I sit on the front steps of my apartment building around 7:15 on a Thursday morning. I have used this time regularly over the past six months to observe the morning routines of local residents. I wave to Ruth, the nineteen-year-old mother of a two-year-old boy. I look on as she pushes her son’s stroller down the street in the direction of where I sit. On many mornings I watch Ruth walk this same path.

“Where you going, Ruth?” I ask with a smile.

She shakes her head and smiles back. “You know where I’m going, taking him to the babysitter, then to King’s” (the local fast-food restaurant where she works). She points to the long-sleeved yellow shirt she wears with the restaurant’s emblem printed on the front. “I gotta stay on my grind ’cause the bills don’t stop.”

“Hang in there, and have a good day,” I say.

“I’ll try,” she says over her shoulder, then waves and continues walking.

The grind, or grinding, is a term used by black women like Ruth to describe the different types of work they do in distressed urban communities. Ruth walks each day through her troubled inner-city neighborhood as she takes her toddler to a babysitter and then works long hours at King’s. Her reference
to “my grind” reveals both the physical and emotional work required to negotiate the demands of daily life in distressed inner-city space. For women in this neighborhood, grinding is a term that can refer to work in both the formal and the underground economies. There are four dimensions to grinding for women in this setting:

*The half-time hustle:* Participation in both low-wage jobs within the formal economy and entrepreneurial ventures in the underground marketplace.

*Underground entrepreneurship:* Paid work in the underground marketplace that commonly includes selling stolen goods from retail stores out of cars, homes, or on the street for a discounted price.

*Managing violence:* Negotiating daily work in the formal and informal economy as both become routinely complicated by the presence of neighborhood violence.

*Surviving the grind:* Coping with the stress and emotional labor that accompany both low-wage and underground labor while working to stay safe in a neighborhood regularly exposed to violence.

As a term, grinding reflects the intensity and drudgery of managing these dimensions of daily life. Not all women experience all dimensions at the same time, but among those women I interviewed it was common to experience underground entrepreneurship, managing violence, and sometimes more at a given time. The intersection of physical and emotional labor make up the grind for women in this setting. The pressure of the grind is exacerbated by the intense demands of daily life, both physical and emotional, that these women encounter each day.

How do women overcome the challenges of paying the bills and caring for their family in settings like East Oakland?
Ruth works at the fast-food restaurant by day and as a seamstress at night and on weekends. Ruth and her retired mother are unlawfully employed by a dry-cleaning business that pays them weekly in cash, off the books, and well below minimum wage to complete store orders requiring sewing or alterations. Ms. Jenny is a middle-aged woman who works full-time in the underground marketplace, using space in her home to resell stolen goods to those who cannot afford to buy those same goods in retail stores. It is not likely that successfully negotiating the grind will lead to stable careers for Ruth or Ms. Jenny. Still, the women do this work because they have few other options to provide for themselves and their families.

I draw on cases discovered during my field research and interviews to illustrate what the grind looks like from the perspective of women like Ruth and Ms. Jenny. Respondent accounts shed light on how structural and cultural circumstances further shape women’s work at low-wage jobs and entrepreneurial ventures in the underground marketplace as a way to make money. The grind is complicated by the presence of neighborhood violence and the stress and emotional labor required to stay safe in its presence. This analysis of the grind also reveals how women manage constraining and contradictory gendered expectations in this setting.

Grinding in East Oakland:
Hustling to Supplement Low-Wage Work

Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton argue that “segregation plays a key role in depriving poor black families of access to goods and services because it interacts with poverty to create neighborhood conditions that make it nearly impossible to sustain a viable retail sector” (1993, 135). In distressed communities without a workable retail segment, residents find it nearly impossible to obtain necessary goods and services and become further
excluded from mainstream job opportunities. With such limited possibilities before them, the lives and work of hustlers, drug dealers, and pimps become more attractive and appear to be a route toward success (Anderson 1990).

These changes are obvious in East Oakland; the presence of work within the underground marketplace is largely a result of such depressed employment opportunities and a lack of accessible goods and services. Here residents must go in search of daily necessities because institutionalized racism has prevented such retail establishments from setting up businesses in this community. Not only is racial isolation taking place as a result, but the conditions also produce “profound alienation from American society and its institutions” as a disturbing consequence (Massey and Denton 1993, 160).

In East Oakland, women sometimes turn to work in the underground and illegal economies as a means of economic survival. They engage in a range of what they refer to as “hustles” to make money. Prostitution, drug sales, theft, and credit card, identity, and insurance scams (such as burning down one’s own property or arranging for one’s property to be “stolen” in order to file a report of arson or theft and claim the insurance money) are common ways people sustain themselves from day to day. This includes hustling to provide food, clothing, shelter, and other basic needs for themselves and their families. Grinding represents the different types of intense work that black women do, including hustling to manage life in troubled inner-city neighborhoods. The grind includes two common ways that women make money: through low-wage work in the formal economy and through paid work in the underground marketplace. Some women adopt a half-time hustle while others become urban entrepreneurs. Women in East Oakland often hold low-wage jobs that require long hours of labor-intensive work, but for many such jobs fail to provide a decent wage. In order to approximate a livable wage some women supplement
their income from low-wage paid work with income from hustles worked within the underground marketplace. Such half-time hustles can provide economically vulnerable women with a place to live and food to eat.

The following account from Rachel, a twenty-one-year-old Oakland native, illustrates how she simultaneously works as a nursing assistant and orchestrates insurance fraud to provide basic needs for herself and her developmentally disabled ten-year-old brother, for whom she is the primary caretaker. Rachel’s work as a nursing assistant takes place at a resident care facility a short bus ride away from her home. As she explains, “I work a lot and still don’t have enough money for everything we need. He [her brother] needs extra stuff that other kids don’t, and Social Security only covers some of it. The rest I have to come up with. . . . I have had a few cars stolen and one catch on fire over the last couple of years just so I can get the insurance money. It’s not something I’m proud of, but at the time I didn’t really see another way.”

Although Rachel is lawfully employed full-time, she resorts to insurance fraud just to get by financially. This type of fraud is not uncommon here, as Rachel goes on to tell me that it is from people she knows in the neighborhood that she learned of this scam and how to carry it out. She says that she grinds “all day, everyday,” but it is apparent that grinding for her is much more than going to her nursing assistant job. The work that Rachel does both professionally and illegally is an example of one way the hustle is used in conjunction with low-wage paid work.

Ruth, the 19-year old mother of a two-year-old, has lived in East Oakland over half of her young life. She, like Rachel, must also depend on a half-time hustle in order to provide basic needs for herself and her son. Ruth describes the “under-the-table” work she and her retired mother do to provide for their household:
My mom is really good at sewing. She always has been, but never did it full-time because she couldn’t ever make enough money at it to quit her other job as a janitor for the school district. But one day she got this chance to sew for this dry-cleaning place. They said they would pay her in cash once a week and drop off and pick up the stuff that needed to be mended. I do the work with her whenever I’m not at my day job. Even though it’s a lot of work for not much money it pays in cash, on time, every week. So it’s something we can pretty much count on.

Ruth and her mother work together to maintain their part-time hustle. This work is illegal, but it adds significantly to how they provide for their household. Although Ruth works full-time at King’s and her mother collects minimal retirement benefits from her janitorial job, the underground seamstress work they do each week is something they have come to rely on just as they do with the legal forms of income they earn. This type of work or “general labor” in both legal and illegal sectors is not uncommon for individuals and families struggling to survive in the inner city (Venkatesh 206, 34). Some legitimate businesses hire individuals on an occasional basis to complete small jobs; these jobs usually pay in cash, do not require employees to have proper certification or training, have no job security, and do not offer health or retirement benefits, workers compensation, and the like. Ruth’s mother’s weekly tailoring and mending work offers no stability and can be discontinued at any time without notice. For Ruth, grinding consists of both the work she does at her restaurant job and the routine underground seamstress work she and her mother do. Together this part-time hustle and low-wage work make it possible to provide some basic needs for their family.

Vanessa, a twenty-four-year-old mother of eight-month-old twin boys, has worked as an administrative assistant at a
local city government agency for the last three years since earning her associate degree in business. Vanessa proudly tells me how she put herself through school to earn her degree, which made getting her job possible. Though currently working in this position full-time, Vanessa also earns money as an unlicensed hairdresser, an underground job she has held since her teens. This part-time hustle is what paid for her education and now supplements the limited income she earns at her day job.

The underground work that women like Vanessa, Ruth, and others take on challenges the stereotypes of poor black women as lazy welfare queens. As Vanessa explains, “I have always liked doing hair and became pretty good at it. My sister went to cosmetology school and taught me a lot of what I know. When I was a kid I was always asking my friends to let me do their hair so I could practice just for fun. Then I got good, and people wanted me to do their hair for real. That is when I realized I could make money doing this. I have been ever since.”

Vanessa’s part-time hustle as a hairdresser helped her finance her education at the local community college. Without this part-time work she explains that earning her associate degree would not have been possible. Now as an administrative assistant and new mother of twins, her part-time hustle is still a vital financial resource for herself and her family. She explains that her day job provided “just okay” financially for her individually, but now with two children she regularly depends on the money she earns from her half-time hustle to help provide for her family’s basic needs. Vanessa’s illegal work as an unlicensed hairdresser and professional work as a city government employee operate in conjunction to help her provide for the daily needs of herself and her young children.

For Rachel, Ruth, and Vanessa, part-time hustles are central to the ways in which they manage their daily lives in the
inner city. Many working-poor individuals and families in the inner city have come to depend upon underground work, though many do not generally condone illegal behavior and some even fear the dangers associated with illegal hustles (Venkatesh 2006, chap. 7). Women like Rachel, Ruth, and Vanessa use low-wage work and illegal hustles as a means of economic survival. Some may participate in illegal work with goals of attaining power, prestige, and social mobility according to local standards, but for the women in this study, low-wage work and half-time hustles are about day-to-day economic survival with the hope of creating some level of economic stability even within this highly unstable underground arena. It is important to note that without significant changes in resources and opportunities for those living in poor urban communities like East Oakland, economic stability and upward mobility remain unlikely but the availability of underground work will persist. The half-time hustle operates in what Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh describes as the “shady world.” In this environment, inner-city households depend upon work as well as “off the books transactions” in the underground marketplace (2006, chap. 7).

The unlawful work performed by women in this study reflects the necessity of low-wage work and the half-time hustle working in conjunction as a means of financial survival. For women to maintain their full-time socially legitimate work and support their families it is important to some that their part-time hustles involve less violence and carry lesser legal penalties than hustles involving, for example, the drug trade. In this way the half-time hustle is different from the often gang-affiliated full-time criminal activity illustrated in what Venkatesh describes as “shady dealings” (2006, chap. 7). The types of half-time hustles performed by these women differ somewhat in nature even as the reasons why they participate in such illegal work are similar. Each woman is lawfully employed
full-time but still does not earn enough money to consistently provide basic needs for herself and her family. In turn, they all rely on this underground work to supplement the income earned from low-wage work. This dimension of the grind is central to how women and girls negotiate distressed daily life in the inner city.

While some women avoid hustles that increase the threat of violence, some women take part in underground work that heightens their risk of physical violence. In addition to individual strategies like those described above, women and girls are also involved in underground marketplaces like the drug trade. Gender patterns their involvement in these systems in key ways. In general, the underground marketplace in this setting is male dominated; men in their late teens through middle age generally control this underground system while employing women to do work within it as subordinates but not typically as partners. By a large margin men run the “drug game,” but they are increasingly recruiting young girls as “runners” for the delivery and pickup of their products and payments. These drug dealers also use young girls as lookouts for police and threatening outsiders. For men, markers such as the number of employees, women, property, cars, jewelry, and clothes they have determine their status. Some exceptions to these rules include traditional and nontraditional family legacies or carrying out crimes “successfully” that have gone unsolved by the police or higher-level public authorities. These exceptions grant limited flexibility upon gaining a “respected” place within the hierarchy, but only consistent successful work—or “putting in work,” as some have described it—maintains one’s status within it.

Limitations for women and girls in the local drug trade can make hustles like Ms. Jenny’s (which I will describe in the next section) and others’ seem more appealing. In a male-
dominated system Ms. Jenny has developed her own business that attracts regular customers. Her business is centered around the resale of stolen merchandise, but her work doesn’t involve the same types of risks that often come with the drug trade. Notably, less violence and lower penalties from law enforcement can attract more women to the underground buying and selling of goods.

**Hustling in the Underground Marketplace: The Case of Ms. Jenny**

One day I notice two children, a boy and a girl, who both look around eight or nine years old. They are dressed in uniforms of black pants and white polo-style shirts. Looking on, I see the two children pass the driveway of Ms. Jenny’s home. A black woman in her fifties, Ms. Jenny stands on her small porch in a housedress as she directs two young men carrying goods into her home. The young men make three trips between their minivan and Ms. Jenny’s front door, carrying several shoeboxes and overstuffed garment bags. I have seen these same young men make deliveries to Ms. Jenny around this time before. I have also observed many local residents come and go from Miss Jenny’s home carrying clothes, shoes, and a variety of other goods. Ms. Jenny is what I refer to as an underground entrepreneur: a person who sells stolen goods from retail stores out of their cars, homes, or on the street for a discounted price.

I first met Ms. Jenny through my neighbor Ms. Loretta, a retired postal worker in her late fifties. After talking informally on several occasions about both my field of study and happenings in the neighborhood, she tells me that she and Ms. Jenny have been friends for several years. I ask her to introduce me to Ms. Jenny and she agrees. On a Saturday afternoon in October Ms. Loretta and I begin the short walk from our apartment
complex to Ms. Jenny’s home. When we reach the modest single family home, I follow Ms. Loretta up three steps to the front porch and she rings the doorbell. I see a pair of eyes quickly pull back the curtain of a small window positioned on the left side of the front door.

“Is that you, Loretta?” I hear a woman say in a friendly voice as she unlocks the several deadbolts on her front door.

“Hey Jenny,” Ms. Loretta replies with a smile as the front door of the home swings open.

“Who is that?” Ms. Jenny says with a frown as she sees me standing beside her friend.

“Remember the girl I told you about who is doing a project for school?”

“Oh yeah, I sure do. Nice to meet you baby, come on in.” Ms. Jenny ushers us in her front door.

Inside Ms. Jenny’s home I follow her and Ms. Loretta into the “store,” as Ms. Jenny calls it, a two-room extension that was added on to the back of the house. The first thing I notice upon entering the brightly lit room is a wall safe resembling those designed to hold rifles and other artillery, wide enough for me to walk inside and reaching from floor to ceiling. Ms. Jenny watches closely as Ms. Loretta and I look at her merchandise, neatly organized by item type. I see clothing, shoes, and accessories of all styles, colors, and sizes arranged on display tables and hanging on wardrobe racks. Ms. Jenny asks for my help to reach a box on a high shelf; it contains goods pre-ordered by Ms. Loretta. After I retrieve the box for her she begins to remove its contents, a variety of children’s clothing items. She holds up each item, including jeans, shirts, dresses, and coats, and hands it to Ms. Loretta to review before putting it back in the box. Happy with her order, Ms. Loretta hands Ms. Jenny a white envelope. Ms. Jenny opens and quickly examines its contents with her fingers. Seemingly satisfied, with a smile on her round face, she folds the envelope and places it into the
pocket of her housedress. She turns and asks me, “Is there anything you want to take a closer look at?”

“Not today, but can I come back and look around?”

“Sure, and remember if there is something you want in a magazine or in a catalog, just bring me the picture and I can get it for you.”

“Okay,” I say, then ask, “Would you be willing to talk with me a little about your work sometime?”

“If you come back with an order and make a decent purchase I will gladly answer your questions,” she says with a laugh. “Business is business, baby.”

“Okay, Ms. Jenny, I understand. You got a deal.”

“Let Loretta know when you’re ready to come back and she will call me and then we can go from there.”

“All right, I will,” I reply as Ms. Jenny escorts us to the front door.

After meeting Ms. Jenny I followed up with her and returned to her “store” and purchased a pair of blue jeans and a plain black sweater. After I had made the purchase, Ms. Jenny seemed a little more relaxed in my presence and agreed to talk with me. I followed Ms. Jenny through her small kitchen and to a door that led to her well-manicured backyard. We each sat on overturned milk crates and leaned against the back wall of the house as she struggled with the slight breeze to light her cigarette. After taking a long drag on it, Ms. Jenny began explaining to me some of the challenges she has faced operating her underground business full-time for the last eight years. She has been robbed twice—“which isn’t bad,” she says—and has had some “issues” with law enforcement regarding her goods that she would not elaborate on when I asked her if she could tell me more about it. She tells of the “good” she has done through her business: helping women and men look their best for job interviews, dressing kids for their high school proms and graduations, and supplying families with
cribs, clothes, and diapers as they prepare for the arrival of a new baby.

“Do they pay you for this stuff?” I ask.

“Well, yeah—nothing is free. I have given things away before, but I need to keep a roof over my head too. I’m not saying I’m a saint, but I help a lot of people look good and feel their best through my business. They probably wouldn’t have nearly as nice quality of shoes and clothes and things if I didn’t run my business here. I do what I can.”

The full-time work that Ms. Jenny does in the underground marketplace is largely a result of her being laid off from her janitorial job of twenty-three years. She explained to me how she had always sold clothes and shoes here and there and around holidays when she came across a good supplier. I listen as she describes using this money to pay for unexpected expenses like medical bills when her children would get sick and getting her car repaired when it would break down. Yet after losing the janitorial job she had worked at for half her lifetime she was forced to sell stolen goods full-time. “I kept getting turned down from other cleaning jobs ’cause they can get young people to do the same work twice as fast, so I had to do something else,” she explains. This is when Ms. Jenny began to turn her seasonal hustle into a full-time underground business of sorts. She focused on building her business while staying beneath the radar of law enforcement as best she could. “Selling clothes and things has given me a way to pay my bills and help my kids from time to time. It’s not easy, and it has risks, but I truly don’t know how I would have made it otherwise.” Ms. Jenny had worked tirelessly at a paid low-wage job for over two decades, but at the time when many consider retirement she was unexpectedly laid off, and she was forced to find other work to keep “a roof over her head”—risky and illegal work in the underground marketplace.
NEGOTIATING NEIGHBORHOOD VIOLENCE

Women like Ms. Jenny grind against a backdrop of violence that poor inner-city residents are routinely exposed to. Even though much of the violence involves men in and outside the community, women like Ruth and Ms. Jenny are also affected as witnesses to the violence that takes place. Women in the community are also connected to experiences of violence through their relationships to men and boys. Such encounters can threaten their safety and that of their family, depending upon how they react to what they have witnessed and with whom they choose to discuss it. In addition to their experiences as bystanders, there is the very real issue of men involved in crimes thinking that a woman who was hanging around when something went down “couldn’t keep her mouth shut.” Whether the woman talked to the police, a friend, or neither one, if there is even the slightest assumption that she “ran her mouth,” death, physical assault, and/or sexual assault could be a real possibility for her and her family. Monique, a twenty-four-year-old East Oakland resident, explains a violent experience regarding snitching that still haunts her:

My friend Sasha was walking home one night and saw this car creeping down the street with its headlights off. She ran behind a Dumpster hoping they hadn’t seen her because she knew they were probably about to shoot at somebody and she didn’t want to see or hear anything. A week or so later the guy who was shot that night died in the hospital. My homegirl [Sasha] said she didn’t talk to anybody or say anything about being out that night, but it didn’t matter. A couple of days after the man died in the hospital, two guys rolled up on Sasha as she was walking home. They
grabbed her in the middle of the day and beat her up bad, right on the street, near where she was on the night of the shooting. They left her on the sidewalk, bleeding and barely conscious. All that happened, and she didn’t snitch on anybody. The crazy thing is it doesn’t really matter if she did or not; they were going to make sure she would be too scared to even think about snitching on anyone about anything, ever.

In this way young women are held to the same “no snitching” standards as others in the community. To “not snitch” or to not “be a snitch” requires that those who live here do not discuss what goes on with outsiders. “No snitching” is an unwritten rule of the street that one should not cross or ignore. The rule applies to any and all people who live in the community, and the code also has very racialized and gendered aspects. Black women are not to snitch on black men; they must remain silent not only out of fear of retaliation but also out of loyalty and a sense of community— spatially and in terms of racial solidarity. This takes place in opposition to outsiders— primarily, law enforcement.

The following field note entry illustrates a black woman’s allegiance to the community expectation of not snitching as well as how local law enforcement perceives this commitment as loyalty to local criminals. The field note entry documents an encounter that occurred when police in this East Oakland community barricaded an entire neighborhood block while questioning residents in an effort to find suspects in a robbery at a local takeout restaurant:

On a Friday night around 11:30 p.m., I am on my way home. I approach the street I live on and see that a barricade of police cars restricts it. I drive around to the other end of the block and see that no entrance is allowed there either. I park my car on a side street and walk up to one of the six
white male officers standing around. They look to be doing nothing in particular. I ask one of the officers what is going on. “Nothing out of the ordinary,” he replies, giving a slight chuckle. I do not laugh. He sees that I’m not laughing goes on to explain that Lucky Pond, a Chinese takeout restaurant a block away, was robbed. He says, “This is the third in a string of restaurant robberies over the last two weeks. The suspects held the place up with shotguns and then took off on foot.” They ran behind the restaurant and are suspected to be hiding in one of the houses on this block. The officer goes on to say that he and the other officers “had gone door-to-door searching with no luck, really only because no one on this street would give up the suspects. Of course, no one knows anything, as usual. The woman in the house over there”—he points off into the distance—“just stared at us when she finally opened her door. We repeatedly asked her questions, but she just stood there.”

Though I know exactly what he is referring to, I ask the officer, “What do you mean ‘as usual’?”

“You know,” he says, “the people over here and in other neighborhoods around here, too, never know anything. They would rather live with these criminals than tell us where they are so we can lock them up.”

Outsiders are often frustrated by the silence described by this officer. If people don’t “give up” suspects, then it is the residents who are seen as partially responsible for the crime and violence. According to this officer, the woman questioned by the police at her doorstep simply replied to the questions asked of her with a blank stare. The officer’s comments suggest that he did not expect anything more from this woman or any other resident. The officer, though still an outsider to this space, knew of the “code” of silence at work. For residents like the
The Grind

woman he sought to question, this silence makes sense. In the earlier account given by Monique she describes how her friend Sasha was brutally beaten in broad daylight by two men. The woman’s attack was linked to her presence near the scene of a drive-by shooting. On the night of the crime Sasha hid, yet the violence later directed toward her at this site indicates that she was in fact detected on the night the shooting occurred. Once the shooting victim was pronounced dead, the urgency of silencing any and all potential witnesses seemed to become critical for those involved. Soon after the case was elevated to a homicide, Sasha, a potential witness, was approached by two unknown men and viciously beaten. Cases like this one not only traumatize the victim but work to frighten others and remind them of the dangerous costs that can come with snitching, the perception of being a snitch, or just being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Violence like this targeted at innocent people can prompt blank stares and long silences when local residents are questioned by law enforcement regarding crimes and those involved.

When police officers questioned residents while looking for suspects in the robbery of the takeout restaurant they described blank stares and silence as a means by which neighborhood residents protect criminals. The police officers see these types of responses to questioning as adherence to criminality. In turn, local residents are trying to stay safe in a place where violent attacks can be waged based on the possibility of someone snitching. Responding to officers with silence and blank stares appears to be a way that some women stay safe. Women like Monique and Sasha are particularly vulnerable to the potential punishments that come with living in a neighborhood plagued by violence, poverty, and social isolation. Such punishments include intense acts of violence and persistent crime. The lack of cooperation with police here seems to be in part based on trying to ensure one’s own safety, not an effort
to protect criminal behavior. In the end, it is safer to maintain and respect the “code” of this community than to risk intervention at the hands of outsiders, even if they are paid to patrol and protect (Anderson 1999).

**Violence and Routine Activities**

Like their male counterparts, women and girls live in an East Oakland community that is shaped by poverty, underemployment, joblessness, and violence. Such elements affect residents both socially and psychologically. One result of the changes these neighborhoods have experienced over time is the exposure to lethal violence. Elijah Anderson (1999) shows that when unemployment, poor public services, racism, crime, and hopelessness are present within distressed urban neighborhoods, violence and other aggressive behavior often persist. The lives of residents who exist within the confines of such circumstances are affected directly in myriad ways. The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates how the threat of violence influences the most routine of activities in this setting.

It’s late Friday afternoon; the sun is blazing on this July day. The voice on the radio blasting from a neighboring apartment, just steps away from the one I share with my mother, says between songs that the temperature is 89 degrees right now. Most of the neighborhood sits outside under trees and in any other spare patches of shade (no one I know of here has air-conditioning). Music blares from parked cars as young men and boys walk by without shirts, women and girls in shorts and short dresses, and babies walk around wearing only diapers. The feeling outside is tense, as is usual with such high temperatures—which also signal trouble. I sit on the curb with a neighbor as she and I talk and watch her children play before us. Slowly a neon orange “scraper” on wheel rims that look to
be at least 24s [twenty-four inches in diameter] drives down the street at a respectful pace considering a lot of kids are at play in and out of the street. Everyone I notice looks up as the car passes by.

On hot days such as this it is very common to see scrapers joyriding. A scraper is a sedan, usually a late 1980s to early 1990s American car, often a Buick, Chevrolet, or Dodge. It is commonly painted a neon color, with tinted windows and very large wheel rims, no less than twenty-two inches in diameter. Scrapers became very popular with the rise of the Oakland area hyphy movement and the associated cultural performance known as ghost riding. On hot days when many people are outside, car owners commonly joyride and show off their scrapers for others to admire, similar to an auto show. Yet, with this show comes some apprehensions. Because many people do hang outside in order to escape the heat, this has also proven to be an easier time to settle prior debts via drive-by shootings. In this neighborhood, such gun violence is not unusual. Each time a scraper that has been associated with drive-by gun violence comes down a street at a slower than usual pace it could mean one of two things: the driver is taking caution for children at play or possible gun violence is about to occur. Tensions rise and fall continuously through the community at the thought of the latter.

Children and adults alike spend time this afternoon outside their homes trying to get some relief from the sweltering heat overtaking the space indoors. As adults make conversation with friends and neighbors and children play the feeling here seems peaceful. This mood changes within moments at the sight of a neon scraper slowly driving down the street. Most of the chatter stops as parents begin to look around and locate their children and people begin to move out of the street. I
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notice a few people move some distance away from the sidewalk toward residences. The sudden change in tone among individuals and families cooling off outside their homes on this afternoon is an example of how violence and the threat of violence influences even the most routine activities.

A central component of the intensity of the grind is developing strategies to manage violence. Yet violence works to further complicate the emotional labor, low-wage work, and work in the underground marketplace that represent the intense struggle required for women to make money here. In this case, the threat of violence disrupts how local residents are managing a routine activity—staying cool on a hot day. Some retreat to their homes, which are likely uncomfortable places to be on a day like this; yet with no place else to go and the risk of violence taking place just outside their door, many are left with few options. Observing how violence can and often does upset routine activities underscores how it can easily make the grind harder than it already is.

Managing the Threat of Violence

In an effort to manage, survive, and operate in this environment and its culture, residents must become familiar with the “code of the street,” a “set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence” (Anderson 1999, 33, 109). It is through this code that public social behavior is organized and often governed. The foundation of the “code” is respect, and without respect, either given or received, penalties are imposed (Anderson 1999). Nikki Jones (2010) writes that the “code” is not gender specific. As a means of survival in the inner-city community “young women . . . are encouraged to embrace some aspects of the ‘code of the street’” (Jones 2008, 76; see also Anderson 1999). Anderson’s concept of the “code of the street” emphasizes the alienation and isolation that has resulted from the
changing face of urban communities across the United States and the culture of these neighborhoods over the last several decades. Changing social norms, the lack of economic opportunities, and the increasingly harsh conditions of urban life have encouraged new ways of operating for the people who are confined to live in these spaces.

People develop a range of strategies to navigate this setting. In Jones’s study of African American adolescent girls and inner-city violence, she discusses the use of situated survival strategies as “patterned forms of interpersonal interaction, and routine or ritualized activities oriented around a concern for securing their personal well-being” (2010, 52–53). Such behaviors include, but are not limited to, fighting and other forms of physical aggression usually associated with boys and masculinity. The situated survival strategies employed by these young girls represent an effort to “effectively manage potential threats of interpersonal violence . . . at the risk of violating mainstream and local expectations regarding appropriate feminine behavior” (Jones 2010, 9).

Jones presents two strategies in her study. The first is situational avoidance, which encapsulates all of the effort and labor that inner-city adolescent girls undertake in order to avoid situations that could prove to be potentially threatening to their well-being and to avoid sites at which conflict might easily arise. The conscious and routine avoidance of probable circumstances and places of conflict is necessary in order to ensure safety in distressed urban communities. The second strategy, relational isolation, uncovers the consistent and deliberate effort to isolate oneself from building friendships and other close relationships in an attempt to avoid possible future situations of conflict directed at friends of loved ones that may require their involvement defensively. All of this takes place within the context of mainstream gendered expectations, accountability,
and beliefs regarding femininity and the ways in which girls—particularly black girls—“should” behave in their daily lives in the inner city (Jones 2010, chap. 2).

In the following account, Amber, a nineteen-year-old expectant mother, describes how she must regulate where she goes and who she spends time with to try and stay safe while living in the neighborhood:

My grandfather used to always say, “Pay attention wherever and whenever because you never know when somebody might get crazy.” I know now that he was right. I always switch up the way I walk to the bus stop and to work or wherever I have to go. I never go the same way two days in a row ’cause I don’t want anybody to pick up my pattern and surprise me one day. I also hang with the same girls. Me and my two best friends have been cool since we were in the second grade. We grew up together and we been through a lot with each other: boys, fights, babies, all kinds of stuff, so we cool. I sometimes hang out with a couple of the girls from work who are okay, but I never bring them over here [to her neighborhood]; we not tight like that. I also don’t mess with no dudes that’s trying to hustle hard [sell drugs]. My ex-boyfriend is in jail now because of drugs. When I was with him it was this one time that we were at this hamburger place where you stand outside and order through a window and it was late, about eleven or eleven thirty p.m., and these two guys rolled up and we were so busy looking at the menu we didn’t see these two guys about to rush us. One of the guys choked me out and the other one held his pistol to my boyfriend’s head until he gave him all the money he had on him. He had just came from a run so he was carrying about four stacks [four thousand dollars]. It was never the same after that. I
was always scared for us to go out after that. That was the last time I was with somebody who sold drugs like that.

Amber describes here some of the lengths she goes to trying to stay safe. She emphasizes having to walk different routes each day as she travels through the community. In addition to living in a troubled environment this daily task simply adds to the stress involved with living and traveling through this space, further complicating the grind for women here. Amber monitors her movements in the neighborhood to try and avoid being followed or surprised by someone watching her route. She also appears to take pride in the close relationship she has with her two best friends. These relationships seem to offer a level of support to Amber in a place where it is not always clear who is there to help and who is not. She goes on to explain a violent encounter she experienced with her ex-boyfriend as they were picking up a late-night meal when two men surprised them on the street. This encounter helped to shape the kinds of men Amber will or will not associate with; after this encounter she was traumatized to the point that she decided to no longer date men who are involved with selling drugs.¹ She illustrates how violence influences some of the most routine activities that are a part of managing her day-to-day life. Violence and the threat of violence intensify the grind for Amber and others like her in this community everyday.

Surviving the Grind: The Role of Informal Networks

At times the work of the grind can be an individual project, but some of the labor of carrying the burden of the grind is a group effort. In addition to their involvement in the underground economy, women also play a large role in maintaining and reproducing a neighborhood social support network that is generally closed to outsiders. This informal network consists of nonfamily
members who live in close proximity to one another but not in the same household (Roschelle 1997, 33–34). These members have frequent to semifrequent interaction with neighbors when providing and/or receiving services such as childcare, transportation, food, and household chores as well as sharing ongoing emotional support. Sometimes these services are given in exchange for other goods or services, but not always. I participated in this type of informal social support network when living in the neighborhood and conducting my fieldwork. For example, early one weekday morning Leslie—a twenty-three-year-old mother of a sixteen-month-old daughter, who lived in the unit next door to me—was sitting on the ground in the empty parking stall where her car was usually parked. Dressed in a red polo-style shirt and black pants—the uniform for the office supply store where she worked—she sat shaking her head, looking to be on the verge of tears.

“Everything okay, Leslie?” I asked as I descended the last few steps leading to where she sat.

“No,” she cried, “I just got down here and my car is gone.”

“Gone?”

“Yeah, like disappeared, stolen—gone. I just don’t know what to do, ’cause I have to be at work in thirty minutes and I can’t be late ’cause I’m on probation, I just got this job and I can’t lose it. I am so frustrated I could scream.” Tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Come on, I’ll take you.”

“Huh?” She looked slightly puzzled.

“I’ll take you. You said you have to be there on time to keep your job, right?”

“Yeah,” she replied, wiping away tears from her face.

“Then let’s go.”

“Thank you. I owe you, like, for real.”

After this occasion, Leslie’s usually dry personality began to brighten up when we crossed paths in our complex and around
the neighborhood. She began to say hello with a smile and she would regularly introduce me to her friends and relatives as “college girl.” About a month or so after I gave Leslie a ride to work she knocked on my door.

“Hey, Leslie,” I said as I unlocked my security gate.

“Hey, college girl,” she said. “These are for you.” She handed me a stack of four composition notebooks and a package of pens. “I see you always writing in these, and I wanted to tell you thank you for taking me to work that day. If I would have been late that day, I would have got fired.”

“It was no problem, really—and thank you for the notebooks and pens,” I answered.

“But, for real, you’re cool. If there is anything I can do for you just let me know. I got you,” she said as she walked away.

As Leslie and I began to talk more frequently, sometimes she would ask me to babysit her daughter for short periods of time when her work schedule would overlap with the times her mother or the baby’s father were scheduled to come pick up her child. I often agreed. In return, Leslie would regularly offer to help me find participants for my study and would often bring me notebooks, pens, and pencils that she explained she got for a “super discount” at her job.

Yet this support network was not just something between Leslie and me. Ms. Virginia, an older woman who lived on the first floor of the apartment complex where Leslie and I lived, rarely had visitors to come by and check on her, and she was sometimes ill. Tenants in the complex took Ms. Virginia on as their own kin, and she seemed to do the same. One afternoon when I was taking out my garbage I saw Ms. Virginia struggling to get down the stairway while trying to hold onto the railing with one hand and carry her garbage bag in the other.

“Let me take that out for you, Ms. Virginia” I said.

“Oh thank you, baby. That would be a big help to me,” she replied.
After taking both bags to the Dumpster, I saw Ms. Virginia making her way back to her apartment.

“Ms. Virginia, you know what?” I said as she turned to look at me. “I really don’t mind taking your garbage out for you. If you want, you can just leave your garbage bag outside of your door and I will swing by and take it out when I am coming or going each day.”

“Only if it’s not too inconvenient,” she answered.

“It is no trouble at all; I pass your door everyday.”

“Well, I guess I will take you up on that. Thank you.”

I noticed Leslie picking up Ms. Virginia’s mail and newspaper and placing it by her door many evenings as she would come home from work. On a few occasions I also encountered Ms. Virginia leaving our complex with Tanya, another neighbor in our building, and returning with groceries. Many neighbors seemed to support Ms. Virginia in the ways that they could knowing that she was older—in her seventies, living alone, and appearing to have few friends, relatives, or other resources to aid in her care.

Another member of this social support network in our apartment complex was Robert, a tall slender man in his early forties who was always friendly and wearing a smile. Robert, who worked in construction, became the guardian of his six-year-old niece and eight-year-old nephew when their parents, his sister and brother-in-law, were killed in an auto accident. One evening when I was came by Ms. Virginia’s door to take out her trash, she opened her security gate and asked me to come in for a moment. Inside, she briefly explained to me that Robert had been laid off from his job and she had prepared a meal for him and his niece and nephew. She asked me if I could take the dinner she had prepared to Robert’s apartment. She also asked me to tell Robert that for as long as he wanted she would be happy to prepare bag lunches for his niece and nephew to take to school. I agreed and delivered the dinner to
Robert’s apartment and relayed Ms. Virginia’s message to him. The next day I decided to support Robert and his family in a way that I could: on my way home from the local grocery store I left some loaves of bread and bags of apples on Robert’s doorstep. Two large bags were already sitting next to his front door, one of which appeared to be oranges and the other potatoes.

The mutual aid performed by those in this social network (including Leslie, Ms. Virginia, Robert, Tanya, myself, and others in the neighborhood) operated as a form of social support. Structurally these informal networks are about purposefully sharing resources as a survival strategy in an attempt to ease economic deficiency (Roschelle 1997, 65). Yet it is important to note that such compensation for social support was not predetermined or required but was often given voluntarily to make life easier for individuals and families who were experiencing particularly hard times. For example, when I gave Leslie a ride to work when her car was stolen and later babysat her daughter, she in turn helped me find participants for my study by asking her friends and relatives if they would be willing to talk to me. She also brought me composition books and pens. These were all ways of offering me social support for the support I had shown her. I did not have a set of expectations for what I would receive or that I would receive anything at all for the aid I had offered Leslie, just as she didn’t initially expect me to offer to give her a ride to work the morning her car was stolen. Yet once I initiated an offer of support to her she quickly responded with letting me know that she now felt that she “owed me.” I observed no agreed-upon expectations regarding mutual aid, its value, or how it should be compensated, but once someone began performing this work for a neighbor the recipient generally understood that she now “should” repay the other person in some way that was valuable to them. For example, in thanks for the support given to her, Ms. Virginia often
gave baked goods or other prepared food items in return. I often came home to notes on my door from her asking me to come by her apartment and pick up a cake, pie, lasagna, or some other dish she had made for me. I observed her often do the same for Leslie and others in our complex. When Robert was hired by another construction company and reported being “back on his feet again,” I repeatedly encountered he and Ms. Virginia at the local grocery store and she often spoke of how appreciative she was that he had driven her there or to other places she needed to go.

The exchange of goods and services as a form of social support is surely relied on by some but seemingly appreciated by all. Specifically, this network of support helps make day-to-day life in a troubled environment a bit easier to bear. Amid neighborhood violence, limited local resources, and unstable job prospects, being able to rely on neighbors for support is vital. The mutual trust among neighbors, including a willingness to support one another, reflects Robert J. Sampson, Steven W. Raudenbush, and Felton Earls’s (1998) description of “collective efficacy.” The presence of such community cohesion challenges prevailing notions that outcomes such as crime and violence are the only results of urban communities plagued by poverty, joblessness, and the like. Providing occasional transportation, gifts of food, help with household chores, and other goods and services to one another illustrates a shared sense of understanding and community among residents within the distressed inner-city space. The continued operation of this non-kin network uncovers some of the struggles that residents face and how they are often forced to rely on one another to manage those struggles. This informal network also operates as a resource for residents who cannot or do not receive a necessary level of support for their daily survival from social services or other community agencies charged with helping families and individuals in distress. Without this independent network, residents who
have become more than neighbors to one another and more like family may not survive.

*The Boundaries of Social Support*

Venkatesh’s (2006) study of the underground economy of the urban poor describes a kind of community network that operates between kin and non-kin in an urban setting. Venkatesh sheds light on how poor individuals and families open their homes and what limited resources they have to friends and family who have fallen on hard times. This community network reflects what Carol Stack describes as “domestic networks” (1974, chap. 3), which are established among kin and non-kin as a survival strategy to ease the harsh effects of economic deprivation. Such networks depict a type of exchange relationship rather than a form of collective efficacy. The work performed in these types of networks have clear expectations for reciprocity. Venkatesh explains that it is common for neighbors and friends to “pool together income from various sources, barter for goods, and develop intricate schemes to exchange services” (Venkatesh 2006, 23). Unlike the social support network I describe, there seems to be a lack of mutual trust and desire to support the common good of those within the network without the expectation of being compensated for performing good deeds for one another. As a result, such networks become a sort of exchange relationship rather than just a form of social support. Nevertheless, in many poor communities resources are few and thus many have little to give to others, making reciprocity understood and expected. Yet, as my respondents show in some inner-city settings, there is a strong commitment to community cohesion despite individual struggle for economic survival. This sense of loyalty, mutual trust, and empathy built among neighbors and expressed through an informal social network represents an emotional reaction to the neighborhood as well as the people and
institutions of which it is composed (Small 2004, 165, 182; see also Gregory 1998 and Venkatesh 2000).

While participants in the present study show a commitment to their neighbors through acts of social support and through displays of loyalty, mutual trust, and empathy, these acts are unlikely to be solely altruistic all of the time. Reciprocity is not required, but it is understood and expected. Mutuality works to strengthen ties between individuals by operating as a tangible form of one person’s appreciation of another’s good deed. Reciprocation also works as a way of maintaining balance between neighbors for the generous actions performed versus those received. The boundaries of expectation for reciprocity are carefully maintained by the degree of the act of kindness displayed. In other words, people generally do not give more than they receive. This helps to prevent an altruistic act from descending into exploitation.

Participation in informal social support networks illustrates a way in which social capital is used within this poor community. Mario Luis Small suggests that there are key individual-level factors that contribute to positive outcomes that result from the relationship between the negative condition of neighborhood poverty and social capital; such factors include affect toward one’s neighborhood, employment status, age, immigration status, and individual perception of the neighborhood (Small 2004, chap. 8). I propose that the informal social support network found among Leslie, Ms. Virginia, Robert, Tanya, and myself reflects a cross between collective efficacy, domestic networks, and how individuals use social capital. This network is not specifically an exchange relationship but rather an informal commitment to helping those in need in whatever way one can. To belong to the network or to receive support from those involved, reciprocity is appreciated but not required. This network is made up of non-kin ranging
in age from their early twenties through mid-seventies who share a level of dedication to supporting those in their immediate surroundings and building a sense of community through social support. This network is fostered out of the common experience of managing impoverished inner-city life and is designed to help ease the strain associated with the daily demands of living under distressed conditions.

With the increasing presence of violence and dwindling mainstream services and professional resources, life is even harder now than it was in previous decades. Today there are fewer stable job opportunities that pay a livable wage, and there is a steady increase in the displacement of poor inner-city residents. Complicated by routine neighborhood violence and a steady decline in local residents’ trust in law enforcement require individuals and families to call on others in the community for support. This social support can help supplement some of the work women do to manage their daily involvement in the grind.

A central part of negotiating distressed inner-city life for black women includes the intense formal and informal daily work commonly referred to as the grind. For many women living in this setting, work within the socially legitimate workforce as well as the underground marketplace is often performed to maintain day-to-day survival. The ways in which gender patterns women’s involvement in the grind is significant. The majority of respondents in this study are mothers, many of whom are the primary or sole providers for their children. This responsibility has proven to be particularly challenging for mothers living under harsh conditions, including poverty and underemployment. In turn, many women here participate in half-time hustles and the underground marketplace in addition to maintaining low-wage work, all to provide for the daily needs of their families. In the male-dominated underground setting, women and girls are often employed but do not control most
aspects of this system, including the “drug game.” Those women and girls who do work in the drug trade often work as “runners” or lookouts. This work can carry harsh legal penalties as well as dangerous consequences on the street. Such punishments can discourage the participation of some women in the drug trade and make other types of half-time hustles seem more appealing, something that may be of particular importance to mothers.

Becoming an underground entrepreneur like Ms. Jenny or working as an unlicensed hairdresser like Vanessa or as an “under the table” seamstress like Ruth can offer women a way to make money to help support their families. In addition, the active role of women working in this underground marketplace (particularly as entrepreneurs, like Ms. Jenny) illuminates the changing roles of women in such a male-dominated space. Ms. Jenny’s work challenges the common role of women working secondary to men and sheds light on the possibility of upward mobility for women in this system. The consistent participation of women like Vanessa and Ruth who work both underground and in socially legitimate spaces represents a more fluid role that women have developed as they travel in and out of this underground system from day to day.

Structural factors like unemployment, racial segregation, and crime are responsible for the continuation of black poverty in the United States. The segregation that creates communities like East Oakland also creates race and class isolation. Segregation is central to keeping out a workable retail sector in this setting. The grind emerges as a way for black women to make sense of the formal and informal work they do under these conditions.

As a result, underground and often illegal networks have developed to provide necessary goods and services. Working in the underground marketplace is not an easy task for women who are seen as subordinates in this system. As a way of managing survival amid these harsh structural conditions, community
members have created their own social support networks that operate as a way to help sustain local families. In chapter 2, I will discuss another demand of life in this setting for black women: I will explore how they manage exposure to microinteractional assaults in their neighborhood, another part of their everyday experience in the grind.