A remarkable property of crack, or smokable cocaine, is its appeal to an older generation living in low-income minority neighborhoods. The “War on Drugs” has generated widespread emotional support among Americans because they believe it is a crusade to save the very young from the temptations of drugs; typically, however, crack users are older persons. In my primary study sites in Harlem (Manhattan) and Flatbush (Brooklyn), New York City, crack users tend to be clustered in the 30-and-above age range, with only a few younger than 23. This finding also applies in other local communities (Curtis 1991). Moreover, crack consumption has invaded the middle class of the inner-city. Those arrested recently in New York for alleged use include a high school principal, school teachers, police officers, corrections officers, managerial staff in both public and private corporations, and other mature professionals or seasoned workers.

Youths, on the other hand, are now involved with crack mainly as distributors. Although some have experimented with crack, most have quickly discontinued it, even by seeking out treatment or professional support. Among youth groups, powerful norms appear to have arisen discouraging the use of “hard” drugs such as heroin and smokable cocaine (Hamid 1991). As a result, it is rare for a young man or woman in Harlem or Flatbush today to smoke cocaine. Beer, cigarettes, and

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marijuana are their preferred drugs. The few who use cocaine intranasally call it “nitro,” as if to deny that the substance is cocaine. Young males in this age group apparently find crack users (who may be older siblings or even parents) so repulsive that some have made a pastime of beating them up (Hemphill 1990).

This chapter considers some consequences of crack’s popularity among older users. In particular, I discuss the role that crack use, in this segment of the population, has played in the social and economic decline of low-income, minority neighborhoods and in the loss of older role models who can link youths to the mainstream job market.

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DECLINE IN THE INNER CITY**

The gross parameters of the decline of inner-city neighborhoods in New York City and in major cities across the United States have by now been well documented (Hughes 1988; Jencks and Peterson 1991; Kasarda, chapter 3, this volume; Moss and Tilly 1991; Myrdal 1962; Ricketts and Sawhill 1988; Wilson 1987). Since the 1960s, New York City has lost over 520,000 manufacturing jobs. In the same time period, the city lost over 50 percent of its low-income housing units. A consequence of male unemployment has been a decline in marriages and a rise in the number of female-headed households, while the loss of affordable housing has obliged households to suffer makeshift shelter and highly mobile lifestyles, or to “double up” and “treble up” in housing units meant for single families.

By the 1980s, these effects had become concentrated in areas similar to the study neighborhoods in Central Harlem and Flatbush. Both study sites were principal recipients of intra- and interneighborhood migration during that decade. When housing in nearby neighborhoods was destroyed through abandonment, arson, or accidental fires, residents fled to the study sites, crowding into the available housing.

By 1990, at least three generations often were co-resident in the same household, made even more crowded by the presence of nonrelated sharers or “paying guests.” But the paths of the household members diverged greatly; the sense of a coherent unit with common purposes had vanished. A typical woman in her late 40s or early 50s may be a grandmother. Having recovered from alcohol (and sometimes heroin) use in the 1960s, she has now rediscovered church and is devoted to it. Meanwhile her children 23 years of age or older have been devastated by crack, and live in a circle distinct from and even predatory upon the mother’s. Her grandchildren, from ages 12 to 23, resist crack and heroin use, have dropped out of school, are unemployed, and are parenting their own infants. Some sell drugs, and the few who are briefly successful at it may contribute economically to the household. Children under the age of 12 in the house may be the offspring of any of the preceding generations. Often neglected, they form cliques that roam at will from the television set to the streets.

My study neighborhoods are among the most socially distressed of New York City. They outrank other areas in the proportion of population living in poverty, dropout rates among children of school age, criminal offending (at any age and in every offense category), drug arrests, child abuse and neglect, poor health indicators, and substance abuse. New York Police Department (NYPD) precinct statistics show that within the patrol borough of Brooklyn South in 1989, the Flatbush study site ranked first in robbery, rape, burglary, and grand larceny complaints; second in assault complaints; and third in homicide and grand larceny auto complaints. It ranked second in the number of narcotics complaints and arrests; in Manhattan North, Central Harlem topped every list (NYPD precinct statistics, 1989). As the statistics worsened, the public began to consider these parts of the city “off-limits.” Other citizens rarely set foot in the neighborhoods. Those who resided there rarely left the neighborhood for legal job opportunities or cultural enrichment.

**PIVOTAL ROLE OF MIDDLE-AGED WORKERS**

In the erosion of inner-city neighborhoods, the role of mature workers is pivotal. Mature workers have high societal value because they are expected to be mature parents and householders who teach work-related skills and attitudes in their families, and uphold orderliness and pride in the neighborhood. In America, they have been the backbone of strong unions, political clubs, churches, parent-teachers associations, and similar organizations. Older workers also play crucial roles in the upward mobility of youth. Many jobs become available to younger men through informal recruitment by older relatives and friends. Older workers, or “old heads,” cultivate a coterie of young protégés whom they train to be work-ready, then place in actual employment (Anderson 1990). The “old head” institution also strengthens community and cross-generational cohesion. One could surmise that the decline of the inner city could not have occurred had there
been sufficient mature and stable workers who pulled their weight, invested their disposable incomes and energies wisely, and looked out for the young men and women coming up.

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**RESEARCH METHOD**

Since 1978 I have been engaged in a number of anthropological research projects focusing on drug use and distribution in several sections of Brooklyn and Harlem. I lived in a Brooklyn study site continuously for five years and have been living in another in Central Harlem for the past seven years (since 1985). In these research projects, more than 200 study participants have been interviewed, tape-recorded, and observed in their neighborhood settings. I have also made additional observations in other neighborhoods where I have not resided.

In this fieldwork, I have been struck by the large number of middle-aged (30- to 50-year-old), middle-income ($30,000-$60,000 per annum) persons who have become crack users, and have lost considerable status or local standing as a result. The individuals portrayed in this chapter are typical of my sample of crack users. They are drawn principally from “freakhouses” (defined in the next section) in a six-block area of Central Harlem in which I have conducted intensive work since 1989. I have preserved the study participants’ statements of their earnings and accounts of their job careers. Although in some cases these may be exaggerated, other evidence (for example, speech, dress, familiarity with things, persons, and places) identify all participants as having belonged to the $30,000-plus income bracket, and to have enjoyed relatively comfortable childhoods.

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**HOW SMOKABLE COCAINE ERODED MIDDLE-AGE AND MIDDLE-INCOME STATUS**

What happened to the many Caribbean-Africans and African-Americans who remained resident in Flatbush and Central Harlem after they had gained jobs as professionals, corrections officers, policemen, junior executives, bank tellers, small businessmen and contractors, or skilled and unionized workers? Many of them had a rendezvous with smokable cocaine.

Cocaine smoking was diffused in New York City’s lower-income minority neighborhoods in at least five successive stages. In the first stage (1979–81), the intranasal use of cocaine hydrochloride powder escalated in “after-hours clubs.” Its distributors (who were often controlled smokers of freebase, the first form of smokable cocaine in the current “epidemic”) experienced a sudden surge in prosperity and popularity. In the second stage (1982–85), “freebase parlors” were established in the homes/distribution outlets of these distributors, where freebase was isolated batch-by-batch from cocaine hydrochloride powder and served to a select company of experimenters. In the third stage (1986–87), as personal use destroyed the viability of early distributors, their (mostly nonusing) successors converted rental units specifically into businesses, or “crackhouses,” where preprepared, prepackaged freebase (now called “crack,” and packaged in vials) was sold as well as consumed. The apartments of users were also important locales for group use and for initiating newcomers to the practice. Some were commandeered by distributors and turned into crackhouses. In the fourth stage (1987–90), indoor selling locations such as crackhouses were eclipsed by “curbside distribution,” where many competing distributors (usually as independent freelancers, or sometimes organized in “businesses,” “gangs,” and “posses”) manned street corners to have the first shot at a steeply increased clientele. Use was often “curbside” too, particularly for the many users who had by then lost their apartments and had overstayed their welcome at friends’ or relatives’ homes. Since 1990, it appears that cocaine smoking has entered a fifth stage of “peaking” and decline. “Freakhouses,” or the apartments of users who still have them, have emerged as locales of use and as shelters for other homeless users, while an appreciably humbled distribution remains “curbside” (“Briefings” 1990; Treasler 1991; Hamid 1991).

In each of these five stages, the lead was taken by mature, middle-aged, seasoned workers, self-employed persons, or individuals who had distinguished themselves in successful, long-lived criminal careers such as pimping, numbers-running, racketeering, and the distribution of the other illegal drugs (heroin and marijuana). “After-hours clubs” created the demimonde where affluent persons from both legitimate and illegitimate enterprises met to show off and to have expensive fun. In “freebase parlors,” only these individuals could afford the $50 (half-gram) batches of freebase that were being prepared continuously during “bings” that lasted 48 or 72 hours. Then in “crackhouses” or in their apartments, as cocaine prices fell until $5 bought as much as $50 did formerly, these same users intro-
duced the practice to a more heterogeneous, poorer but mostly coeval, population of initiates. The stage of "curbside use and distribution" saw all these older persons on the street buying crack from teenaged, nonusing distributors, in some cases their own children. Today, "freakhouses" are often the apartments of elderly single males (60 years of age or older), who are the latest (and, it seems, the last) segment of the population to initiate cocaine smoking. Assured of their apartments through Social Security Insurance (SSI) payments, they attract a serendipity of other crack-using males and females who exchange tithes of sex, crack, and money in return for living space.

In the case studies presented here, persons over the age of 23 explain their crack use and its consequences. The narratives cover many themes—for instance, that "fast" money grows "faster" when cocaine distribution suppliants marijuana, and yet the change is ruinous to distributor and consumer alike. Other cases explore the ways in which common complaints of middle age and middle income are given a new twist by crack: restlessness and a longing for unaccustomed excitement, rebelliousness against middle-class norms and values, the challenge of unprecedented amounts of disposable income, and the emergence of criminal tendencies that had so far remained hidden.

RASTA MUSA'S FREEBASE PARLOR: THE PITFALL OF "FAST" MONEY

Rasta Musa's career illustrates how a significant political and economic force in minority communities was fragmented following the onset of smokable cocaine. Spearheaded by middle-aged Caribbean-African marijuana distributors who had prospered in some 15 years of successful marijuana distribution, the Rastafarian movement initiated an influential program, utilizing exclusively indigenous capital and resources, for Caribbean cultural and economic development. At the same time it mobilized Caribbean immigrant populations in New York City to compete more effectively in the city's fiercely ethnic politics and commerce (Hamid 1980). Rastafarians constituted a "development elite" in New York as in the Caribbean.

The following account of one prominent Rastafarian's participation and downfall in the evolving New York drug scene records how cocaine and crack distribution came to supplant other drugs. It also notes the strong resistance to cocaine that Rastafarians exerted, before eventually succumbing to both its use and distribution.

Middle-Aged, Mid-Level Marijuana Distributor

Musa was 35 years of age when he settled in Flatbush, Brooklyn, in 1971. It was rumored that he was well-educated, widely traveled, and had held a government position in Trinidad, his home country. In New York, he had worked for a number of years at various low-paid, freelance, literate jobs: as contributor to a pornography magazine, as an occasional columnist in a Caribbean magazine, and as a data processor for an advertising firm in Manhattan. Then, in 1976, while working on a reggae music project in Jamaica and New York with a video production company, one of his Euro-American co-workers introduced him to a Euro-American marijuana grower from Oregon. The grower assured Musa that he had hundreds of pounds of fresh high-grade sinsemilla ("without seed": intensively cultivated, high-potency marijuana). He offered sinsemilla to Musa at $1,200 a pound, which Musa knew he could sell in Brooklyn for $2,800. He asked the grower to entrust a pound to him and assured him that he would return with the money in about an hour. He returned, paid the grower $1,200 and kept $1,600 for himself. A few weeks later, the grower introduced Musa to several Euro-American suppliers of Colombian "commercial" (the staple of the booming street-level marijuana traffic, selling for $300-$500 per pound), who also stocked "exotics"—high-grade marihuanas, hashish, and hash oils from around the world.

Middling Prosperity

In this way Musa became established as a mid-level marijuana distributor, who "moved weight" (sold pounds or more) from importers and cultivators to street-level sellers. A few Rastafari "blocks" (distributing organizations selling marijuana from one or several street-level locations) depended on him to supply them. He sold 3 to 5 pounds of sinsemilla a week, making a $300 commission on each pound; and 20 or more pounds of "commercial" marijuana, at a profit of $50-$100 on the pound. He soon accumulated a substantial fortune, and bought property in relatives' names in Trinidad and California.

1. To protect their identities, none of the individuals in this chapter's case studies is referred to by his/her real name.
Middle-Age Political and Ideological Development And Commitment to Community

In 1974, Musa became an ardent Rastafari. He was among the first Caribbean-Africans from islands other than Jamaica to embrace the ideology and to wear dreadlocks (hair allowed to grow long and matted by shunning combs or brushes, as the Old Testament recommends). He had expert knowledge of the Scriptures and of the writings and world view of Marcus Mosiah Garvey, a Jamaican Pan-Africanist who had stimulated the spread of Rastafarianism in the 1930s on his home island, and is revered as a prophet of the religion. The Garveyite tenet that Musa heeded most exhorted Africans at home and throughout the diaspora to develop their independent economic institutions. In the 1920s, Garvey had raised subscriptions in the United States of $5 each for the organization he founded, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and had invested in a shipping company, the Black Star Line, whose ships traded between West Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. He also founded newspapers, restaurants, and other businesses. In Musa's mind, the "nickel bags" (small brown envelopes, stuffed with about four grams of "commercial" marijuana and selling for $5) that were packaged by his street-level distributors were subscriptions, identical to Garvey's, that he was asking from this generation of Africans.

Adapting Garvey's prescriptions, Musa encouraged mid-level Jamaican distributors like himself to stimulate cultivation in Jamaica. Rural Jamaicans were taught to grow, cure, and export sinsemilla to the United States in quantities sufficient to meet their demand. They were then independent of Euro-American or Hispanic importers of Colombian, Mexican, or Far Eastern product, as well as of domestic growers. On a smaller scale, Rastafarians eventually expanded marijuana production in Trinidad and introduced it to Grenada. Musa was thus an early founder of a movement that eventually "Caribbeanized" a sizable corner of New York's marijuana market.

In New York, Musa reinvested much of his marijuana revenues in conformity to Rastafari principles. He helped some co-religionists establish their own "gates" (street-level marijuana distributorships). He gave seed money to others for a health-food store and a vegetarian cookshop, and earned the affection of many Rastafari "daughters" (young women) for his financial support of their efforts in becoming seamstresses, making Rastafari artifacts, parenting, and education. Many mid-level Rastafari marijuana distributors followed his example.

Middle-Age Spirituality

Musa was recognized for his "good works." Personally, he lived an austere and even ascetic life, exercised regularly, and played ball in the park. He lived alone, had no car, dressed casually, and had a modest manner of speaking. His many co-religionists visited his home regularly but briefly. Apparently his affairs with women were respectful and discreet, and in the neighborhood he was mostly seen by himself. On Marcus Garvey's birthday, he welcomed guests to a vegetarian feast and an evening of drumming and Rastafari chants. The event became an institution in Rastafari Brooklyn and demonstrated the high esteem in which he was regarded.

How Interdiction Destroyed the Marijuana Economy and Promoted Cocaine

When cocaine for intranasal use was introduced to Musa in the late 1970s by a young Puerto Rican marijuana distributor, he refused it and explained that it was contrary to his religious beliefs. In the winter of 1981, however, his attitude changed. Vigorous street-level interruption of the marijuana traffic by law enforcement agencies, international seizures of large shipments, and successful crop eradication and substitution programs had made marijuana scarce. Musa had been spending much of his time at a candy store in Harlem, from which "nickel bags" of "commercial" and "dimes" of sinsemilla were sold by a co-religionist, Rafi.

Tired and dispirited one night, he was approached by two young Puerto Rican women of mixed African descent who were regular customers at the candy store. Although in the past he had politely ignored their smiles and other signs of favor toward him, this time he stepped out from behind the bulletproof partition and walked with them out of the store. The young women, sisters named Joanna and Nancy, confessed that they were very attracted by Musa's graying dreadlocks and his kindly manner. They wanted to know him better. They were strangers in the predominantly African-American neighborhood, and made their living through discreet prostitution. Musa accompanied them to their apartment on Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, and, perhaps spurred on by the sisters' genuine friendliness, snorted some of the cocaine they offered him. The drug relieved the anxiety and fatigue that had overcome him. He stayed the night at the sisters'.

Subsequently, Musa was seen often in their company. In Brooklyn, he made inquiries and was soon introduced to a cocaine powder...
distributor from whom he bought “8ths” (3½ grams $275) several times a week. The marijuana traffic showed sudden bursts of activity that provided him with the money. He also discovered that many of the marijuana distributors he dealt with also used cocaine intranasally. When they visited, mounds of cocaine were shared and exchanged.

Overcoming Misgivings about Cocaine

Although the intranasal use of cocaine was becoming more prevalent among Rastafarians, they were still distrustful of the practice, which violated their religious beliefs. Marijuana use and distribution (as well as vegetarianism) were divinely justified. But where was the justification for cocaine? Rastafarians rationalized that it was a tonic with merely physical effects: it toned up the body, it stimulated and prolonged sex, and it induced wakefulness. It was an extraordinary food rather than a drug.

Learning to Smoke Cocaine from Colombians in Trinidad

Musa’s doubts about cocaine were removed during a trip he made with Joanna and Nancy to Trinidad early in 1982. Marijuana had been impossible to find in New York, and he had needed a holiday as well as an opportunity to attend to business he maintained on the island. Both women traveled with several ounces of cocaine strapped to the insides of their thighs. In Trinidad, they went to Rafi’s father’s house in Central Trinidad. Rafi, the earlier-mentioned Rastafari marijuana distributor from Harlem, had also returned home and had started a very popular reggae discoteca that his father managed.

“Taking coals to Newcastle” is the quaint Anglo-Caribbean phrase Musa used to describe their import of cocaine into Trinidad. Several Colombian distributors were conspicuous in inner-city neighborhoods in Port-of-Spain and San Fernando, Trinidad’s largest cities. Each had a few kilos of high-grade cocaine to sell, at prices well below those in New York. Rafi and Musa befriended one, Pablo, in Port-of-Spain and took him home to Central Trinidad. Rafi’s discoteca was a well-known drug distribution locale, and many intranasal users of cocaine in Trinidad, whose numbers were increasing, started going there to buy the drug. Pablo, the Colombian, produced five kilos, which were quickly sold. Pablo also taught Musa and Rafi how to smoke freebase. He had brought with him half a kilo of “basua” (cocaine paste preceding crystallization), which he cooked into freebase with baking soda.

Eventually Musa returned to New York City with four kilos of cocaine from Pablo, strapped as before to Joanna and Nancy. One of his first duties upon returning was to send two “daughters” to Trinidad to pick up more cocaine. Through the use of women or families as couriers, Rafi was able to send frequent shipments of cocaine to New York City until late 1984.

Development of New York City Cocaine Market

Cocaine hydrochloride powder kept arriving from Trinidad regularly at prices several thousand dollars cheaper per kilo than New York’s. To sell them, Musa and others to whom Rafi sent supplies worked around the clock. Quickly, an extensive network of mid-level cocaine distributors who bought several ounces at a time fell into place. Telephones rang constantly. Buyers drove up from Washington, D.C., and Maryland, who were willing to pay double the local prices.

Freebase Parlors

Musa’s New York apartment was transformed into a freebase parlor as he sought customers for smaller quantities (half-grams at $50 each) of cocaine—or as they crowded to his door. He converted many Rastafarians to cocaine smoking, and through Joanna and Nancy, attracted a sizable Hispanic clientele for the first time in his drug distribution career. The scene was greatly enlivened by the arrival of a succession of entertainers from the Caribbean, who had bookings in America and Canada. Many were “freebasers” and claimed that cocaine strengthened their vocal chords.

How Cocaine Smoking Unraveled Fortune, Morality, and Politics

In the dense crowd at his apartment, and in the midst of continuous smoking and attending to business, it was a while before Musa realized that for him, a generous person, the cost of freebasin was prohibitively high. Personal use and gifts to his companions sharply reduced his cocaine profits. But he felt compelled to smoke freebase himself, and when there was company, was obliged to share it. He and others were puzzled by this compulsion. At first, they felt that it was caused by careless preparation of the drug, or its improper ingestion. They experimented with a variety of techniques—constructing pipes,
measuring out exact amounts of the drug and baking soda, altering the cooking process, finding new heat sources—but to no avail. The compulsion to prepare and smoke freebase remained, and continued to siphon off business profits.

**Escape to Ethiopia**

In 1983, Rafid discontinued supplies of cocaine to several co-religionists in New York City who could not pay for consignments. Musa was one. To find cocaine to support his own need and for business, he was obliged to network among distributors for whom he had been formerly a major supplier. Many were receiving their own bulk shipments from the Caribbean or Florida. Personal use, however, prevented Musa from making any profits. Convinced that he had been a false prophet in advocating the use and distribution of cocaine, especially smokable cocaine, Musa reportedly tidied up what remained of his business interests in early 1984 and flew to Central Africa, where he now works on a farm managed by a Rastafari colleague.

![Bruno: Crack Satisfied a Mid-Life Quest for Excitement](image)

Restlessness and a desire for novel sexual or other excitement appear to be common mid-life crises among Americans and result in a high divorce rate for married couples. Among African-Americans, the imbalanced male-female ratio aggravates the problem. Marriable men are objects of keen competition when women greatly outnumber them. Some male African-Americans regard polygamy as “African culture,” but its practice usually causes them considerable hardship. Bruno's story reveals the special appeal crack had for these restless hearts. As a well-paid worker, he could initially afford to yield to its temptations; yet it led to a bitter end.

After returning home from military service in Korea in 1978, Bruno was briefly unemployed before becoming a corrections officer in 1979. Energetic and ambitious, he rose in a couple of years through the ranks, earning, with overtime and other benefits, close to $50,000 per annum. He supplemented this income by helping out at a friend's auto repair shop and by exploiting other legal and illegal opportunities to earn cash. To qualify for further promotions, he became a zealous student at a college of criminal justice. Married to a junior bank executive, and the father of two children, he maintained a stylish apartment in a new housing project in Flatbush, Brooklyn.

Despite his good fortune, however, Bruno was discontented with his free time. Most of it was spent with his extended family. He had many cousins, with whom he and his wife drank inordinate amounts of alcohol in family gatherings lasting several days. Swayed by the large amounts of disposable income he carried about in wads of $100 and $50 bills, he yearned for more, or different, excitement. In 1981, a female co-worker introduced him to a circuit of “after-hours clubs,” and after becoming a habitué, he began using cocaine intranasally and soon graduated to freebasing.

Bruno is remarkable for the rapidity with which he abandoned self-preparation of freebase for crack, after its introduction in 1984. He presents a problem for the student of drug-consumer behavior. Because initially he had the money, he could have avoided risk of arrest or robbery (or of receiving inferior product) by buying cocaine in bulk and using it in private settings. Instead, he preferred to buy and smoke crack in the highly exposed locales where it was sold. He survived many mishaps before 1986, when he lost his job as a result of a positive drug test. The following transcript reveals Bruno's perspectives on his addiction.

**Can't Explain His Craving for Crack**

And you know, to tell the truth, the high now, it's a fucked-up head, and I don't know why I keep doing it...but it's superaddictive and compulsive. You just want to keep doing it no matter what happens. I would beg Alice for money. Because at this point I cannot manage my money. My whole check goes to her account. I cannot make money at this point in my life...and it's really frustrating...a grown man, approximately 35 years old, has been around the world somewhat, and is somewhat educated, has seen career heights, and know better. I absolutely know better. It can't do me any good at all. It can only do me harm, and eventually, if one continues to do it, death is there. But is that a deterrent, actually? No, it's not.

**A Lust for Extramarital Sex**

I say to myself that it's the sex I want—-but you see the funny thing about the whole situation is that I say that I'm going for sex and once I smoke, that's it. A lot of times I've had women take their clothes off and...you know...open up and stuff. Then I say, hold on a minute,
Friends introduced me to it. They took me down to the Club Baron on 137th, and we sniffed and listened to Dizzy Gillespie. By God, I thought smoke was coming from his horn that night, because I was very much into jazz, and very much into vibes, or feelings. The coke was very mellow. You’d take a couple of lines, and you’d feel all the sensations of it over four to five hours. Then it would “drop.” You’d feel it falling inside your throat, and that’s your final proof that it was good coke. It’s true that my expenses climbed from $25 to $100 to $200, but it really wasn’t a problem. I had found myself a dealer and dealt with him. I feel if you can pay for your drugs—cigarettes, whatever—then you are entitled to them.

Testing the Middle-Class Limit: Crack

I started smoking crack only last year, on New Year’s Day, 1990. I was going through some changes. I was kicking a whole lot of old garbage out of my life. And then I must have had a flashback to those old, glorious sixties, “let me find out.” I started out with [crack] vials, but there was too much movement with that. People running in and out to buy it or use it. So then I discovered “cook-up” [self-preparation or freebase]. I’d buy $10 worth [of cocaine hydrochloride powder, for cooking-up] into smokable cocaine] and settle in with that. Now I have it down to a science. Two or three friends together, about $100 of coke, $25 of that for sniffing, the rest cooked up pure for smoking.

Maintaining Class Distinctions in Crack Use

You see, the “dungeon” [Chuck’s Place: a nearby “freakhouse,” where many crack users live, and where there have been many recent quarrels] is too radical for me, yessuh! I can’t go through all those trials and tribulations. Here, if you see looking at the ground [crack users often search floors anxiously for crumbs of crack, while knowing there is none], you’re out. I think that it’s the agitation, the movement that causes worries and leads to compulsive use. When you enjoy the stuff in peace and calm, you can control yourself. If I had to work today at 4 P.M., I’d stop this by 1 P.M., if the drugs were good, or by 2-3 P.M., if they weren’t very powerful. And then on the job, no drinking or drugs. It only happened once that I passed out on the job. Up at Montefiore Hospital, and it really was because I’d been out late the night before drinking wine.

Some Worker Characteristics of Middle-Aged, Middle-Income Cocaine Smokers

It’s strange that you should be interested in job changes which have occurred as a result of crack. I keep telling you that your timing in coming here is exactly right! It was only last week that I was saying to three or four persons who were here [at William’s, smoking cocaine] that we all had something in common. We were all over 35. We all came from very straitlaced backgrounds, family wise, and we all had better-paying jobs, as professionals or executives. But after 25, there had been rocky roads, and eventually some of us kept the jobs, but some just went out on the street, while others just couldn’t give a shit, and settled for less-important jobs.

I started off working on 8th Avenue as a messenger for $50 a week, but soon gave it up. Next, I went to Boston, which I call my “finishing school.” I joined Barney and Schulberg, a pharmaceuticals firm as stock clerk, but rapidly rose to a manager’s position, earning $200 a week. I was very aggressive when it came to work, and when my sister’s husband died, I came back here to be near them, and started in 1972 in a supervisor’s position at World Industries, at $15,000 a year. But within two years, I had an executive position. By 1977, I had a home in Richmond, where my youngest sister was living. I had CDs and other investments.

Living with Crack after Losing Job

But in 1975, the company had brought in a white replacement, and as I was only the token nigger in the first place, I knew I was on my way out. I quit in 1977 and took away $50,000 in compensation. I saw some rough times after that. I used to sit in bars a whole lot, I just couldn’t understand what had happened to me. I learned to play the numbers. In 1977, I got this Certificate in Training as a home health aide, but although I worked, it didn’t prevent me from being homeless for about a year, from 1982 to 1983. But then in 1985, I began specializing in AIDS cases. As I am homosexual, and as a lot of patients were rich, white homosexuals, it was one of our own looking after one of our own. What I do is work two days with my rich cases, who fly me to Key West and places like that, and then put in a day with a poor AIDS patient. That’s how I justify it to myself.

REGGIE: CRACK MENDS A BROKEN HEART

As indicated earlier and as illustrated by the case of Bruno, marriage is a frequent casualty of mid-life upheavals. Couples cite growing apart, with divergent interests or careers, as a frequent source of conflict. Reggie’s transcript shows how crack can be a catalyst. In Reggie’s story, the “rocky roads” that William mentioned—of personal and
career crises—converged in crack use, job loss, and loss of family and shelter.

Perfect Family Man

Although I had used heroin in Vietnam, I became a complete family man after marrying in 1977. My wife was the only woman I have ever loved, and I was very much into her and our children. We both came from good backgrounds, had had good educations, and were giving the same to our children. By 1986, I was earning $40,000 on the job at the hospital, I had a partnership with a friend in a garage, I did freelance photography, and we had homes here in New York and in North Carolina and two cars.

Suffering for the Past

My wife had been a heroin user too, and then she learned that she had AIDS and would die soon. She changed completely. I would come home and find the house dark, just the television on, and the kids being neglected. What was most painful for me was that she shut me out of her illness. She knew she was going to die and she made it hard on all of us.

Wife’s Infidelity

Finally I sat her down and explained to her that if she was going to die, she might as well make the best of it. Now why did I tell her that? A few weeks later, I came home early from work, and found the chain on the door. As I was fumbling to get it off, my wife comes running up, buttoning her blouse. She said that she had company, and that I should go away. I went in and found that she had a man in our bedroom. I tore the house up to prevent me tearing them up.

After that my wife kept disappearing more frequently, leaving me to look after four children. One of her boyfriends she used to go to for weeks was a man who had just got out of prison, and I used to think, “here you are leaving everything, to go to nothing.” In 1987, she complained about me to the Family Court, and she got an Order Of Protection which prevented me from living at the apartment. She sent the children to live with my mother-in-law, and I found another apartment.

Crack Provides Solace and Sex

When all this started, my wife had said that she didn’t mind if I had my fun. That’s when I first smoked crack. This woman took me to a place where everyone was a professional—policemen, corrections officers, bus dispatchers, about 10 of them—and they offered me a hit. That first time wasn’t very impressive, but when I tried it a couple of weeks later, I really liked it. Since then, my smoking increased as time went on. In 1988, I lost my job, and moved here in March 1990. Since losing the job, I have earned my living as a jack-of-all-trades.

COCHISE: ALL THAT MONEY CONFUSED ME

Many seasoned workers in low-income, minority communities came from poverty-stricken childhoods, and grew up managing without cash. Although many learned rapidly how to invest disposable income profitably, perhaps an equal number never did. In the following interview, Cochise describes his cocaine smoking as a response to large amounts of disposable income, job-related stress, marital problems, and alcoholism. He thanks crack for delivering him to less-well-paid, less-stressful employment. Living in his tire-repair shop and attending customers, he is the father of an 18-month daughter, whose mother is a crack user in the neighborhood. He restricts his consumption, and his wife’s, to a few vials after work, but drinks beer throughout the day.

A Native American Raised among African-Americans

My name is Cochise and I am 50 years old. I have lived in this part of Harlem since I was 9—all my life you could say. I am a Native American, a Cherokee. My father was part Irish, and part Cherokee, and my mother was all Cherokee. Both are still alive. My father has retired from his job—he used to paint ships for the government—and lives in Virginia, where I was born. My mother lives in New Jersey.

My real name is John Running Deer Byrnes. The names represent both my Native American and Irish parents. My oldest son’s mother is an Apache, and I go every year with her to pow-wows. Some were held at Fort Dix, in New Jersey; but the one I really want to attend is in the Rockies, in California, where my people, the Cherokee, have their reservation. Those Native Americans can look at me and see that I am one of them.

Although I was born in Virginia, I was raised in North Carolina. When I was 9, I was sent to live with my aunt on 12th Avenue, where she owned a bar. Her husband owned a fish store close by. After I quit school in the 11th grade, I worked in her bar, and in several of the other bars near here. I also worked as a laborer, a machine quilter, a
printer, in a steel company making doors for apartments, in private sanitation, and at the Post Office. In 1958, I got married—in the same year that my oldest son was born to the Apache woman. My wife was African-American, and we had five kids. But in 1978, we got divorced.

**Sudden Money and Fame**

In 1970, I got a job at the Transit Authority, and eventually I became a troubleshooter earning between $1,000 and $1,500 a week. I used to repair machinery and special equipment, because I was good at mechanical things. I used to be sent out into dark tunnels to work for hours, and it was dangerous. I lost that job two years ago because of crack.

**Family Background of Alcoholism**

Well, you know my background. I am Native American. So that should tell you about my drinking. And Irish! When I was a kid—I remember I was still in a high chair—one of my parents gave me a glass of beer. They both drank a lot. So drinking was just part of my life. But I never really touched it until I was 17 or so. It was just a social thing at first. But then around 1975, when I was 35, I began having problems with it. I used to have blackouts, I couldn't remember how I drove from one place to another, or when I had gotten on a bus to go I don't know where. So I turned myself into a drug and alcohol hospital in Freeport, Long Island, for a 5-day detox. But it wasn't enough: I think you should be kept at least 60 days. I was back out drinking when I came back.

I started using crack in 1985. I just knew some people who were doing it and they said why don't you try it, so I did. I was really having a lot of trouble at home. I got married again in 1980, to an African-American woman from North Carolina, and she had two children. Around 1985, I was making a lot of money at the Transit Authority, and I had just bought a five-speed Toyota. My wife was getting angrier with me over all kinds of stuff and she tried to wreck the car several times. So I don't need aggravation, and we separated. And that's when I tried crack.

**Embarrassment of Riches**

It was the money too. Before I was making that much money, I was happier. All that money just gave me more headaches. How to spend it, who's going to steal it. And now that I have lost that job, and am only making what I make from tire repair, I am happier again. Not having all that money helped me control my crack use. I last used crack four days ago, and it's only at night after work that I smoke. Look at this. I have fixed your bike. That's an accomplishment. I feel good about it.

Crack can bring out underlying pathologies. Sam is among the youngest of the crack users to be found in the Central Harlem study neighborhood, and is a comparative newcomer to cocaine smoking. He is also the latest to have suffered job loss because of crack use. It appears that crack has unleashed a violence in Sam that had been latent since early childhood. In the following transcript, he describes the "violent role" he is beginning to play as a strategy to get more crack.

**Solid, Lower-Middle-Class Background**

My name is Sam and I am 24 years of age. I come from a good family who lives over in St. Nicholas projects. My father is 68 and a cabdriver, but he doesn't live with us anymore. My mother has been working for New York City Transit Authority for the longest while, and still works there today. My older brothers and a sister all completed school, work in good jobs, and have their own homes. I have my own room with color TV over at my mother's apartment, and that's where I live. It's just that I come over here and beam up, and then I just end up sleeping here. Sure, there's a lot of tension between my mom and me because of crack.

**Dropping Out of School and Hanging Out**

I went to school here in Central Harlem at P.S. 136, and then to Martin Luther King Junior High School. But I dropped out in grade 10, when I was 15, or in 1982. I had had a lot of problems at school, because I used to get into a lot of fights. I always get into a lot of fights because I have always had a very quick temper.

After I dropped out of school, I used to hang around the neighborhood with other kids from the projects. Then, about five years ago.
when I was 18, I got a job in construction and worked at that until the beginning of this year when I got fired, because of crack. When I got the job, I also started using marijuana and beer.

Introduction to Crack

I only started using crack three years ago, in 1988. A young lady offered me some in a blunt [emptied out cigar, refilled with marijuana: the crack had been sprinkled into it]. They call those “wullas.” But six months afterwards, I started taking the “stem,” and that was when it was all over. Because when Scottie sends down that beam [makes circle with hands in an ensnaring motion] and beams you aboard the Enterprise, you have no choice. If you want to take care of any kind of business, you have to do it before you take that first “hit,” because afterwards you can’t take care of any sort of business. If you have money in your pocket, it burns a hole in your pocket until you buy drugs. Because then the monkey is on your back. No, it isn’t a monkey really; more like a gorilla!

Stealing on the Job

I have gotten into so much shit in the last six months because of crack, it’s unbelievable. What’s frightening is every day I get into some shit because of crack. First, I started stealing on the job. This is a private construction company, and as I was the foreman, I had keys to the storeroom. I used to take one item or two at first, but then one night, I stole about $4,000–$5,000 worth of tools. I took out a whole duffel bag filled with hammers, spanners, jackhammers, carpenter tool belts, brand new heavy duty extension cords—all kinds of stuff. I sold it all for $125, bought crack with that, and got fired.

Diversifying Crime

Next, I got arrested twice for assault early in January. The first time I was mad at my girlfriend—at the time we had an apartment together on this block—and I picked her up and slammed her against a wall. Some neighbors called the police, and I got locked up for seven days for that. The next time I plugged her, and got locked up for a month. By the time I got out, we had lost the apartment, and I had to go back to my mother’s apartment to live.

Crack Distribution

When I got out of jail, I started selling crack for someone around here. He used to give me a package of 100 $3-vials, and I kept $50 from the sales. He didn’t know I was a user, so I used to spend the $50 with another distributor to buy crack for myself. Then one day I was really rollin’. I was pitching [was the actual seller, not a steerer or other staff], and I had made up a lot of money. I had so much money that I needed to turn it over and get more product. Of course, I hadn’t been booming up, otherwise I would have spent up all that money. In fact I was going to cut when I made a sale to an undercover TNT [Tactical Narcotics Team officer]. They busted me with eight vials and I got six months.

Need For Crack Triggers Violence

Now let me tell you about the violence. When I get that hit, I usually stay real quiet. Maybe I’ll move around the room a bit. Maybe I’ll want sex, it depends on the mood. But then I start needing more. And if someone comes in with some, I’ll ask them for it. If they refuse, I pull this out [he pulls out a small razor]. Or otherwise, I’ll beat them up. I’ve beaten up Reggie and Kathy here. Yesterday, a man came in here and shared his smoke, but he had two cameras he was trying to sell. So I cut his face with the razor—he had to get 30 stitches—took the cameras, and sold them for $20.

No, I don’t like the trouble my quick temper brings me. But I am always like that. I had fights in school, I had fights in prison. I don’t like what happens to me. I’ve gotten stabbed, shot at—all kinds of things have happened to me because I go off.

**POST-CRACK LOCAL LABOR MARKET**

The aftermaths of these stories affirm a certain labor-market logic at work in them, rather than individuals merely undergoing contingent crises or tragic accidents. Having lost well-paid jobs, commanding positions in their families, grassroots political roles, and community respect, middle-aged, formerly middle-income crack users often end up being satisfied with low-paid, intermittent work in the immediate neighborhood. As a result, the shape of the local labor market has been altered. The bottom tier of “noncompeting” laborers (Doeringer and Piore 1968) has expanded at the same time that retrenchment has shrunk the ranks of better-paid workers in formal-sector employment.

For example, Bert, a 31-year-old Trinidadian African and former electronics technician, is adept at discovering or creating bottom-tier work. Within a small radius of his mother’s home in Flatbush, he trims hedges, stacks garbage, carries loads, assists neighbors in home
repairs, sweeps and cleans driveways and sidewalks, and washes cars. By working close by, he is able to smoke crack at home during the day when his mother is at work.

In Central Harlem, Reggie (see previous transcript) is involved in a staggering number of drug exchanges almost every day. His friend Chuck, who has made him second in command at his “freakhouse” apartment, explained that one of the valued qualities that recommended Reggie to the post was that “he is a hustler. If you need something for the apartment and you tell him about it, it is here. Look, right now he’s with Sandy at the church [close by] hustling for some food.” Chuck pointed to a discarded washing machine that Reggie had hauled back to the apartment and repaired. He was hoping to sell it for at least $50. Reggie later stated his belief that “New York is paved with gold; people throw away fantastic things, sometimes brand new, which you can scavenge and resell.” In his transcript, he described himself as a “jack of all trades”: fixing cars, doing carpentry, performing construction jobs. He has been seen in the neighborhood selling big, black plastic bags, probably “scammed” at a construction site. On another recent occasion he was selling gallon cans of paint. In several of these undertakings, labor was contributed by Chuck or other co-residents of the “freakhouse.”

“Scraping,” or retrieving and selling scrap metal, is a growing industry for crack users. Scrap metal yards (where metal is weighed, bought, and sold) in Brooklyn are thriving, and several new yards have sprung up, near which crack distribution has immediately emerged. Although it is hard work, scraping nevertheless brings in a regular daily income. Scrapper’s are routinely seen around the neighborhood pushing shopping carts filled with odd pieces of metal. They are good at spotting the valuable types (copper and aluminum, for example) and can wring profit out of sites (abandoned buildings or heaps of garbage) that appear valueless. Scrapers in Bushwick have mapped out territories so that each has his own route and storage places across the section that others do not molest.

Some labor entrepreneurs have learned that shelters for the homeless, where many crack users sleep and eat, provide pools of readily exploitable labor. They may be seen in the morning at some of the bigger shelters in Brooklyn, recruiting day laborers for such work as “picking” (sorting through and selecting valuables from discarded clothes or garbage), selling watches or other merchandise on sidewalks (under pain of arrest, a day in custody and forfeiture of merchandise), and demolition (removing debris, stairways, and fire escapes from abandoned buildings). Homeless persons who were also crack users were brought in by contractors from New York City to work as kitchen or maintenance help during the summer season, a practice revealed during the investigation of the recent murder of a New York City couple at one of several upstate resorts for the elderly.

Many crack users manage to secure regular, if low-paid employment, after they have lost better jobs. Both Cochise and William (see previous transcripts) have found jobs they like, as a tire repairman and a home health aide, respectively, and William expects to earn more in his specialty of working with AIDS cases after he qualifies as a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN). Bruno (see previous transcript), however, may be more typical. After he lost his $50,000-per-annum job, he has held a series of jobs that never paid more than $19,000. He was dismissed from each in turn for theft or fraud. Between jobs, he spent several months in treatment. Currently unemployed, he is negotiating to spend the next two years in upstate New York in a therapeutic community.

**FEMALE WORKER-USERS: SHASHI’S “MISSION”**

Women also have had their work lives altered by crack dependence, though in different ways from men. In the study neighborhoods, female crack users were most likely to be heads of households supported by public transfer payments, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Whereas formerly they might have spent the two-week period between “welfare checks” at home, consuming beer, marijuana, and television soap operas, the burden of maintaining an increasingly expensive crack habit has forced them onto the street, to earn money from prostitution and other crime (Hamid 1991). Many of these women devote themselves to “hustling” and sex-for-crack exchanges—despite the risks of apprehension by the criminal justice system and the consequent loss of their children and welfare payments.

The “mission” is the street word (borrowed apparently from the “Star Trek” television series) used to describe the multiple, unique “jobs” that crack users perform to procure crack or cash. Shashi, a 26-year-old African-American woman who has moved directly from 10 years of AFDC support, during which time she never worked, to postcrack duty as a sex-worker, describes a recent mission in the transcript following. The mission goes on for four days nonstop. Like others, Shashi intersperses “missions” with periods of abstinence,
during which she receives treatment services and attends meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. Although she does not describe the sexual services she provides explicitly, when new money suddenly appears in the transcript, it is the result of sexual exchange.

Getting the Urge to Use Crack
This mission started when I had gone out to a restaurant with somebody from the rooms [Alcoholics Anonymous]. We started talking about crack. He was saying how he don't get the urge to do it anymore. But I was rushing the motherfucker so I could leave and get high. I had $20 that I was going to spend on crack... I went straight to the fourth floor apartment in 2025 and smoked that $20. After that, I left and went home 'cause I didn't have any more money on me.

Finding “Victims” and Crack: First Day
The next day I came back and did it again. This time, I had $50 that somebody had given me for Valentine's Day. They had also bought me some perfume from Macy's, and I sold it. And the $50 went just like that. This time, I went to Martense to cop 'cause they got good stuff over there. Me and this cab driver went there and got a “dime” from the fourth floor, but he didn't like it. So, we went riding around and he said he knew where two other places were. We rode around all day in his yellow cab getting high. We were picking up people and smoking up the fare money. We did this all the way 'till the next day. Came the next day, we wound up at his house and still had the company cab.

Second Day
Later, we went out to cop again on Fulton Street. He gave me $40 and told me, he said, “Do you see that building right there?” The fucking building was condemned. When we left there, he copped some dope on Fulton Street and we went back to his house. He sniffed the dope, but I wasn't interested in that. We smoked and he started to take off his clothes again. He said, “You stay here while I go and get some more. I gotta pick up another fare.” When he came back, he had stupid money and drugs. When we finished with that he drove me back.

Third Day
I went back to Martense and copped some more crack. I smoked a nickel in the hallway of a building a couple of doors away. When I left there, I went back to 2025—why that building I just don't know. It's an empty apartment where people would smoke. They got it boarded up now. Anyway, I smoked lovely in there by myself. When I smoked everything, I started trying to figure out where I could get more drugs. I need money now, so I started calling up all my old friends—the ones that still get high. I got a hold of one guy who lives on Ocean Parkway. He pays about $1,000 a month rent. I went over to his place. He gets too paranoid. He wanted to fuck, but he can't when he gets high. Anyway, we bought a fifty piece from an apartment on St. Pauls. When we got back to his place we cooked it up. He didn't trust me. He asked me if I had pockets in my clothes. “Ain't no pockets in my clothes.” And he told me, “Don't touch the drugs.” He was going to take a shower. I'm an addict. I took half of the motherfucker and put it in my shoe. I kept it so then when he came out of the shower, I had the stem and everything ready. I said, “You ready to take your hit now?” I got him off balance and he never noticed that anything was gone. Once we smoked that, he said that he didn't have any more money. So I thought, “As soon as you step off and go to the bathroom again, I'm in the drawer, looking for money.” I need money. But that motherfucker was smart and didn't keep any money laying around. I told him, “Don't you want another hit? So, let's go get one.” And that's when he pulled out the money. Stupid money, stupid money. But he got so paranoid from smoking, I had to leave. I couldn't take it. He would go out on his balcony to look and see if anyone was coming to get him. He'd go from one room to the other. He couldn't stay still. I had to leave. I couldn't even steal nothing from him because he had me getting paranoid.

Fourth Day
When I left, I still had that other hit in my shoe. I took a hit from it in the hallway of his building. After that, I went back to 2025 and found some empty capsules. I needed some money for cigarettes and beer, so I sold one nickel from the rock I had in my shoe. Then, I wanted to go somewhere to sit down and smoke. I went back upstairs to the fourth floor apartment in 2025 and started all over again. People was begging me for a hit, but I told 'em, 'I ain't got it.' I smoked what I had and then I left. I went to a friend's apartment in the Ebbetts Field Houses and chilled out for seven day after that. I didn't have no more money and I was tired after being on a mission for four days.

All in all, Shashi had worked 96 hours more or less continuously to earn approximately $250, all of which was spent on crack. She had run the gamut of risks—from jail to beating, and from loss of custody of her 10-year-old daughter to further estrangement from her kin and loss of welfare payments.
In the drug market the most arduous and risky tasks of drug distribution fall to young males. Nonusing crack distributors rarely profit permanently from their work. Much of their income goes for conspicuous consumption in the form of clothing, gifts, and entertainment. At the end of brief spells of prosperity, many join their customers at the bottom tier of laborers in the local job market, or wind up imprisoned or dead. The ethos of community development for which Musa had been a spokesman and practitioner has not been repeated in the age of crack.

The following transcript of an 18-year-old male African-American describes the motivations and outlook of the typical young crack distributor, the extent of his engagement in the trade, and the nexus between drug dealing and other violent crime.

“Hanging Out”

When we are hanging out, how we dress is very important. Tonight I’ll wear my eight-ball jacket, costing $250; pants worth $30—like Levis; a shirt for $40; $80 Timberland boots; and my gold jewelry—the ring and bracelet—cost $800. I’ll wear one of those brim hats you see old men wearing. So I’ll have about $1,200 on my body, or $12,000 between the group of us. I don’t drink or smoke or do drugs: but the rest of the fellas will snort up about three $30 bags of “nitro” [intranasal cocaine] or $90’s worth. They’ll drink a lot of beer, mostly Heineken or Budweiser—say about 10 $1 bottles, or about $100 in all. And maybe they’ll smoke about five “nickel bags” ($5) of reefer, or $25. That’s in one night of hanging out, like tonight. We don’t spend much on food, and maybe we’ll rap to the girls who hang there and buy them beer.

So it’s to buy clothes, jewelry, and sneakers that we try to make money mainly. I spent about $1,800 on myself alone at Christmas time. I bought my girlfriend a shearling coat for $140 and a ring for $79. Shearting coats are the rage this year, and they are robbing them off people’s backs. I had just got a settlement since turning 18 for an accident I had when I was 14, so I had that cash just before Christmas. That’s how my mother paid down on the house in Queens.

Selling Crack

Three of us sell crack while we hang out, and I suppose we are a sort of protection, since nobody will mess with us when we are all there. They are selling for another 26-year-old African-American in the neighbor-
while I was at the High School of Graphic Arts, at 50th Street. I hope I
can live long, if I don’t run into any problems.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided a glimpse of the transformation of labor markets and the loss of wealth and of income-generating potential triggered by cocaine use in the inner city. The middle-income, seasoned workers introduced here not only withdrew substantial wealth, vigor, and intelligence from the upkeep of families and neighborhoods, but also gave up useful, regular work in favor of long hours of occasional labor, with virtually no protection and at high risk of arrest, incarceration, and violent injury. Crack-dependent women, in contrast, generally increased their cash earnings, but only because they needed money to buy crack and only by means of theft and sale of sexual services. In the process, they walked away from family and kin networks, and incurred equally high risks. Even the young distributors who for a time earned good money had fatalistically short time horizons that inhibited wealth accumulation, either for themselves or for the neighborhood. There is no time for investment in income-generating assets or labor skills, and few chances to return to the mainstream labor market for youths who have been marked by arrest for drug distribution or armed robbery.

The crack epidemic, in sum, has helped to deplete human and physical wealth in the inner city. Crack revenues, reckoned in several billion dollars, have been rapidly removed from inner-city neighborhoods. For low-income, minority areas crack has been a social “vacuum cleaner” that collects wealth in whatever form it exists, exchanges it for drugs, then extracts it from the community.

References