GENDER, POWER, AND ALTERNATIVE LIVING ARRANGEMENTS IN THE INNER-CITY CRACK CULTURE

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Impoverished crack-abusing women are usually without a regular place to live, sleep, relax, bathe, eliminate, eat, and store possessions—but most are not homeless persons on the streets because they find alternative living arrangements. This article draws from a rich descriptive repository of field notes, field diaries, and transcribed tape-recorded interviews from two ethnographic studies in New York City, focused upon crack users and sellers. The most common alternative living arrangement was for women to live in the household of an older male with a dependable income for a period of time. Women typically provided the men with sex, drugs, cash (less often), domestic service, or companionship. Several women lived in freak houses (locales where several women entertained sexual customers and shared crack or other drugs) but tried to avoid crack houses or shooting galleries as residential locations. These alternative living arrangements reflected the women’s powerlessness and the high levels of sexual exploitation and degradation of women in the inner-city crack culture.

The advent of crack cocaine has had a profound effect on the economic and social life of many low-income inner-city communities (Johnson, Williams, Dei, and Sanabria 1990). The crack economy has also extracted a much higher price from its participants than previous drug eras, taking an

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excessive toll on users’ lives (Hamid 1990). Within this context, shelter has become a crucial and sought-after commodity. This article will document processes by which impoverished crack-abusing women resolve their human needs for shelter and personal safety and describe the strategies they pursue in constructing little-known alternative living arrangements for themselves. The core question addressed is: Among inner-city women without legal income (for instance, who have no legal employment or welfare payments), who are excluded from assistance by their family and kin networks, and who expend most of their monetary and labor resources to procure and use crack, how and where do they find shelter with some semblance of personal security?

Recent scholarship on homelessness (Barak 1991; Hopper and Hamburg 1984; Jencks and Peerson 1991; Ropers 1988; Rossi 1989; Vanderstaay 1992) has documented many forces associated with the increased numbers of homeless persons in America but has neglected two themes. Although the homeless literature occasionally mentions the importance of crack abuse (Jencks and Peterson 1991), few studies have sought to specify the mechanisms by which crack abusers become homeless. Moreover, homeless women living without children are rarely mentioned or studied; such women appear to constitute less than 10% of persons living in shelters or other institutions where homeless persons are found. The relative absence of homeless crack-using females in the homeless literature may be largely due to their success in obtaining alternative living arrangements, which keep them out of shelters and institutional settings.

The literature on crack use and sex-for-crack (Boyle and Anglin 1993; Carlson and Siegel 1991; Edlin et al. 1992; Goldstein, Ouellet, and Fendrich 1992; Inciardi, Lockwood, and Pottgieger 1993; Inciardi, Pottgieger, Forney, Chitwood, and McBride 1990; Ratner 1993a; Weatherby et al. 1992) reveals many factors that contribute to women becoming crack abusers and having no conventional place to live. First and foremost has been the influence of social and economic forces in limiting options for low-income women. Since 1965, inner-city minority neighborhoods have been marked by persistent poverty, structural unemployment, and urban dispossession. In many neighborhoods, the drug economy has become a way of life and a means of survival for a significant segment of the local population (Bourgois 1989, 1995; Dunlap and Johnson 1992; Hamid 1992a; Johnson et al. 1990; Kasarda 1992; Moore 1991; Sullivan 1989). Few of the women studied here had held employment in legal jobs during the preceding decade, and at the time of interview most failed to comply with welfare regulations; thus they were not in receipt of any legitimate income.

These crack-abusing women typically grew up in family and kin systems severely affected by these structural forces. Little prepared these women for licit jobs or conventional marriages. Few women had even one parent who held steady employment, and welfare support was often intermittent and never enough. Mothers or other caregivers (typically a grandmother or aunt) supplemented income by informal sector activity (e.g., serving alcohol at after-hours clubs, working for a numbers runner, etc.—see Dunlap 1992; Maher, Dunlap, and Johnson unpublished). For many women, both community and family level involvement facilitated access to informal sector labor markets. Within some families, alcohol, heroin, marihuana, and cocaine use and abuse, as well as the illicit sale of such substances, had been a primary economic activity across several generations (Dunlap and Johnson 1994; Dunlap, Johnson, and Maher forthcoming).

The majority of women respondents here (see following) initiated illicit drug use prior to 1985-1986, when crack use became widespread in New York City. Many were former heroin and cocaine powder users with a history of intravenous drug use. A significant minority also used alcohol and marihuana on a near-daily basis (Golub and Johnson 1994; Johnson et al. 1997). However, despite the fact that most were not drug neophytes, these women’s lives were severely disrupted by crack use. The demands of crack use and the crack lifestyle forced many of them to develop new and innovative ways of meeting their instrumental needs. In particular, the advent of crack had a dramatic effect on the nature, frequency, and dollar value of sexual acts in street-level sex markets (Maher 1996; Maher and Curtis 1992). Although the exchange of sex-for-drugs is not a new phenomenon, recent accounts have highlighted its significance and frequency in inner-city drug use settings (e.g., Carlson and Siegel 1991; Edlin et al. 1992; Fullilove and Fullilove 1989; Goldstein et al. 1992; Inciardi et al. 1993, p. 96; Inciardi et al. 1990; Ratner 1993a; Weatherby et al. 1992).

The cumulative effect of these influences was a large number of crack-abusing women who had no legal income, expended all their illegal income on crack, had no relatives or friends who allowed them in their households, and were excluded by male crack sellers who dominated them sexually or as employers. One of the most pressing problems confronted by the crack-using women encountered in this research—in addition to their constant mission (the search for crack and the illegal activities this typically entailed)—was the search for shelter and respite from the street. Although they vacillated between homelessness and periods of temporary residence with family, friend and associates, most of the women in this study could be classified as homeless and certainly almost all had experienced homelessness at some
place to go. Day after day, month after month, these women had no conventional place to go to sleep, eliminate, bath, eat, rest, relax, and restore themselves. Using ethnographic data based on observations and interviews with active women crack users, this article documents the existence of a set of gendered "solutions" to the problems of homelessness and residential instability encountered by women crack users.

**METHODODOLOGY**

This article combines data from two ethnographic projects conducted in New York City over the period 1989-1992. These projects spanned seven low-income neighborhoods and included data from a broad sample of women crack users of different ages and race-ethnic backgrounds who exhibited considerable diversity in terms of their drug use careers.

One study, the Natural History of Crack Distribution/Abuse, is an ethnographic study of the structure, functioning, and economics of cocaine and crack distribution in low-income, minority communities in New York City. The data set generated for this project constituted one of the richest in the field, containing several thousand pages of transcribed recorded material and drawing on the insights of a variety of informants and a multidisciplinary team of ethnographic researchers. (Further details of this study and the methods used are outlined in Dunlap and Johnson 1994; Dunlap et al. 1990; Williams, Dunlap, Johnson, and Hamid 1992.) As of 1992, 23 African American women, 9 Latinas, and 1 White woman had been studied. Although these women were active sellers and distributors of crack (and often other drugs), the vast majority were rarely able to afford housing and were usually without a regular conventional place to live.

The second study (Maher 1995) consisted of a multisite ethnographic study focusing on the economic lives of women crack users in three Brooklyn neighborhoods. In the course of this 3-year project, field observations and interviews were conducted with more than 200 women crack users. Although the majority of subjects were African American women (36%) and Latinas (44%), a significant minority (20%) were European American women. A majority were poly-drug users and nearly all were homeless or involved in lifestyles that exhibited a high degree of residential instability. These women were both perpetrators and victims of violence, and all were engaged in lawbreaking activity—principally street-level sexwork—at the time of the study (for further details of this study and the sampling procedures see Maher 1995; Maher and Curtis 1994).

These two ethnographic research endeavors were conducted in the same city over the same time period, although in different neighborhoods and with slightly different focal study groups. In both studies, women ethnographers (Dunlap and Maher) conducted extensive fieldwork (recording hundreds of pages of field notes) and completed extensive in-depth tape-recorded interviews (generating thousands of transcript pages) with their selected subjects. In most cases, specific female subjects were contacted and observed on different days and times during the year—ensuring that the reliability of their living arrangements was routinely documented over time. In both studies, the ethnographers intentionally visited the women at their current living arrangements, thereby observing and validating the actual conditions in which subjects lived.

A major theme emerged in both studies: The majority of these women did not have a conventional place (a home or apartment where someone [rarely the subject] paid the rent and maintained the household) to sleep, rest, eat, eliminate, bathe, and store possessions. Instead, these women crack users, regardless of whether primarily active in sexwork or drug distribution and sales, demonstrated considerable effort and skill in finding places to stay for relatively limited time periods. These alternative living arrangements reflected their persistence and extensive experience in continuously locating a place day-by-day and week-by-week to restore themselves. This rich descriptive repository of field notes, field diaries, and transcribed tape-recorded interviews documented both similarities and variations in local social and economic conditions as well as how the larger context of drug use, income generation, and gender relations affected these women. (It should be noted that many male crack users exhibited similar difficulties in finding places to live and often resorted to nonconventional living arrangements, but the focus of this article is upon female crack users and the gendered nature of their arrangements.)

As the following sections demonstrate, for many of the women in this study, homelessness served both to cement and intensify their involvement in and commitment to the street-level drug economy. However, the nature, form, and physical location of accommodations utilized by these women exhibited wide variation, as did the relationships to which such coresidences gave rise. Although in this context the considerable evidence of exchange and support patterns gives lie to the stereotype of the predatory thirsty crackhead, it needs to be borne in mind that such relationships are also responses to the exigencies of life on the margins. The variability of these alternative living arrangements and the social relations they reflected and spawned are discussed below.
Starting Out: A Little Help From Your Friends

The more I looked into homelessness, the more it appeared to be misstated as merely a problem of being without shelter: homelessness is more properly viewed as the most aggravated state of a more prevalent problem, extreme poverty (Rossi 1989, p. 8).

For many poor people, homelessness is the end result of a gradual and piecemeal shift from a tenuous existence that encompasses economic and social marginality, substandard housing, and family breakdown. Among the加速this process, a majority of women maintained precarious and model of homelessness as with, the experiences of most of the women in this study appear to fit this mentation prior to problematic drug use. For some women, involvement in drug sales led to arrest or eviction, serving to expedite official homelessness, as reported by Carol, a 41-year-old African American woman.

I had my own apartment, myself and my daughter. I started selling crack. From my house. [For who?] Some Jamaican. [Yeah, how did you get hooked up with that?] Through my boyfriend. They wanted to sell from my apartment. They were supposed to pay me something like $150 a week rent, and then some off the profits. They used to, you know, fuck up the money, like not give me the money. Eventually I went through a whole lot of different dealers. Eventually I stopped payin' my rent because I wanted to get a transfer out of there to get away from everything. 'Cause the dealer would get out, another group would come along. [So how long did that go on for?] About four years. Then I lost my apartment, and I sat out in the street.

Whereas the majority of women in this study had not sold drugs from their apartments, the experiences of those who had done so suggest that such arrangements only rarely represent a form of female entrepreneurship and are typically short-lived (but see the case study of Rachel for an exception—Dunlap and Johnson 1996; Dunlap, Johnson, Manwar 1994; Dunlap et al. 1990).

Initially, whether they were evicted, pushed out, or left of their own accord, many of the women in this study avoided formal acknowledgment of their homelessness status by becoming "couch people"—alternating between household and extended kin networks (see Dunlap and Johnson 1992) or roaming from friend to friend in search of short-term accommodations. As is evident in the following quotation from Jonelle, a 32-year-old African American woman, such offers are usually limited to a shower or brief rest or perhaps an overnight stay, usually in exchange for drugs.

[So where do you stay mostly now?] Walk the street. [You don't have one particular place where you go?] Oh, we got a girlfriend named Jeannette that lives on J——, you know. She let us go up there and wash up or sometimes I might fall asleep up there, but I'm not—I don't consider myself stayin' with her though. [Does she charge you anything to go there?] Not really. . . . With her, she's just lookin' to get high. You come with some "get high" which most likely we'll do, and you turn her on and you know it's cool.

Occasionally, women were able to negotiate short-term arrangements with other women drug users. More often than not, however, such hospitality was contingent on the approval of coresident males. As Sugar, a 36-year-old Latina, reported:

I found me a new room. [Yeah, how did that happen?] So you know, uh, Angel, she lives right here on J—— and T——, okay, she's one of my co-workers. And her old man said, "Hey let her stay here," you know. And I appreciate that. [You have to pay them?] She never said nothing like that, but of course I've got to give them something. Yeah, you know. [Throw them something anyway.] Of course, definitely. But I mean they didn't make any kind of formal arrangement? [They just kind of expect you to, when you have, to, you know?] Um-huh.

Contingent on the strength and nature of the relationship, a few women were able to negotiate longer term arrangements when various forms of payment were provided, as did Shorty, a 22-year-old Latina.

I was living with a friend of mine and her husband, and then this guy came along and started living there too, and they were into getting high and stuff, and at that time, I was getting high too. [On what?] On crack. You know, and I was having a very hard time there, and I didn't have no financial help, as far as my husband working, he wasn't working, I wasn't on welfare or nothing like that. So, finally these guys weren't satisfied with the money we were giving them. They wanted me to support their habit, buy food and pay rent money. You know? [How much were you giving them?] I was giving them $75 a week for both of us, which wasn't bad. I could deal with that, but then they wanted, you know, crack. I had to buy them crack too, plus feed her, her husband, and this guy that started living there.

However, such arrangements rarely last when the household is immersed in drug use. Even long-standing relationships between women are rapidly
depleted by one or both party’s use of drugs, as happened between Dee Dee, a 29-year-old African American woman, and her “homegirl,” Rita.

She lives in the projects on Marcy. She used to live right around the corner from me. She’s one of the first people that we lived with when we came in this neighborhood. But then they abandoned her building. [Is she somebody that you could stay at her house?] Yeah, but everybody, you know, to get in the door it’s like you got to have something for them. And I don’t really feel like they’re such a friend, you know. I told her when I first came there, I said, “Look I got a bag of dope. I’ll give you some, all right.” I’m like, “Just give me a wash cloth and a towel. That’s all I want to do. I want to take a shower and clean up and then I’ll talk to you,” you know. So of course I was taking my time. I wanted to relax and really get clean, you know. So when I come out it’s like a big thing now. It’s like, “Well you just walk in my house, and just walk into my shower,” and all this is ‘cause all the time I’m in the bathroom she’s thinking I’m gettin’ high. She think I don’t have no more dope. So I played it off like I didn’t. I said, “You know what the bag was so small, I did the whole thing.” And honey she must have caught on fire, right; and when I seen her attitude, and I felt like—and I really had the bag of dope. I just wanted to see how she was gonna act. And she acted just like I thought. “And you ain’t got nothin’ for me, you’re not welcome here.” So when I seen it was like that I said, “Yeah well I’ll just go, and I won’t come again.”

These accounts illustrate that although the need for reciprocity was clearly understood, the terms were often vague, suggesting that among this population, conflict over the precise nature of reciprocal obligations would be frequent and perhaps inevitable. For the most part, however, the women crack users in this study were rarely in a position to extend shelter to each other. Most of them were homeless, a majority were estranged from both their families of orientation and procreation and all could be characterized as possessing severely limited economic and social resources. For a majority of women, this meant that they had three choices—either resort to the city shelter system, go it alone on the streets, or rely on men.

**Engaging the System: Welfare Hotels and Shelter Accommodation**

Without exception, the women in this study identified Single Room Occupancy (SRO) or welfare hotels, as criminogenic, dangerous, and conducive to drug use. Although Jenny, a 25-year-old European American, had experimented with drug use in the context of her relationship with a violent and abusive husband, it was not until after they split up that she began to use heroin, cocaine powder, and crack. Evicted from her apartment in Queens because she could no longer afford to pay the rent, Jenny and her two children were made homeless and wandered the streets before eventually being relocated to an SRO hotel in mid-town Manhattan. Her story clearly illustrates the way in which social and economic factors converge with situational factors, such as the availability of drugs and the proximity of experienced (usually male) users/sellers to render homeless women even more vulnerable.

After I split up with him [husband] I couldn’t pay the rent, and he wouldn’t give me no money unless I let him stay with me. So I had to take him to court. But in the meantime, I still couldn’t pay my rent. So I went down to Welfare, and Welfare wouldn’t pay that amount. So they got me in the welfare hotel in the Holland. . . . So I had to go to the Holland Hotel on 42nd Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. And it was like pimps, crack, dope, you know, drug hotel—pimp hotel. And I was, like, I never knew anything about this stuff you know ‘cause I came from Queens, in a quiet area. . . . He [drug seller and pimp] conned me into staying with him, and I did, you know. I was vulnerable, hungry, you know. I lost my welfare, and they were kicking me out of the hotel, and he had a room in the same hotel; the Holland, which he paid the security guards to have it. It wasn’t like welfare benefits. He just paid to keep that room and I was staying there because I had no other place to stay, and then he turned me out to the streets. I was sniffing dope, coke, and smoking a lot of crack. [Yeah, and he turned you onto all those drugs.] Yeah and that’s how I became like really hooked because I had a habit and I didn’t know [it].

Boy, a 29-year-old African American woman, was one of the few women who from time to time made use of this system. Her views of the shelter system were reinforced by many other women, most of whom refused to even contemplate shelter accommodation.

I was scared the firs’ time I ever went to a shelter. [When was this?] It was about eighteen months ago. An’ I was scared. They took me to a single shelter, I only stayed two days an’ I went to 116 Street. It’s called [Women’s Shelter], the worses shelter ya can ever go to ‘cos deres dikes and everythin’ there. An’ dat taught me a lot. Thassa woman shelter. I wouldn’ put ma dog in it. But I havta stay. There’s two accommodations dere, dykes and crack. There’s nine a y’all inna room. If you look at one person—“You looked at ma woman, I’m gon’ kick your ass.” Y’know dykes are the worst things there ever is. I don’t like it, but I havta deal wid it, so you can’ really—in nis place you don’ get ta lay down. You gotta get up eight a’clock innna morning. An’ you don’ get ta go back upstairs till, like, six a’clock in afternoon. [What do most of the women do during the day?] I sit ou’side. I sit right ou’side. But I don’ cumulate wid none o’ dem nere because once you start ta be rens wid dem, dey’re wrapped up in nat system. [So do some women do crack?] Crack it up inside the place,
they be crackin' it up outside the place. Shootin' up. Sellin'. I mean I was like marked. Is like an animal house.

Although the women in this study were critical of the conditions of shelter life in general, they reserved greatest hostility for those that worked in the system. In particular, women received little comfort or indeed protection from the security guards employed to police behavior and maintain order in the shelter system (see Rossi 1989, p. 199; Waterston 1993). Guards were widely perceived as being involved in drug use, and, in particular, female guards were frequently cited as being implicated in lesbian relationships with shelter residents.

Is bad when dere own guards do it. How can da guards protect you when they do the same thing? You got guards dat go together. You got guards dat smoke. How can you protect me if you're smokin' an' you a dyke? So you're 'cumulated wid da rest a them. If you have a fight with a dyke, okay, the guard's gonna be on a dyke's side, not yours, so you fucked.

The violence and criminality endemic to shelter life also promote the use of instrumental aggression (Campbell 1993) by women in an effort to ward off potential aggressors. As Boy explained in response to a question about how she protected herself:

Myself. Okay, when I went there Tuesday I laid ma law straight. I hadda argument, but dey know me from before, alright. I jus' let you know. Okay, iss a certain way you can look at a person, y' know. An' nas wa' I did, y'know. An' by me bein' there before, people know, don' mess wid me, I'm not one a dem suckers. See if you go in dere wimpy, they're gonna kick your ass. But if ya go in dere lay ya law down, an' don' fuck wid no one. Thas all—you don' fuck wid dem, dey won' fuck wid you.

Although women appeared more likely to reside in shelters during pregnancy, shelters specifically for pregnant women were similarly perceived by Boy.

Dey placed me inna [S-Shelter]. I don' wanna be dere, y'understand'. I don' like to be wid a groupa people. Now dey got me inna room, dere's thirteen beds in this room. [Thirteen pregnant women?] Yeah. An' iss like eleven o'clock, I'm ready ta doze off, y'know. Dere playin' cards an' playin' music, an' lights on. Iss like you never can sleep when ya wanna sleep. Ya can't watch TV when ya wanna watch TV. Y' gotta sign fo soap, ya gotta sign fo toilet tissue. Iss jus' like bein' inna detention home. [Do the women fight with each other?] Dey

argue like cats 'n' dogs okay, ya got it inside an' ya got it outside. Right around the corner on the side of the building is a crack area. On number one crack dealers. [What do they sell, mix?] Yeah. Crack, dope, heroin, um wass dat stuff, dat orange stuff? [Methadone?] Methadone. Anythin' you want they got, okay? It makes it bad on us. Because at night you hear, “You took ma money bitch” an' ‘ba, ba, ba.”

These accounts suggest that for many women, current system responses to female homelessness were perceived in a negative light. At best, hotels and shelters “constitute a subculture that makes any attempt toward sobriety extremely difficult” (Zimmer and Schretzman 1991, p. 174). At worst, they provided an environment that served to amplify drug and alcohol use, fostered involvement in illegal activities, and encouraged the neglect or abuse of children. Most of the women interviewed in this research preferred to take their chances elsewhere. Thus the recent proliferation of alternative living arrangements can also be seen, in part, as a response to the city’s failure to meet these women’s needs.

Going to the Curb: Squatting and Sleeping on the Street

For most women, city accommodations failed to provide a viable alternative even when the only other option was to sleep on the street or in an abandoned building (see also Boyle and Anglin 1993). Queen Bee, a 25-year-old African American user/seller, was squatting in an abandoned apartment building. She held the keys to two apartments on the fourth floor of this building. Cable wire attached to a city outlet brought electricity into both apartments. Water was acquired from the fire hydrant outside. As the following field note excerpt suggests, the conditions of life were both unsafe and unsanitary.

The first apartment can only be explained as a garbage can. It is extremely disorganized and reeks of garbage and decay. The floors are littered with old clothing and rags and each room is adorned with broken pieces of discarded furniture and piles of refuse. Queen Bee took me into this apartment to retrieve a lamp, consisting of a bulb screwed into a broken base, before quickly proceeding to the other apartment. This apartment is also filthy and smells terrible but is in slightly better condition than its neighbor. There is a long hallway and several rooms open off it but it is too dark to see into these rooms. The only source of light emanates from the lamp Queen Bee is holding. We enter a room off to the right of the hallway containing an old beat up dresser with a mirror, two chairs in decayed condition, a stool, various boxes, a tray table with a hot plate on it, and assorted other junk. The dresser is covered with
empty vials, about eight empty lighters, and a lot of debris. Queen Bee uses a
sweep of her arm to clear the contents of the dresser top and create a space for
the lamp.

This abandoned building was an active drug dealing spot. Several other
individuals besides Queen Bee dealt drugs from this spot. Booby traps were
set for police and strangers. The steps on the third landing had been rigged.
Everyone lived above this landing and anyone that did not know his or her
way around this particular step would fall through to the first floor.

Similarly, Princess, a 32-year-old African American woman also chose to
create her own living arrangements. Unlike Queen Bee, however, Princess
did not have access to an abandoned building and her accommodations were
strictly curbside. As she related:

[Where did you go when you moved out?] Well I started staying here, there.
Mainly I break night a lot so, mainly in the streets. Not that I have to be in the
streets. Just that I don't choose to take these drug vices into my family's home.

Princess rationalized her choice by saying that she preferred to stay on the
street rather than in someone's house because, in her opinion, either way
people were out to rip you off. As she saw it, in some ways sleeping rough
may even reduce the risk of victimization insofar as she believed that there
was less chance of others thinking that you had anything to steal.

I'll stay here [in the lot], y'know I paid anywhere I went, but besides gettin'
robbed, y'know 'cos when you stay in somebody's house all they do is rip you
off. I've gotten by better in the streets, y'know. That's right. You sleep, fall
asleep in the streets nobody think you got nothin'. So they're not gonna search
you for anything. You know you wake up with any dime—you go to some-
boby's house and you have nothing, not even a wake up.

Sleeping on the street, or sleeping rough, typically entailed the construc-
tion of a makeshift shelter, usually in the form of a cardboard box shanty or
lean-to against a wall or fence. Ironically, these structures were referred to in
one study neighborhood as "condos." For most women, however, the high
likelihood both of victimization and of police harassment meant that condos
were not a viable option unless they were in partnership with a male.
Following the eviction of Dream from her apartment, three African American
couples who had been staying there were forced to relocate to a vacant lot
where they set up a large communal condo. Below, Dee Dec, a 29-year-old
African American woman described this arrangement.

In the backa da lot, dere a couch back dere. Wen I'm finally poopd, I can't
take it no more, I step back dere and fall asleeep. An' iss gota Johnny pump das open.
[But it's not too good when it rains.] No, but we done made it like a canopy or
whatever wid de pallets on each side o' da couch. [How many people are
staying over there?] Iss really six of us there, but we be in there at different
times. An' if there's not room for the nex' one we lay a pallet out. We got enough
blankets and staff. We put a blanket on the pallet an' lay out there. [But anyone
can go in there?] They can yeah, there's nothin' stoppin' 'em, but day don't.
Iss not as popular as dat lot dere. Guess a lot o' people know about it but never
think to go in there. Jus' an empty lot, a parkin' lot. An' iss got trees ona sides
dat block us out, iss cool for now.

Although most males who were part of street-level drug-using net-
works were neither inclined nor particularly well placed to provide for
women's needs, some relationships endured. Latisha, a 32-year-old African
American woman and her mate, Tre, resided in an abandoned truck situated
on an empty lot hidden from the roadside by undergrowth and adjoining a
large warehouse. Even though it was located a 30-min walk away from the
drug market area, Latisha and Tre made this journey at least once a day.
Latisha and Tre managed to successfully hide the fact that they lived in
this truck from other drug users (and for a time, from the ethnographer)
by claiming that they lived in an apartment in an adjacent neighbor-
hood. Following the ethnographer's visit to the site, Latisha discussed their
accommodation.

It's very hot in the summer. You have to keep the doors open when you're
sleepin' and God forbid if you try to put a cover on you, and mosquitoes, my
God. [What about rats?] Well, you see the bag hangin' up over the ceiling. Thas
where we put the food. If we didn't eat it all we have to hang it up in the ceiling
because the rats would smell it and come in. You gotta remember you're on
the outside and those are big rats. [What about other people in the neighbor-
hood?] They know that we're around and we don't bother them or steal or
nothing... I keep myself pretty much clean, I mean I can't take a bath every
day, but we have access to hot water. The guy across the street give us hot water.
[So you take a bath over there?] No, we fill up buckets, we got a big barrel,
you fill the barrel, get in and wash. Outside. Last winter was three feet of snow
and I still went outside.

Although involved in a physically abusive relationship, Latisha saw
herself as fortunate in that she at least had a "roof over her head." Moreover,
sleeping rough was not an option for women who depended on street-level
sex work because of the undesirable message it sends out to customers.
I refuse to just sleep right over here [in the drug market area]. I don’t want people to see me lyin’ out here on the sidewalk. Dates come through these areas too and they see a girl laying out here and then they see her back on the street. You know, it’s gonna be hard for you, they figure out you ain’t shit.

Within the street-level drug economy, sexwork, as a primary means of economic sustenance necessitated a basic level of attention to looks, physical hygiene, and, ironically, moral propriety (see Maher 1995).

**Older Males**

By far the most common alternative living arrangement for the women in this study was as part of the household of an older male for a period of time. Most of the women in this sample patronized older men to secure and satisfy their needs for shelter. However, as Hamid (1992b) has argued, these relationships cannot be considered in isolation from the economic position of young minority women generally.

While the real income and other benefits of elderly men or senior citizens have improved appreciably in the past two decades . . . young women have seen their income decline steeply over the same period of time. (p. 344)

By middle-class standards, these older men do not control significant resources, but in the inner-city context, the resources of a steady income and maintenance of an apartment enabled them to obtain a sense of mastery or control over women. These older males usually had some form of dependable or steady income, such as a low-wage job, pension, social security, or retirement benefits. They owned or had a long-established lease on a house or apartment and were well positioned to provide women crack smokers (and sometimes their children, as well) with shelter and a place to wash and rest up, and sometimes food.

Although individual arrangements exhibited considerable variation, these accommodations always came at a price. Women typically paid in either sex or drugs or less often, cash, and sometimes all three. In addition to sexual availability and drugs, these older men received the companionship of younger women and, in some instances, were able to exert considerable control over them. Some also extracted further benefits in the form of unpaid domestic labor, such as cleaning, cooking, and laundry.

**Cash for shelter.** Although few of the women were able to negotiate these relationships with older males on strictly economic terms by paying in either cash or crack, Connie, a 24-year-old gay Latina, maintained that she was able to keep the transaction at a purely financial level.

[Where do you stay now?] At my [male] friend’s house on W----. [The friend smokes crack too?] Yes. [You have to ---] Pay him. Pay him cash, right, in order for me to sleep and take a bath. [What, he doesn’t ask for sex or anything like that?] No, he’s an old, old man. Well, I tell him I don’t like mens. I tell him, and I don’t like mens. [You like women?] Exactly. [You pay him by the night or by the week?] Oh, I give him ten, fifteen dollars a day.

**Crack for shelter.** Similarly, Jo-Beth, a 23-year-old and Candy, a 41-year-old [both European American] were part of a group of women who stayed at the apartment of an elderly Latino on a regular basis and claimed they always paid in crack.

I’m in this old man’s house. He’s a crack-head. A lot of the girls go there. You give him crack. [Do you find that there’s a lot of old guys that smoke?] I don’t know. I don’t hang out with old guys. I pay my way. (Jo-Beth)

I bought a nickel crack for this old man right here so I can come in here. It cost me a nickel or two to get here. And he’s still not happy. If you go out ten times a day, if it be ten times, you got to bring him a bottle [of crack]. It took me so long to make that damn money and the bastard, me so sick. At least I had that nickel to get in here, you know. (Candy)

**Sex for shelter.** More often than not, however, sex was part of the deal. Shorty, a 22-year-old Latina recalled a typical former relationship.

Well, he’s the type of guy that used to help all the girls from the Avenue. And they would go up there and take a shower and sleep, you know. He was like very perverted, and to get a place to sleep, you had to do something with him, you know? “For a couple of weeks, I’ll help you out,” so we started staying there, but he had a drinking problem and was perverted. [Did he use crack also?] No, he used to drink. Just drink. And when my husband wasn’t there, he would try to get fresh with me, ‘cause you know, he’s a pervert. So that didn’t go over too tough, either.

Whole networks of women crack users informed one another of possible sites of shelter with older males, as Jackie, a 29-year-old Afro-Caribbean woman, explained.
Mo used to live right upstairs in a bad apartment. And he invite the same Joelyn up to, you know—fuck around. . . . After a while it was like everybody get—ya know, the word pass around, and people see how people live here, a lot of girls used to live there, and guys use to be lookin' for girls, too. . . . Everybody tell you all about him and ya know, everybody start livin' there . . . gettin' high, gettin' high, gettin' high.

Frequently, the older males who offered their space to be entertained by these women were retired and many were alcoholics. However, some older men were initiated or "turned on" to smoking crack through their associations with these younger women. In many places, a typical scene involved a group of old men who were playing cards and drinking beer while women smoked crack. Later, the old men might take their pick of the females and some would also smoke crack. In addition to older retired males, middle-aged working men may also offer various forms of hospitality to women crack users. For example, George, an electrical engineer, worked everyday—often with a charge from "Scottie" for the road. According to women, George treated them to a less exploitative time: they showered, cooked, listened to music, and beamed up together.

**Companionship/affection for shelter.** In several instances, these older men were dates or former dates who claimed affections for individual women. For example, Tameka, a 41-year-old African American woman, met her common law husband as a date in a local bar and remained in this union throughout the study period.

He told me he said, "Look I'm not worth the fuck all I want is companionship," he said, "Look I'll give you $50 you go home with me." So I said, "Cool, no problem." We never did anything together or anything like that other than lay in the bed and sleep, and that was it. . . . whoever he bought with him they would take his money. Because I knew that it was somebody that I wanted to see again who would be there for me. . . . So I knew if I rolled [stole from] him he wouldn't have wanted me. So I didn't roll him and thank God I didn't, and the man's been there ever since.

Similarly, Peggy, a 34-year-old European American woman, lived with an older Italian man who worked as a numbers runner. Although not a drug user, Peggy's boyfriend gave her money to purchase drugs in an effort to keep her from prostitution. The relationship, however, was not without its problems.

The man that I live with, I met on the stroll up here. We would see each other once a week, then he would come twice a week, then he would come three, four times a week, take me to lunch, take me to dinner, take me to the house . . . And then, I never moved out. . . . Well, it's my home. I'm living there eight months already. I mean, he knew what he was getting. But, I cook, I clean the house, I wait on him hand and foot. He never was married, so I'm like his baby. I was never home when he got home from work and that's all he asks, that I'm home. He don't care if there's no food, if the house is burning; as long as I'm there when he gets home. He says, "I'm going to chain you," and he did one day. I swear to God! He put shackles on my feet. I freaked out.

**Domestic duties for shelter.** Chef, a 27-year-old African American woman, lived with Clyde (70 years old), who had his own apartment for many years. Clyde did not use crack nor allow Chef to bring others into his apartment. She was required to keep the apartment and his clothes clean, cook the food, and to complete a number of other well-defined domestic duties in return for staying there. Sex was not involved.

Similarly, Linda, a 31-year-old European American woman, negotiated a deal with an older man whereby she was given food, shelter, and a few dollars in return for her services as a sitter for his elderly invalid mother, an arrangement she later described as "too good to be true."

I've been babysittin' the old lady. I'm still over there but, you know, he's got a lot of problems—he drinks. Yeah, her son. [How much do they pay you for watchin' over her?] You know whatever. I don't have a set thing, you know. I'm just happy with the roof over my head. [How old is this guy?] Fifty-five. [You don't have to take care of him?] No, only when he gets drunk, real, real drunk. He just wants me to cuddle up next to him. I don't do anything, but I get mad 'cause he wakes me up. You know, he drinks all night until two, three, four o'clock in the morning, and he has the radio blastin', and then he comes and wakes me up. He goes on and on.

However, despite variations in the nature of the commodity exchanged, living arrangements with older males typically took the form of short-term instrumental associations. Over a 2-month period during fieldwork observations, Linda had had four such associations.

Remember I told you I was living on J——? You know that guy died? [Since then where have you been staying?] Well I was staying with this other guy on the Southside, on B——, you know. How do I know him? Well I used to go out with him. You know, I give him a blow job to stay there, you know. But then he threw me out, 'cause he says, "I don't want no more injections in the house." He don't get high. He drinks, you know, when he got the money. [Since then where have you been staying?] I found this other guy, right. But he got on a program, and he was doing good, you know. So then I left there. So now I'm staying with this other guy, this old man, he don't get high or nothing.
Social resources, were forced to rely on short-lived associations with older males during which they exchanged drugs, sex, cash, or services (or some combination thereof) for shelter. Although most of these men used alcohol and some also used crack, these males were peripheral to street-level drug-using or selling networks. They were simply older neighborhood males, who, by virtue of their apartments and somewhat better economic status, were able to offer these younger women shelter—in exchange they received a number of benefits, including sexual favors, drugs, money, and domestic labor. But there was a fine line between these households and their commodified forms as “freakhouses” and other commercial settings for crack consumption.

Freakhouses and Other Commercial Settings

In many impoverished inner-city neighborhoods, crack has become the “de facto currency of the realm”—a liquid asset with cash value that can be exchanged for shelter, sex, food, and other durables (Inciardi et al. 1991). The rise of the freakhouse, which specialized in sex-for-crack exchanges between chronic crack-using women and men who were less heavy consumers (or were nonusing males), exemplified crack’s capacity for the commodification of human relationships. In New York City, freakhouses generally took the following form.

The elderly man receives sexual services and gifts of crack from a core group of five or six crack-abusing women. In exchange they gain a sanctuary in highly transient lifestyles where they can wash, prepare meals or feel at home. They promptly attract several other crack-abusing women, and the combined “harem” lures male users and working men of all ages. The latter come to “freak” (use any and all of the women sexually)—a favorite pastime is “flipping,” with the male going from one to as many women that are present in continuous succession, and some use crack (but many do not). The visitors pay the old man or one of his appointees cash or crack for any activity: going out to buy crack, beer, or cigarettes; use of private space (by the half hour); or access to the women (Hamid 1992b, p. 344).

Joe, a 31-year-old Afro-Caribbean male, inherited a beautiful frame house when his mother died. A regular crack user, Joe was not employed at the time of the study and used the house to accommodate a core of six female crack users and a shifting number of crack-using transients. Although he was unable to pay the monthly mortgage, his female house guests kept Joe in drugs. The presence of women willing to provide sexual services in exchange for crack quickly turned Joe’s place into a freakhouse. However, freakhouses are sustained by male sexual desires that extend beyond the inner-city crack culture. The freakhouse created and maintained a setting for sexual commodities neither readily accessible nor cheaply available in the commercial marketplace of street-level sexwork.

The social and economic organization of such households ranges from anarcho to authoritarian (see also Ouellet, Wiebel, Jimenez, and Johnson 1993). Isolated from other sources of social and economic support, many women initially entertained freakhouse accommodation and the accompanying sexual demands as a response to scarcity and deprivation. However, whereas the freakhouse was by definition a commercial setting for sexual transactions and crack/drug use, often the relationships among individual residents suggest that it functioned along the lines of a household unit, however unstable and exploitative. According to both owners and other residents, many freakhouses exhibited social obligations of affection and limited trust developed among household members. Residents exchanged food, money, goods, services—and drugs—and sometimes considered each other as family. Members looked out for each other and provided protection against serious violence. For the most part, then, freakhouses provided a more congenial setting than other commercial locations.

In contrast to the freakhouse, this research also identified a number of commercial settings variously described as crack houses or shooting galleries, which often catered to both intravenous drug users and crack smokers (but rarely present were nonusing males interested only in sex). These settings tended to operate along the lines of the traditional heroin shooting gallery (e.g., see Murphy and Waldorf 1991) insofar as they created a relatively secure environment where street-level drug users gathered primarily to consume drugs. Although some establishments provided rooms for rent on a half-hourly basis for sexual transactions, payment was typically extracted in exchange for entry and a range of drug-related services including equipment hire and the purchase of drugs. Within such establishments, the margin of profit, or house take, depended on how long people stayed and how much they consumed—encouraging excessive use and a high incidence of theft and violence (Inciardi et al. 1993; Ouellet et al. 1993; Ratner, 1993b).

Women known to the owners were permitted to spend the night in these establishments in return for either drugs or cash. Commercial sexual transactions were generally not permitted in these settings, although a minority facilitated sex-for-drugs exchanges and some provided private rooms for
rental on a half-hourly basis. Unlike freakhouses, however, these commercial settings were drug focused, rather than sex focused. Women made important distinctions between the two types of settings—freakhouses and crack house/shooting gallery operations—on the basis of perceived safety. Personal and material safety emerged as primary considerations in the search for shelter, and these women were extremely reluctant to stay in locations identified as commercial consumption settings.

Pappy’s I don’t trust. I have walked passed it and I don’t trust it because if they see somebody with you and it looks like somebody dug a lot of money they rob them. Dey set them up. Pappy’s, day [potential date] look at his place and say, “Oh, all these guys out here, no I don’t want to go,” and dey would drive off. (Keisha)

Uh, well you know it’s so busy over there at Pap’s house. And man, I swear to God, I can’t hold nothin’. I can’t have nothin’ there. They took my wick [tampon] from out my underwear while I was sleepin’. (Sugar)

[You ever stay at Kizzy’s place?] No I don’t like it there, she robs you when you’re there. She robs your stuff while you’re there and then say she doesn’t know what happened to it. [Have you been robbed there?] Yeah. I bought a sweat suit for $75 and when I woke up the top of my sweat suit was gone. She said she didn’t know what happened to it. (Rachel)

Within the inner-city crack culture studied here, settings for drug use and sexual transactions can be located along a continuum of alternative living arrangements that attest to crack’s capacity for commodification. Whereas the more commercially oriented settings are more strictly drug focused and the less commercial tend to exploit the potent combination of sex and crack, strictly commercial settings are further differentiated by the absence of exchanges rooted in domestic labor, companionship, and affection. The reality for many crack-using women was a choice between a rock and a hard place—between submitting to the exploitation and potential sexual degradation offered within the relative safety of the freakhouse or retaining sexual autonomy but at the increased risk of physical and material victimization in other commercial settings. For many women, the relative insulation from the exigencies of street life provided by being a sexual partner/drug conduit to elderly males or freakhouse owners (and their clientele) appeared to render such arrangements the least undesirable option.

**DISCUSSION**

Recent research has drawn attention to the existence of new opportunities for female participation in street-level drug markets and the influence of structural changes on the gender composition of street networks (e.g., Baskin, Sommers, and Fagan 1993; Mieczkowski 1994). As Fagan has suggested:

Some women have constructed careers in illegal work that have insulated them from the exploitation and destructive behaviors that characterize heavy cocaine and crack use. . .Signs of the changing status of women in drug markets are evident in the relatively high incomes some achieve, and the relatively insignificant role of prostitution in generating income (Fagan 1994, p. 210).

However, the findings of this research suggest that many crack-using women are seriously impoverished and unable to maintain stable living arrangements. This was true both of women who engaged in street-level drug distribution and sales activities (Bourgois and Dunlap 1993; Dunlap et al., 1995) and those who relied primarily on the street-level sex economy (Maher 1995; Maher and Curtis 1992). The women in this study clearly lacked the necessary resources for maintaining physical security and economic independence and for assuring sexual autonomy. Many expended their incomes exclusively on crack consumption with little or nothing left over to pay rent or meet other basic needs.

The failure of the city system to meet these women’s needs meant that for most, shelters and welfare hotels were regarded as the least desirable accommodation option. The alternatives, however, were loaded with risk and uncertainty and skewed by the gendered distribution of power within the inner-city crack culture. In particular, the costs of sleeping rough and in commercial establishments were high and included the risks of theft and violent victimization. On the other hand, older males provided an elastic source of accommodation. Many of them lived alone and welcomed crack-using women as companions or house guests. Within the context of this particular form of alternative living arrangement, women remained vulnerable to exploitation by virtue of their relative powerlessness vis-à-vis older men with apartments and economic resources. It is ironic then, that these households—some of which spawned new depths of sexual degradation and new forms of indentured labor—were seen by women to minimize the risk of victimization. However, when viewed in the context of other options for accommodation, such arrangements reflected women’s search for what they clearly regarded as the least vulnerable situations.
CONCLUSION

Rather than seek to isolate the sexual and economic practices of women crack users, this article has sought to identify and describe some of the changing contexts in which these practices are situated. Bolstered by widespread sex-segregation in the street-level drug economy, the relative powerlessness and economic marginality of women crack users undergirded an array of alternative living arrangements that fueled female participation in both prostitution and sex-for-drug exchanges. Although important distinctions clearly existed between the sex trade on the streets and sexual activities in the context of crack use behind closed doors, these women's accounts suggest that women crack users continue to experience significant levels of exploitation and degradation (see also Bourgois and Dunlap 1993). Within this context, the advent of crack cocaine has served to reproduce, rather than rupture, existing gender divisions.

This study indicates that however freed from the confines of family life, the lives of these women remained firmly anchored within the confines of a gender regime that served to disadvantage them both as social actors and economic agents. Although women crack users have ostensibly been liberated from the confines of oppressive pimping structures that characterized previous eras of street-level sexwork (Maher and Curtis 1992), reliance on males for drugs, shelter, and other commodities prompted new forms of female dependence (see also Goldstein et al. 1992, p. 360; Inciardi et al. 1993, p. 85). Moreover, the data presented here indicate that drug dealers, lookouts, and participants in the street-level drug economy were not the only males to whom women crack users relinquished their meager incomes and their bodies.

The proliferation of alternative living arrangements devised by female crack users in the inner city has clearly prompted shifts in gender relations. Women crack users, in developing creative responses to homelessness, have redefined the boundaries of household forms and the nature of domestic economies. Within these contexts, gender relations have been reconstituted. However, underlying imbalances of power continue to structure the positioning of women in the street-level drug economy and the cultural meanings that attach to female drug use and homelessness. Even though the crack culture serves to amplify existing gender inequalities, it does not create them (Maher 1995). The privileged access of males, and older males in particular, to social, cultural, and economic resources, works to ensure that they remain the principal beneficiaries of these reconstituted gender relations.

REFERENCES


