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Publicly housed Black mothers' experiences of structural racism in their everyday lives

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Abstract

Objective: Drawing upon critical race and feminist theories, the objective of this qualitative study was to understand, through Black mothers' narratives, how structural racism operates within a public housing system located on the outskirts of Washington, D.C.

Background: Structural racism has been identified as a root cause of racialized housing segregation, concentrated poverty, and health inequity—factors that disproportionately affect Black mother-headed families living in public housing. Yet, more research is needed to delineate the underlying mechanisms of structural racism at play in public housing systems.

Method: Using a community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) approach, the research team partnered with public housing residents and staff of a non-profit organization to guide the study. From 2017 to 2019, community partners co-developed the research protocol, recruited participants for in-depth interviews ($N = 15$), and assisted with data analysis, interpretation, and local dissemination of findings.

Results: Black mothers' narratives depicted in detail the structural manifestations of racism perpetuated in public housing systems, including: (a) systemic neglect; (b) economic oppression; (c) eviction threat; and (d) community surveillance. Findings suggest that structural racism is enacted and enforced by many dispersed agents of power, including street-level bureaucrats (e.g., caseworkers and maintenance workers) and White and wealthier neighbors.

Conclusion: Critical perspectives and community-driven research approaches can deepen understanding of how

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structural racism and institutional power relations operate to reproduce Black family marginalization within complex social systems like public housing. Directions for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS

African Americans, cultural/race/ethnicity, housing, low-income families, mothers, qualitative research

In October 2020, the American Public Health Association (2021) declared that structural racism was a public health crisis in the United States (U.S.), subjugating people racialized as Black to structural oppression and discriminatory outcomes that have harmed generations of Black families (Baker & O'Connell, 2022; Bonilla-Silva, 1997). According to Bailey et al. (2017), structural racism refers to the "totality of ways in which societies foster racial discrimination through mutually reinforcing systems of housing, education, employment, earnings, benefits, credit, media, health care, and criminal justice" (p. 1453). There is a rich and growing social science literature conceptualizing structural racism (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Burton et al., 2010; Krieger, 2014; Walsdorf et al., 2020) and theorizing the ways in which structural racism conditions and constrains the family functioning and well-being of Black families (Baker & O'Connell, 2022; Cross et al., 2022; Letiecq, 2019; Williams & Baker, 2021). However, to dismantle structural racism and advance health equity and justice, critical race scholars have called for more research that delineates *how structural racism operates* in the everyday lives of Black families (Hardeman et al., 2018; Jones, 2002).

Perhaps nowhere in the U.S. is the legacy of structural racism more visible than in racially hyper-segregated public housing projects—the state-manufactured urban ghettos that disproportionately house Black families headed by women (Massey & Denton, 1993; Rothstein, 2017; Simning et al., 2011). For the current study, situated in a public housing system on the outskirts of Washington, D.C., we aimed to contribute to the critical discourse on structural racism by explicating the inner workings of structural oppression and institutionalized power relations as experienced by publicly housed Black mothers. To carry out this study, we used a community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) approach (Letiecq et al., 2022) and formed a partnership with Black mothers and a community-based organization serving Black families. In collaboration with Black mothers, we (the authors) interrogated the following research questions: (1) How does structural racism operate in the everyday lives of Black mothers rearing children in a racially segregated public housing system located on the outskirts of Washington, D.C.? and (2) From mothers' perspectives, who enacts and enforces structural racism? As we discuss, using a research approach that centers the very people penalized and harmed by structural racism and unequal power relations offers a critical lens through which to understand racialized oppression and is needed to foment transformative antiracist action for systems change (Collins, 2019).

THE DEEP ROOTS OF STRUCTURAL RACISM IN PUBLIC HOUSING

Racially segregated public housing projects—and the history upon which they were built—epitomize structural racism. Created by the U.S. federal government, public housing's original purpose was not to shelter the poor, but to provide civilian workforce housing for working and lower-middle class White families (Rothstein, 2017). Black families were initially excluded, forced to live in overpopulated slums. But in the 1930s, under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, which included plans to redress widespread Depression-era housing shortages, the Public

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Works Administration (PWA) began constructing separate, racially segregated public housing projects for White and Black families. Following a "neighborhood composition rule," the PWA expanded public housing by building Whites-only projects in mixed neighborhoods it deemed White and Blacks-only projects in those neighborhoods deemed Black (Rothstein, 2017, p. 21). According to Rothstein (2017), President Roosevelt committed to the racial segregation of federally subsidized housing to appease Southern Democrats and see his New Deal legislation pass Congress.

By the 1960s, however, few White families were still living in urban public housing, having benefited from housing laws, policies, and programs that subsidized the mass expansion of America's suburbs, White homeownership, and White flight from urban centers (Billingsley, 1968; Massey & Denton, 1993; Rothstein, 2017). Black families were excluded from this government-subsidized expansion. Indeed, a complex web of discriminatory economic and housing policies (e.g., zoning ordinances, redlining, blockbusting, and discriminatory federal government home loan programs) and interlinked private actions (e.g., homeowner association rules and racially restricted covenants) blocked the social mobility and housing options of many Black families and prevented them from accessing wealth derived from home ownership (Brown, 2021; Ocen, 2012; Rothstein, 2017; Woolf, 2021).

By the 1970s, the federal government viewed the hyper-segregated Black ghettos it manufactured as problematic and shifted its housing strategy from public housing to privately owned rental housing (Chaskin & Joseph, 2015; Duneier, 2016). The Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program (commonly referred to as Section 8) was promoted to break up impoverished enclaves and disperse low-income families throughout wealthier communities—to create more economic diversity and social mobility (Popkin & Edin, 2016; Rosen, 2020). Yet, despite the intentions of the voucher system to cure the ills of racially segregated public housing projects, voucher recipients continued to face discrimination in the housing marketplace (Chaskin & Joseph, 2015; Rosen, 2020). For example, one study reported that HCV recipients were denied access to roughly 70% of market-rate units available to them (Ocen, 2012). Several researchers have also documented Black families' experiences of hostility, harassment, and policing from their White and wealthier neighbors in mixed-income communities, suggesting alternatives to public housing projects were no panacea for the deeply entrenched structural racism built into the housing marketplace (Khare et al., 2015; Ocen, 2012; Trounstine, 2018).

Structural racism, public housing, and Black family harms

Today's remaining public housing projects are controlled by federal, state, and local governments or large real estate organizations (or some mix of the public-private enterprise) and often are run by public housing authorities (PHAs; Duneier, 2016; Massey & Denton, 1993; Ocen, 2012; Schill, 1993; Trounstine, 2018). These racialized and bureaucratized spaces have been characterized as "a phenomenon of ongoing external domination and neglect" (Duneier, 2016, p. 225), where Black residents are continuously demeaned, ignored, controlled, surveilled, and policed. Racially segregated public housing exposes Black children and their families to pollutants, toxins, physical hazards, community violence, gangs, over-policing, and other chronic and acute psychosocial stressors (Bailey et al., 2017; Shah et al., 2018). Racialized residential segregation and structural racism more broadly have also been linked to elevated risks of mortality (Collins & Williams, 1999), hypertension (Simons et al., 2018), poor birth outcomes (Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2003; Wallace et al., 2015), chronic disease (Williams & Collins, 2001), and poor mental health (Bailey et al., 2017; Wildeman & Wang, 2017).

Public housing systems do not operate in a vacuum, however, but function collaboratively with other social systems (e.g., social welfare, child protection, and criminal justice) in "the management of social marginality" (Beckett & Western, 2001, p. 46). These systems are interlocked and work together to ensure public housing residents meet complex eligibility criteria and adhere to strict rules or risk being evicted (Curtis et al., 2013; Desmond, 2016). The

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collusion of systems has become more punitive and controlling over time, effectively "policing public subsidy recipients through criminal law" (Ocen, 2012, p. 1563), and has been linked to state-sanctioned family separation (Roberts, 1996; Waquant, 2009). Indeed, racially segregated, low-income Black families are disproportionately more likely than other families to experience the removal of children by child welfare (Roberts, 2012) and the incarceration of family members by the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2012; Wakefield et al., 2016). Based on these harmful outcomes, critical race scholars have concluded that these systems reproduce racialized inequity and injustice at an institutional level (e.g., Bailey et al., 2021; Burton et al., 2010; Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1989; Paik, 2021). What remains less clear are the ways Black families residing in public housing projects experience structural racism in their everyday lives (Hardeman et al., 2018).

CONCEPTUALIZING HOW STRUCTURAL RACISM OPERATES IN EVERYDAY LIFE

To guide this study, we drew upon Young's (1990) political and feminist theorizing on how structural oppression and unequal power relations operate to reproduce social marginalization. Young (1990) posited, for example, that oppression is not simply coerced by tyrannical power, but, in the U.S. context, is also enacted and enforced in the everyday, often unconscious, practices of well-intentioned people working within systems. Young (1990) acknowledged that the tyranny of a ruling group over another, such as in South Africa during Apartheid or in the U.S. during Slavery, would certainly be called oppressive. But oppression, in Young's (1990) view, also referred to the systematic constraints on groups that are "embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules" (p. 41). Thus, she argued that institutionalized power (e.g., structural racism) was mediated by many dispersed actors or "third agents" who, for a complex host of reasons, "support and execute the will of the powerful" (Young, 1990, p. 31). As an example, Young (1990) described how a judge exercised institutionalized power over incarcerated people through a network of agents—from prison wardens, administrators, guards, lawyers, parole officers, and many others—who are each tasked with operationalizing the laws, policies, rules, and regulations of the criminal justice system.

According to Young (1990), to understand structural oppression, we must understand how individuals, as agents of the powerful, reproduce *the background conditions* necessary to perpetuate marginalization. In this sense, individuals (or collectivities) are not legally or morally responsible or to blame for structural racism. Indeed, Young (1990) claimed that individual attribution or blame would not help remedy structural injustice because structural injustice is not an isolated instance of wrongdoing. For Young (1990), structural injustice is the product of multiple actions and processes occurring over time that are enacted by diverse agents who are following laws and policies and acting within accepted rules and norms. In other words, structural injustice is the "unintended, cumulative result of everyday, accepted behavior" (Young, 2011, p. 52). Drawing upon Young's (1990, 2011) theorizing, in this study, we used a CBPAR approach (described below) and interrogated the following research questions: (a) How does structural racism operate in the everyday lives of publicly housed Black mothers? and (b) From mothers' perspectives, who enacts and enforces structural racism?

STUDY LOCALE AND APPROACH

The current study took place on the outskirts of Washington, D.C., in a Northern Virginia enclave grappling with its own entrenched history of government-sanctioned, racially

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segregated housing, great wealth inequality by race, a shortage of affordable housing, and gentrification (Hyra, 2017; Woolf, 2021; Woolf et al., 2017). The racially segregated public housing projects where most study participants lived were dilapidated, neglected old buildings constructed between 1942 and 1968 under the PWA's neighborhood composition rules (Rothstein, 2017). While schools in the study locale were racially integrated in 1964, many of the same segregated Black ghettos constructed by the government prior to the Civil Rights movement continued to be used nearly 60 years later to provide subsidized housing to low-income residents who were disproportionately Black (Woolf, 2021). According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's "Picture of Subsidized Households," in 2021 nearly all public housing residents in the study locale were minority, 84% of public housing residents and 81% of HCV recipients were Black, and nearly three-quarters were female-headed households.

In 2016, members of the university research team were invited to a community meeting of public housing residents organized by a local school's family and community engagement staff to discuss residents' concerns about redevelopment. The local government, in concert with the area PHA, was planning to redevelop the housing project (along with several others in the area) and replace it with mixed-income units. The residents in attendance, six Black women (aged mid-20s to 70 years), were concerned that their voices were not being heard as the redevelopment plans were taking shape. During the initial meeting, and over the course of several others that followed, the university team was invited to build a community-university partnership with Black mothers rearing their children in public housing utilizing a CBPAR approach (Letiecq et al., 2022).

Our approach: Centering Black families using CBPAR

CBPAR approaches differ from traditional approaches to research in that they are community-driven, participatory, democratic, dialogic, action-oriented, and based on trusted, community-university relationships (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Wallerstein et al., 2018). Over time, CBPAR practitioners work to blur the lines between researchers and the researched in order to share power with and amplify the voices of those marginalized in science and society (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Henderson et al., 2017). CBPAR should be an empowering process in which community partners (i.e., co-researchers) guide as many components of the research and action taking efforts as is feasible (Wallerstein et al., 2018). As a diverse team of university researchers committed to antiracist, community-driven scholarship (first and third authors are White women, second author is a Black man, and forth author is a Black woman), we worked with our community partners to: (a) center Blackness; (b) ensure that Black people guided research production and its translation to policy and practice (and were compensated for the effort); and (c) ensure that Black families and communities were not harmed by—and indeed benefit directly from—the research enterprise (Dei & Johal, 2005; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

After establishing a community-university partnership in 2017, our research team met with local government and agency officials and housing advocates to better understand the local housing landscape; formalized a partnership with a local after-school program serving Black children and their families to house the project; garnered funding to carry out the current project; and established a community advisory board (CAB) to drive the project. The CAB ($N = 11$ members) comprised of one of the women we met during project conceptualization (a former public housing resident who transitioned to Section 8 housing), five Black mothers rearing children in public housing projects, a Black single mother living doubled-up in an apartment whose children were enrolled in the after-school program, and four Black after-school staff members. From late 2017 to mid-2019, members of the university team and CAB met

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monthly at the after-school site. During meetings, we provided food and drink and $25 gift cards for CAB meeting attendance (the after-school program provided childcare). Following a CBPAR approach (Letiecq et al., 2022), CAB members guided research efforts (discussed below) and planned several community-driven actions including (among others) co-presenting research findings to local leaders and implementing workshops on personal finance, homeownership, and family health.

METHODS

Participants

Inclusion criteria for this study included: resident of public housing, mother or caregiver of at least one child, racialized as Black. CAB and university co-researchers, along with after-school program staff, recruited participants using snowball sampling. Our sample for this study included 15 mothers or caregivers residing in public housing who self-identified as African American or Black (one mother was also Latina, and another was West African). All but one participant (a social mother/caregiver for a preschool-aged child) were co-residing with at least one child. Most participants lived in public housing projects ($n = 11$); four voucher recipients resided in Section 8 housing. The average age of the participants was 34 years with an age range of 26–57 years. Most had completed high school ($n = 8$) or earned a GED ($n = 2$). Five dropped out of high school and had yet to complete a GED. Two participants completed vocational or community college, and three were pursuing college or vocational certificates at the time of the study. Nearly all participants were single; one participant was married, and another was cohabitating with her same-sex partner. Two mothers were in relationships with men who were incarcerated. The number of children ranged from 1 to 6 (average of 3 children), with ages ranging from 2 to 33 years. Most participants lived in the study locale for most of their lives. The majority ($n = 12$) were employed; two mothers were on disability (SSI), and one mother was unemployed.

Procedure

Before study implementation, we received institutional review board approval. We developed our research focus and interview protocol with guidance from the CAB. Interview questions relevant to the current study included: *What goals do you have for yourself and your family this year and over the long-term? How, if at all, has the support from governmental agencies (education, housing, human services, public safety) or community-based programs helped you to reach these goals? How were you treated by these agencies/personnel when seeking these services?* Once the protocol was finalized, the CAB and after-school staff aided in recruiting participants (by word of mouth and sharing flyers) and connected us with other public housing residents. These introductions facilitated trust between the interview team and study participants. The interview team was headed by the lead author, a White woman scholar of Black and Latinx immigrant family life with significant CBPAR experience, and five Black graduate and undergraduate research assistants trained in the art of the interview. The lead author interviewed most participants, with two research assistants taking field notes, making observations, and asking probing or clarifying questions. Two interviews were conducted by graduate student-led teams of two. Interviews were conducted in participant homes, on their front stoop, at the after-school site, or at a location of their choosing and lasted about 60–75 minutes. Participants received a $50 gift card for their time. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by the research team for coding.

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Data analysis

Initial informal data analyses were conducted in the field during CAB meetings and data collection (Maxwell, 2012). Research team members wrote memos and engaged in critical, reflexive conversations about race, racism, antiracist research, and our diverse positionalities (e.g., by race, gender, class, and sexuality) and power relations to raise individual and collective consciousness about the subject matter and our connection to it (Humble & Radina, 2019). We worked to bracket our assumptions, share power, engage in cultural humility, and remain flexible throughout the analytical process to deepen our inquiry—practices we document more fully elsewhere (e.g., Vesely et al., 2019).

Once data were transcribed by research team members, checked for accuracy, and entered into Dedoose (a qualitative data management software tool), the research team began formal coding processes. We engaged in multiple waves of coding reflective of open, axial, and selective coding (LaRossa, 2005). During open coding, the research team consulted with CAB members to develop a priori codes based on the research questions inclusive of community interests (e.g., housing challenges, policing, institutional betrayal, resilience). The research team then used these initial a priori codes to code the interviews using a constant comparison method. Each line of text was considered in relation to the codes. Individual team members coded interviews independently and then met to discuss codes, come to consensus regarding emergent codes, and add codes to the codebook. After coding three interviews in this way, we worked in dyads to code the remaining 12 interviews, with each interview double-coded to ensure coding reliability. During axial coding, the research team consolidated open codes to more significant categories relating to the ways structural racism was operating in mothers' everyday lives. We then worked to bring the large categories together to inform the story underlying the analysis (LaRossa, 2005). Pseudonyms were used throughout to conceal participant identities.

Validity and trustworthiness of data

Multiple strategies were used to ensure data quality. When we began collecting data, we had been in the community, engaging families and attending community meetings, for 2 years. We were partnered with a trusted non-profit after-school program that was embedded in the fabric of the community. This partnership with a Black community-serving organization, the development of the CAB on-site, and our time in the community contributed to establishing trust and rapport with many public housing residents necessary for robust data collection. These relationships contributed to the research team's more in-depth understanding of Black mothers' experiences from their perspective. We also used several forms of triangulation (Glesne, 2016). First, multiple data sources, including the CAB, after-school staff, local leaders, agency officials, and housing advocates, contributed to our understanding of mothers' experiences residing in a public housing system. Second, engagement with the CAB deepened and extended our understanding of the data throughout the coding process—contributing to observer triangulation via member checking. Third, we engaged in critical reflexivity and dialogue with community members and among members of our diverse research team (Glesne, 2016).

FINDINGS

In this study, we aimed to delineate how structural racism and institutionalized power relations worked in a racially segregated public housing system on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. Data analyses centered the narratives of Black women rearing children in public housing projects. Analyses also drew upon CAB member experiences, field notes, memos, and notes of

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meetings with local leaders and housing advocates. Black mothers' narratives depicted in detail their experiences of structural racism at play in public housing, including: (1) systemic neglect; (2) economic oppression; (3) threats of eviction; and (4) community surveillance. Importantly, mothers' narratives also pointed to the roles played by "street-level bureaucrats" (e.g., PHA staff and social workers) as key to enacting and enforcing structural racism in public housing (Lipsky, 2010, p. xi). According to Lipsky (2010), street-level bureaucrats are public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs and often have decision-making power in the execution of their work. The roles played by White and wealthier neighbors were also discussed. According to Young (1990), identifying the agents of the powerful who enact and enforce structural racism is not intended to assign individual blame for structural oppression. However, understanding how structural racism operates can deepen understanding of our individual and collective responsibility for the reproduction and remediation of oppression.

Systemic neglect: *"Don't just treat us like we nobody and we paying all this rent"*

During interviews and environmental scans of the public housing projects, research team members observed poorly maintained buildings with peeling paint on the walls, broken windows, air conditioning units and doors held in place with duct tape, and large holes in the walls exposing residents to the outside. The poor condition of these public buildings, which were surrounded by expensive, well-maintained, privately owned townhouses, condominiums, and modern apartment complexes, reflected a key mechanism of structural racism at play in public housing—that of systemic neglect born out of decades of public disinvestment (Schill, 1993; Woolf, 2021). The street-level bureaucrats charged with tending to the dilapidated public housing structures included PHA maintenance crews. As their narratives detailed, mothers viewed these workers and their behaviors—their actions and omissions—as culpable in the reproduction of structural inequality instead of contributing to structural improvements. Seldom did mothers' blame for systemic neglect extend beyond these workers, although a few mothers did implicate agency officials and policymakers. For example, Kenya, suspecting an ulterior motive for the years of property neglect, reasoned, "They [public officials] want to do away with this [public housing]. They want to tear it down and want to just do a redevelopment plan."

Across interviews, mothers expressed frustration, anger, and bewilderment over the dehumanizing neglect they experienced as tenants in the housing projects. For example, Jada, a 32-year-old mother living in public housing with her 8-year-old daughter and her nephew, shared, "There is a hole behind my stove, and the gnats are having a field day coming in from there." When asked if she called maintenance for repairs, she said, "All they [maintenance] did was put a piece of plywood on it….gnats are still coming in." About maintenance, she shared what would be a common refrain during interviews: "Sometimes they're unresponsive, sometimes their work is incomplete." Like Jada, other participants noted that the maintenance "don't pick up," "never answer their phone," and only come out to the apartment if you "force" them. Lisa, a 38-year-old mother of three (aged 22, 12, and 8 years) shared her frustrations:

> We just had an inspection and I called for all these maintenance issues. They never came. For each day, I'm like 'Are they coming, did they come?' They never came. So, who knows when they gonna come? Each day they never came…and that's not fair to us. If something wrong or something laying out on my house they gon' say 'oh your housing wasn't clean', but you didn't tell me you was coming…Give me some type of dignity to know that you coming.

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Lisa continued, "To me, as a resident, they should at least try to call…Or at least leave us a note saying we came, we coming back, something. Don't just treat us like we nobody and we paying all this rent."

While some participants qualified for a full housing subsidy (i.e., did not pay rent for their housing; $n = 6$), most residents ($n = 9$) were required to pay roughly 30% of their income in rent (ranging from $119 to $700 per month; see Perl & McCarty, 2017). Like Lisa, several mothers discussed the disrespectful and negligent treatment they received from the PHA staff rather than being respected as renters. Nikki, a publicly housed 28-year-old mother of four children (aged 9, 9, 5, and 3 months) earning $10.50 per hour as an early childcare educator, shared:

> I don't see how you want me to pay rent and you can't even give me the proper house. Or you don't come out to do things when people call you. You don't fix anything on time. You don't do anything.…But you make me pay for a house that barely works.

Tay, a 29-year-old mother rearing two children (aged 16 and 12 years) in public housing, had this to say:

> And then when you go tell them about it, they act like they don't know what the hell is going on. You know what I'm saying? If you look around, I painted this house…I painted it… the stove was old… This house was so roach infested. All housing did was came in here and paint over top of the chip and that's all they did…and poorly. But they want money.

Systems neglect as a mechanism of structural racism created undue stress and exposed families to the kinds of dehumanizing and poor living conditions that are harmful to individual and family health and well-being (Bailey et al., 2017). Because few pathways existed within the system to redress their poor living conditions, participants told stories of bucking the system and seeking private solutions at their own expense. One mother shared that she paid an outside company to fix whatever was broken, especially a toilet or something needed every day, noting "[outside workers] are going to do a better job than the maintenance people." Jacqueline, another long-time public housing resident, summarized: "This community…done went to the dogs. You know 'cus I think that if housing would have did something a long time ago different, then the community probably would have been better."

Economic oppression

Beyond systemic neglect and the public disinvestment evident in public housing spaces, mothers also shared stories illustrative of what Cudd (2006) referred to as economic oppression or the direct (and sometimes indirect) forces that restrict and curtail economic opportunities, often at the intersections of race, class, and gender (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989). Manifestations of economic oppression were organized into three subthemes: (a) hidden fees, fines, and costly errors; (b) suspected corruption; and (c) systems collusion. Recounting their experiences of economic oppression, mothers often blamed street-level bureaucrats—the caseworkers, who administered the complex rules of the PHA, and other social service workers—for making their lives more difficult. Mothers often expressed a sense of institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2013) as when individuals turn to institutions upon which they depend for help and then feel betrayed when workers levy unexpected fines that can lead to eviction, make costly errors without apology, or are suspected of corrupt practices that curtail their economic liberation.

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Hidden fees, fines, and costly errors: "They charge you for every single thing"

One of the ways structural racism manifested in this study was through caseworker's enactment and enforcement of obscure and economically oppressive rules that resulted in hidden fees, fines, and costly errors. Across interviews, residents told numerous stories of being billed for maintenance repairs and having to pay for garbage disposal replacements, stoves, broken doors, and broken air conditioning units—items that renters of privately owned units would typically not have to pay for if broken or at the end of their useful life. A housing advocate confirmed that public housing tenants are often charged for appliances that break because PHA caseworkers assume the renters are breaking things and therefore responsible for the cost of the repairs or replacements. These unforeseen—even predatory (see Rockett, 2021)—charges and other hidden fees and fines can take residents by surprise, adding hundreds of dollars to monthly expenses. Discussing these unexpected costs, Shanice, a single mother of two, said: "I don't call maintenance for anything. They charge you for every single thing. A light bulb, anything."

Mothers' narratives also detailed how economic oppression was reproduced by the costly errors made by PHA caseworkers operating within a complex bureaucracy at the expense of housing residents already living in fiscal precarity. Throughout interviews, participants shared stories of having to learn the ins and outs of the housing system and constantly monitor their accounts for accuracy. Errors mattered because they could result in delayed or lost benefits and/or unforeseen costs that could lead to a downward economic spiral and eviction. Shanice's frustrating narrative was illustrative of many:

> The workers don't even know how to calculate your rent. I'm like, 'Tell me how you got this down.' Plenty of times they've messed up. 'Oh, we thought this. Oh, we thought this.' It's just no communication, they're not professional down there. It's a mess.

Like Shanice, Kiara, a solo mother of four (aged 7–17), also experienced costly caseworker errors and charges that caused her significant hardship and undue stress. As she explained, Kiara moved her family to the city to take up a public housing unit she was offered, only to be informed upon arrival that her unit was not yet ready. With her extended family hours away, she ended up unhoused for weeks. She said, "Well, I had to end up sending my kids to stay with my dad for a while, because I had nowhere for them to go." When asked what happened to her, she said, "I was just basically laying where I could lay my head at. I was living out of the trunk of my car." When she finally was housed, she had to deal with processing errors, which led to unforeseen costs and a months' rent that Kiara had to pay for in full (even though she was eligible for a subsidy). Then she came home 1 day to find "a court order for a maintenance bill that…added up to about $350. And they were basically trying to send me to court to put me out for that, but they never sent me a bill for these maintenance repairs." Kiara felt deep anger:

> It made me angry. I was angry. I was very angry. For one, you wasted my time. For two, you gave this information and I feel like she [PHA caseworker] lied about the whole situation. I feel like when we got there, she lied about it. And she didn't really want to help.

Kiara's experience reflected an institutional betrayal. When she sought help for the assistance for which she was eligible and needed to shelter her children, she felt betrayed and lied to by her caseworker.

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Suspected corruption: "She was basically selling the housing vouchers"

Within the public housing system, participants' stories suggested another form of economic oppression was at play—that of governmental corruption (Cudd, 2006), where those in power were suspected of engaging in unfair, dishonest, or fraudulent conduct that curtailed the housing opportunities of others. From Kiara's perspective, the PHA was like a "money laundering" operation. She said:

> [The PHA caseworker] was basically selling the housing vouchers…giving them to people who didn't even need them. But it's people out here that need the stuff. And you won't give it to the people that need it, but you'll give it to somebody that you're in a relationship with ….And how are you going to sell something that doesn't belong to you, that belongs to the government?

Kiara was not alone in her suspicions and mistrust. Many participants suspected that some PHA caseworkers were unduly benefiting from the system in which they worked, and using the system to advantage their friends and family members. Jacqueline, a long-time resident who raised six children in public housing, when asked how she would like to be treated by the street-level bureaucrats of the PHA, shared, "What would I say? Stop making us feel like we the little people." But then she added, "Don't get it twisted. Some of them [PHA caseworkers] still in Section 8 too. Some of them still got their little Section 8 thing. Trust me now, we ain't all living [outside the system]."

Shanice's frustrating story of advocacy and trying to work within the system over several years to meet her family's housing needs also exemplified a common perception among participants that the PHA was unfair, unjust, and corrupt. As Shanice shared: "I fought, I fought, I fought. And I finally got on the transfer list. They finally approved me for a three bedroom." But then she added, "and that was two years ago." Detailing her drawn-out advocacy efforts, she added:

> Last time I checked, I was the second person on the list to go to a three bedroom. Two people have already moved in here, so I'm thinking I should be the next person on the list. One of the persons around here is on the advisory board for the residents, and she told me to call up to a person. I called, I left a message. They did call me back, [and] I told them my situation. I said, 'Well, I'm approved, but my paperwork is with somebody.'

She was then told that the person she was assigned to work with wasn't going to help her, noting "you can just forget that." The PHA caseworker later told Shanice that she needed to be "buddy-buddy" with the person in charge of the transfer list "so that you can move." Clearly incredulous, Shanice responded:

> I'm like, 'Why do I got to be buddy-buddy with her for her to do her work? That don't make no sense. I went through the proper channels. I did all the paperwork. I did everything you guys asked me to do. Why do I have to be buddy-buddy with her to get into a three bedroom? I'm not understanding.' He's like, 'Well, that's just how it works.'

Stuck in her overcrowded housing with no timeline for moving, Shanice felt like she was being told, "F-you," and that "You'd better be just grateful you got housing to live in."

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Systems collusion and the benefits chase: "It's a Hassle…It's the Workers"

As a mechanism of structural racism, economic oppression was not only visible within the public housing system, but also across interlinked social welfare systems that were in collusion with the public housing system to control and police residents, ensure they adhered to strict rules, and met complex eligibility criteria (see also Paik, 2021). Mothers keenly understood that loss of benefits in one system or a conviction in the criminal justice system could hold implications for eligibility or evictions in public housing (Curtis et al., 2013; Desmond, 2016). For example, in Virginia at the time of the study, an entire household could be evicted from public housing if even one member was convicted of a drug-related felony, such as marijuana use, whether or not the tenant knew about the activity (Jenkins & Ifill, 1989).

Mothers experienced the collusion of systems as restrictive, punishing, and interfering with their ability to earn wages and move up the economic ladder. Study participants described how they had to "chase benefits" across housing and social welfare systems to ensure their housing, food, and/or child care assistance (among other benefits) would not get turned off, resulting in significant economic hardships and possible eviction. Mothers' narratives revealed the inordinate amounts of time and planning needed to chase benefits, maintain eligibility, and access supports across misaligned systems, which often precluded mothers' ability to get and/or keep a job. As with other mechanisms of structural racism, mothers' narratives pointed to the role of caseworkers across systems as instrumental in the enactment and enforcement of the laws, policies, and rules that were economically oppressive.

All participants in this study who resided in public or Section 8 housing were also enrolled in (or their children were enrolled in) numerous other social welfare programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, also known as food stamps), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF, also known as welfare), the National School Lunch Program, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Head Start/Early Head Start. However, rather than feeling supported and economically liberated by participating in these interlocking systems, mothers talked about feeling trapped as they chased or managed their benefits and the various requirements they had to meet in order to not jeopardize needed aid. Ironically, this benefits chase curtailed mothers' efforts to get and keep a job, a necessity if they were to exit the public housing system and become fully self-sufficient.

As Anita, a 31-year-old mother of six children (aged 4–12 years), shared, trying to maintain housing and keep her job (or jobs) while chasing benefits (e.g., TANF, SNAP, and WIC) was nearly impossible. She described, "Because like, this is the place to help me and my kids…but… it doesn't really help when you're a single parent with the things you have to do," indicating that it was a challenge to meet the in-person paperwork requirements, particularly with children in tow and while working multiple jobs. Unmet child care needs also challenged her ability to accept jobs. Despite receiving multiple offers, work opportunities that offered nonstandard work hours or fell outside of the hours that she had care for her children were impossible to maintain. She went on to say, "It's not too many jobs you can go and get…[that have] specific hours…that you want. I've had good jobs. I've had really good job offers. I can't keep none of them."

Describing the misalignment between low-wage work and her benefits chase, Jackie, a publicly housed single mother of three children (aged 2, 4, and 6 years) who worked as a home health aide for $10.50 per hour, shared:

> When you start working jobs like me, as a mom right, you have the doctor's appointments that come. Then you have the WIC appointments that come. Some employers, they are generously nice but not as nice to let you keep getting all the time off to keep going to the SNAP appointments….the WIC appointments. The

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> doctor's appointments are excusable, right, for yourself and or the kids in emergencies. But then you have SNAP. Every now and then you have to go be with a caseworker and then you have to go…with WIC, you have to prick your finger, do the full body exam… It takes hours…so sometimes you have to call out…It's a hassle.

Explaining further, Jackie noted that even the appointment system works against you. She said, "They will give you an appointment. [But] That's not necessarily the time you will be seen. It's the time you are in the line." She goes on to say, "This makes no sense, right, because you get there expecting to be seen at 8:00 and you actually don't get seen until 3:00." Jackie reflected, "So, that's the entire day that I had to replan and redo because you weren't as committed with me about the time."

Jackie's and Anita's experiences, among other study participants, reflected how structural racism worked to produce layers of economic oppression and a double bind—where low-wage, unbenefited work with nonstandard hours did not work, especially when you have young children, and the benefits chase across systems precluded mother's attachment to the labor force and hindered educational pursuits. Mothers' narratives also reflected their experiences of being denigrated, mistreated, and disrespected by street-level bureaucrats, whom mothers perceived as lacking empathy for their plight. Mothers often felt othered and blamed for their impoverishment, and were told that they needed to simply "change their mindset" to get out of the projects. Speaking of her goals for her family, Jackie said, "In five years, I pray to be assistance free. I don't even want to go another year of…public assistance only because of the hassle behind it. [And] the workers and everything aren't too reliable."

Threats of eviction: *"Yeah, that's my biggest fear…being put out"*

As participants confronted systemic neglect, advocated for better living conditions for themselves and their children, and interacted with systems that felt more punishing than helpful (see also Paik, 2021; Roberts, 2012; Waquant, 2009), they were simultaneously being threatened with eviction. Participants' experiences illustrated that to live in government-subsidized housing was to live within a system of opaque rules and power relations that, if violated, could lead to severe penalties, including eviction and homelessness (Desmond, 2016). As Anita made plain, "So yea that's my biggest fear, being put out because I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do but actually I am."

Nearly all study participants shared stories regarding the rules, oversight, inspections, monitoring, and mandatory meetings that—if missed—could result in eviction. As Nia, a 57-year-old long-time public housing resident, shared, it is critical that residents figure out the PHA rules and abide by them. She said, for example, that the housing authority created mandatory meetings where "they like force you to come. And that's a good thing too because some of them need to be forced." But if a resident does not go to a meeting, first they will get a warning from the PHA, "then if you don't come the next time, it'll be an eviction." When asked about residents who work or have other obligations and cannot make a meeting time, Nia said, "Well, you gotta have an excuse…If you can't make it on your day, then you better make it [to the next meeting]. That's you second chance to get there." She said, "If you don't get there that day, you're likely to get a 5 day notice, [and] you're gone." When asked about the short notice, Nia said, "Yeah, you gotta be out…or they come and set your stuff out [on the street]."

Jacqueline, a mother of six children (with ages ranging from 33 to 17 years) and long-time public housing resident, confirmed the new, fast-tracked eviction timeline, stating, "Well, they don't have to wait for thirty days [anymore]. They can put you out in five days, put you out in a day, they can put you out automatically." She continued, "Yeah, as long as they give you that paper from the judge stamping that, they can take them out." Nia and Jacqueline both shared

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that they thought the main reason for evictions was drug-related (e.g., "like letting them [older children] sell weed out the house"). Jacqueline noted that "when somebody like the police get word of it [drug dealing] or housing gets word of it" then they "send somebody in there to foreclose on them." But Jacqueline mentioned that child protective services (CPS) can get involved as well, "because kids have not come to school, [or] you sending them with dirty clothes on." If CPS gets involved, that can lead to child removal and eviction. As Jacqueline shared, "Yeah, if it get that bad because then you ain't going to have no kids and the reason why you got this place is for you and your kids."

Another mother, 28-year-old Nikki, rearing four children in the projects, told a story about witnessing her friend being put out "for a really stupid reason" and how she felt bad and tried to help because "she had children" and "housing is against you, you know, allowing anybody to be at your house." She tried to intervene because she would never want to "see anybody on the street." But then she became the subject of eviction when someone broke an exterior window of her home. She shared:

> So, you're telling me they're going to put me out because someone came to my door and they bust my window? … But I'm like, you want to kick me out…and I didn't understand.…but I'm like, 'I have two kids.'…my son was 10 months, and my daughter was a newborn [at the time].

These extremely stressful narratives were echoed by many participants. Tay relayed her experiences of maintenance neglect and rules changes that threatened eviction. She shared:

> You call them… maintenance repairs, you have to argue with them down there. Like who wants to live like that? I don't want to live like that. The window falling out, I had to go a year arguing with the lady… And then they'll change the way they want their money. And I'm just like do you want your money on the first or the fifth? It was the first and then the fifth. I don't get payed like that. My check doesn't fluctuate like that, so when they going to make changes, they don't care…they just want their money…and if you don't [pay on time], you get kicked out.

Community surveillance: *"They take pictures of your kids"*

Threats of eviction were often fomented by both street-level bureaucrats and White and wealthier neighbors who constantly monitored and surveilled Black families living in subsidized housing and reported their activities to the PHA or local law enforcement. Some mothers who were living in the projects were hoping to secure a voucher so they could move to Section 8 housing, believing it would be an improvement to their over-policed life in the projects. Yet, for Sandra, a single mother of a 10-year-old boy who had moved from the projects and was now living in Section 8 housing, she had mixed feelings. She still felt monitored by PHA caseworkers and threatened by eviction and had to manage housing inspections and recertification to maintain her voucher. She said,

> So that mean I gotta take off work, because with these, you have to be home when they come inspect it. So I don't have anybody 18 or older, it's me and my son, so I basically have to be here [at the house for recertification]…you may have to go down there [to the PHA]. You may have a bill you gotta take [care of]. So there's a lot of things you have to do to keep your voucher.

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She added that the lease has "stipulations" regarding what is allowable, and if a resident falls outside of this, they can be evicted. Like other mothers, Sandra shared that, as a single mother, being evicted was her biggest fear, so she worked her hardest to "stay within [her] lease values." She understood that the cost of eviction was high, particularly because of the lack of affordable housing options in the area.

But Sandra also experienced racialized tensions with her White and wealthier neighbors as well. When discussing life in a mixed-income complex as a Section 8 voucher holder, she said:

> "I think that, you know, like, there's tension with homeowners here…They …they put you in that box. Not knowing who you are, not knowing that I'm trying to raise [my child] the best I can. I go to work every day. I'm not sitting around to wait for anybody to give me …food stamps. I get up every day and I do 85 hours every 2 weeks so I can provide and show him what it is to provide and have a job. But they don't know me, because they assume that I'm in this box, I'm gonna be lazy, I'm gonna ruin they property, you know, so you get that."

Many participants told similar stories of feeling judged, stigmatized, and monitored by White and wealthier neighbors, which sometimes resulted in homeowners taking action against residents, including calling the police. For instance, participants told stories of community members monitoring residents and calling the police to complain about everyday experiences of youth—from hanging out in open spaces to riding bicycles in a parking lot. According to a housing advocate, police were called on a large group of teens "hanging out" in a mixed-income neighborhood. She shared further that while youth hanging out was clearly "not appealing" to some, in her opinion "everyone enjoys hanging out outside on a nice day" and it seemed unfair that Black teens were not allowed the same mundane pleasures.

Sandra, the mother of a 10-year-old boy, likewise relayed how she felt surveilled by her White and wealthier neighbors (homeowners in her building) and was fearful of bringing unwanted attention to her family that could jeopardize her housing, her job, and her family's safety. She shared:

> Because they complain to housing for anything. I just don't want no complaints, so like, if I get off work, he [son] can't just go outside and play. They [neighbors] take pictures of your kid outside their front door, and then send to the housing [authority]. …So, it's hard… Like, [my son] can't ride [his] bike while I cook dinner. [He] can't go outside for 30 minutes because I don't want nobody to jeopardize my voucher…so we really try to keep him busy and not outside.

Sandra went on to describe a horrifying time when her then nine-year-old son came home "terrified" and "bloodshot red" after a neighbor called the police because her son had been riding his bicycle in the parking lot. This prompted conversations with him on racism and restrictions to his outdoor activities:

> So, when he came in [from riding his bike], he was so scared. I told him, you know, we're just not going to play in this area anymore. I don't want you to feel that you're not safe in your own home, so we'll just go out [outside the neighborhood] and play. His bike, you can see, is over there, looks brand-new. Hasn't really been rode outside. Unless I put it in my Honda and take it up to [a friend's place] and ride it around. Because I don't want him to feel like he has to be scared or terrified about playing outside.

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Anita, when considering moving from the projects to Section-8 housing post redevelopment, shared similar concerns about White community action, police involvement, and eviction threats when she said:

> They talking about when they tear these down, the people that live here get first choice on the ones if they want to come back or not. Well if all they're going to do is build an apartment complex, no I don't want to come back. I don't. I don't want to live in an apartment… and I don't think I want to have the police called on me everyday. I've been through that already.

DISCUSSION

The public housing projects located on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. that were the site of this study were long-ago constructed by the government to segregate neighborhoods by race under the neighborhood composition rule (Rothstein, 2017; Woolf, 2021). Although efforts to redevelop the projects, deconcentrate poverty, and build integrated mixed-income housing were in the works—a form of discrimination management according to McFarlane (2019)—many of the projects remained with their legacy of structural racism intact, housing a majority of economically marginalized, Black, female-headed families (U.S. Housing and Urban Development, 2021). Using an antiracist, CBPAR approach, this study makes a significant contribution to the extant literature by delineating how structural racism was operating in the everyday lives of Black mothers residing in racially hyper-segregated public housing projects. Based on mothers' narratives, four key mechanisms of structural racism were identified, including: systemic neglect, economic oppression, threat of eviction, and community surveillance. Key to the operationalization of each mechanism, from mothers' perspectives, were the agents of the powerful—or street-level bureaucrats and White and wealthy neighbors—who, through their positions of power, authority, and influence, daily enacted and enforced structural racism to the detriment of Black families.

Four key mechanisms of structural racism

According to publicly housed Black mothers, systemic neglect, or the poor, substandard conditions that they and their children were exposed to while living in racially hyper-segregated public housing, was a key mechanism of structural racism that threatened their health and well-being (Bailey et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2019). Such gross neglect was not only the result of poor maintenance and unresponsive maintenance workers, but also the outcome of legacies of disinvestment in public housing systems perpetuated by powerful entities, including law makers, city officials, private corporations, other interest groups, and wealthy and White neighbors who hold power and sway over decision-makers. As mothers' narratives made plain, they saw the neglect as intentional, a process used to denigrate, demoralize, and dehumanize residents; a problem created by those in power to justify the eventual forced relocation of poor Black families once the money was raised to redevelop the projects.

Under the control and surveillance of public housing *and* social welfare systems, mothers also experienced deep economic oppression—another key mechanism of structural racism at play in public housing systems. Some mothers suspected these systems and workers were corrupt; others simply were distrustful of them as mothers were made to degradingly "chase benefits" across systems (e.g., vouchers, TANF, SNAP, and WIC) to meet their families' basic needs. Chasing benefits took an inordinate amount of time and planning, was an incredible hassle, and often interfered with or even curtailed mothers' employment opportunities and

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educational advancement. Mothers also told stories about all the hidden fees and fines assessed by PHA caseworkers for not following opaque rules and workers' costly errors that exacerbated mothers' fiscal precarity and rendered them vulnerable to legal intervention and eviction. These punishing and controlling systems that mothers navigated as a part of everyday life in public housing offered them few pathways to true housing security or economic liberation. Instead mothers' narratives revealed the myriad ways structural racism operated through laws, policies, and practices to economically oppress them, trapping their families in poverty (Paik, 2021; Waquant, 2009).

Eviction threat, the third key mechanism of structural racism endured by mothers in this study, was clearly the cudgel used to control residents by inducing fear that they could be put out on the street with their children and made homeless. As Desmond (2016) has documented extensively, eviction causes loss. Families lose their homes and possessions, children lose their schools, and eviction records bar families from future public housing assistance (Desmond & Shollenberger, 2015). Mothers in this study often talked about desperately wanting to get out from under the constant threat of eviction from public housing, but had few alternative housing options given the high cost of housing, poor employment opportunities, especially for those without a high school diploma, and significant lack of affordable housing in the area (Hyra, 2017; Woolf et al., 2017).

The fourth key mechanism of structural racism experienced by publicly housed Black mothers and their children was community surveillance, often carried out by White and wealthy neighbors. Other studies have likewise found that neighbors of public housing residents often surveilled them as a form of social control (Khare et al., 2015; Ocen, 2012). In this study, mothers told stories of neighbors taking photos of children playing in public spaces and reporting these as well as other everyday activities (e.g., youth hanging out, children riding bikes in parking lots) to PHAs or law enforcement who then acted upon those reports. These agentic actions by White and wealthy neighbors created inhospitable social and living conditions for Black families, and reminded them that their families were not welcome, especially in mixed-income units. Moreover, neighbors' actions subjected Black people to police engagement which could result in life-threatening situations (Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019).

The role of street-level bureaucrats

In addition to delineating the key mechanisms of structural racism operating in the everyday lives of Black mothers residing in public housing, this study also interrogated, from mothers' perspectives, who was enacting and enforcing these mechanisms. Central to their experiences in the public housing system were street-level bureaucrats. Street-level bureaucrats, according to Lipsky (2010), are public service workers who work within bureaucracies and directly interface with citizens in the course of doing their jobs. These workers, or agents of the government or public-private enterprise, often work under stressful conditions where resources are limited and caseloads are high, yet they have decision-making power and discretion in the execution of their work (Lipsky, 2010). For example, as mothers in this study shared, street-level bureaucrats employed by the PHA determined which maintenance projects were completed and when (and how much residents would be charged for repairs), who was eligible for public housing assistance and other benefits, the amount of rent to be charged each month, and the public sanctions, such as fees and fines, to be levied against residents who were deemed non-compliant. Such decisions meant that some families might get a larger unit to accommodate their needs while others faced fines for minor infractions (e.g., leaving a garbage can by the curb too long)—decisions that could ultimately lead to court involvement (e.g., for non-payment) and eviction. In this way, these workers enacted and enforced structural racism in the public housing system.

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Dispersed agents or bureaucrats also worked in collusion with social welfare and criminal justice systems, as Ocen (2012) noted in her research as well, to monitor residents and ensure they were following complex rules enforced across systems. Mothers shared many stories of having to master these complex and often opaque rules to maintain the supports and benefits to which they were entitled in order to meet their families' needs. Scholars have noted that these rules have become increasingly punitive and controlling over time and, as mothers in this study likewise noted, can result in state-sanctioned family separation via child welfare and criminal justice systems as well as evictions and homelessness (Desmond, 2016; Ocen, 2012; Paik, 2021; Roberts, 1996; Waquant, 2009).

Indeed, Black mothers in this study were very aware of the institutionalized power of street-level bureaucrats enacting and enforcing the rules and carrying out the mandates of the government-sponsored public housing system. When discussing their experiences living in public housing, residents often centered their stories on these workers, narrating accounts of punishment and cruelty and depicting workers as seemingly devoid of empathy. Some mothers noted that the workers who wielded great power over their lives (e.g., levying fines and threatening eviction) were "just like us"—Black people who grew up in the same racially segregated communities, were known to the mothers as neighbors, some as Section 8 voucher holders too—which added to their sense of individual and institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2013). Mothers expressed feelings of frustration, bewilderment, and anger at how they were treated in everyday interactions with workers. In studying this dynamic, Bhatia (2020) posited that structurally racist and punitive laws, policies, rules and regulations can give license to and empower worker cruelty. As we found in this study, whether agents of the powerful acted cruelly or with good intentions and "no ill will" as they carried out the dictates required by the system, they nonetheless contributed to "a web of causation that result[ed] in structural injustice" (Strand, 2019, p. 156).

Study limitations

Drawing upon the narratives of Black mothers, this community-based study offers many key insights regarding structural racism and institutionalized power relations operating to reproduce Black family marginalization. Yet, it is not without limitations. First, this CBPAR study is based on a small sample of Black mothers residing in public housing projects or utilizing Section 8 vouchers to live in mixed-income communities. Findings are reflective only of those women who were willing to share their stories; we recognize that there is significant within-group diversity of experiences that needs further study. A second limitation of our study centers on our CBPAR approach. While we partnered with a non-profit organization and committed and dedicated community advisory board members who served on the CAB and guided study efforts, we (university researchers) were structurally limited in the amount of time we could spend in the field building connections and taking community action with our partners. Our community partners were critical to participant recruitment efforts, which imbued trust between the research team and participants who consented to be interviewed. Yet, recruitment was still very challenging, perhaps because of our outsider positionalities and/or participant mistrust of researchers due in part to the legacy of scientific racism. We also recognize that we were just one more group making demands of mothers' limited time in a structurally oppressive context.

Directions for future research

Using a CBPAR approach, this study documented the ways in which Black mothers rearing children in a public housing system located on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. experienced

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structural racism operating in their everyday lives. As this study demonstrated, centering the very people penalized and harmed by structural racism and unequal power relations offered a critical lens through which to understand racialized oppression (Collins, 2019). Family researchers should continue to engage critical perspectives and implement CBPAR and other antiracist approaches to build upon this work and more fully interrogate how public housing and interlinked social systems perpetuate structural oppression.

While certain key mechanisms of structural racism, such as systemic neglect (e.g., Schill, 1993) and eviction threat (e.g., Curtis et al., 2013; Desmond, 2016), are well-documented in the extant literature, more research is needed to unpack the collusion of social institutions (e.g., social welfare and criminal justice) in the perpetuation of Black mothers' economic oppression and entrapment in punishing poverty (Paik, 2021). More research is also needed to document and more fully understand the agentic acts of White and wealthy neighbors, who, in this study, surveilled public housing residents and took it upon themselves to engage in the social control of Black families. Researchers might work to document the motivations of White and wealthy neighbors in perpetuating (or conversely and sremedying) racial inequality and marginalization. In addition to understanding the mechanisms used to reproduce oppression, more research is also needed to document emergent community efforts to repair legacies of structural racism in public housing systems and the broader housing marketplace and what laws, policies, and practices are proving to be promising and effective (Desmond, 2016; Rosen, 2020).

Importantly, based on mothers' narratives, this study also identified the key roles played by street-level bureaucrats to operationalize structural racism, reproducing and reinforcing social marginality. As discussed, this finding should not be understood as placing blame on street-level bureaucrats for structurally racist outcomes, but it recognizes how workers within unjust systems are entangled in a web of causation resulting in structural injustice (Strand, 2019). Clearly, more research is needed to understand how workers enact and enforce state power in public housing and other systems, and, drawing upon Bhatia's (2020) recent study, how punitive laws and policies undergirding these systems give street-level bureaucrats permission to be cruel. Future researchers should interrogate the full range of roles performed by street-level bureaucrats; internalized racism, implicit biases, and anti-Blackness stereotypes held by workers; worker consciousness in operationalizing the mechanisms of structural racism and carrying out the will of the powerful; and their efforts to subvert structural racism and advance justice from within systems. In conclusion, we agree with McKeown (2018) that all agents of the powerful—indeed, all people—who contribute to the structural processes across social institutions that reproduce racialized oppression shoulder the responsibility to understand structural racism in all its insidious forms and work to remedy these injustices.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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