a few times at his place and spoke well of him. When I met Caleb for an interview, his garage was a shed on the side of his father’s home, enclosed by a fence. Various free weights of various sizes, dumbbells, and benches were present, including a large tire but there were no expensive weight-lifting machines or aerobic machines were present. He was very shy but accepted tacos I brought over for lunch before we got to chatting about what motivated him to get into weight training. It started at the age of 13 when he was bullied severely for being overweight to the point where he had to take a year off from school. His dad had a small weight set (what he had in his shed) and he began using it every day while studying from home and working at his dad’s job in construction. He stated the following about what happened after he returned to school one year later:

“people respect me alot more seeing that I looked strong and big, I learned a lot of respect in the weight room, joining the High school Iron Club, and it made me feel better about myself.” However, due to his missed year and frequent absences to help his father at work, he was not able to graduate. “I ended up dropping out emotionally too but then I went to the Mission to apply for a GED. I was 19 when I did that. A month later, I got my GED and went straight to work, my first job at Home Depot.” With the money he earned there, Caleb began to think about becoming a personal trainer since he liked to work out and began using his connections at the school’s Iron Club to train kids, reading up on nutrition and weight training books, and charging a small fee for the usage. Most of the time, he is offering advice to many of the young boys that come, telling them to stay in school, and helping to build their confidence and self-esteem through weightlifting.

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10 Name changed for anonymity
Maria’s Story\textsuperscript{11}

Maria is referred to in this study often as the 21-year-old DREAMer and was a member of the YG. She came from Mexico with her family when she was five years old and, thanks to the DREAM act, was able to pursue community college in the region. As the oldest YG member, she was considered the unofficial leader of the YG and was offered many times the position of Church Youth Leader by the Mission. She would always decline because of her schoolwork and job hours to dedicate weekly to picking up the kids and bringing them. While her visits to the weekly YG meetings were rare, she made it a point to be available for the Mission summer bible camp for the young children in Wachoosa, often driving the Mission van in the morning and afternoon to pick up the children. Her aspiration was always to finish school in order to have the life her family could not. And even though she appreciated trade jobs, such as plumbers and electricians, and had worked in the fields every summer helping her parents, her idea of making it was “\textit{working inside, in air conditioning, an office. That’s when I know I’ll have made it.}” She would work constantly when she was in high school to get good grades, picking up her siblings from school and meeting her parents in the field to help them finish picking faster. Then they would all go home to eat, and she would study until 2am before waking up at 5am to start getting everyone ready for school. This went on daily for her until she got into the local community college and was able to get a work study and a wage job at McDonalds. As she stated:

\textit{Personally, I think it (resilience) comes down to yourself. Like your mentality and aspects of stuff. What helped me a lot was going to the fields (farm work) for spring break. And I knew I did not want to be working hard like that. I admire and give my respect to them. But I feel like that’s what motivated me. I feel like there’s a lot of parents that are like “ay mi niño” and give them everything to their hands. Personally, that’s how my parents were but there were times when they could not. And I seen that and decided I don’t want to live off my parents.}

Maria recognizes the resiliency and grit it took for her to get where she is and she also recognizes the need to be seen by other younger kids, for them to know that it is possible to come from humble roots and reach their goal. Most of her friends who she grew up with in Wachoosa either got pregnant and never

\textsuperscript{11} Name changed for anonymity
graduated or ended up in gang life “just to be popular.” In many conversations when she was present at YG meetings, Maria tried to make the rest of the younger teens understand why that high school diploma was so important, especially when the YG group kept mentioning just taking a technical job like their parents instead of pursuing college or even finishing high school. She went on to explain to the group the difference between a technical degree and bachelor’s degree, the difference between high school and college.

Yes, you could get a job as a janitor without your degree or whatever, but you also have to think about like plumbing and jobs like that are hard labor jobs. You bust your ass every day, while if you have a diploma, you could sit in an office and sit at a computer and type and like $15 an hour, maybe even more. That paper alone can make such a difference. Even if you have another job and they see that you have that paper, that paper shows that you are responsible enough to do your homework, you’re responsible enough to attend class, you’re responsible enough to keep up with your work, it shows that right there is a good work ethic. They want to see that. That’s what that paper shows – that you have a good work ethic. You’re gonna work hard for what you want so that shows them, okay, if she’s gonna work hard enough to get this diploma, she’s gonna work hard enough at my job, therefore I’m gonna give her a job, and I’m gonna give her a high paying job. You know? That paper, it matters. I mean plumbing, sure you get good money, construction too, but you bust your butt out there.

Maria understood the value of a diploma and college education. Coming from Wachoosa and living as a DACA recipient, she could relate to many of the YG and was trying to serve as an example of what is possible to them. In her own way, she was trying to show them a different path from their parents. Appealing to their desire for financial freedom, she equated the college degree as the “paper” that can lead to a higher pay compared to not having that “paper”. This goes against what many of the YG preferred which was learning via YouTube to start a business and marketing using social media, without any business training or guidance. While this idea of being self-taught via media or apprenticeship, instead of via formal schooling, was not dissuaded, she did warn them that they would need to work hard and take some self-responsibility.

That growing up is bound to happen and I’m not gonna have teachers after me or anything like that. It’s just a matter of figuring out who I am as a person and what I’m willing to do to succeed and how I’m willing to handle my responsibility and know my weaknesses and work on them because definitely college shows to you your weaknesses. It shows you – if you’re a slacker, you’re gonna know. Or if you forget things and you don’t write them down in a calendar, you’ll know because it’ll come back, it’ll hit you. But, you’ll definitely learn to grow as a person and
learn how to be an adult, which is good. It’s like a completely different outlook from high school. It’s not the same.

Maria called out the YG for their lack of initiative, for their inability to make a decision concerning college or teaching themselves to learn a trade. College gave her a chance to explore various outlets and majors until she learned what she wanted to aspire to. It gave her the challenge she needed to grow and the ability to solely focus on her personal aspiration with other like-minded people. Being surrounded by other ambitious people in college, all striving to reach a goal, she felt was pivotal for her growth and ability to stay resilient. She warned the YG about their short-sighted mindset focused on fast money and the social situations around them. Unlike Maria who is surrounded by mentors and ambitious young people, this was something the YG would not get the chance to experience by staying in their small towns and not broadening their experiences as they would in a community college.

The people you see right now in high school – everything that, all the drama you see in high school right now, none of that is gonna matter – nothing. Nothing’s gonna matter. You’re gonna graduate and you’ll literally never see that person ever again...That’s so true, you’ll have like two friends if you’re lucky. Even the person you think you’re gonna come out of it with, like I swear to you, you won’t. Like at the end of the day, all the friends you swore that you had because you see them five days a week...Once you graduate and get into different things like me for example, I’m in business...The people that I am in business, that I go to school with, are business-related. Those are all people that are in the same mindset as me. People that think like me, people that want to succeed in a way that has to do with business. So, you’ll have like topics like that with them. Yeah, you’ll start getting involved with people who are just like you and whoever’s around you shows who you are. - F, 20-year-old Wachoosa and DREAMer girl

What makes this quote even more poignant is the fact that Maria delivered this speech months before the 2016 Presidential election of Donald Trump. As a DREAMer, she believed wholeheartedly in the power of education. Once the elections were over and stricter sanctions were being issued against undocumented status individuals, the ICE raids increased in Wachoosa. Maria began to express concerns with ICE finding her parents due to her DREAM act documentation stating place of residence. One summer when she was driving the bible camp children to the Mission, she noticed an ICE white pickup van following the Church Van. Even though she had her papers with her, something she never leaves home without, and had a Church Volunteer with her (an older white lady), she had a van full of children, two of them YG minors without any documents. When she pulled up to the Mission grounds, which is
private property, the pickup van was seen to slow down and passed by her once she entered the facilities with the kids. She ran into the Mission Director’s office to break down in tears so the kids would not see her and quit that same day. Maria was not heard from again nor seen at any other YG or community event, despite repeated calls and inquiries from the Missions staff, myself, and a few friends. It remains unclear whether she was able to remain in school or moved to another state. Her story is one that started resiliently and yet, present circumstances beyond her control severely blocked her forward momentum. Maria’s story is an example of the political sphere having a ripple effect across a nation and severely impacting minority families within small low-income communities. The impact of the 2016 election will be explored in the following section.

The Effects of the 2016 Presidential Election

Before continuing into the personal barriers and threats youths faced in general, this chapter focuses on the unique political threat that affected all minority groups, but most especially undocumented youth during this time. This unique trauma not only affected them personally but was uniquely experienced by this neighborhood of Wachoosa, known for its significant migrant population and nicknamed “Little Mexico” by the YG. The election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States whose platform included building a wall at the US border to keep all the “illegals” from crossing the border, launched a series of discriminatory and overt racism against communities of color throughout the nation. The week after Trump was elected many of the YG teens commented as a joke that they would all be deported now. After a few days, they stopped saying this in a joking manner. Figure 12 shows the number of themes that arose during this time referring to discrimination felt, the incidents with ICE, the lack of support concerning the legal status and the politics surrounding it. People were in fear, and this was evidenced by the local Walmart, agricultural farms, and missions being almost empty of staff and volunteers for two weeks after the election. Fruit was left out to rot on the trees or ground for weeks, many farmers commented on the lack of workers, and there was less traffic on the streets. Local residents
stayed home, even those who regularly visited the organization where I worked. Those with whom I spoke at the local pantry mentioned hearing about increased immigration raids in migrant farm camps. Before the election, things were not much different except for the frequency of ICE in the region.

![Figure 12. The Theme “Illegality, Racism, and Discrimination” and related sub-themes referring to the incidents experience involving ICE, the fears of deportation, the racist remarks and the politics surrounding minorities and legal status.](image)

Wachoosa is mainly an agricultural town with various tomato and citrus farms offering year-round fieldwork positions. Due to the season lasting for almost the entire year, a small percentage of migrant workers reside in Wachoosa during peak planting season from October to May, with a few staying into the summer season. Local migrant organizations estimate that this number may be higher as this only counts those workers that live in migrant housing compared to those who stay with resident relatives (UNIDOS NOW 2018). With a high percentage of these transitory migrants suspected to be undocumented, including many long-term residents in Wachoosa, this led to an increase in the number of immigration officials in the region, especially after the Trump administration came into power. During the peak planting season, nearby Riverton and Wachoosa are often targeted by immigration officials (i.e. ICE) in raids in migrant farming camps, during food pantry distribution days, or during random weekends at the local Walmart. ICE officials often park their cars in local towns or bodegas which serve as the pick-up and drop-off locations for local migrant farmworkers to catch a ride-share to the farm. Usually, these
rides are arranged by the farm landowner and the overseer to pick up the workers. The mission’s program manager informed me when there is a suspected ICE raid, sending word to the radio stations to make a “discreet announcement” which lets most people know to stay vigilant. However, as I spoke with one migrant mother, she stated that this often means that she cannot pick up her kids from school out of fear of being caught and deported. One 13-year-old YG girl regularly picks up her younger siblings at least twice a week from the local school every day and walks for an hour to get home and then starts dinner before her parents arrive later at night. She recounted one frightening incident with ICE when she was young that occurred in Wachoosa.

So, there’s a scarier story when I was about seven and I remember exactly what happened. ICE had actually come to my house. ICE had come to my house but thank the Lord my parents weren’t home; they were working. And my cousin – my cousin, she’s turning 22, her brother is turning 19, and the smallest one is in the same grade as BN – so when we were smaller, she was like 15, she would come over and take care of me and my sister. And it was all three of them plus me and my sister. And we were all in the living room one day and all we hear is like five cars pull up and we checked through the window and it was like a big van and it was like three police cars and we ran into the room. We shut everything, we turned out everything, and we were in there. My cousin (inaudible) because they are immigrants, they were just at the wrong place at the wrong time. We were all in the room and they were there for like 20 minutes and they were just like standing there. And I think at the time (inaudible), so my cousin was like really silent because my cousin was at the window, the 19-year-old one, he was at the window and he was looking out and they were walking all around the house. And they were knocking on both doors, front and back. And the van, it said something, it was like white and green. And then they left, they left a sign on the door and I remember that I did not read it because I was small, so we gave it to our parents and I just remember the expression on their face. That was it. And I told my mom, I was like remember that one time we told you the police came. And she was like that was not the police, that was ICE. And like now that I understand what ICE is, that was scary.

While we have heard these stories from other YG concerning their fears of ICE, there is also the psychological effect of living undocumented that is largely not spoken about. Because so many of the YG come from mixed status homes, those born in the United States often forget the constant struggle their undocumented counterparts go through since they see them every day participating in the same things they do (e.g., school, YG, sports, even community college). The frustration of having to work so hard and not being guaranteed the aspiration they seek, the lack of opportunity to apply for scholarships, or know
that they could go to any college they want without fear and have a “normal life” doing what other youth were doing is often suffered silently.

Liz’s Story

Liz was one of the group of popular YG girls. She was 14 years old when I met her, from Mexico, and was actively planning an elaborate quinceañera party, which is all she talked about for months leading up to it. Outspoken and very smart, she was always saying she wanted to go to Harvard when she was done in Wachoosa. She was brought into this country when she was 3 years old, and completely identified as an American. She stated: “I have pictures (of Mexico), but they tell me nothing. I’m illegal. I’m just like, I did not tell my parents to bring me here. You know, like I feel so honored that I’m here, I don’t get to have what most people have but how does a baby – a three-year-old be called illegal?” For her, being deported was a real possibility and she never felt safe anywhere in Wachoosa, breaking into tears whenever she heard ICE was nearby and expressing so much pain and resentment towards her parents for bringing her to this country where she felt she could not do anything, was treated like a criminal, and where her dreams of attending Harvard Law School would never materialize. Liz stated “I’m scared of the police because with my business (no papers), I’m scared of the police. Actually, last year, the night before Christmas they pulled over my dad and they were about to go take him, but they did not take him because I had called him, and they heard me crying over the phone in the background. So, that’s why they did not take my dad.” At a YG meeting, when the mission director was leading youth group and mentioning scholarships and focusing on school, Liz snapped at the unfairness of some classmates being lazy and getting the opportunity for scholarships while she could not.

Like a student has a privilege to get scholarships and they don’t appreciate that, and it gets me mad because this girl (JK) what she does is she skips (class), and she don’t take privilege of what she has. So, one day I had got so mad I told her, “you know what, I don’t have the things you have. I cannot get a scholarship because I don’t have a number (social security) for that.” I wrote an essay and the essay said I had to do a four-paragraph essay and if I do it, I get the chance to have four years paid of my college. I’m like it’s worth a try but the thing is you need a

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social security number, and I told my mom and I cried for a good hour about that because I could not get it. And that sucks knowing you cannot get things that people can get. Like, I cannot get my driver’s license, I can learn how to drive right now but I cannot get it until I have a social security number.... Naturals born with privileges, they don’t appreciate what they have and that gets me mad. I told my parents about my feelings. I get mad every time somebody you know has a privilege and they don’t really take care about it, you know? And I have expressed all of my anger about it to JK. I did not sugarcoat anything. I was like you are very selfish because you have a privilege and you don’t take care of it. Like, you have something that I cannot have until later. I have built so much anger towards everybody who was like not taking care, not really viewing what they have in front of them. They have opportunities that I cannot have, I have to work twice hard for that. And it gets me very mad, like just thinking about it right now it gets me very mad because that’s what most people don’t see. They mostly joke about it like oh haha ICE is coming, like that’s not funny. You know people actually get anxiety over that? – Liz, 14-year-old Wachoosa girl

The amount of anger and distrust many of the YG youth of mixed or undocumented status demonstrated was their way of surviving, particularly with the Trump administration threatening to phase out the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that allows children unlawfully brought into the country to receive a renewable two-year deferment from deportation and a work permit. With DACA being argued in the courts and no one knowing if this would defer deportation, even those with mixed status families began to be even more careful about letting people know their family’s situation.

My parents tell me not to trust anybody, don’t tell them I’m an immigrant, don’t trust nobody with it, just tell them that I’m from Texas and that I came from Brownsville. That’s what happens too and then I’m like do I tell them I’m from Texas or do I tell them I’m from here? And then like I won’t tell them I’m from here because I don’t trust teachers, I don’t trust nobody here”- 18-year-old YG girl from Riverton.

With organizations and communities holding information sessions with immigration lawyers to answer questions, give free counsel, and argue specific cases- a tight network of trusted community organizations and Churches provided much needed support in this region mostly for the adults mostly. However, within the YG, this topic and the stress of discrimination and racism were never addressed, nor how to deal with the difficult emotions and confusion youth felt. This lack of emotional support and guidance often affected the youth’s mental health deeply and added to the emotional and personal challenges they faced.

These personal threats and challenges are explored more fully in the following chapters that focuses on youth personal self-esteem and aspirations.
Personal Barriers and Challenges

When addressing the main question in my interviews concerning personal aspirations, many youths who could not provide one or who could not say any concrete steps they had taken to start achieving that goal. It took several probing questions to get them to go past the first answer which was usually “I don’t know.” Most of the youths were aware of where the community college was in Riverton, which was across the street from the high school. Plenty of recruiting agencies for work-force training, certification programs, trade schools, ROTC, and internship programs held career fairs at their high school at a minimum of 2-3 times a year. When I would tell youth this, most all of them were aware of these events or had attended them so they were not ignorant of the opportunities and resources available. With many probing questions asking youth what was stopping them or what did they feel was holding them back from applying to these opportunities, the conversation began to reveal personal barriers as major factors.

Figure 13. The Theme "Personal Barriers and Threats" and related sub-themes referring the personal challenges and barriers in youth’s lives that personally kept them from pursuing a goal or even formulating a plan for future success.

Figure 13 reflects the various themes that came up from my conversation participants, including the resilient 18 youths who also suffered from personal challenges in their journey. While financial constraints (52%), pregnancy (28%), and criminal records (12%) were a significant barrier, many youth were aware of the scholarship opportunities offered by local non-profits, social service organizations aiding young mothers or teens struggling, and even religious missions assisting with undocumented students gaining funding for graduation and initial college funds. For those for whom no programs could
offer financial assistance, those who were resilient found ways to work and save money with the end goal in mind, even with criminal records. The biggest and most overwhelming factor was a hopelessness (60%) felt by many of the youth interviewed, that tied to their feelings of low self-esteem (20%) and limited confidence in their ability, the lack of guidance (46%) and social support (34%) from friends or family, and the strained relationships (28%) with the people they lived with that continue to affect their morale. Many of these factors had deep emotional and psychological effects on these youth.

During the co-ed focus group, one 21-year-old man, who never made it to college, mentioned: “I think in some cultures it’s not promoted enough, that it’s more accepted to just go straight into the workforce and stuff like that. They view college as okay, that’s just something for them and not for me or for my family and stuff like that. I think it’s important to educate people on the benefit of actually learning what it can be like.” A 21-year-old woman who was attending the local community college had this to say- “I think people sometimes feel that college is a different step, it’s like so unique for people to do and only a certain amount of people can do it, but college should be for everyone and it should be accessible to everyone and I think that’s a big problem that it’s not accessible to everyone.” These two individuals quoted were one of the more resilient of the group. However, their optimism was not always shared by other youth in the same neighborhood. An 18-year-old woman deciding between college and working often felt like she could not even make a decision saying, “we don’t even want to try because no one seems to be supporting saying “you can go to college, you can do this if you work hard” they just keep pushing you down saying it’s going to be this difficult so on and so forth.”

**Maya’s Story**

Maya was 21 years old when she began working at the same non-profit I worked with and became my local guide in gathering Wachoosa youth to speak with me. Her family came from Nicaragua, her mom was undocumented but was an active member of the Church, and her father received disability

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checks which is how the family of four subsisted. Her brother was younger by a year and failing high school, with no intentions to enter college. Maya herself had only lasted one year at the community college before dropping out because “no one helped me understand anything. And when you ask, they get all offended, like they cannot be bothered and you’re stupid to ask.” However, she always had a very friendly disposition, knew people in the community, was always attending Church social functions, and was recruited for a paid internship at this particular non-profit. The female CEO, while running a Women’s Center that empowered women to work, could not bring herself to tell Maya that her cutoff jeans, mesh see-through blouses, and dramatic makeup and nose rings were not “professional” so I was assigned the task to guide Maya in her professional role and find a project she could flourish in. In order to do that in my own way, I had to get to know her better and for two years, she became a close friend.

Her story is reminiscent of that of many youth in the area. Coming from a mixed status and highly religious family, Maya had dropped out of a community college after three months, citing the lack of care by school officials and lack of support and confusion over what to do, and what to major in that she kept failing. She had high aspirations to paint, be a travelling artist, and showed great talent that I fostered in any way I could within the job we shared. Her beautiful original artwork was displayed in many of the community festivals to sell and began to boost her confidence. With her friendly disposition, I trained her in interviewing youths and families for her own work projects and mentoring her throughout the projects she was given within the organization we worked for in order to maintain her paid internship. During that first year, Maya was awarded scholarships to go back to school, offered a second year of paid internship, went on field trips to various Florida colleges, and even a paid trip to Washington DC with the CEO and fellow female community members of Wachoosa to participate in the Women’s March after President Trump’s 2016 election.

However, for each small step Maya took forward, she suffered from bouts of deep depression and anxiety that affected her work, her demeanor, and her motivation. She admitted to taking anti-depressant medication very infrequently because she hated how they made her feel and we had many rough
conversations involving her casual drug usage (marijuana, acid, prescription drugs, cocaine) and tense relationships with her parents. The strained relationship she had with her family affected her moods deeply. Maya lived with intense guilt and shame, whether from not being “religious enough” in the eyes of her mother who constantly harassed her for the way she dressed “like a sinner.” Her father, who also suffered from deep depression and abused medication, would call her expletives, especially when she and her brother flushed his medications and cigarettes because of his failing health. Being the oldest daughter, she felt the responsibility to make ends meet to support her mother who was undocumented, especially if her father passes away which was a constant fear for her. Unfortunately, her family lent her no support in any of her artistic endeavors, even after she admitted to her parents how painting made her feel less anxious and mentally calm. Despite on-the-job training and higher opportunities offered to her as a youth community activist, she turned these positions down because she did not feel qualified. “It was too much, I did not want to let (CEO) down and all the people that are counting on me. It’s not me. I like it and I’ll help but it’s too much. I’m not good at this.” When I pressed her if she would reconsider going back to community college, having been involved in many college field trips with other young ladies, she was firmly opposed to that option. She believed “higher education is a waste of money and time…. meant to put individuals in a box.” Despite the opportunities offered to her, Maya declined the internship and then began feeling guilty that she disappointed her mentors and the CEO. Her work suffered, she no longer showed any initiative to conduct interviews, and began showing up to work late. Within a few months, the organization let her go and she moved into her friend’s house, started babysitting some of her friend’s kids, and experiencing deeper depression at not feeling as if she was going anywhere. She felt guilty leaving her brother alone to deal with their mother’s verbal assaults, no longer felt joy in painting, started smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol more with her friends, and did not know where to go next or what to do. This feeling of aimlessness was commonly heard by some of the YG and many of the participants who displayed little to no resilience.
Linda’s Story

Linda’s story is reminiscent of that of the other four young mothers in this study, all under 21 years of age, who expressed the same lack of support and complete reliance on their partner and the charity of their in-laws to get by on food, a place to live, and putting their education and careers on hold to raise their children. One of these young moms, Linda, had an 8-year-old son born with severe mental disabilities. She attributes that to having been severely malnourished during her pregnancy while living with her partner’s family in Texas. She had left her family in Wachoosa to be with her partner once she got pregnant. Far from her own family, Linda was repeatedly beaten by him and her mother-in-law for being “stupid o muy flaca (too skinny) o una vaga (lazy)” because she would not do the housekeeping and cook while in her 3rd trimester. Shortly after giving birth, she left this man and brought her child with her back to her family in Wachoosa. Having no GED and a small child to raise, she ended up with another partner who promised to take care of her, and she got pregnant again. This man subsequently began dating Linda’s cousin while they all resided under her mother’s roof and left once the child was born. This caused many strained relationships amongst her immediate family and even amongst friends who blamed her for her own misfortune. Linda tried to get on the “right path” by attempting to attend community college but received no guidance from the college staff on FAFSA or registering for classes and credits. As she stated:

From my personal experience, whenever I went to community college, they weren’t very supportive like even the actual financial aid and the actual guidance counselors. I felt really like on my own with it, like I did not feel the support that I felt that I needed in order to, you know, be able to continue and graduate…I don’t want to be that person that has kids with different dads…I just don’t know what’s stopping me. Feel like I’m never gonna get over it, like I’m a mensa (stupid) and cannot do it.

While Linda understood she needed counseling, with two kids and an unsupportive family, she did not feel that it would be something she could commit to. This need for mental health support or “counseling” was mentioned by the YG, by many adults with whom I interacted and by social service employees. Yet

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no one had the time or the means to focus on their emotional health, especially without any familial support. The toll this took on some of the youth and the deep emotional trauma some harbored had serious effects on their ability to display agency or resiliently respond to emotional triggers.

**Emotional and Physical Trauma Preventing Resilience**

After eight months of interacting with the YG and gaining their trust, many of the stories that began to unfold became deeply personal and revealing the emotional scars many suffered from past abuse. While emotional abuse from bullying at school, harsh criticism from their parents, and neglect from teachers was present in the youth’s daily lives, those who had suffered from extreme forms of psychological trauma (See figure 14) continued to exhibit destructive behavior years afterwards and remained oftentimes silent to the adults in their lives, for fear of further abuse rather than emotional support. For the YG youth, coming together and having a trusted circle of friends outside of school to be able to vent their frustrations, their fears, and their trauma provided that much needed emotional support.

![Signs of Abuse/Neglect/ Self Destructive Behavior](image)

*Figure 14. The Theme “Signs of abuse/neglect/ destructive behavior” and related sub-themes referring to the traumas experienced by some of the youth in the study.*

One of the main things I continually heard in the beginning of my time with the YG was the high incidence of fighting taking place at school. At the time, this fighting necessitated its own code since it dominated 25% of our initial conversations (see Figure 5). The YG would show me videos of fights at
school, group fights at the Amazon parking lot (a local favorite due to the lack of cameras) and boast about the annual “Fight Day” at school where both middle and high school students were informed through social media on the date and the point is to instigate as many fights as they could in one day to break the records set by previous years. One of the popular YG girls would boast about her grade year posting the record of 18 fights in one day and eight teachers and the school principal resigning that day. As one male participant put it “everyone’s got beef with someone in Wachoosa.” One violent incident occurred in the high school as two older boys started fighting over a girl, who was heavily pregnant, and a gun was brought into the fight. The police were called and the one with the gun got away, but these incidents were seen as pretty common at the high school. As commented by one of the YG member (18-year-old), “Esos morenos son locos (those black kids are crazy). Why they gotta bring guns?” The YG girls mocked the use weapons by boys during a fight. For the girls, it was a source of pride to rely on your fists and muscles alone to end a fight. This was reinforced by so many conversations overheard during YG nights where the youth watched videos over Snapchat and critiqued the technique used during fighting. They would reminisce with pride how their age cohort was either more or less violent than the current middle school children, and how they practiced at home with their siblings. One YG girl (16-year-old from Riverton) said her brother, recently released from jail, was teaching her how to throw a punch and knock someone out with a bat with one hit. Another 13-year-old Wachoosa girl, known for being the most studious and religious with her chastity ring, would comment how her mother told her not to engage in a fight at school but “I better know how to defend myself or else my mama would beat the crap out of me.” After hearing this, I had to probe into why there was this necessity to fight?

With the exception of two 13-year-olds, all the YG had been in fights, with the girls fighting more than the boys, and they recounted stories of being bullied and calling for support from their close friends whenever they knew they were going to get “jumped” by several attackers after school. While my initial reaction was to ask why security at school was not made aware of this, the YG gave various accounts of the school official not caring or turning a blind eye and ear to the racial slurs that started
many of these fights. One YG 16-year-old girl was harassed in the bathroom and taunted for being “ugly and having a mustache” by many of the popular girls when she decided to run for school treasurer. Fat shaming was common amongst the YG girls and even a YG 13-year-old boy. But the discriminatory insults were the most hurtful. As stated, “the white kids calling us illegals as a damn joke, like who the fuck does that? Don’t they know how scary that is? I have my papers, I’m from Puerto Rico but some of these kids hearing that, what’s wrong with these people” (18 years old Riverton YG women). These comments, the YG explained, were generally responded to with “a fist to the face” or having that bully attacked later by a much more violent friend after school. For some, this destructive behavior was necessary in order to survive violent confrontations at school and in their neighborhood. For others, however, it stemmed from deep fears and trauma.

**Becca’s Story**

Becca was a 15-year-old migrant girl who had just moved to Wachoosa from Michigan with her mother, 16-year-old brother, and her two little sisters (5 and 3 years old). They were all undocumented and the mother worked the tomato fields while the older children went to school and the smaller ones stayed with a neighbor. They lived in a migrant campground, sharing a trailer with two other men, not related to them, who also worked the field. Becca, who was known for being supremely quiet and introverted, had joined the YG with her brother around the same time I started attending the YG. While the YG tried to get to know her better, her standoffishness was very apparent as she would stay in corner with her headphones on and ignore all the bible study proceedings. Her brother, on the other hand, was always chatting with the other YG boys and was known to be very protective of his sisters. In conversations with me, the mission director, believed strongly that his protectiveness had a lot to do with those men that shared their living space, especially with the three young girls. When I had one opportunity to drive the kids home after a late-night session when their mother could not come pick them

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up, I noticed one of the men outside smoking and the brother staring the man down hard before getting his sister inside. When I asked Maria, the 21-year-old YG DREAMer if she had spoken to Becca, being the oldest member of YG, she mentioned that she had tried but Becca is a “throw a punch first and ask questions later if provoked. She’s always in trouble and doesn’t want to talk to anybody. Nobody can help her cause she doesn’t let you in.”

One evening, the YG were busily discussing and exclaiming over another fight video when Becca was absent. Apparently one of the YG girls who attends school with Becca took a snapchat video of Becca fighting two white girls. One Snapchat video, taken by a fellow YG, showed a group of kids surrounding Becca and two white girls in the cafeteria, surrounded by a group of teens urging them on. As Becca is walking away from fighting one of the girls to the ground, her friend called her a “dirty illegal Mexican, Imma call ICE on your ass.” Becca is seen whirling around with her fist and punching her face so hard, you could hear the sound of the impact clearly from the phone, and the girl is knocked unconscious on the floor with all the onlookers exclaiming in surprise and admiration. Becca ended up being suspended by the school and taken to juvenile detention. Her mother had to be called from the fields, asked for a ride to pick her up, and picked up her daughter who was released under probation for the next six months. No one in the YG had anything but pride for her, despite their wariness of her attitude.

It was months later, once the 2016 election of Donald Trump led to the increased ICE raids in Wachoosa and conversations between the YG about experiences with ICE and “illegality” that Becca and her brother opened up about how they got to Wachoosa. Surprisingly, it was Becca who told the story. Becca and her brother had been on a school bus heading back home when they saw ICE officials stopping cars at an intersection and checking licenses and IDs. It remains unclear if the driver was called and warned of this or if he saw what happened, but the bus driver immediately stopped on the side of a highway and opened the back door of the bus. Whether he said something to the kids to warn them or they just knew (Becca never elaborated here and no one was interrupting), she remembers her brother
grabbing her hand and running into the trees on the side of the road with a few other migrant kids doing the same. Becca remembers she had no idea where she and her brother were, if they were in the woods too or had dogs, and if her little sisters were safe. As Becca’s recounting this story, she is shaking and starts tearing up from the remembered trauma. For the rest of the evening, the YG is completely subdued, shocked to have heard her story, and railing against Trump and ICE. One thing that was clear is that the trauma of this incident and the constant fear continue to be a trigger for much of her behavior and mistrust towards others. The fact that Becca shared something so personal with the YG was a significant step in expanding her circle of support.

Becca’s story illustrates the destructive behavior stemming from trauma of being undocumented and her fears of ICE. But what if the trauma is caused by one’s own family? Some of the stories I heard from the YG about their home life revealed that the bullying is not just at school but at home, with parents belittling their aspirations or yelling constant criticism over “how they’re going to the devil for being worthless” (Maya commenting on what her mother always yells at her).

Familial criticism was usually linked to the cases of neglect, running away from home and excessive drug use. In the course of two years, three YG girls had reportedly run away from their parent’s home to live with friends, relatives, or a romantic partner for a time. While drug use was commonly spoken of, as in the case of Maya and her frequent marijuana smoking, the use of prescription medicine became an issue when one YG boy ended up in the hospital. Adam¹⁶ had been diagnosed with ADHD for some time and had been given medication but refused to take it due to it affecting his mood. Everyone in the YG knew about this, since Adam would frequently irritate the girls on purpose and then say it was his ADHD that made him do it. With the YG boys, he was always playing sports. One evening, the mission director got a call that Adam was in the hospital after overdosing on prescription medicine. Only the mission director and one of the YG girls were able to see him and speak with him. Overhearing conversations by the YG, I heard one of the YG girls saying:

¹⁶ Name changed for anonymity
He got offered drugs by some individuals here in Wachoosa by the railroad tracks...Yeah, it really is very easy to get drugs here. He overdosed on Xanax and the Xanax was starting to make him feel much sadder, you know, more hopeless, and he decided to take too many. His mother found him and took him to the hospital and (another YG girl) helped him through that, she was actually able to visit him. The next day she went to go see him and he was gone, without a chance to say goodbye, with his phone taken away, and in Texas with his dad.” - story retold by 15 year old YG girl to the group.

While the group believes this was a suicide attempt, it remains unclear what Adam’s true intention was or how long he had been taking prescription medications.

The last and most disturbing topic that came up with at least four youths on separate occasions was the topic of sexual abuse. During my two year stay in Wachoosa, news broke on the local media of a Wachoosa pastor convicted of sexually abusing his stepdaughter for six years, from the time she was 11 years old, up to the week of his arrest. This pastor happened to be the one employed by the Mission, the same one where all the YG met and participated. Within 24 hours, the media coverage was immediate, condemning Wachoosa and the ministry institution that employed the pastor (now fired) for covering the scandal quickly. For the next week, the YG discussed all the news they could find out. The stepdaughter and victim of abuse had never been allowed to attend a single YG session, which was seen as very odd by the YG kids since the group belonged to the same Church that the pastor administered to. The victim’s younger brother (13-years-old) was friends with one of the 13-year-old YG boys and had admitted to his friends after the incident that he had known about the abuse but had no idea how to stop it since it had been happening since he was seven years old. Both children were immediately placed with the YG kids for the following weeks to come, with the YG girls enfolding the victim of abuse and giving her support. But the trauma remained unaddressed by the religious leaders and youth leaders. A 15-year-old YG girl stated the following regarding the situation:

The thing about it that made my stomach turn was that – I told (YG member) this too – the thing I feel most disgusted about was the fact that he was preaching God’s name but yet he was over here doing stuff that I don’t ever want to hear coming...that a girl went through. You know, I cannot imagine a girl going through that because I really don’t have that much hope for the guys in this generation or anything like that.
No counseling was offered to any of the YG and the incident was kept quiet and not spoken of by any of the ministry employees. This incident, unfortunately, became a public scandal for the family due to media coverage. While the mother was ostracized by the community, the girl and her brother were continually welcomed at the YG. They however did not last long in the community before the mother moved to another state.

A month after this incident, the media was again in the community denouncing another case of sexual abuse of a minor. This involved a popular school coach for a private charter school in the region accused by a middle school girl of molesting her while in the classroom. Again, while media coverage made it a public scandal, the community’s reaction was split. This school coach was known throughout the community as supporting the migrant youths in the region, buying soccer cleats for the kids who could not afford them, and mentoring many of the young boys through the sport. Feelings by the community were split over whether he was really guilty due to his community charity. The YG knew the coach as a flirtatious and inappropriate alcoholic but refused to say if they believe the coach was guilty of molestation. However, the YG believed the victim guilty of lying, as this girl had a reputation for lying. After a suspension and investigation while he was apprehended, the school coach was released on bail and currently remains actively coaching community kids in the area though not with the same charter school. Nothing was heard from him again and the YG, and even though this charter school was located right next to the mission, this subject was again not addressed or discussed with the youth.

These incidents, over the following weeks, triggered two members of the YG strongly. Artie\textsuperscript{17}, an 18-year-old, had an “angry episode” and was told by the older YG pastor that he was no longer welcome to weekly bible sessions. His best friend, Brianna\textsuperscript{18}, explained to me later that an argument between him and one of the YG girls triggered his “anger issues”- a description used frequently by the YG synonymous to a diagnosis to describe any disruptive behavior or outburst.

\textsuperscript{17} Name changed for anonymity
\textsuperscript{18} Name changed for anonymity
Artie wants to become a pastor really bad and when (another girl) yelled at him that he was never going to be one, that got him into a really angry state where he started hitting the floors and hitting everything, throwing stuff and hitting stuff but not hitting anyone because he still does respect the Youth Group...His way is a little more physical, but never towards the group, even though (girl) was gonna punch him, my brother held her back but Artie never would have put a hand on her because regardless of his anger issues, he’s still protective of the group...he just got angry because there was a session when the kids were talking about sexual abuse and how it’s different for boys and for girls and how it’s terrible and it triggered something in him...Rape really triggers his anger issues alot, especially with what happened...He had a very rough childhood. He told me his dad used to beat him and his mom up alot before he left them to go to Texas. He still has anger issues that he’s dealing with from his dad and his mom just criticize him more for it.

This incident could not be followed up at the time as Artie refused to come back to the YG and Brianna refused to elaborate if her friend had experienced or witnessed abuse. Being one of the few male YG members left, his absence left Becca’s brother and another 13-year-old boy as the only male members of the group. After Artie’s outburst, the ministry director took over the YG nights, which led to some more structure in the bible sessions and some healing discussions regarding the political unrest regarding the ICE raids and increased discrimination observed in the region (more on the following section). However, due to the lack of an official pastor and running a busy mission in the region, the ministry director was soon unable to continue to pick up the children and the dwindling attendance of only 2-3 YG kids led to the cancellation of YG nights by the summer of 2017. For the youth to still have somewhere to meet, I would remain at work late every Wednesday to allow those YG youths a space to meet while their parents attended service. It was during one of those nights that Brianna, after having been missing for two months, came to my office in tears asking for help.

**Brianna’s Story**

Brianna was the most popular 18-year-old Puerto Rican woman at the YG, being cool and confident, pretty, and outspoken, and a good fighter when needed as backup. She would be the first to talk to anyone who joins the YG and vouches for them to the entire group as someone to trust. Being in her final semester of high school, she was recruited by the ROTC and was working steadily to pass the physical test, forcing herself to diet and working on beating her best running time for speed. She lived
with her older parents, who had adopted her and her twin brother, and lived in Riverton with them. Her goal was set but unfortunately, she was always distracted with one boyfriend or another. Even though she was close to receiving an ROTC scholarship, she gave it up and refused to go to college because it would mean leaving her boyfriend and her older parents behind. As her anxiety increased with not finding work in the region and seeing her twin brother start taking classes at the community college, she decided to live with her boyfriend and not tell her family. For three months, only her twin brother knew where she was and would reassure his parents, friends, and myself that she was safe and somewhere with her boyfriend but never provided specific details.

Three months later, Brianna showed up in my office crying and asking me to take her to go get a pregnancy test. As we were driving to the pharmacy, she tells me that she had been living with her boyfriend they decided to get pregnant. She suffered a miscarriage in the early trimester and her boyfriend subsequently blamed her for not wanting the baby enough and kicked her out of the apartment. “How could he say that to me? To Me? After everything I’ve been through.” Brianna proceeded to tell me that she was adopted and that her mother had been a heroin addict. Before the age of 5, she and her twin brother were placed in the foster system and separated and during one of those foster homes, Brianna was sexually molested for years. She recalled, as a little girl of 5 years, she would run and hide, but would always be found by this stepfather and molested repeatedly. It was only years later that she was reunited with her brother and that they were able to live together with their current stepparents today, a very religious older couple with three older children. She gives all the credit for her confidence to her stepdad whom she adores and said saved her life.

At 15, I used to cut myself and my dad, my stepdad, he got me through it by putting me in sports. He would break down every time he’d see me doing it and he tried putting me in every sport to get my mind out of that dark place: baseball, basketball, even paid $200 so I could take belly dance because I loved it. I never told him about what happened to me, it would break him, but he knew I was suffering, and he had to do something.

It was only a year before our interview that she trusted the YG enough to reveal what happened to her, even to her twin brother who had no clue, and she also became very close to Artie after that.
revelation. It is because of this traumatic event that the thought of not wanting this baby was a shock to her as she wanted deeply to love and protect someone. The pregnancy test that night was negative, and she ended up going back to her parents. It was a shock to me that Brianna, who was such a strong and self-confident role model for the YG, with a supportive stepfamily and a huge love and respect for her current stepfather, showed no outward indication of her painful history throughout the year that I had known her.

Yet, despite having strong social support from friends and family, Brianna’s aspirations remained elusive, and she never could decide on another goal after losing the ROTC scholarship. During one of our chats, I reminded her again of her previous dreams involving the army. She commented on that dream being “too hard for her to follow through” so she was trying to get into college, perhaps in Miami, but was scared of leaving her parents alone since they were “getting viejito (old) and someone needs to be around to take care of them.” Before I left the field, Brianna continued taking minimum wage jobs, with no significant steps towards college, and living with her parents. Recently, I found out she had a baby and continues to live in Wachoosa in her parent’s home. Meanwhile, her brother continued his coursework at community college, was able to buy himself a new car which he used to drive his sister to work and his parents to their volunteer jobs. In many cases, his direction seemed much more straightforward than his sister’s, but his history did not, as far I know, involve the level of trauma that his sister had.

What these stories revealed to me is the powerful trust that can be built from just listening to youth, without judgement or comments. Their most destructive behavior were reactions to the people and circumstances around them that triggered past traumatic experiences. Behavior that is vilified by the adults and society around them, such as the frequent fighting, drug use, and bouts of “anger issues” are reactions to those triggers, to the fact that there are no outlets for them to express that frustration, and the lack of mental health counseling for any of these youth. Even opportunities or outlets to discuss traumatic events that occur in the community are completely avoided, leaving the youth to independently deal with the emotions and make sense of the information on their own.
Code Co-Occurrence Analysis of Themes

One final analysis was conducted using MAX-QDA’s analysis software to test the occurrence of themes together in the same conversations also called code co-occurrence analysis. Running an analysis of all conversations and interviews, all the themes clustered together according to its co-occurrence with each other.

Figure 15. Code Co-Occurrence model clustering themes as they occurred frequently together in all conversations and observations with youth.

In Figure 15, all the themes were quantified for code co-occurrence to analyze the frequency in which certain themes were coded together in all the conversations and participant observations noted in the two years of research. It was noteworthy to see the theme of resilience clustered closely with the themes concerning role models and motivations and social supports, since these were present in all the resilient stories recounted. This supports the qualitative findings over the role that social support from peers, families and role models plays in being able to maintain resilience in the face of neighborhood challenges and personal struggles and trauma. The theme of hopelessness and lack of vision clustered closely with lack of opportunity, self-esteem, and lack of social support. From the stories recounted of personal challenges, the opportunities to overcome psychological trauma caused by traumatic experiences or strained relationships at home were hardly mentioned by youth. Instead, youths turned to drug use, running away from home, destructive behavior (e.g., fighting), becoming pregnant which further limited
their ability to reach their own goals, or suffered from deep depression and very low self-esteem. This was corroborated by many of the stories heard from teenage mothers, undocumented youth living in fear, and those suffering from emotional and childhood trauma.

Meanwhile in the middle cluster, opportunities were identified but they were deeply tied to the themes of neighborhood improvements and challenges. This is indicative of youths asking for more academic or sport-related programs that don’t exist or are financially unattainable. It also reflects the conditions in the neighborhood (crime, gangs, lack of social supports) that do not foster the right kind of guidance or confidence to reach for some of these opportunities. Brianna (18-year-old Riverton woman) had no confidence in the educational system. “I have a couple of friends still in high school because either their teachers told them ‘no, you won't make it’ just because they’re different and don’t have money for college or a scholarship, because they’re from here (Wachoosa)...we don't have many family or friends motivating you to do something you want to do, helping you out and telling you hey you should do this.” Maya’s brother (17-years-old) had a similar response when I asked him about any jobs, he knew in the area that he wanted to pursue. He said “Yeah, sure there are lots of jobs but how do you get started, what is the job, how do you learn about the job?” The fact that they have no trusted individual to go to for advice and guidance, sometimes not even their own family, shows the major personal challenges present in these youth’s lives and why agency is deeply bound from both personal barriers and structural ones.

With agency being limited for many youths in being able to provide a strategic working plan to achieve a goal and resilience remaining stagnant, a deeper analysis of those resilient 18 youths needs to be conducted to see what factors, structural or personal, bear a stronger influence in helping minority youths in this region to move forward.

**Concluding Results**

As we review back on the neighborhood challenges that youths identified, many of these challenges resulted from youth feeling unsafe with the presence of gangs, crimes, drugs and alcohol use,
and the lack of recreational spaces for youth to engage in. In fact, many of the improvement youths suggested revolved around providing more opportunities by opening more parks, creating educational and recreational outlets for youths to get out of the streets and not see gangs and drugs as an alternative to making money. Having a healthy role model or motivator to guide youth in staying on the steady path was one of the identifying factors of many of the resilient stories recounted.

For the eighteen resilient youth, all their stories included the presence of mentors (relatives who had graduated or became successful) and familial support to pursue their dreams, whether this involved college tuition, taking them to classes, offering childcare, supporting their entrepreneurship venture, or making them aware of opportunities in the region. From pursuing a childhood goal, like María’s dream to go to college, to adjusting those career goals after every setback like Nuria, to giving back to the community by mentoring others like they were mentored such as with Esme, Mateo, Eduardo, and Caleb, all these stories showed examples of how those aspirations were shaped according to their circumstances and surroundings. And once those aspirations and opportunities to achieve them were identified (e.g., a construction job training new hires, a GED program at a local organization, a scholarship opportunity), the work and motivation from role models, and social support all contributed to the resilience displayed by these youths. However, as what happened in Maria’s story, sometimes even with all these factors in place, other threats and barriers to resilience can occur. For those 86% of youth who never identified any steps taken to achieve a much-wanted goal, many of those barriers were personal challenges that kept them from being resilient.

For those 86% of youths who either could not name a personal goal they were working for, had no vision of what future path to take, or felt completely lost in how to begin to move forward- the feeling of hopelessness dominated many of the conversations. This hopelessness stemmed from a variety of factors of feeling discriminated against due to legal status or ethnicity, feeling unworthy because they come from a poor neglected town, lacking in social support from family and peers, lack of finances and trauma to their self-esteem.
The lack of opportunity and the financial constraints are evident in the minimum wage job opportunities in the region and the lack of information and guidance for those youth who do seek higher education to get themselves ahead. Due to the costs of higher education, many of the older youths mentioned seeking to work first to make enough money to afford college or a technical program but, due to circumstances, would oftentimes find themselves expecting a child in the interim or needing to contribute to the family income, forcing their priorities to change to support a family. As mentioned in focus groups and interviews, these youth then begin to feel that college or a better opportunity is not for them, for fear of letting people down, as we heard in Maya’s story. How much does this hopelessness stem from years of strained relationships with the adults around them (parents, teachers, community members) refusing to listen and take into account their pursuits and dreams? How much is their destructive behavior (fighting, drug use, and rebellious behavior) a result of years of emotional and psychological abuse to their self-esteem?

With the adult and leadership community remaining largely absent in youth’s lives to discuss traumatic incidents occurring in their lives and the community and no space for youths to vent their frustrations, concerns and uncertainties, fighting became an outlet. Fighting, a predominant activity shared by all the YG and a good number of youth in the region, was a common occurrence at schools and viewed as a necessary means of survival. For some, fighting became an outlet for all their emotional trauma or “anger issues,” a self-diagnosis many of the YG gave to identify their moments of uncontrollable rage, and provided them a small boost of confidence and self-worth in being able to defend themselves well. Between coping with the daily stress and emotional toll of violence in their community, feeling disinvested in, fear of failure and no emotional support, all these personal and neighborhood challenges had an effect on youth’s outlook of a positive future, their decision making and ability to even act in a resilient way.

The behavior of the youth who could not formulate a future plan for themselves was often viewed by adults and outsiders as a lack of motivation, not trying hard enough or being lazy. Youth feel and hear
these impressions people have of them and the constant negative judgement, criticism, and lack of support in any of their pursuits, which affects their self-esteem and is the foundation of much of their hopelessness in themselves. Yet, blaming youth for the little control they have over their circumstances and placing the responsibility on them to adjust to their negative circumstances, rather than critiquing the social inequities that surround them is the fault of much resilience research (Evans 2007; Unger 2004, 2008, 2011; Bynner 2000). Through a CMA approach that focused on the youth’s mental health, those destructive behaviors were revealed to be reactions to the people and circumstances around them that triggered past traumatic experiences. Who is to say that many of these socially unacceptable behaviors are not their way of resiliently responding and defending against further emotional trauma?
CHAPTER SIX:
DISCUSSION

Referring back to the research questions, this study focused on the factors that influence Hispanic youth’s agency as they contemplated a long-term goal (i.e., personal aspiration, future plan, defined success) and took the necessary actions to resiliently meet the challenges, both structural and personal, that kept them from reaching these goals. This study’s results reflected youth’s perspectives and minority’s struggles, drawing from the TFRSBCA (American Psychological Association 2008) definition of resilience that focuses on how everyday agency upon an individual’s own strengths, resources, and motivations to help them survive, along with what opportunities are available for them to work with. Youth in this study drew upon their life experience, past trauma, present sense of fear over safety and neighborhood violence, and the resources they had to work with (i.e., jobs, social supports, scholarship) to create their own opportunities and respond to their environment. Whether this response was gaining a reputation as a fierce fighter, working a minimum wage job to save money for a car or school, or learning a skill via YouTube to start a business venture, these youths took “agentic action” (Haffejee and Theron 2019: 696) and made the best decisions for themselves. The findings on the resilient 18 youth in this study demonstrated the power that supportive relationships and their individual capacity can have in achieving resilience. This finding with the Resilient 18 strongly supports the “bounded agency framework” that focuses on individual capacity as the stronger factor in promoting resilience (Evans 2002, 2007; Hafferjee and Theron 2019; Denov and Maclure 2006). However, not all of the resilient 18 had the same resources to draw upon and all had vastly different life experiences that influenced their agency and ability to act. While the resilient youths all had more social capital to draw upon when compared with the non-resilient youths in this study, it is important to examine what capacity and resources youths were drawing from to make their decisions.
To better understand what resources and assets youths were working with, what influencing factors were involved in shaping their agency, CMA theory was incorporated into the Youth Agency and Resilience Model (see Figure 2 in previous Theory chapter). The holistic approach CMA takes made it possible to expose all the structural conditions and personal life experiences that created the challenges faced by these youths. Issues of politics and immigration status, neighborhood violence, and lack of economic opportunities created barriers in identifying a personal aspiration for a successful future.

Negative influences such as conflict with peers and family, discrimination, emotional and physical trauma created adversity in their daily lives. Seeing how youths responded to those adversities allowed me to examine whether resilience-building factors were even present. One resilience building factor, self-esteem, became a critical individual component for youths. The level of self-esteem counteracted many of the negative influences, helping youths to believe in themselves to take action (agentic action) and remain resilient as they strove for their goals. For example, self-esteem was a critical resilience building factor for Nuria in her goal for financial stability. Her goal was to contribute financially to her family and she continually took her infant son to night classes, finished her GED, and then pivoted to get a CDL (Commercial driver’s license) to drive heavy machinery. She took action at each setback and demonstrated resilience in her continued attendance to classes, reaching her goal after months of hard work.

As noted in the literature, belief in oneself (i.e., self-esteem), knowledge of surrounding barriers and opportunities, and a future-oriented focus (Hafferjee and Theron 2019: 696) are essential factors in defining agency. But they are not the only factors that influence agency and personal aspirations. However, resilience studies rarely explain the foundations from which these aspirations and agency come from. Resilience studies also rarely focus on the “non-resilient” group and the mental adversities they face, such as hopelessness, that keeps them from moving forward. These were explored using the anthropological lens that CMA brings to this study.
When Hopelessness Becomes Cement Feet

The impact hopelessness and feelings of disinvestment had on individual assets for many of the youth in this study must be addressed as it affected a vast majority of the participants in this study. The general sentiment felt by most Wachoosa youth resemble what one 21-year-old male youth said regarding Wachoosa and its residents:

_We don’t have much revenue to give, I don’t think the county would care very much about us, you know, Wachoosa- if they felt they would make more money off of the town then maybe they would give us more money. Otherwise, I feel like we’re kind of just excluded... So I feel like we’re kind of that- like the fifth child of the county, the neglected one, the black sheep of the family._

Witnessing many youth who felt ignored and mistreated adults around them, one can feel how this youth is internalizing the lack of investment (i.e., disinvestment) from the County towards their community as a personal lack of investment and belief in the people that live there and in himself. In other words, since the County does not believe Wachoosa will amount to much, then neither will the people who live there hence “the fifth child of the county, the neglected one, the black sheep of the family” where he makes no differentiation that he is talking about himself or his community. The literature demonstrates that feelings of hopelessness and disinvestment can lead to reckless behavior that often leads to either self-harm or violence towards others and a disregard for future outcomes since youths may feel they do not have a viable future (Lorion and Saltzman 1993; Lau and Lau 1996). Cahill (2007) called this the “violence of disinvestment” when poverty, lack of funding to improve the local assets and resources for low-income local residents, and feelings of “relative deprivation” begin to affect resident’s mental health and ability to respond in resilient ways. For youths living in these conditions, Cahill found that this feeling of relative deprivation (e.g., failing public education, poor housing, lack of choice opportunities) leads to youth feeling unworthy of public investment as well. This violence of disinvestment is most dangerous when youth internalize the message and “take responsibility for failing institutions that under-serve and under-educate them, leading to a personal sense of failure” (Rios-Moore et al. 2004: 9). Haney (2007) found that when youth perceived that their cities and neighborhoods were not invested in, these youth tended to internalize a negative self-worth and low self-esteem became common. This was evident in many of the
quotes from this study mentioning “this place.” “When you can tell somebody ‘hey go to school’. In their mind their like ‘I cannot do that because I come from this place” (21-year-old Maria from Wachoosa).

Brianna’s twin brother (18-years-old) noted the negative effect of trying to succeed in “this place”:

“It seems like all they don’t have anything—all you have here is hope. I feel like growing up all I had was hope in Wachoosa. Either you have to turn to the streets...I don’t know many people from here that finished school. It’s just because of the fact that it’s this place. I know some guy who went to college and he had a scholarship for USF but staying here—it messed him all up.”

I witnessed firsthand the gunshots having little effect on the Wachoosa youths as they continued soccer practice into the night and the YG mentioning gang activity and drunk car races in their quiet streets. This was viewed as a daily normal, inevitable and accepted if one lives in “this place.” The danger of falling into this mindset is believing that one is stereotypically meant to stay in this cycle of poverty as Cahill’s teen participants felt as they gave in to peer pressure to drink, have sex, and make money through gang-related activities because it was normalized (Cahill 2007: 214). As our 21-year-old DREAMer Maria noted:

Everybody in this place grew up together, so we all kinda just know each other and it’s annoying. This town is too little so I feel like once you start growing up, you start seeing these people all the time and then you got stupid like gang problems, and he said, she said, and it’s developed more often than it should.

One of the results, as noted in this study, is a high incidence of fighting and retaliatory attitudes, which became an unlikely albeit resilient protection against the negative self-worth brought on by Cahill’s “violence of disinvestment.”

**Fighting: Is It Resilience?**

The high pre-occupation towards fighting, knowing how to fight, and being labeled as a “good fighter” were some of the frequent early findings with the YG youths. While the high incident of crime and gang activity was noted in the neighborhood as unsafe, the school environment was no different. The high incident of bullying, harassment and fighting at Riverton middle and high school was noteworthy, along with the 30% high school graduation rate for Wachoosa and Riverton youth. A common factor
found in marginalized communities where schools are severely underfunded, understaffed, and overwhelmed is a high incidence of school fights and bullying, which is reflective of the school’s permissiveness of this behavior and lack of policies in place to protect their students and those most vulnerable to attacks (Anderson 2000).

The YG were candid in demonstrating why it was so essential to know how to fight. They recounted incidents of bullying and harassment at school, the physical fights that occur in cafeteria rooms or outside of school. They shared the need to often have a backup of friends after a confrontation because of the risk of physical retaliation by the other party and being hyper vigilant of an attack, especially in the hallways between classes. They spoke about the annual Fight Day that often-renewed old arguments and were used to settle scores. Also noted was the family involvement around fighting with older siblings teaching the young ones how to fight, how to block and tackle a larger opponent or larger crowd, and, at the very least, encouraging the youth to know how to defend themselves. The research shows that fighting and retaliatory attitudes have often been seen as a means of protection, especially in marginalized communities and hostile environments where the “code of the street” is adopted (Anderson 2000; Ness 2004; Cahill 2007; Rios-Moore et al. 2004). Particularly with the YG girls, who had more incidents of fighting than the boys, it was a source of pride to be viewed as a good fighter and be a backup for one of the younger kids. Brianna from this study was often called upon as backup by the younger cohort of girls in the YG, including Liz and Maya who were the most vulnerable to verbal attacks due to their legal status. According to Ness (2004), that reputation of being viewed as a good fighter is the most reliable source of social capital for girls living in disadvantaged and hostile communities.

Research has shown that hopelessness plays a major role in youth who adhere to the “code of the street” (Drummond et al. 2011; Bolland 2003; Bolland et al. 2001, 2005; Joiner and Wagner 1995; Durant et al. 1994; Lorion and Saltzman 1993). This study does document that hopelessness was a major personal barrier for many of these youth. However, the ability to fight was seen as a positive reaction against that sense of despondency. For these youths, being able to fight and identify as a good fighter was
their way of responding resiliently to the negativity and increasing their self-esteem and self-worth. When Becca was threatened by someone claiming to “call ICE,” she responded violently and efficiently to that comment, making it clear that she is not one to take bullying of that sort lightly and earning a reputation for herself that offered her a level of protection from further harassment of that nature. Brianna and the other 16-year-old YG girl were popular because of the number of fights they had engaged in and won, again establishing a reputation that offered protection from further bullying and harassment at school. The techniques they would discuss, the videos of fights they would replay, the protection and mentorship of the older “fighters” to the younger YG members further attests to the social capital and boost in self-esteem that being a good fighter brought to these youth.

With the right mentorship, this initial boost of self-esteem could be nurtured and re-focused into youth seeing their self-worth as more than just a “good fighter” but a good student, entrepreneur, athlete and so on. This finding could inform youth programs on how to work with youths from violent neighborhoods in re-defining their identity and using that passion and self-confidence in pursuit of new opportunities and goals.

**Resilience-Enhancing Factors Identified**

Personal barriers (e.g., hopelessness and trauma) and structural neighborhood barriers affected all youth, including the Resilient 18 youth. Yet the critical components that supported youths in this particular community to act upon their personal aspiration and enhance their continual resilience were the following: positive social supports (e.g., peers, family, and role models), strong self-esteem or belief in oneself, and access to opportunities. Each of these factors were identified by youths as they explored the challenges in their life and around their neighborhood that kept them from opportunities they desired or blocked them from achieving their goals.

Social support of peers and family was a crucial resource and social capital that youth had to draw upon when formulating a personal aspiration and pursuing action. Many of the 18 resilient youth
focused on the positive support that family, peers, and mentors had in their pursuit of their goals. Self-esteem or confidence in one’s own ability was an asset that was vulnerable to many external factors, such as negative support systems, personal trauma, frequent failure, and hopelessness. While the benefits of fighting well was found to bolster self-esteem, without guiding that energy towards a future outcome or goal, it did not inspire action. Positive self-esteem, coupled with strong social supports that continually boosted and supported that self-esteem, is what drives youths to take action and begin the journey toward their goals (whether this was a class, a training, a job, or entrepreneurship). The last and sustaining factor and resource was access to opportunities which supported continuous resilience for many youths as they struggled with setbacks, such as loss of jobs, pregnancy, legal setbacks, and needing to adjust goals based on changing circumstances.

Each of these resilience-enhancing and agency factors will be explored in more detail and how its presence or absence affected the Hispanic youths from these regions.

Asset: Factors Contributing to Self-Esteem

Developing a strong self-esteem was one of the defining resilience-enhancing factors found in this study relating to individual assets or individual capital. Within the Resilient 18 youth, self-esteem and mentors (whether family or peers) coincided into aiding them in reaching their aspirations. For those without a clear future goal or aspiration, both of these factors were lacking. Low self-esteem played a key role in not only limiting youth’s vision of a future but also undermining any progress towards a better opportunity.

Looking back at the theoretical model (Figure 16), a youth’s sense of surrounding and available opportunities are often sabotaged by their own self-doubts. These self-doubts were observed in Maya’s story she thought herself unqualified for job opportunities offered to her and continually critiqued herself, just as her family negatively critiqued Maya for wasting her time painting. Other self-doubts were influenced by external factors such as discrimination from ICE and the politics surrounding
undocumented children limiting their educational pursuits as seen with Maria and Liz. Yet these same self-doubts did not dissuade the Resilient 18 youth, despite coming from the same circumstances.

A sense of self-worth and self-esteem (i.e., confidence in one’s ability) were the strongest factors that spurred the resilient youths to agentic action to reach their goals. Literature on youth resilience supports this focus on individual character and self-esteem being a strong trait that aids youth living in low-income violent neighborhoods or overcoming trauma (Haffejee and Theron 2019; Theron 2020; Foxen 2016). In Haffejee and Theron’s (2019) work with abused South African girls, they found that without family support, limited resources, and no help from law enforcement, the girls made a decision to believe in themselves and identify a future goal before actively removing themselves from the abuse and taking advantage of an opportunity provided by an intervention program. This finding contrasts with what the socio-ecological resilience theory (SERT) and bounded agency theory predicts, which over focuses on individual capacity or self-esteem as playing a major role in resilience-building. In this study, those girls who had suffered similar abuse, like Brianna (who suffered childhood molestation) and Linda (spousal abuse) who found it difficult to move forward despite their clear future resolve and initial steps to go back to college. Like Theron and Hafferjee’s South African girls, they had a clear future aspiration but were missing any guidance on how to move forward. What this study found is that mentorship and family cohesion play a supporting role for self-esteem in guiding youths towards resilience.

Resources: Role of Family and Mentors

While self-esteem aided youth in identifying a future goal or personal aspiration, family cohesion (i.e., strong family bonds and connection) and familial support were significant drivers in youth's ability to reach those personal aspirations. Many studies emphasize the importance of family and parent-child relationships in the Hispanic culture in general (Halgunseth, Ispa, and Rudy, 2006; Smokowski and Bacallao, 2007). Having a supportive family member affirming their child’s aspirations can boost that child’s self-esteem and resiliency skills (Jasinskaja-Lahti and Liebkind, 2001, Felson and Zielinski, 1989;
However, family cohesion and family support do not equally support resilience and youth agency. One of the major findings in this study was the misalignment that can occur between what youth’s aspire to be and what the family aspires and actively supports their child in, which can greatly affect youth’s ability to be resilient.

While most of the participants shared the same Hispanic culture with a focus on family cohesion, family support was often not uniformly expressed. For the Resilient 18, family support consisted of their parent’s actively supporting their goals, either financially, through mentoring or creating opportunities that made their goals more accessible (e.g., financing technical school or college, helping with their start-up business, enrolling them in tutoring program or athletic programs). For those who displayed strong family cohesion but low levels of support, the study found that families were unsupportive of their child’s chosen “passion” or career goals, often pressuring them to pursue another goal. Maya wanted to pursue art, but her parents felt that this passion should be a hobby and not the main focus as it could not lead to a higher paying career. Brianna mentioned wanting to pursue the army but felt as if she were abandoning her older retired parents, who did not support a military career. She subsequently gave up that dream to take a low wage job locally to bring in some money. Those aspirations that were parent-influenced did not always lead to resilience and were often abandoned. Oftentimes, youths who did not feel supported in their goals also felt fear in speaking candidly to their parents for fear of being rejected or dissuaded from their goal.

For those youths who displayed limited resilience, family cohesion limited their sense of opportunities since they felt tied down to take local jobs to care for their family rather than pursue higher-earning opportunities outside of their community or pursue their own passions. These limitations were frequently heard from youth whose families relied heavily on their English-speaking children for support (e.g., contributing to household income, translating material to Spanish, transporting family members to work or clinic, or caring for younger siblings). This sense of familial duty was often observed amongst female participants, such as Brianna not wishing to move far away to take care of her aging parents and
the young teenage moms who could not pursue opportunities due to lack of childcare. Individuation, which refers to the development of an individual identity separate from the family, occurs during the critical developmental stage of adolescence when choices, goals and a sense of identity is being formulated separately from the family’s needs and wants (Amsel 2009). When families oppose or do not support a youth’s choices, feelings, and goals, this conflict can negatively impact youth’s sense of self-esteem, which this study has found as a crucial resilience-enhancing asset. The inability to individuate successfully can lead an adolescent to become more dependent on others, exhibit poor decision-making skills, relationship challenges (both familial and romantic), increased anxiety and depression, and a feeling of not knowing oneself and what one wants (Schmidt 2005). This was observed in the non-resilient youth in this study who admitted to a lack of familial support and poor communication with adults in their lives. On one hand, These non-resilient youth were often vulnerable to negative peer influences, feelings of hopelessness, no clear idea of a personally defined goal, and low motivation in their present state to even consider opportunities within their own community. In severe cases where family provided negative feedback, increased drug activity, running away, constant fighting at school, and varying levels of depression were seen. On the other hand, those Resilient 18 whose aspirational goals were youth-identified and family-supported, who were able to individuate and identify their own goals separate from what their family may have wanted from them, these youth tended to be much more likely to show high levels of resilience, decision-making, and high likelihood of being able to achieve their goals.

This distinction from familial support and family cohesion is something that has not been noted by previous resilience research with minority youth (Foxen 2015, 2016; Jasinskaja-Lahti and Liebkind 2001; Felson and Zielinski 1989; Patten et al. 1999; Kirmayer et al. 2012; Ungar et al. 2005) and may explain some of the mixed findings. For example, Theron’s study with South African black adolescents found that familial support did not account as prominently in the 2020 study compared to her earlier 2019 research which involved mentors instead of family members. In this study, one of the neighborhood
improvements youth requested was the need for mentors in the region. Unlike family cohesion, mentors can expand a youth’s vision of what is possible and achievable from one that shares their heritage, their ethnicity, and their background. Being able to provide proper direction and guidance, mentors can foster youth’s passions and skills into a viable career path. Theron’s (2020) own research found vast differences in what Black adolescents identified as resilience-enablers in the face of structural disadvantage compared to adults who work in youth intervention programs and youth services. Unlike family cohesion and in lieu of family support for some youth, mentorship can guide youths through character building and formulating clear actions to achieve their goals. Helping youths see their own potential and guiding them towards the right opportunities (e.g., jobs, technical classes, higher education, entrepreneurship, counseling), can create a network of support that can break the cycle of hopelessness seen amongst many youths.

Resources: Opportunities for Youths

For communities like Wachoosa and Riverton that are undergoing rapid transitions and gentrification, opportunities can often be limited and further increase the economic gap between local residents and new incoming families and business, forcing the locals to survive not thrive. Due to the limited income local residents possess, this often means families trade off long-term goals for short term gains. Pain and Levine’s (2012) called this “tradeoffs based on short term vision” because of the high level of insecurity and risk in their neighborhoods that does not allow them to plan for anything long term.

For youth living in rural, resource poor communities like Wachoosa and Riverton, where few educational opportunities existed due to disinvested schools and limited scholarships, these job opportunities and paid trainings with Amazon, Wawa’s and Aldi’s were welcomed and caused many of the older youth to forgo higher education or professional training to make quick money. The short-term gains were much more appealing for those with limited money and looking for quick opportunities to
support their family and gain some financial autonomy. The younger youth did not express any interest in the opportunities that were becoming prevalent in Wachoosa at the time, such as construction work, childcare training, and minimum wage positions, since they were still financially dependent on their family. One of the key findings of this study is that while the access to these opportunities was present, the variety and quality of opportunities was limited as these trainings and certifications were for minimum wage positions, which further constrains an individual to succeed financially to pursue a long-term goal.

During the early onset of my study in 2016, these economic opportunities were highly attractive to older youth who would see other peers begin to drop out of school, begin to contribute to their household and personal expenses, and would lead to some forming families quite young. By the end of 2017, when the real estate and commercial development began to expand more, the job position these youth had taken with these companies remained stagnant, continuing to pay the same low minimum wage, with limited promotions a year later. Back in 2016, when some youth decided to drop out of school and take advantage of these positions in Amazon, Wawa’s, Aldi’s, and other certification programs for a possible future goal, they were displaying resiliency. However, as the months went on and resources (e.g. money or job opportunities) became limited or strained, any ability to envision or pursue a long-term goal or career started to become severely constrained due to rising responsibilities (e.g., a rent, a young family to support, bills) and a limited income. The trade-off where short term gains or “quick money” becomes a resilient solution to afford the things they need at that moment (e.g., transportation and a place to live) and support their family can often keep individuals in this cycle of poverty. This dynamic change observed from a resilient short-term gain that impacted their resilience over time demonstrates the dynamic changes that occur in low-income and gentrifying communities where opportunities are constantly shifting and forcing youth to adjust continually to survive, not thrive. It also reinforces the idea that resilience is not a static state but a dynamic process that continues to shift according to available resources and circumstances, requiring youth to continually adapt and make decisions that may have long-term consequences to future resilience.
Both adults and youth living in low-income communities, cope with a system that has been disinvested in them for years and the resources to train for higher-paying opportunities are few to choose from. Therefore, agency is limited to the range of choices available to them and the degree to which they can make an informed choice about their future. This is referred to as “dependent security”, which points to the limited resources that people depend on for livelihood (Pain and Levine 2012). Policies need to consider the dependent security from which people exercise their individual agency and move them towards autonomous security, where individual can act according to their desires and not negotiate those desires based on what is available. The question has always been how to do this. For that, we look towards the Resilient 18 who were able to make those limited opportunities work for them.

The Resilient 18 youth had access to the same low-wage jobs as their fellow Wachoosa and Riverton youths, but had a clear vision and focus on a future outcome. Using these minimum wage opportunities as short-term gain to achieve a long-term goal, allowed these resilient youth not to become complacent with these minimum wage positions but to utilize the income and work experience to their advantage. Some youth took advantage of the flexibility of Amazon jobs and Dollar General to be able to pay for college and pay down their car. One young woman started at Aldi’s and is currently working as a manager, using what she has learned there to get into a Business program. Emma, a 21-year-old Riverton woman, started interning with a social service agency while in college and is now working for this agency and using her job-experience for her master’s degree in social work. Eduardo, the Wachoosa entrepreneur, is continuing to train himself in various trades (e.g., cell phone repair, solar panel installation, and tax preparation). He is saving up money to open his own shop in Wachoosa to offer a variety of these services to the community. Another much younger girl (13-years-old) takes advantage of her math skills and currently tutors at the local Riverton YMCA. On the side, she charges her school friends for doing their math homework and uses it to supplement her allowance money. For Nuria, who had to switch from one certification to another to finally land a job that helped her family financially, the availability of other opportunities and her motivation to pursue them helped her maintain resilience.
despite the setbacks. These youth’s ability to utilize their asset skills and take the same opportunities that are available to their fellow youth and use them to change their circumstances shows high levels of resilience and expressing agency.

While not all youths have a focused drive and resilience-mindset, this study did reinforce the need to diversify the jobs available in this area, with more access to advancement opportunities for higher pay (e.g., tiered levels of promotion or paid professional certification training). While local non-profit organizations link with employers to offer technical training, these are usually for minimum-wage positions (e.g., CNA, Construction worker, Child Care worker) with limited opportunities for growth that offer more of the same short-term gains and dependent security. While these positions are attractive to youths for the short-term economic benefits, they do not pay enough to allow youth to invest in their future or even live in one of the new developments in the surrounding areas.

Key Findings Supporting the Youth Agency & Resilience Model

In reviewing the Youth Agency and Resiliency Model, the contributing theories are outlined in Figure 16, along with an adjustment made post-analysis to demonstrate the cyclical nature between action and resilience. As youth adapt consistently to their surroundings, to available opportunities or skills needed, and to their wavering self-esteem, resilience is not always consistent and requires an individual to re-establish goals and self-esteem to renew action. This further emphasizes that resilience is a dynamic process, instead of goal-driven, and changing circumstances requires an individual to frequently adapt and adjust to changing opportunities or diminished self-esteem throughout the life course.
Figure 16. Youth Agency and Resiliency model, developed for this study, adjusted based on final analysis to demonstrate cyclical relationship between action and resilience. Key findings for this population indicated, along with community-specific resiliency-enhancing factors.

Figure 16 also highlights the key findings of the study and indicates the resiliency-enhancing factors unique to this community and population. This model was adapted to incorporate both critical medical anthropology theory to provide context behind youth agency and youth’s formation of a personal aspiration. The asset and resources that influenced this particular group of Hispanic youth may not be the same in Hispanic youth of another community with varying resources. This model adapts itself well to be used with other minority youth and cultural groups with varying life experiences and levels of self-esteem, other communities with different educational resources and economic opportunities, and changing political laws affecting the community.

‘Resolviendolo’ or Making It Work: Resilience Redefined by Youth

This study revealed a clear connection between those who displayed a high level of resiliency and their access to three resiliency-empowering factors: the presence of opportunities to succeed, strong self-esteem to envision success and take action, and high levels of social support (e.g., family or mentors) for
maintaining and supporting the journey to success. Whether it was parents pushing their children to succeed or having a role model (e.g., older sibling or older adult), the guidance and motivation served to boost these youth’s self-esteem. These findings also drew attention to how complex resilience is in the variation found in what key resources and individual assets assisted some youth into action but not others, and to the distinctions made by youth over what they defined as resilience-enhancing compared to the literature.

Being able to approach this topic of agency and resilience through a holistic critical anthropological lens, this study demonstrated how Hispanic youth in these regions expressed individual agency, identity, and power within their environment. As minorities, often discriminated against openly, youths cope and strategize within their limited individual capacity and resources, with continual challenges affecting their self-esteem. Therefore, this study needed to combine several theories to capture all the nuances in these youth’s stories. With resilience theory, individual character and self-esteem were noted (bounded agency, Evans 2007) and the quality of the socio-cultural resources and social supports critiqued (SERT theory, Ungar 2005; Ungar 2007). With critical medical anthropology theory, an analysis of both resilient and non-resilient youths struggle was revealed and “promotive resources” such as schools, youth programs, and neighborhood resources meant to serve as resources for at-risk youths were critiqued. The Youth Agency and Resiliency model helped in re-thinking who defines resiliency and provided critical insights on overlooked resilience-enhancing factors.

This study supported the findings that hope and future oriented action are intertwined with agency (Goodman et al. 2017) from the high case of hopelessness seen in those non-resilient youth. This study supported youth being the voices that define resilience (Theron 2020) as the role of fighting was identified as a resilient response in increasing youth own self-protection and confidence as a “good fighter.” It also supported the role family plays in resilience (Foxen 2015, 2016; Kirmayer et al. 2012; Ungar et al. 2005) but made the distinction between family cohesion and familial support having varied, sometimes negative, effects on youth’s self-esteem and resilience. This may not be the case in all regions.
and with all Hispanic youth populations, but the model allows for the exploration of all those exposures that influence individual youth agency, their sense of surrounding and self-esteem, agentic action, and how to support those resilient efforts to eventually lead to their version of success.
CHAPTER 7:
CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD

This study is one of the first to fuse critical medical anthropological theory with a resilience framework to provide new insight into the factors affecting individual youth agency and resiliency, further supporting the complex nature of resilience, and answering the need for more holistic approaches to resilience research (Haffejee and Theron 2019; Theron 2020; Kim et al. 2019; Ungar 2008; Evans 2007). The Youth Agency and Resilience model is generalized with its variety of assets and resources forming the context behind youth’s decision making that it can be adaptable to any community of youth. The model also enables a researcher to identify localized influencing factors, such as varying educational systems, life experiences, political influences, and cultural differences in familial support to be used in comparative studies on different ethnic and racial groups of youth. This study also contributes to the anthropology of childhood by offering a new perspective of looking at individual youth agency, not from a disparities standpoint but a strength-based analysis of resiliency, utilizing critical medical anthropology to broaden the scope to include the context behind resilience and adversity. Much of the literature touches on the power dynamics and lack of perspectives when developing policies for vulnerable communities, but it is especially evident with youth being left out of the conversation (Evans 2007; Ungar 2005, 2009). The literature around individual youth agency has largely involved the effects of parent-child relationships, community structural adversity, and adolescent mental health symptoms amongst minorities, but very few if any have focused from the youth perspective how they feel they are coping with such adversities and their own self-perceived level of resiliency (Theron 2020; Foxen 2016; Haffejee and Theron 2019). The narrow focus of resilience research also drew attention to the systems in place that continue to put the emphasis on youths to cope and strategize their way out of their circumstances,
expecting youth to define an aspiration with limited vision and guidance. Resilience research should make emphasis on the disinvestment experienced in poor neighborhoods that lead to underfunded schools, limited to no programming or technical training, no recreational outlets or youth spaces, and high rates of crime and violence that continues to limit the opportunities and vision for many low-income youths to break the cycle of poverty. Labeling youth as “at risk” for their “destructive” or non-resilient actions because they adopt the code of the streets (Anderson 1999) to protect themselves or turn to selling drugs to make ends meet or choose You Tube over school to learn a new trade fails to see the context from which these youths operate and how they choose to resiliently thrive in their own way. From a strength-based approach, the best way to empower youths is to give them a platform and a voice to speak their mind and identify their own solutions, to educate them on the barriers and the resources and allow them to make an informed choice. This is not something that is often seen with youth programs and school counselors, and very few are funded to involve mentorship and the family in the process (Foxen 2016).
CHAPTER EIGHT:
LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY

This study, despite its length, did have some limitations. In terms of resiliency and individual agency, this study would have benefited from including parent testimonials, especially with those who displayed high levels of resiliency, to better understand the parent-child dynamic. By incorporating the parents or caregivers, conversations on their life experience, their relationship and aspirations for their adolescent child would have yielded some context over their parenting style and why these parents aligned or did not align with their youths’ chosen goals. Being able to hear from both sides the struggles and actions taken to survive daily challenges could have yielded a different study and provided insights on how to bridge the poor communication between the parent and child that could aid in individuation and family support of youth’s goals and resilience. This study was also limited in the lack of longitudinal data to follow up with many of the younger youth on their progress towards resilience. While this study was conducted over 18 months, it mostly benefited my observation of the older youth who partook of local opportunities and either used it as a stepping-stone towards their long-term goals or suffered setbacks in the opportunities originally chosen, oftentimes being limited to a low-wage employment with a family to support. By witnessing the struggle of their older siblings and YG members, it would have been insightful to see how the younger youth interpreted the failure of some of the older youth and how that impacted their path and their choices moving forward.

Due to funding limitations, this study did not have the capability of following up with more in-depth conversations with participants outside the YG, who were willing to speak more based on the trust and rapport that had been earned from frequent attendance in their youth Church evenings. Also, out of respect for the privacy of the participants and due to safety concerns, interviews were not performed in many of the participant’s homes or nearby neighborhoods as originally proposed for the walking
interviews due to safety concerns. This problem was adjusted by conducting every interview at the initial place of meeting (e.g., church youth group sessions, on the mission grounds, at a local taqueria or community event). As noted previously, due to the political climate following President Donald Trump’s 2016 election, some of the DREAMer and undocumented participants either moved away or I lost contact completely and could not follow up to find out if they had remained in school or pursued any of the scholarships and aid given.

My positionality also came with some limitations. As an adult researcher working with youth, there was some initial hesitancy by all of them to speak with me. Surprisingly, it was my affiliation with a local non-profit and the mission that gave me more credence and level of trust compared to being affiliated with a university. The fact that I worked with the youth’s parents or community members they knew, had information on scholarships and paid-training opportunities, and had the support of a local young girl (Maya) increased the comfort level of those youths I approached randomly outside the YG. As a foreign-born immigrant, Latina, and mother of two very young daughters, the level of comfort most of the YG girls felt towards me was akin to that of an older sister or aunt due to my open honesty in answering all their questions. They appreciated my candid responses to subjects that they could not discuss at Church sessions or at home such as sex and relationships, the fact that I listened attentively and without judgement, and counseled them in their relationships with their parents and significant others when asked. I earned their trust through my complete honesty. In return, I became a trusted adult and mentor as I was the first immigrant Latina that could relate to their story of coming from another country, growing up poor, and successfully getting a degree and raising a family simultaneously. Being the same age as many of their mothers, it made it more poignant for me that, under different circumstances, I may have been in a similar situation if not for the opportunities and social supports that opened doors for me to be where I am.
CHAPTER NINE:

PILOT APPLICATION OF FINDINGS

With the support of the non-profit, I was affiliated with and collaboration with the Wachoosa Community Development Association and a religious volunteer program in Florida, the initial findings of this study led to the creation of a monthly community gathering event to encourage family participation and build that community cohesion. Nicknamed “Festive Fridays.” Beginning in November 2017, each first Friday of the month was an invitation for a youth-focused event with families invited to participate in a fun-filled theme of the month activity or performance show. The themes ranged from trivia night, holiday dancing, mud-run competition, males vs. female soccer competition, festive Cinco de Mayo, talent show, and dance off. With no agenda (either religious, organizational, or political) except to offer a recreational gathering in a community devoid of social gathering spots, young adults with their children, teenagers, parents, and grandparents would come, socialize, participate in the activities, enjoy free food and giveaways, and socialize into the night. Reminiscent of a family reunion, each one of these Festive Fridays had youth making friends, meeting with community members outside the church, meeting with prominent community leaders and getting advice, mingling with current college students who graduated from their neighborhood, and making those critical social connections that can open their eyes to other opportunities.

With continued participation observed at Festive Fridays, I was able to pitch to my CEO to create a youth-based program for Hispanic girls in the Wachoosa and Riverton area, as I worked in a Women’s Center at the time. This pilot program focused on mentorship-building and connecting young women to successful Hispanic businesswomen and life coaches, who could speak on the unique struggles that family, culture, and ethnicity pose on young Latinas as they develop their own career path. On top of professional development, this program also provided monthly co-ed personal development workshops to
help young women identify the opportunities around them and work through their personal barriers, as well as college tours with their parents throughout the state to show them the various opportunities available. The program was also aimed at gaining the trust of these young women to view the organization as a safe space to gather amongst friends, do homework, and get some feedback from trusted friendly staff. Piloted in 2018, the positive response by the community of this program has shown the critical importance of social supports, youth spaces for fostering relationships and emphasizing a strength-based approach to increase self-esteem and resiliency amongst adolescent youth. This was an initial first step and an important one in giving a platform for youths to feel comfortable in the spotlight, be the focus of these celebrations, and feel as though the community was watching their progress and invested in giving them advice and mentorship to see one of their own succeed.

With my study being a holistic analysis of factors influencing individual agency and resiliency, the Youth Agency and Resilience model approach is adaptable to analyzing the effectiveness of various systems affecting youths: mental health, body image self-esteem, youth recreational programs, youth-focused training programs, pre-college mentoring and preparatory programs, and risk-prevention programs geared towards youths. Future research could focus on the quality and impact of youth mentorship programs in an effort to improve opportunities for youth in communities like Wachoosa and Riverton, as well as the type of youth-focused training programs promoted in high school job fairs and local technical schools. Youths need to be better informed of the choices available to them, the career pathways they can take in relation to their passions, and the danger of short-term gains, like low-wage, labor intensive jobs that can lead to poverty if they are not careful. My plan is to continue to foster community development programs in regions undergoing rapid economic transitions, advise organizations on incorporating cultural resiliency and familial support with minority youths, and advocate for high-earning training opportunities in satellite locations like these small rural communities of Wachoosa to increase access for youth and families. The hope is that in building community cohesion
and increasing access to opportunities for these youths, they will serve as role models in investing back into the improvement of their family neighborhoods and help other youth move forward as well.
CHAPTER TEN:
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Creating culturally sensitive community-based programs that focus on building capacity, nurture family support, and social networking and mentoring, is a challenge both in recruitment and implementation in community settings which is why so few programs like them exist. Very little funding exists for programs like these as they rarely fit evidence-based frameworks, due to the longitudinal research needed to prove the benefits of this type of approach. Most organizations provide free or low-cost educational and vocational training based on job availability in a region (e.g., construction, childcare, medical technician, welding, GED) to connect companies with a trained workforce or boost high school graduation rates (not college). Or these programs are tailored towards a specific grant to provide funding for the organization and thus focus on recruiting “numbers” rather than people to retain their funding, which is an unfortunate reality and often leads to a high turnover rate of youths. Very rarely are programs built based on what youth’s interest or to diversify classes not available in community college (such as web design, graphic design and art, or business planning), which leads to low attendance or the programs eventual failure due to the lack of youth interest. These programs also fail to promote cultural resiliency in not involving the family as a support structure nor linking youths to mentors in the field of their interest, so they have a better chance of success. Factors such as variety in technical and educational opportunities, more interpersonal interactions between family and like-minded peers, and community investment are needed to create programs catered towards a younger generation and ensure youth retention (Paiva and Araújo 2008; Kirmayer et al. 2012; Ungar et al. 2005; Foxen 2015). This could be achieved through paid internships or apprenticeships for trade skills, assigned mentors throughout high school and college, a network of vocational organizations and college recruitment to regularly hold meetings in these low-income areas, and clear personal action planning that involves the parents as well.
to foster a clear understanding of their youth’s passion and personal goals and how it can be linked to a career opportunity.

Recommendations for NGOs and non-profits focused on community development would be to incorporate community-informed investigations into what resources local residents identify as needed and to employ community members or invite to their boards community leaders to aid in creating, recruiting, and delivering programs. Employing community-based participatory research where the investigative power is given towards the community in identifying solutions for their own local challenges would not only yield relevant data to create successful programs, but also train those same local researchers as community leaders and program recruiters for a program that the community itself has shown an interest in. This would not only lead to success from an organizational standpoint and funder’s perspective but also empower the community in taking back ownership of their power, rather than leaving it to county officials, in implementing change in their neighborhood and addressing future adversity for families in the region. From a strength-based approach, future research and policy makers should consider employing more anthropological methods and theories, like community-based participatory research, for community development, economic empowerment, and creating policies to address disparities in partnership with the people who have a vested interest in seeing a better future for their community and its youth.
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APPENDIX A:

IRB APPROVAL LETTERS

May 27, 2016

Sara Arias-Steele
Anthropology
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review
IRB#: Pro00025751
Title: Biocultural assessment of Hispanic adolescent agency and body image ideals affecting eating habits and physical activity choices in low-income communities: How are community barriers navigated to achieve healthier lifestyle choices

Study Approval Period: 5/27/2016 to 5/27/2017

Dear Ms. Arias-Steele:

On 5/27/2016, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
Version 1 5/23/16 Hispanic Adolescent Agency

Consent/Assent Document(s) *:
Arias-Steele Adult Consent.docx pdf
Arias-Steele Child Assent.docx pdf
Arias-Steele Parental Permission English.docx pdf
Arias-Steele Parental Permission Spanish.docx pdf

* Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).
APPROVAL

February 22, 2021

Sara Arias-Steele
2067 Santiago Way N
Clearwater, FL 33763

Dear Ms. Sara Arias-Steele:

On 2/20/2021, the IRB reviewed and approved the following protocol:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Application Type:</th>
<th>Modification / Update</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IRB ID:</td>
<td>Pro00037254_MOD000001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Review Type:</td>
<td>Expedited 6 and 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>Biocultural assessment of Hispanic adolescent agency and body image ideals affecting eating habits and physical activity choices in low-income communities: How are community barriers navigated to achieve healthier lifestyle choices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IND, IDE, or HDE:</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approved Protocol and Consent(s)/Assent(s):</td>
<td>• Biocultural assessment of Hispanic adolescent agency and body image ideals affecting eating habits and physical activity choices in low-income communities: How are community barriers navigated to achieve healthier lifestyle choices;</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The modifications, as described by the study team below, have been approved:

No notifications needed. This study is under data analysis stage for dissertation defense.

Within 30 days of the anniversary date of study approval, confirm your research is ongoing by clicking Confirm Ongoing Research in BullsIRB, or if your research is complete, submit a study closure request in BullsIRB by clicking Create Modification/CR.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Institutional Review Boards / Research Integrity & Compliance
FWA No. 00001669
University of South Florida / 3702 Spectrum Blvd., Suite 185 / Tampa, FL 33612 / 813-974-5638
APPENDIX B:

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

| Phase 1: Interview Question | 1. Would you be willing to show me around your neighborhood?  
| Meet-up | 2. Preferably a route you take when walking around outside: either heading to school, walking amongst friends or exercising? |
| Neighborhood Assessment of Food and Recreational Locales | 1. How would you describe your neighborhood?  
| | a. What do you like most/ least about living here?  
| | 2. Where do teenagers your age normally hang out?  
| | a. Get something to eat? Engage in extracurricular activities? |
| During Walk: Perceptions on route? Barriers? Changes to Neighborhood Space? | 1. How often do you come by this route?  
| | 2. When in the day do you come here?  
| | 3. Are their places you avoid? Why?  
| | 1. How would you rate this neighborhood (1 being least and 5 being most) in allowing an individual to adopt a healthy lifestyle?  
| | 2. What would you like to see more in your neighborhood in terms of food venues and recreational spaces? |
APPENDIX C:

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS AND AGENDA

Opening Activity: Posters are Posted around the room with 5 Questions. Youths asked to grab a marker and write down their responses before the start of the Focus Group.

1) Please name your Top 3 Fave Hangouts- Anywhere
2) Please name your Fave Foodie Spots in Wachoosa/ Riverton
3) Our Neighborhood- What do you LOVE about it
4) Our Neighborhood- What do you DISLIKE about it
5) What do you WISH your neighborhood had?

Opening Questions: 3 minutes for responses.

1. Who is your favorite celebrity (tv, movie, music, sports) and why?
   (Girls have to pick female stars and boys pick male stars)

2. Our Neighborhood --- Likes/ Dislikes (10 minutes)

   Tables had a thumbs up sign and thumbs down signs. Group takes 5 minutes to go to the “Neighborhood Likes/ Dislikes Poster” and put their opinion (agree/ disagree) with like/ dislike column. They can also write down more responses. Discussion follows.

3. SWOT Analysis – All about you. (10 minutes)

   Everyone receives an individual SWOT form. They can put their name on it or not.

   Now everyone is asked to take 10 minutes and fill in the squares answering the questions. “What strengths or talents do I have?” Give examples. Weaknesses, etc. What Opportunities do I see for me (job, school, college etc)? Give examples. Threats- what are the things that can hurt me right now, followed by example.

4. What are the Major Challenges/ Barriers? (10 minutes)

   Explain neighborhood barriers and personal challenges- Discussion follows. What are the things that are getting in their way or in the way of their friends – staying in school, getting to school? Getting a job? Is it the lack of resources or the lack of social support/ motivation? Probing questions to help youths reflect on their answers.

5. What would you change or improve in Wachoosa (10 minutes)

   Give everyone a fake $1,000,000 bill. Pass it around – Now ask them if you had a million dollars, what are the three things you would do immediately to improve the community.
6. When you think about Wachoosa—You think about_______ (10 Minutes)
### SWOT Analysis Worksheet

- For instructions on using SWOT Analysis, visit [www.mindtools.com/nl/SWOT](http://www.mindtools.com/nl/SWOT).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you do well?</td>
<td>What could you improve?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What unique resources can you draw on?</td>
<td>Where do you have fewer resources than others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do others see as your strengths?</td>
<td>What are others likely to see as weaknesses?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What opportunities are open to you?</td>
<td>What threats could harm you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What trends could you take advantage of?</td>
<td>What is your competition doing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can you turn your strengths into opportunities?</td>
<td>What threats do your weaknesses expose you to?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E:
COMMUNITY PERCEPTION SURVEY

1. What's your name and age?

2. How long have you lived in Wachoosa?

3. Where do you work/go to school? What do you like/not like about it? Why?

4. What do you like/dislike about Wachoosa?

5. What changes would most improve Wachoosa?

6. What were the last three places you went to for fun?

7. If you don't participate in activities, why not? What kinds of activities would you like to participate in?

8. Overall, how responsive is law enforcement to the needs of Wachoosa?
   - Extremely responsive
   - Very responsive
   - Somewhat responsive
   - Not so responsive
   - Not at all responsive

9. What are the challenges stopping you from achieving your goals?
   - Education
   - Language
   - Skills
   - Courage
   - Motivation
   - Support System
   - Ability to establish relationships
● Information/resources
● Family
● Money
● Other (please specify)

10. What are the three ways you get information about what is going on in Wachoosa?

● Facebook
● Instagram
● Newspaper
● Google
● Church
● Family
● Friends
● Other (please specify)
APPENDIX F:

RECRUITMENT FLYER

Want To See More Parks And Fun Programs For Teens In Your Neighborhood?

Participate in a study focused on getting teen’s opinions on what a healthy body looks like, how to maintain a healthy body, and what is available for teens to do in your neighborhood.

- Requirements: Teenager between the ages of 13-21
- Fave Teen Hangouts: Provide a 15-20 min tour of your neighborhood or favorite park/exercise spots
- Attend 3 Group Discussions: Teen Exercise Habits, Teen Eating Habits, & Defining a Healthy Body Type
- BE PART OF THE CHANGE: Tell me what programs or changes YOU want to see in YOUR Neighborhood
- Monetary Compensation for your time!

- University of South Florida Approved Study #25751

Sara Aries Steele
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If interested: Call, Email or Come Visit me at Beth El Mission

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APPENDIX G:

RESEARCHER’S EXPERIENCE WITH ICE

Working with children of mixed status, I would hear stories about ICE and deportation of family members. As a citizen, I thought myself safe from such discriminatory stops and questioning. On the contrary, ICE stopped me twice during the 2 years of active research. The first incident occurred shortly after I was hired at the local non-profit in 2015 and the second incident occurred after the 2016 presidential election. The first time, I was waiting for my YG kids to be picked up by the Pastor that night in front of the Mission parking lot at 7:30pm. It was dark, the mission is very isolated and surrounded by a fence that was left open but mine was the only car in sight. I saw a white truck approach and a white male walk out and rap my window, asking me to please roll down the window as he flashed his badge very briefly. I complied by rolling the window an inch and asked what was wrong. The official then began asking me what I was doing there and asked for my identification. At the time, I was visibly shaken as I was a lone woman, in a dark isolated parking lot, with someone who was not in cop attire or a police car. As I had just started working in the non-profit organization located within those grounds and received my business card that morning. I pressed against the car window my state license and handed my business card with the missions' address through the window to the official. I calmly explained repeatedly what I was doing, that I worked at the organization and that I was refusing to give him my license because “no offense, but you are not in an official police car and I’d rather have a police officer present. So I can call one but I would like to know what I’m doing wrong as I have every right to be here. The Pastor, who is also the director of this mission will be here soon and can explain this to you if you give them 10 more minutes to get here.” The mention of the pastor/director had him change his mind, he kept my business card and proceeded to leave. As soon as he left, I proceeded to cry and visibly shake. I don’t know if this event would have ended differently if I had not received my business card that morning or had forgotten
my license that day. I was labeled a suspect because I was out late at night and I was clearly a minority. I later learned from the director that the official had no right to be entering into the mission as it was private property. I doubt this would’ve made a difference that night or any night when mission officials are not present to anyone, but most especially those of undocumented status.

The next ICE incident occurred when the organization I worked for moved to its own location in the Center of Wachoosa and in broad daylight. At 8:30am, I drove into my building to see an unmarked car parked in the back parking lot. Walking into my job, I hear my CEO calling the sheriff's office to ask why the ICE official is parked out back and to please send a car to escort this individual. Apparently this ICE official had informed the CEO he had “every right to park where he damn felt thanks to federal law” after she confronted him. Considering the organization owned the land, this official was again trespassing in private property. A few minutes later, my coworkers and I watched a sheriff patrol car drive by, exchange words with the ICE official for 2 minutes without leaving his car and proceed to drive right towards the exit without even stopping to inform us (the people who called inside the building) why the ICE truck remained in the parking lot. At this point, I ran out and waved down the sheriff and explicitly asked him what the situation was, to which I was informed that the local authorities had no jurisdiction here. The ICE truck then proceeds to drive up to hear what I’m saying to the sheriff, flashes his badge, and informs me that he is “looking for someone, this is official federal business.” My response was very curt “Who are you looking for? How are you going to see him from all the way in the back of the parking lot? There are only woods back there- are you waiting for that person to walk out of the trees?? This is a community center and privately-owned land. Our organization just bought it. You have no right to be here.” He proceeds to threaten me “Are you asking me to leave? Tell me because I’m going to remember that” in front of the sheriff. At this point, I do begin to address both officials as to why that remark sounded like a threat, why was I being threatened for asking a question? I also clarified that he is indeed trespassing on private property and demanding to see both officials’ badges with their numbers so I can follow up on why, as tax-paying citizens whose taxes are paying for their salaries, I am being threatened.
for asking a simple question. Needless to say, neither answered nor did they let me record their badge numbers, but both left the premises immediately. The ICE official merely moved across the street to park at another privately owned (Hispanic) restaurant. I then preceded to go inside and call every single member we served in our organization to please refrain from visiting that particular day. I also called several missions and organizations to warn them where ICE was parked. In this particular community, networks of informants made up of several missions and local community folks have a “code phrase” that is spread out through local community radio channels warning of ICE presence and where. The difference between the first incident and this second one is that, after 2 years entrenched in this community, I no longer felt like an outsider but an advocate. Even if the officers would’ve arrested me for “disorderly conduct,” which they could have, I had made enough partnerships with local leaders, community members, and invested funders to argue my case, unlike so many who are arrested. After 2 years of developing close relationships with families, guiding women through their education, working with youth to receive scholarship opportunities, and volunteering at community events held by local leaders and church clergy, I felt invested in this community and their well-being. Spending more time in Wachoosa than in my own neighborhood, I could not only name the owners of many of the taquerias, but knew who they were related to, could ask about their mother’s health, and tease them about their teenagers being able to drive them around now. My positionality changed from an outside researcher over the course of this study, to that of a community advocate, aware of the tactics and injustices used by ICE and the local police from all the families I counseled and assisted in my work. The increase in ICE raids not only led to greater community cohesiveness among partner organizations and community leaders, to protect community members but an incredibly effective means of mass communication to get vulnerable individuals off the streets fast. While this communication system was ineffective in getting the word out about community events and family engagements, when it came to ICE raids, free ITIN renewals (tax identification number used by working migrants), free food distribution sites, free mattresses for Irma-
impacted residents (Hurricane Irma 2017)- anything that served a basic essential need or had a direct impact on their livelihood, the news spread quickly!
APPENDIX H:

EMAIL PERMISSION FOR USE OF FIGURE 1 BY AUTHOR

Permission to use Copyright Figure for Dissertation
3 messages
Sara Arias <saraarias@mail.usf.edu> To: nlam@lsu.edu
Tue, Sep 11, 2018 at 1:18 PM

Dear Dr. Lam,

I came across your Resilience Inventory Measurement Approach figure in my research looking at resiliency and agency amongst Hispanic teens in low-income neighborhoods. Your model in many ways fits in an individual-focused resilience model. I would like to include your figure in my dissertation. May I please have your permission to do so?

Many thanks for your work!
Sara

Sara Arias-Steede
Doctoral Candidate and Graduate Teaching Assistant
Department of Applied Anthropology
University of South Florida Tampa
saraarias@mail.usf.edu
201-605-2679

Nina S Lam <nlam@lsu.edu>
To: Sara Arias <saraarias@mail.usf.edu>
Wed, Sep 12, 2018 at 10:45 AM

Dear Sara,

You have my permission to include the figure (in Natural Hazard Review) in your dissertation.

Good luck on your research!

Nina

***************************************************************
Nina Lam, Ph.D., Professor &
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***Remote Sensing/IDS Research Lab: 225-578-4005
Email: nlam@lsu.edu
http://www.lsu.edu/coeresearch/faculty Profiles/nina_lam.php

"Management is doing things right, leadership is doing the right things."
-from Tony Robbins, 2009

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