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Contextualizing Kindergarten Readiness Data: A Qualitative Research Study of the Highland Neighborhood in Spartanburg, South Carolina

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Spartanburg, South Carolina**

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1. Project Background

This project was undertaken as a result of conversations initiated by members of the Spartanburg Academic Movement (SAM) about the desirability of qualitative data to contextualize quantitative data generated by the use of a validated national instrument in Spartanburg County Schools. SAM is a nonprofit and community movement that facilitates the discussion of shared information and intentional, collaborative, and strategic work by cross-sector partnerships in order to foster high levels of academic attainment for all children in Spartanburg County. As part of data-gathering efforts by SAM, the Early Development Instrument (EDI) was implemented to gather data about kindergarten readiness first in Spartanburg School District 7, then in 2017, across all seven Spartanburg County school districts. The EDI is a validated, population-based measure of early child development in five key domains (physical health, emotional maturity, social competence, language and cognitive skills, and communications skills and general knowledge).¹ Kindergarten teachers respond to the questions on the EDI for each child in a kindergarten class.

EDI efforts in Spartanburg are part of a national initiative, Transforming Early Childhood Community Systems (TECCS), which is itself a partnership between the UCLA Center for Healthier Children and United Way Worldwide. Following the administration of the EDI countywide, UCLA/TECCS conducted analysis of countywide data and provided analysis to SAM in census tract form so that data could be understood and presented visually as place-based data. SAM staff members shared the EDI data with numerous community groups, and based upon the desire of community leaders within particular census tracts, SAM selected geographical areas of focus for our research. These census tracts were selected primarily because of the interest of community leaders in the neighborhoods in taking next steps for improving outcomes. These tracts are 210.01 (the Forest Park neighborhood) and 208 (the Highland neighborhood). Both are neighborhoods on the Southside, and children from each attend Spartanburg School District 7.

The community-engaged qualitative research conducted by our team in 2019 offers contextualization of the EDI data for these two census tracts in the City of Spartanburg. This report shares the data from census tract 208, the Highland neighborhood.

While census data and the other limited quantitative data available give a sense of community demographics, this large-scale picture does not reveal why the data looks the way it does; how community members experience opportunities and disparities; and how community members express their needs and aspirations. Organizations working to co-create solutions to challenges

¹ <https://www.healthychild.ucla.edu/pages/edi>

do not have the capacity to elicit qualitative data that highlights individual situations and narratives, particularly at the census tract level. In combination with quantitative data, the qualitative research in this report is intended to: a) help community partners and researchers develop better, more informed next steps, shaped by voices within identified communities; b) provide better cultural context for community organizations to be able to do their work inclusively and effectively.

2. Top Line Analysis

The Highland census tract (census tract 208) in Spartanburg, South Carolina, encompasses a neighborhood landscape with distinct residential zones, identities, and dynamics. The Highland landscape at the time of our data collection includes spaces of positivity and neighborhood engagement: public spaces for recreation, like Stewart Park, and community resources like the Bethlehem Center and Thornton Center. It also is comprised of places, like Norris Ridge, Prince Hall, and certain streets, that residents associated with challenges. In some residential zones, such as Norris Ridge,² there is a strong element of impermanence and transience, as new residents enter and leave the neighborhood with frequency.

Perceptions of residents of social interactions and place are heterogeneous and shaped by both social identity and the remembered past that residents associate with the neighborhood based upon their own experiences or those of others. There is, for many of our interlocutors, a memory of violence, both of specific events recalled by residents and the slow violence of racial segregation and exclusion from decision-making in the past. Some older residents referenced an infrastructure that was once a draw for the Black community but was done away with by past decision-makers, and some residents recalled individual acts of criminal violence they associated with particular places.

Neighborhood connectivity is also a challenge. While residents reported being connected to other areas of town through family ties, schools, work, and the need to make purchases outside the neighborhood, infrastructure for connectivity is challenging. There are three distinct, car-friendly entry points to the neighborhood, and the lack of complete streets (friendly to pedestrians and those using vehicle transport) presents hazards for those leaving the neighborhood on foot. City buses run regularly but infrequently. As a result, for those without private vehicle transport, daily tasks, like grocery purchases, can be time-consuming, friction-filled, or dangerous.

One of our interlocutors mentioned [The Boston Basics](#), “five, fun, simple, and powerful ways that every family can give every child a great start in life.” The first of these is “Maximize love, manage stress.” What Highland residents describe and what our research team observed is an environment in which many community members seek to support children, and also in which residents report significant stressors for themselves and the children in the neighborhood. The persistence of hope and care in the voices many residents shared with our team is both an invitation and a challenge to the greater Spartanburg community to “maximize love, and manage stress” alongside those who are already doing so for children and neighbors.

² On October 14, 2019, Spartanburg City Council voted unanimously to take the first steps toward demolishing Norris Ridge, relocating residents, and redeveloping the site.

3. Methodology

There were two primary methods for gathering data:

1. phenomenological observations by researchers as participant-observers or bystander-observers in community spaces;
2. semi-structured interviews by researchers with community members (ages 18 and older) to elicit narratives around questions such as:
 - What is an ordinary day like for you (and/or your family) living in Highland?
 - What do you like about Highland?
 - What do you wish were different?

All observations and the majority of interviews took place in the summer months when most schools were out of session. Data from observations and interviews were analyzed using established qualitative methods,³ and this written report was prepared from that analysis. All names of individuals and identifying information have been changed to preserve anonymity; only names referenced by residents in relation to publicly available information are included. The report and findings are being shared with community collaborators whose interest sparked the project and will shape further research and action.

4. Major themes identified in the data

The following themes consistently emerged from the observation and interview data, and these themes serve as the organizing structure of this report.

Infrastructure and Neighborhood Connectivity
Friction, Gaps, and Fragmented Access to Resources
Infrastructure and Use of Space in Neighborhood
Transience

Perceptions of Crime, Neighborhood
Perception of Child Safety: Schools, Housing, Play Areas
Gangs or Teens Behaving as if in Gangs
Memory of Violence and Place, Comparisons to Today

Relationships & Ties
Children, Grandchildren, and “Bonus Kids”
Reported Interactions and Community Member Efforts to Support Children
Observed Interactions in Public

Hope and Care

³ Heideggerian hermeneutic analysis

Infrastructure and Neighborhood Connectivity

Friction, Gaps, and Fragmented Access to Resources

Educators we spoke with talked to us about [The Boston Basics](#), which are “five fun, simple, and powerful ways that every family can give every child a great start in life.” These basics are described as easy and free and can be done while a caregiver is engaged in other tasks such as shopping or playing. Sarah, an educator who works with children in the Highland neighborhood, supports the Boston Basics but acknowledges that the context for those raising children in Highland may make the Basics not so simple. Sarah told us:

The Basics is 5 simple things that are completely free that a parent can do with their child to ensure that they are more successful. The first is Maximize Love and Minimize Stress, which is hard for these parents, you’re stressed, you don’t have money, you don’t have stability.

The researchers’ own experiences spending time in the Highland neighborhood brought to light the difficulty of connecting to public resources, to stores with healthy and affordable food, and to other necessities for families and children. Trips to key locations outside the neighborhood often included time-consuming travel or friction-filled situations.

Bus ride to Division of Social Services

To gain a better understanding of neighborhood connectivity to Division of Social Services (DSS), researchers rode the bus routes that connect Highland to DSS. Route 7 connects Highland to Downtown Bus Terminal, where a passenger must transfer to Route 3 to reach DSS.⁴ Observations from that bus ride include the following.

Upon arrival at the DSS stop on Beaumont Avenue:

I notice that one must cross the street to get to DSS, which can be dangerous due to the intersection at Beaumont Avenue and Highway 221 being a busy intersection with sometimes heavy traffic. Furthermore, DSS is at the back of the small shopping center, but it is a sizable walk for many people, including older caretakers or young children.

Further observations from the DSS stop:

We look up and notice the yellow letters on the cash advance building ... We walk towards it to find some bright red letters that say “CSL Plasma” and we also notice a Black woman entering the place. We are interested in learning more about the plasma. We make our way in and I immediately sense the change of atmosphere. First is the smell – because it is a hospital smell mixed with body odor. In the donation room I count about 40 plasma chairs which all are occupied. The demographics are mostly Black and men... In the waiting room, there is a Black man on the phone talking loudly and what I hear is, “no I gotta wait now for my blood pressure to go down so I can donate.”

At the central bus station, transferring to Route 7 to return to Highland, a researcher observed:

⁴ Route 3: http://www.cityofspartanburg.org/cms_assets/SPARTA/North_Church_Street_Route.pdf;
Route 7: http://www.cityofspartanburg.org/cms_assets/SPARTA/Crestview_Route.pdf

We walk out and on our way to board the bus for Route 7 Crestview, a man calls out to us and we speak briefly about where we are going. He points us in the direction of the bus, explains to us that he grew up in Highlands, and then asks if we can spare a quarter so he can get a bus ride home. [My fellow researcher] hands him one and we board the bus. This bus is emptier than the Route 3 bus, and we ride through town, towards and through Highland and over near what used to be Park Hills Elementary.

The neighborhood entrance on Forest Street

Observations of one of the neighborhood entrances raised further questions of connectivity from Highland to the rest of Spartanburg:

I turn right into the neighborhood and notice it is separated from Forest Street, which has four lanes and a bare median, by large power lines and what appears to be some sort of waterway, as there is a bridge-like structure I travel on as I make the turn. It makes me wonder about how the entry and exit points for the neighborhood are somewhat controlled by the infrastructure, so that if you're a pedestrian, it's not easy to take shortcuts to the main roads. We pass a Black man on foot as we enter; he is walking quickly and appears to be in his 20s or 30s.

During another visit to this neighborhood entrance, a researcher observed:

As I enter the Highland neighborhood from Forest Street, I see a young woman walking with a very young child, maybe 3-4 years old. Both appear to be Hispanic. They are walking at the edge of the street; there is no sidewalk, and the grass at the edge of the road is somewhat high. The woman appears to be listening and talking to the little girl, who is also talking. I wonder where they are going because we appear to be a long way from stores and playgrounds. I wonder if there is a bus stop and if buses are still running after 5:00 pm on Saturday.

Grocery Store

When our research team attempted to buy simple, staple groceries while in Highland, it became apparent that Highland had very limited access to fresh food. The only full-service grocery store nearby was the Save-A-Lot. Traveling there by car required driving out of the way and making some awkward turns, and it would have been difficult to travel there by foot, crossing busy streets and walking without benefit of sidewalks for part of the way. One researcher who went to buy groceries at the Save-A-Lot observed:

I am in a hurry to get the supplies for the team, but I notice the produce section as I go by. It is maybe three feet wide and three feet tall. The vegetables in it do not look appetizing. There is something leafy that looks wilted. There is a much larger section devoted to meat. I see large chunks of meat, red with a lot of bones showing, sealed in plastic wrap.

The young Black woman currently checking out has a 1-year-old in her cart and another woman of a similar age is with her. Most of their groceries are already in bags. The woman raises her voice to say "stop that" to a 5-year-old girl sitting on a stool near the exit door. I had not noticed the girl doing anything. The woman gets her receipt and says an item was supposed to be five for a dollar but has not rung up that way. The Black female cashier explains the receipt to her and says actually it is right, it just shows the

discount in a strange place. The woman doesn't understand or doesn't believe it and is still questioning the receipt. Both she and the cashier keep a friendly tone, but the woman checking out seems anxious. Eventually a manager, who is a white man, is called over. I find myself feeling relieved that he is friendly and respectful to the woman. He looks at the receipt and says actually it is wrong. He fixes the error.

The woman customer is now standing near the exit, looking at her receipt. She says to the manager that the ramen noodles have rung up at the wrong price. He stops the cashier, scans the ramen, touches some buttons, and says to the woman, "yes, you're right." He proceeds to re-ring the woman's order on the cash register.

Finally the manager tells the cashier to go ahead and ring me up. I pay with a credit card. I notice that it requires a signature even though the total is under \$5. I have never had that experience at any other store in town. The screen freezes and won't allow me to sign. The manager is called over. He hits some buttons on the register to override it and then lets me sign the printed receipt. I notice that I am feeling stressed from the unexpected amount of time it has taken me to purchase a small amount of groceries.

The Save-A-Lot grocery store closed in August 2019, and the nearest grocery stores are now a 10-15-minute drive away, or require a lengthy bus ride.⁵

Resources: Access, Gaps in Access, and Challenges

Our interview participants spoke to us of resources available for parents, caregivers, and children. They also spoke to us of the challenges of getting people in different parts of the neighborhood connected to those resources.

Stanley, a neighborhood resident, talked with us about resources available to children and their caregivers:

With that after school program, Ms. Patrena [Mims] you know that's over the [Bethlehem] Center, the room with the computers that she purchased herself for the kids to come in and teach them. Down the street you have the [activity] center, Thornton, and that was the guy that used to be over it back when I was a kid, Reverend Thornton and they built the center down there at the park and they do a lot of after school programs down there teaching the kids.

Gerard, another Highland resident, spoke of the same computer center and the challenges of making sure all members of the community take advantage of the resource:

[But what about] the older kids? Yeah, the younger kids are there [at the Bethlehem Center] until 12 or 13 and the older kids are down there, but they do a lot of stuff you know they have a lot of great turn-outs and stuff. But you just have to get the parents more involved. That's a big thing even with the computer lab it's there for the kids but it's also there for the community. You gotta get people to come in and they don't come in

⁵ Swann, Samantha. "South side Save-a-Lot grocery store closes in Spartanburg." <https://www.goupstate.com/news/20190826/south-side-save-a-lot-grocery-store-closes-in-spartanburg>.

but it's here and it's free you know, job searching whatever it's here. But that's the only problem here and the people not applying themselves.

Gerard also articulated the challenges to resource access that come from time, transportation, and safety issues:

I know it's a lot of different things, parents can't get to certain things for a lot of families, you know some work and some don't have transportation, it'll be hard for them to get them to the program. Even here, if it's dark, you know, not gonna have kids walkin' at night, so it's a lot of different little things that need help, resources is a big thing, too, you know 'cause nothing is free.

Also, even the successful programs cannot address all the hours that children are out of school. Gerard points out:

With the [Bethlehem] Center and the hours for the after-school program there is only so much they can do... They've got a good program but with all this runnin free they need something to really occupy them more like some tutoring and stuff like that and I know it all starts at home truly but a lot of times you know they just let them run free... I notice some areas that you see 'em and it's hard to get people to volunteer. When you say volunteer, people look at you funny, it's kinda crazy that nobody wants to volunteer their time. It takes a community to all come together and be a part of it... There is only so much [the Center and its programs] can do and you got young parents, real young parents and young grandmothers. So they got the feeling of life and they have to raise kids, it's a lot.

Sarah, an educator, made a similar point: "I still meet families that are here and don't even know [Bethlehem Center director] Ms. Patrena [Mims] and [community leader] Ms. Wilma [Moore]. If they knew them, look at how many things they could be helping them with."

Sarah added the additional context that people in charge of resources outside the neighborhood may not be willing to come into the neighborhood, either for logistical or perceived safety reasons:

Getting the Library Book Mobile to go down there. These kids don't have books. The Chinese take-out people are not even going there, I highly doubt the Library will go in there. Get these parents to get library cards. That in itself is something we have really struggled with. But if we can even get the Library Book Mobile to go once a week, even if it's at the front, right by the Thornton Center, those parents would commit... My colleague called the Chinese food delivery people and they said well, they are going to have to come to the gates because we do not go past the gates. That was very eye opening to me because I always get Chinese food delivered to my door. So yeah, I'm like if they don't deliver to Highland, I am sure others won't either.

In our conversation with Stanley, his comments brought up the additional complicating factor that some parents and caregivers may be overwhelmed or hard to reach, particularly in Prince Hall, a Spartanburg Housing Authority property, and Norris Ridge, a privately owned Section 8 apartment complex:

Ms. Patrena [the Bethlehem Center Director] took over but there's a lot of assistance that's needed in Norris Ridge and probably Prince Hall area with the kids cause there's a lot of unwedded mothers down there. They are struggling.

Stanley went on to explain that he thinks that programs like those at the Bethlehem Center are also needed in public housing because of the children not being raised in a two-parent household. He indicated that this problem of single mothers not accessing the available resources seems to him systematic and very common.

Sarah made a similar point:

But I think they could do more for the kids as far as the Thornton Center. It is right there and I believe that they have homework help in there sometimes. The Thornton Center is a community center, it is located right by Norris Ridge. So I would like to see the Thornton Center do more of what the Bethlehem Center is doing because it is right there near Norris Ridge.

Annalee, who lives at Norris Ridge and has two small children, in answer to "What would like to see in your community?" told us that she'd like a more positive climate, especially for the sake of her children. She also gave the recommendation of more activities for children at the Thornton Center, as well as getting the Book Mobile to come through the community so that her children can pick out some books to read.

Infrastructure and Use of Space in Neighborhood

The different areas of what the City of Spartanburg identifies as "Highland Neighborhood" each have their own character and are not necessarily perceived as one coherent whole by residents. As one resident, Caroline, told us: "They divided Prince Hall and Norris Ridge and all this area considered the Highlands. Now they call themselves separated like that. Can't get the peoples to come together."

Infrastructure, and use patterns of infrastructure such as parking, also present challenges to families and even some dangers to children. As in other areas, age and ability of the residents are key variables. One interview participant in Norris Ridge told us that access to her apartment is often difficult for her and her two small children: "I hate the parking because people that do not live here take up the spaces. The walk be so long."

Stewart Park and Surrounding Area

When the research team was at Stewart Park hosting a meal event for residents, one researcher observed challenges for users related to the design of the park and the sheltered picnic area:

I notice our team unloading tables and chairs from the parking lot, which is some distance from the shelter. The two port-a-lets are in the parking lot; one appears slightly damaged as it did last time. They are a long way from the splash pad, and I wonder how accessible they are for an adult supervising multiple children. I pull over on the street alongside the shelter area; the street is up a steep hill from the shelter. The ground on the hillside is

uneven; it is clear from the exposed clay that it has been eroded by rainfall and the runoff of rivulets or streams of water.

A combination of design and previous use of space by others presents challenges for those who use the picnic shelter:

We unload my car. It is difficult to pick one's way down the hill. In the shelter area are various metal picnic tables. Two have been moved very close together and it is difficult to navigate the space with all that we are unloading. There are large piles of burnt charcoal powder on most of the tables, except one or two at which a couple of women are sitting. There is also more charcoal on the concrete slab floor. We try to figure out what to do. I remember there are wipes in my car, and we wipe down the tables, wetting paper towels and wipes at the splash pad. Two members of the team comment that they breathed in some of the dust, and it made them cough, and so we leave a pile of charcoal on one table, and just work around it, so we don't generate more dust in the air.

[Later...] The little boy with one of the women is barefoot, and he walks through some of the charcoal. She remarks, "He walked right through that, now I gotta clean him up" and shakes her head.

As we clean up after our event, [member of the research team] shows me where she has acquired a new hole in her jeans, down near the ankle. I ask how it happened. She tells me it caught on a sharp metal edge on the picnic table.

In this Stewart Park area on an early weekday afternoon in summer, a researcher observed children playing in the athletic field and the splash pad with adults nearby. Shade in the area is limited, and at the time of observation, adults were observed seated on the ground under a tree in the only shade available near the splash pad:

There is a bus with "Growing Minds Learning Center" written across the side. I hear the sounds of children playing, and as I look over the hill and down toward the park, I see a shady picnic shelter with several tables at which are seated some women who appear to be in their 20s, 30s, or 40s. There are children, boys and girls, playing in the splash pad. I drive along the side of the park where there is an athletic field At that end [of the athletic field] furthest from the adults is a group of children maybe 7-10 years old, all Black boys, who are clustered together and moving about and talking, like they are trying to organize a game. Their movements are animated, and a couple are shirtless, and I wonder if they have just run from the splash pad. At that moment, another boy comes trotting toward the group, and the other kids look up at him. I can see that there is a clear line of sight from the group to two adult women sitting together on the ground in the shade on the hillside some distance away. [Later...] We turn around in the parking lot of the resource center [next to the park], and I see a girl, maybe 9 or 10 years old, with another woman sitting on the ground under the trees in the shade, a little distance from the pair of women. The girl slips out of her clothes, and she runs in her bathing suit toward the splash pad.

Prince Hall Area

In the middle of the day on a weekday, a researcher observed:

We wind our way through the neighborhood, past the Prince Hall apartments which are in neutral colors, with a colorful playground on which no one is playing. I observe that at this time of day, there is no shade, only bright sun. I hear nothing and see no movement.

Early afternoon on a weekday, a researcher observed:

As we leave the Prince Hall area, I see more houses and no people. The houses are small, brick or wood constructions, and some have front yards that are dirt only and some slope considerably toward the street. I wonder what it is like when it rains, if the sidewalks get muddy from the runoff... I drive past the James Talley Resource Center, part of the Spartanburg Housing Authority, and the apartment complex behind it is full of people in the parking lot standing and talking.

Norris Ridge Area

In the Norris Ridge area, a researcher observed a mix of well-kept houses, abandoned houses, and teenagers wearing possible gang identification:

People are outside talking and as we move through the three different roads within the apartment complexes, they feed into other roads with houses. Some houses are well kept and have flowers. There are many houses that are boarded up. As we finish the first road from the apartments, we round the corner to find three teenagers sitting on the steps all wearing red bandanas. They stand up and watch the car.

Highland Street

On one visit to Highland Street, a researcher observed many people outside in a shared space:

The [apartments] are identical in shape and size, with four entrances presumably representing four housing units in each building. There is a staircase in front of the building that leads up and then branches to the left and right to get in the doors, with a shared space between them where many people are seated. The streets have cars parked on them and they are lively with activity.

On another visit to the street, a researcher observed a few people outside and less use of shared space:

I drive past the Bethlehem Center down Highland Avenue. Two white people are talking in the parking lot while an older Black man cuts grass in the lot adjacent to the Bethlehem Center. There are not many people out over here. A few men sit on two porches side by side in houses with dirt front yards. I drive past an orange and tan playground that is empty. The park is empty and only a younger man is playing basketball on the basketball courts. I turn around in the park parking lot. I take a right onto Gibson Street. There are many more people on the porches and a middle-aged lady is standing at the bus stop. Two young men are standing across the street and they wave to me.

Transience

The high level of transience in parts of the neighborhood means that this research report is a snapshot of the children and families who were living in Highland in the summer of 2019. Some

children and families have long-term ties to the area, while others may move within the year. Several of our interview participants either stated they were planning to leave the neighborhood soon or were new to the neighborhood, having moved there in the last few months. Other conversations in the neighborhood were with long-time residents, often proud of Highland, who worry about or feel disconnected from more transient residents who live in certain areas, especially in Prince Hall and Norris Ridge. We also encountered stories of families separated by incarceration or having to move into or out of the neighborhood for financial reasons.

In our conversations we encountered people spending time in the neighborhood without official residence, and an indication that adults in the neighborhood had moved around often as children, and that current children (especially those in affordable housing) may change addresses and schools often. When we spoke with Oscar, we asked him, “Did you raise your daughter in the Highland community?” He responded, “I was in the penitentiary.” He went on to tell us, “I went to Highland Elementary and then I went to Cumming Street and then I went to another school, back to Cumming Street and then to Dorman High School. Got my GED in federal prison.”

We also heard from residents who could trace their history in Highland through generations. Stanley told us, “I’ve been spendin’ here for a while and my kids grew up here, my grandkids grew up and my grandson he graduated from Duke University and he’s back here home now, he’s gonna open a business.”

Teisha, a mother to several children and caregiver to one other child, explained to us that she and her children spend time in Highland even though she doesn’t live there herself. Teisha told us:

I don’t live in this neighborhood, but my mom does but yeah, it’s ok except for the nighttime but kids shouldn’t be out then anyways. In my neighborhood, they don’t play outside in the daytime. It’s all good, we live. [Researcher: What about the children, do they all go to the same school?] They do, but I have a middle schooler but other than that they would have all been in the same school. But I love Mary H. Wright much better than Carver, I mean, what’s that other school, Cleveland. I live over in [another Spartanburg neighborhood] but my kids were coming here over to Mary H. Wright. The schools are doing better from the first year, but they got a new principal at Mary H. Wright now. Well he’s been there for 3 years now.

Lorene, a grandmother who lives in the Prince Hall area of Highland and cares for her grandson and several other children after school each day, wants to help with children in the neighborhood and the after-school programs, but told us that she is herself in transition and therefore disinclined to get involved:

Researcher: Would you like to be more involved in the community, like go to the Bethlehem Center meetings and such?

Lorene: Well, I would but I’m on my way moving out of my project you know, so I’m not sure where I’m going to end up.

Bethany, who has two young children, a boy and a girl, told us “This is temporary until we get somewhere permanent.” We asked, “Are a lot of new people moving in?” She responded, “Yeah, the girl above me moved in just before me, my neighbors moved in a little after me. So we are all kind of new, and my friends just moved in.”

Perceptions of Crime, Neighborhood

Perceptions of Child Safety: Schools, Housing, Play Areas

Residents who are caregivers of small children shared their perceptions, including both concerns and positive impressions, about the environments in which their children live, play, and learn, both in the neighborhood and in schools located outside the neighborhood.⁶

Bullying

Teisha, whose children spend time in the Prince Hall area of Highland, told us:

There's a lot of bullying. It's the kids but it's because of their upbringing from home. Obviously, they are doing what they are taught to do so that can be tough at times but we manage. That's another reason why I brought my kids to Mary H. Wright and out of Cleveland. Because of the bullying issue, those kids over there seem to be a lil more rough around the edges than these over here... Cleveland, that's the one with the uniforms, and I love the uniforms, that's probably the best part about it. You save a lot of money buying school uniforms. [Researcher: Is bullying less likely when they are all dressed the same?] Well not really because then they are picking on shoes and hairstyles, it's always something to bully on always.

Teisha reflected back on her experience with her children and bullying and told us:

My child got bullied [at school] and was jumped in the 2nd grade by some boys and since then he has been diagnosed with [a variety of mental health issues] so it didn't hurt him physically but it did something to him mentally. And mentally here we are 2 years later and it's getting better but it's lasted a long time... If I was not the type of parent to ask my child how their day was at school I would have never known. They just sent him home... it's really affecting him mentally but yeah, they just threw it out the window and they were like they had something more important at the time and so I'm like what's more important than my child getting beat up in the bathroom. So, it was a whole situation but you know that's living in poverty, it happens. It shouldn't anywhere but it definitely happens.

Housing

In addition to our team's observations of public spaces with safety issues for children (such as the charcoal in the park's picnic shelter) and unsafe railings on upper floors of apartment buildings, a wide variety of residents expressed concerns that children in parts of Highland may not have a welcoming or safe place to live and/or may experience health and safety issues in their own homes. Residents pointed both to infrastructure and the dynamics of the household in which children live as challenges to children's health, safety, and thriving.

⁶ At the time this research was conducted, D7 offered school choice within the district, and Meeting Street Academy, a newer initiative within D7, gave priority for attendance to children in Highland.

Several residents referenced “bugs and raccoons” in and around apartment housing, with Norris Ridge of particular concern. Bethany, a young mother, said, “The only thing I do not like are the bugs. The bug problem is horrible... And I wish we had better maintenance of the apartments. There are cracks in the floor and the walls.”

Brianna and Candice, both mothers of small children, talked with each other about safety concerns related to housing. In response to the question, “is there anything you wish were different about the neighborhood?” they said:

Brianna: The community, the people, nah I’m just playing. It is alright but...

Candice: But the apartment doesn’t have a back door and there’s just one way in.

Researcher: I am guessing that can be a safety concern or inconvenience?

Candice: Anywhere else it is considered a fire hazard.

Brianna: So if you get a fire in your living room how are you supposed to get out.

Researcher: Are there any concerns specifically with children in the neighborhood?

Candice: The railings in the apartments.

Researcher: I saw that. They don’t have anything around the balcony; if a child walks out they could easily fall down.

Candice: And the animals.

Brianna: Yes, the racoons, they were in front of her door the other day. They were trying to get in her house.

Researcher: What did you do?

Candice: Yell and threw a chair.

Brianna: It was my chair.

Researcher: What about inside?

Jada: There are bugs and spiders.

Candice: The upkeep of the walls, period.

Annalee, who lives with her young children at Norris Ridge, observed that the housing is not child friendly. She told us that she lives in the second floor of the building, and to get to her apartment she has to take steep stairs. On the second floor, the little patio section is open, and railing is inadequate to prevent the fall of a young child. She mentioned how especially for her toddler, it would be easy for the child to fall off, and that this is dangerous and worrisome.

Several residents also spoke of their perceptions of the areas immediately surrounding their residences as being unsafe for children or fraught and loud spaces. Caroline told us, “Norris Ridge had that policy to where if they call the police more than 3 times they have to move, and see if they have somebody at your house jumpin on you and you call the police it’s gone count against you.” Tonia lives in Norris Ridge and said, “Look I know you have heard a lot about shooting, the violence, this and that, the drug community. My kids they live in a different spot [outside Highland], I am glad they do.”

Annalee said that she does not like having her children play outside in the neighborhood. She perceives there to be more violence during the weekends and at night. She perceives what she describes as “a high crime rate no matter the time of the day.” She said she sees and hears frequent “fights and shootings.” She was sad that she and her children were unable to celebrate the 4th July for these reasons.

On this topic, Sarah, an educator of children in the neighborhood, said:

Some do not play a lot outside, and some love to be outside here. It just kind of depends on the parent. You have some parents that are just like “get outside and go do something” or you have the parents who are like “you are not going out there.” Or I have even seen a mom who had a towel outside and they had to stay on the towel right beside the door so that if anything happened they would still be able to get inside the door... The kids come and can tell us all kinds of stuff. A couple of years ago, I had a child who, there was a shooting right outside of his house. The bus could not even pick him up that day because he could not even get out of his home, due to the fact that all of this was happening right outside of his door. Some of them are seeing more than any of us have ever seen.

In addition to concerns related to safety associated with housing conditions and the environment outside the home, we also had interview participants express concern about the environment within the home. Stanley and Caroline, older adults in the neighborhood, discussed concerns over the food available for the children and their sleeping conditions:

Stanley: If you go to the grocery store the first or the end of the month and you see the women, their buggies full of groceries utilizing food stamps and if you look in that buggy and see what’s for the kids you won’t really find nutritious food in there, what is that instant soup. They have cases and cases of them things piled up in those buggies.

Caroline: Sure thing, those mothers can’t cook. Young.

Stanley: I heard some city officials speak when they entered the home what the kids were sleepin on and you know when you hungry and you can’t get a good night’s sleep and you sleep on the floor, well, it’s gonna effect you in the school and anywhere else.

Sarah referenced extreme examples, including children she works with who have experienced or witnessed trauma in their homes and express reactions to that trauma in school. As one example, she told us: “The child we were working with was really traumatized by [being in a household in which there was abuse] and was acting out and having difficulty dealing with all of it.” Sarah explained that in teacher training, her organization talks about ACEs, Adverse Childhood Experiences, “defining trauma and what that looks like in the child’s life.” The teachers also take the ACEs test themselves. She told us: “When we take it our scores look totally different, because we look at these questions and we think, “This would never happen.” That is the first thing you need to wrap your mind around. “Yeah, this is a no from me. I would never even come close to experiencing any of this.”

Gangs or Teens Behaving as if in Gangs

Based on our observations and what we were told by residents, there are patterns of teen boys either being in gangs or behaving as if in gangs. Stanley said, “The young kids is just looking at so much TV nowadays and they wanna be what they call territorial and it’s been that way for numerous years. Hank said, “It’s nothing like it used to be, it’s got more dangerous. Because you got these gang boys that are talking about they’re Crips and they’re Bloods. But really, they not no Crips.”

Individuals interviewed described how older people who have been in prison are becoming models for the youth. One older man said, “There’s so many guys that have been in prison for some stretch of time and they come back with their philosophy of teaching the kids how to be aggressive, they weren’t aggressive in prison, they wimps but they came back and they help find little gang signs with the kids and make kids start jumpin other kids and it’s just a bad thing.”

Tonia attributed the problem more to young people not having or seeing better options: “See life doesn’t have any value no more. Life doesn’t have any value no more. These young boys do not care about nothing.” Caroline said:

You got a lot of young people down there [in Norris Ridge] and that’s where a lot of the violence come from cause of a lot of young people hang around there then they come over and start stuff and find something going on, then some from Prince Hall comin down here just shootin and goin on or whatever.

Memory of Violence and Place, Comparisons to Today

One salient theme in our conversations with residents was how their sense of place is tied to memories of the neighborhood, including memories of violence, some recent and some many years ago. We asked Oscar, “What was it like growing up in Highland?” He responded, “We had a swimming pool back there. They found somebody dead in there and closed it down... They had a concrete block tied to a [inaudible]... That was the first time I’ve seen somebody dead outside of the casket. I was nine years old.”

Hank talked with us about memories of violence and trouble many years ago:

Hey, that street right there, look, when you turned up through there, if you weren’t my mom and them, you better not come over there, especially not at night time... Highland was dangerous then. I remember a time a lot of people couldn’t even come over here. When that store, they had to tear it down, that used to be a store right around there. Stanley Earl got killed right there, look. At that park back there. Stanley Earl was real, real dangerous... Highland ain’t nothing like it used to be. Back in the day, look, you couldn’t walk through there... Like, what’s it called ran that whole spot up there. He dead now, that’s Highland Avenue. Up there, [convicted drug dealer] Timmy Rice, his mama had ten boys and one girl. Highland used to be bad down there.⁷

Not all memories of violence and place are from twenty or more years ago. Sarah shared with us that some children she works with have witnessed violence in the neighborhood:

We had a case recently where two of our kids were in one child’s front yard, and there is a lot of shootings in Norris Ridge. So there was actually a shooting and the guy who got shot was standing near one of my kids. So his mom grabbed him and ran inside and put

⁷ Names unchanged: Timmy Rice was convicted of cocaine conspiracy and distribution in federal court in 1990 (<https://www.goupstate.com/article/NC/19901018/News/605197985/SJ>). Two men by the name of Stanley Earl (Stanley Earl Robinson and Stanley Earl Jones) were murdered in Spartanburg, though press reports do not locate the murder scene for either in the Highland neighborhood.

him in the bathtub. And we have other kids who have seen or experienced violence and some need therapy and take a while to learn how to be ok.

In Hank's words above, he conveys his perception that Highland now is less dangerous than the neighborhood of 20 years ago. At the same time, though, he perceives a lack of safety, still today, coming from the community isolation, saying, "It's dangerous now because people like y'all really don't come here." Other residents also compared, without prompting from researchers, the Highland of today to the Highland they remembered or had heard about. Lorene said, "It's lightened up on the violence, you know. I haven't witnessed or heard any break-ins or anything like that. It's just the fights. Maybe it's some gunshots here and there, but it's better." Bethany, who recently moved to the Highland Community, said, "I heard it was a whole lot worse than what it is now with the shootings and fights all the time. It is quiet for the most part." Prince Hall resident Lashona said, "It has calmed down a whole lot. All you used to hear were shootings and all that."

Perceptions of the level of crime or danger in today's Highland varied from annoyance at noise levels to concerns about shootings and general safety. The wide variety in our responses is likely partly due to experiences that vary among residents within Highland related both to their particular places of residence and their own social identities, including whether they are men or women, and whether they are caregivers for young children. When asked what nights are like in the neighborhood, two mothers of young children told us:

Brianna: It is worst at night. It is like a club out here.

Researcher: Is it that you don't feel safe to walk around?

Candice: No, not necessarily but you can be inside and you know that something is happening even without seeing it. I'll hear people fighting and screaming.

Hank and others perceived today's Highland as better than the past. Hank said, "Highland ain't nothing like it used to be. Back in the day, look, you can't walk through there. Look. Police was scared to come through here."

In contrast, Tonia's perceptions are that Highland is worse than she had remembered from the past: "I've been here for a little bit, it has its ups and downs. Back in the day when I stayed there was a swimming pool right here, a basketball court where everybody got along. It wasn't always this shooting, but now there is always these shootings." Teisha did not seem unconcerned about the current state of violence in Highland, but did find it to be expected. She said, "Well, I wouldn't really say that I have any concerns because the activity from those neighborhoods are kind of expected. So, you can't really say well I'm really concerned about this. Cause it's just expected to be where you livin and public housing I guess."

In separate conversations Gerard, Nala, and Bethany each spoke about the police's involvement with crime patrol and relations with the community. Gerard said: "You gotta be willing to work together as a community. With all the stuff going on, people see it going on but they won't say anything. So, you know it's a touchy situation cause most of the time with the police their information is what we give em." Nala said, "I volunteered with a Highland project and there was a lot of talk about the violence and the incidents in the neighborhood. The chief [of police] comes every month to discuss the violence within the neighborhood." Bethany's perception of

police presence in the neighborhood was mostly positive: “They have police out here patrolling 24-7. It’s just the conditions. From the things that I have seen, when things get crazy with shooting and fighting, they are pretty quick with responding. Then they catch who be doing it.”

We very consistently heard from residents the perception that crimes were being committed by outsiders to the neighborhood, not by residents. Nala said, “The crimes are committed by people that do not live in the neighborhood but by people who come in the neighborhood to commit crimes and then leave.” Similarly, Stanley said:

Well, a lot of the violence that occurs in Norris Ridge, a lot of it takes place from people coming from other areas and they come here and start things and then they jump in and leave. Well, by the time the police get there they see Norris Ridge, but normally it’s people from other neighborhoods but Norris Ridge gets the blame.

Oscar expressed a similar belief, and emphasized the sense of community in Highland in contrast to the crimes:

We don’t fight one another. Any time any violence come over here in Highland, people don’t live here. And people hanging out here don’t live here. And they get drugs... Highland is a neighborhood that people like each other and get along. I see nothing bad with no people that live in Highland. And I can’t say nothing bad about them. I know a whole lot of them, really... The violence you hear on the news all the time, that happens over here, those people don’t live over here.

Tonia expressed a similar sentiment:

What I like about the community is that everybody gets along but then the outsiders are the ones that bring the problems. That is what it’s all about. The community get along just fine, but the outsiders are the ones bringing the problems. Every time you turn around it’s something different.

Relationships and Ties

Children, Grandchildren, and “Bonus Kids”

As we talked with adults in Highland about the children they cared for, a pattern emerged that quite a few children are spending time with adults that are not their parents. We heard from participants who care daily for their grandchildren, the children of friends or neighbors or relatives, or for “bonus kids” in the same age range as other children in their household.

Lorene told us:

Basically what I do, I keep my grandson, and the other little boy that I’m the caregiver for. Other than that, I help out with kids in the neighborhood. On a regular day, [I’m looking after] five children. The youngest is three up to twelve. It’s busy... I get them after school hours. Sometimes just an hour or so. I help with homework until their mom comes and then that’s it... We got one at Mary H. Wright, we’ve got one over at the Franklin school, one at Meeting Street, one at Z.L Madden.

An older man we spoke with told us, “I’ve got twelve children and nineteen grandchildren.” Stanley said, “I got 3 great grands, one’s 2, one’s 3 and the other is 5 and Meeting Street is trying their best to get the 3 year old now. She’s real sharp, too sharp.”

A young mother said, “My twins are 3. They’re potty trained, too, so I’m excited. Then I have a 6-year-old son, my twins are girls, 11-year-old daughter and a 13-year-old son. And then my bonus kid is 9.”

When we asked Lashona, “How many children do you have?” she responded:

I stopped at two. Well, to be real with you, I have lost a lot of them. It bothered me a lot since I miscarried and you know how the baby daddy is, blaming me for it, but I would tell him it wasn’t my fault... I have a son and a daughter and I know I have nine grandchildren... I don’t see the oldest much, but I saw three of them yesterday, my daughter brought them. You know how mamas are.

Teisha, whose mother lives in Highland, said, “Over the summer, obviously they are out of school so basically, I just bring them to my mom’s and then I go to work, then I come back. But pretty much other than school they go to my mom’s.” Bethany told us that when she is at work, “My best friend watches my kids or their grandparents do. And I just started them in a learning program not too long ago where the person makes home visits.”

Reported Interactions and Community Member Efforts to Support Children

In our interviews, we heard from adults on their perceptions of parents or caregivers in the neighborhood sometimes not being attentive to children; we heard reports of older children being responsible for care for younger siblings; and we heard from volunteers and professionals who work with children about the difficulties they sometimes encounter in trying to get parents involved in children’s activities.

Nala, who does work at the Bethlehem Center, said:

I know the [Bethlehem Center] staff and volunteers were having a conversation about the junior leaders which all have smaller siblings that they are typically responsible for keeping or watching when their parent isn’t home, I know for a fact that one of our girls has four younger siblings and all of them are in the summer program, but one went to their dad’s house. She is responsible for three other siblings and herself. So, it’s like when do you have time to be a child. But her mom started having babies early. We want to push her away from that, but because she is the oldest, she has the responsibility of raising her older siblings. She doesn’t get that chill feeling of just being a kid and do what she wants like hanging out with friends or walking around the mall, because she always has a responsibility to uphold. We try to facilitate them being kids as much as possible.

Nala explained that some children come to the center consistently and others do not. For the ones who attend programs at the center less regularly, she said:

Most of the time, it’s because they are older. A young man would come on Wednesdays because he enjoyed art but did not want to come to do his homework on other days. He

had an older brother that would make him come. Mom was not there, so she did not know if he was coming or not unless the older brother told him to. But it's usually either they are older, sometimes they will go home without their parent knowing or they would go home first and then come here when they are just supposed to come here. Sometimes it's, I'm sick and did not go to school.

Ayana, who also does work at the Bethlehem Center, shared with us, "There was this girl who would come and stay and do her work and do the schedules just because she wants to stay. I first began by helping her with her homework because she was super quiet, now she stays by choice."

Speaking of after-school programs at the Bethlehem Center, Gerard spoke of the difficulty of engaging children in homework without parental support, not just at the center but perhaps in the schools as well:

But if you been in class all day and in the school all day and you come to a program like this, this is still, you know, a school, you get your homework done and all that. But you have a lot of kids that don't see it that way, so on the other hand that goes back to discipline and the parents. But also, when I say the school, they have to have been doing something else in school other than just their work. You know what I mean? Kids still can't read and different things and I know they got No Child Left Behind or no kid left behind. But what good is that."

We heard from several neighborhood residents their concerns about young mothers not giving needed attention to children. Stanley said, "There are a lot of single mothers, and when you put a lot of young mothers in an apartment that's gonna bring a lot of young men, and single mothers are more interested in the young men than their children, and they won't spend the time with them." Caroline said:

Well, mostly what I see is the children out playin, and they got young mothers they just let them go out to play I think they have the center here, but the parents they don't care about what the kids are about and what they do, they just let them go out and play and do whatever. So, it's a lot, I think, we need a class to teach the mothers how to raise their kids, but it's a lot of kids around in this neighborhood. They need some guidance and their parents do, too.

Along similar lines, Annalee told us that there are often children in the neighborhood that go unsupervised "and later when gunshots are heard you don't know if it was one of those children where that occurred." Teisha attributed specific unsocial behavior to problems with parenting or the child's home, saying of one young boy, "I tell you he is all over the place and a flirt at that. One time at the park he was pinching a woman's behind. I said, what you been doing cause don't know where he gets it." Caroline also spoke about youth and children she sees outside without apparent adult oversight:

Well, they play down there at the park and some of em like they have they lil phones, they don't have internet or anything they just sit in front of the center when it's closed to use the Wi-Fi or whatever. They go around there and play at the park or go to some other child's house.

When we spoke with Candice, Brianna, and Jada, all of whom have young children, about their daily routines, they shared wide-ranging details including their own daily habits, their impressions of police, children they see unattended, and their concerns for their own children interacting outside:

Candice: I don't know, I just stay indoors.

Brianna: I sleep most of the time.

Candice: Well, and we have to follow the curfew.

Researcher: There is a curfew?

Brianna: Yeah, but no one follows it.

Jada: The police will just park right in front of our house, watching us.

Researcher: How does that make you feel?

Brianna: Uncomfortable.

Jada: There is just no trust. They are there when you don't need them and when there is an emergency they take forever to get there.

Candice: They will pull and talk to the kids.

Researcher: Without you being there?

Jada: Yeah, and the parents aren't there. Kids riding outside by themselves.

Researcher: So, there is not much supervision, would you say? Like what is the age range?

Jada: I would say that those kids be like seven or eight.

Researcher: What is the youngest you have seen?

Candice: Probably like four.

Researcher: Is this an everyday thing?

Brianna: Yeah, it's quiet now when it is hot, but wait when it is cooler.

Jada: But even when it is just not hot.

Researcher: So there are children after hours outside?

Brianna: Yeah, the parent will stay in the inside and the kids outside. They don't watch the cars.

Researcher: Do you think there is a reason for that?

Brianna: Yeah, bad parents.

Researcher: Yeah, I am just thinking that I wouldn't want my kids to be outside.

Brianna: I just wouldn't do it. I can't.

Researcher: Do you think the children's parents are just working a lot?

Brianna: No, just sleeping, being lazy and not caring.

Researcher: How do you think that affects the children?

Brianna: They just get in trouble doing things that they shouldn't do.

Jada: If they are outside running around they can get hit by stray bullets. They disrespect authorities.

Researcher: Do you see that a lot with teenagers in general?

Jada: Not just with the teenagers, even young ones will also be disrespectful.

Candice reported that she sees teenagers out causing trouble who seem to lack better things to do: "It would be nice if they, maybe have a daycare or program and just to get them to do something like a Boys & Girls Club or anything to keep them off the streets and occupied. You see them breaking bottles."

Sarah spoke with us about how children from the neighborhood may struggle in school because of lack of attention from parents or witnessing fighting and other disturbing behavior:

What we are seeing is that these kids are coming in further and further behind in the social area to where it's taking more and more time. So last year we had a discussion where we were like: "Listen, knowing their letters is great right now, but they are still fighting, screaming, hitting and spitting, they've got to get that under control and then they will pick up those letters, but if they don't get that under control it's going to be a mess." So yes, academics still takes a priority, but we are trying to make that shift because we are seeing how low they are coming in. These kids do not know how to play, you have to literally show them how to look at a book. They do not know how to interact with other children. So, they need someone to walk them through all of that. But then again, I will say you have a few pop-ups. For the testing we have already done this year there have been a couple kids that have come out of the Highland area, and I am just like: "What?" Academically, they already knew some stuff, but through the parental interaction with them were pretty top notch, again that was maybe two or three kids... You do still have some that are so low or, for example, we were just talking about a child who, we are seeing a lot of language delays. Again, whoever is at home they are not speaking to them, they are not conversing with them. So those kids are taking a little bit longer but they are still, if you look at the progress they have made since they came in the door, it's huge. It's just if you compare them to the average three-year-old they are lacking.

Adding more context, Sarah went on to say:

We are seeing obviously a lot of poverty. The parents switch jobs a lot. So they are either unemployed or constantly getting a new job. So there is not a lot of stability at home and therefore these kids do not have a lot of structure. Their behavior is pretty rough at times, but again these parents are working a lot. They are trying to figure life out. They don't have their own lives together, how do you expect them to teach these kids structure and behavior, when they can't even do it? So they show up to school unprepared, it's hard to get in touch with parents, it's hard to respond. The best way we've learned to do that is to just go to their house. So we make a lot of house calls, and we do use Facebook Messenger, they do respond to that a lot. But other than that, one of us [who works with the children] just shows up."

Sarah explained that children who have experienced significant trauma may have an extra hard time if they do not have a parent or caregiver at home who can help them recover from the trauma:

But [working on recovery from trauma] also takes family support and the family being able, and knowing, to work through this, because you can go to counseling but that is probably once, twice, let's just say three times a week and that's probably rare, you're still with your parent the majority of the time. So, yes, you can go talk about when that traumatic thing happened in or near your home, but you are still returning to the same place at night. Your mom is still a nineteen year old who doesn't even have a high school diploma and doesn't even know how to take care of herself. She doesn't know how to communicate with you and talk this through with you.

Nala spoke about communicating with parents about the children she works with at the Bethlehem Center:

For the most part, we send home reminders or post a note on the door. We do not have transportation during the summer to pick them up from home or drop them off. During the school year, they get bussed here and after, if they need to be dropped off, then we drop them off if the parents don't come pick them up. During the summer, the parents are responsible for the child, so it is easy as sticking the note on the door. During the school year, it is a lot more difficult to get a parent involved. We call and tell them if they could stop by or say we are sending this home with your child or something like that. If we just sent them home, half would bring them, and half wouldn't. If it was for a field trip, all the kids would bring them home. During the school year, there is always someone to say let me call my grandma or let me run home and get it signed because it is a field trip. During the school year, it is not as easy to communicate with them like it is during the summer because you have to get them here and you have to pick them up.

We also heard from several residents about programs in the neighborhood that allow children of different ages to interact with each other or with adults. Speaking about her work at the Bethlehem Center, Nala said:

We do have a junior leadership [for older girls]. They participate in all activities but get to do more... They can distribute the numbers, pass out plates, and they will help clean up, get kids seated and help little kids walk their plates to the table. They will help Miss Joyce with anything like meal prep or to help kids get meals and clean up after meals. They get a stipend at the end of the summer. We try to do other things like they will come to the lab and make crafts. They have free time to go watch YouTube during the day. Ms. Mims [the Bethlehem Center Director] is a godsend. Not a lot of people know that because the older girls are going to Carowinds. She is taking them to get manicures and pedicures just because that's stuff that they don't get to enjoy.

Nala added to the above information, "We don't have very many boys. I think the oldest boy is ten. Mr. Louis comes in and when the girls do sewing, the boys do boxing. They are into the boxing. He does football and basketball too, but they enjoy the boxing aspect. They are not as old as the girls." Ayana also spoke of opportunities for boys at the Bethlehem Center: "Mr. Thompson started coming in two years ago and was doing little boxing moves and it grew. He was already doing a gym somewhere and began it here."

Nala added about the neighborhood more generally, beyond the Bethlehem Center:

I know that there was a lot of talk about that there wasn't that much of extracurricular activities to keep the kids occupied. So, boxing came and the Spartanburg Gators. They used to practice on the West Side but now they practice in Stewart Park where the parents don't have to worry about driving to. There is boxing and football. If it was left up to the kids for transportation, then it probably wouldn't happen because they might not have transportation. Now it's walking distance.

Nala told us that at the Bethlehem Center, "We do have a very eclectic group." She explained:

During the summer program, we get kids from all over Spartanburg, but during the school year, it is mostly District Seven, some from District Five and Six. The majority of

them – Miss Joyce, bless her soul – she will give every piece of food in this building away to a child because some of them don't know if they will go home and eat. Some of them don't know if they will have dinner or are responsible for making dinner. I know there's been many occasions where a child says, "well I don't have very much food at home," and Miss Joyce will come up here and sign some papers, go to the food pantry and send the kids home with oatmeal, pop tarts and whatever she can find. Majority of them I would say, I think 30 % may or may not eat when they are here. It is the consistency of the parents. If you aren't there to make sure your child eats, or if the child is able to fix something to eat... [Feeding younger siblings] is left up to the older kid. Do you have something to cook, if so, is it enough? I don't think that that is a responsibility that the child should bear, but it is like that. We feed them breakfast and lunch. On Tuesdays, we send them home with pizzas because we know they will eat them. If mom doesn't want to cook, then you have dinner. We get donations from Chick-Fil-A and try to send them home with something to eat... With the afterschool program we do snack which is basically a full course meal because we get donations from their culinary courses from Upstate. We usually give them a meal with a meat, two veggies, and bread or chips, apple sauce and pop tart. They eat, do homework and then have free time where they go to the lab, play outside, play basketball.

Nala said that during the summer they have more children than during the school year:

During the year we saw around 35 a day. Sixty-five enrolled but during the year, a consistent thirty-five showed up. There is around seventy-six that is registered but typically see around forty-six to forty-eight a day consistently [in the summer]. Like today I think it's forty-eight based on lunch numbers; the coordinator of the program does all the planning, scheduling, food trips that they take, all the good stuff. The summer program, afterschool, and senior program. On Wednesdays, they meet with the seniors and they teach them how to sew and life skills like that. On alternating Wednesdays, Miss Joyce teaches them how to cook and things like that.

We heard from several people about seeing children and youth playing together in public, and neighbors connecting with each other and looking out for each other. Bethany, a mother of two small children who lives in the Norris Ridge area said, "Since it's the summer time, kids are outside playing, but before they got out of school for the year, I noticed that they weren't here outside in the daytime [after school hours], so I am not sure where they are then." A resident told us, "All of my neighbors like, we love each other. I am not sure how it is for other parts of the neighborhood, but our street is very close." Another resident said, "We hang out on the street in Highland. Everybody says about Highland that's where people hang out on the street."

Observed Interactions in Public

While spending time in and just outside the neighborhood (for example, at the nearest grocery store), our research team observed public spaces, including the interactions that happened in these public spaces. We saw adults watching children, and people of varying ages interacting. Our team spent time in private spaces, such as residences, when invited to do so for interviews; no observations from private spaces are included here.

Stewart Park

I wind my way through the neighborhood to Stewart Park. This time at the house on the corner, there are no men outside talking, seated in the shade like last time I was here on a weekday. Instead, the chairs are tipped around the perimeter of the house. There are a lot of chairs, more than a dozen.

When we first arrived [late on a Saturday afternoon], there were three Black women with their children....One woman ... had a baby girl and a little toddler boy. I put up some flyers on the awning of the pavilion. I walked over to explain our purpose for being there and the women ... gave me a look and said, "they are supposed to tell us about our neighborhood." I explained to her that was not what we were here for.

A family arrives: an older woman, and man who appears to be middle aged, and a young child, all white. The man speaks sharply and loudly to the child as they sit, after they check in and get a numbered post-it.

As a few interviews from the first round are still winding down, an older Black man comes and asks if he can have food and a bag of incentives because he has grands. He agrees to be interviewed, and [two male researchers] interview him. As he sits with a plate of food, he raises his voice, and loudly asks, "Can I ask you all for something? I'm not gonna ask for money. Can you pray for my brother? He's in the hospital." The gathered people assent. When the man leaves after the interview, he tells us again his brother is sick and in the hospital and he doesn't want to sign the paper, he's not going to sign the paper. I tell him I hope his brother gets better, and he says, "he's not going to get better."

When the white family leaves, they walk up the steep hill to the curb. A little boy, somewhere between two and four years old, who has been with them, walks up the hill.... He takes a while but makes it to the top.

Most people have gone from both the shelter and the splash pad, even though it is just about 7 pm. The little boy [Name], comes back; he looks to be about 3 years old and he can talk. He reaches for my juice and starts sipping it. He later drops it on himself. He smells soiled, and I feel like his diaper is overdue for a change. The other white woman that is not interviewed smokes around the children.

Toward the end, another older Black man comes. He agrees to be interviewed. Two members of the research team sit down with him, and I fix him a plate, as we are packing up food and I want to make sure he has a chance to eat. He starts talking, loudly. I go to take down the "Interviews" sign, near where two women we've already interviewed are sitting. The man says very loudly, "We n---s here stick together," and the two women start shaking their heads. I widen my eyes and smile at them, and one says, "And he serious. I ain't even gonna laugh," as she keeps shaking her head side to side. I can hear him explain more, but his voice has lowered, and I cannot make out what he says.

Norris/Ridge Street area

Norris Ridge - As [another researcher] and I were making our way out of [an interview] and into the street there was an older lady on the second floor that was talking loudly, almost screaming in our direction. I could not make out what she was talking about.

I circle back around and drive down past the basketball courts on Norris Street. A young man walks down the street in casual wear, and the apartment units here have chairs out front of the doors. Many people are down here, and almost all of them make eye contact with me and at least nod. I take a left on Norris Court, and there are three elderly men doing yard work outside and cutting their grass. In the middle of the street, a white Chihuahua walks in the middle of the road without a collar. At the end of the cul-de-sac, two women sit in chairs outside the front door of the house.

Save-A-Lot

When I arrive at the plaza for the grocery store, there are 3 adults – two Black men and one Black woman – having a loud argument in the parking lot. There is an older Black man walking slowly through the parking lot. His head is hanging down and he shuffles his feet. [Time for entering store and making purchases elapses.] I take the purchased supplies out to my car and notice the same people are still there arguing. [Time elapses for re-entry and second purchase.] I ... head out to my car. The argument in the parking lot is still going on, but two more people have joined in. I can't tell if they are participating or just listening and watching.

There are two teenage boys – one Black and one white – buying a few things. They are chatting to each other, and their body language is light and happy. There is only one lane open and a long line. Then another cashier opens a lane. The boys, who are in front of me, dash over to the new lane. But the cashier says she isn't ready yet. So they come back to the first lane. The newly-arrived cashier calls me over. I ask the boys if they want to go in front of me, but they tell me to go ahead.

In the other line, a Black woman and a white man are arguing about something. The woman seems very upset. I can't tell if they know each other. She points her finger at him forcefully, and he does the same back to her. Their body language is stiff and tense. The woman raises her voice and yells at the man. A middle-aged Black woman in an electric riding cart motions for me to go in front of her since I only have two things.

J&G Restaurant

A researcher who spent time in the J&G Restaurant located within the Highland census tract described it as friendly and welcoming, with good food:

I walk into the restaurant to eat and am immediately greeted by the hostess. I take a seat and then an older man approaches me and strikes up a conversation. He tells me he is from Jamaica and that he lives nearby, coming by to have the restaurant fry his seafood that he bought at the seafood market next door. In the corner, a child is lying on a table and alternates between playing a Nintendo Switch and watching YouTube videos on an iPhone. Directly in front of me, a large oscillating fan faces the kitchen to cool down the kitchen and the seating area as well. It is loud and it's the only noise save for the sound of

food frying in the kitchen, another man talking with the owner, and a rerun of the TV show “Martin” on the BET channel. The restaurant smells of cheeseburgers and okra along with fried shrimp in Cajun seasoning. I order the cheeseburger and okra and promptly tell the lady cooking in the kitchen that it is the best okra I have ever had. She smiles ... A few minutes later, the owner comes out with a silver metal bowl, and puts extra fried okra on my plate, which makes me extremely happy, and I smile. He tells me “Thanks for coming in, my friend.”

Hope and Care

Throughout our conversations with residents of Highland, we heard statements of pride in the neighborhood and its history, stories of neighbors helping each other and looking out for each other, and community members helping educators and others with resources connect with children who could benefit from their services.

Oscar spoke with us about the proud history of Highland and the neighborhood’s strong sense of community:

I’ve lived in Highland for over 40 years. I know Highland like the back of my hand. Highland is a legend. Mary H. Wright taught school at Highland Elementary... I went to school at Highland Elementary. Highland is a community that your neighbors that live here stick together... We love Highland. I love Highland. Highland is a neighborhood that you enjoy. I love the people in Highlands... Highland produces great athletes. You know [names some athletes]?... And everyone in my family went to college, all my nieces and nephews, and they finished high school. My daughter is the smartest girl in the United States.

Tonia spoke about the importance she herself puts on a sense of community in the neighborhood:

The community is what you make it. What you put into, it’s like life, what you put into it is what you get out of it. If you can’t help your community then you aren’t going to be able to help yourself. If you can’t make a change then you won’t be able to change yourself. We have to stick together and be a unit, be one. Everything only one. It’s hard but it’s fair.

Bethany feels connected to her neighbors, and told us, “My neighbors are really nice and love my kids... All of my neighbors like, we love each other. I am not sure how it is for other parts of the neighborhood, but our street is very close.”

Stanley spoke with us about the efforts he and others have made to bring the disparate areas of the Highland census tract together, working with the Highland Neighborhood Association and churches in and near the neighborhood:

We did that through the neighborhood association, matter fact we didn’t do it this year, but last year we did a cookout at Prince Hall, we did one at Norris Ridge and one at Nee Crossing to bring the peoples together and there was numerous times we did a cookout at Stewart Park down the street and just invited the entire neighborhood, we were trying to get them registered to vote a fun day and the city would always interact with us and help provide things and the Journey Church would help. We’ve been doing that a little bit and

Macedonia Church furnished a lot of the food time to time which the neighborhood association, we furnished a lot of the food throughout the years. Last year from the grant from the Mary Black Foundation we did each area... We've tried about all you can think of, everything. Food wise we thought of chips, burgers, hot dog, chicken. Different charities came in and grilled out and some came in and did it there in that parking lot. We've had a little bit of everything that's imaginable, we've had ice cream from The Beacon, snow cone trucks, they love their snow cones. Every year the Highland Neighborhood Association we do the National Night Out. It's where you leave your porch light on and the community participates to talk about awareness of the violence but then again it might be canceled because of the Highland community reunion. Yeah, we'll probably have that at Stewart Park.

Lorene spoke about the efforts of one church in the neighborhood that specifically does outreach with children:

I only see the one [church], Journey. That's the only one I see. It's up the street, next to the soup kitchen... That's the only one that'll come out every week and spend an hour or so with the children, you know. They are very much involved in that. A lot of the kids do catch the bus and go to that church too during the summer.

Some residents shared with us, unprompted, their hopes for resources and connections with entities outside the neighborhood that might help the children residing in Highland. Gerard said, "And so y'all go to Wofford, I was thinking maybe you could do some tours of the college for the kids and see about that." What we heard from educators who work with children in the neighborhood served as further evidence of this attitude of wanting to help connect children to resources. Sarah told us:

I will say that a lot of the people living there are kind and open people. They show a lot of gratitude when we go out there, and we try to do something once a month out there. They are pretty open to it, they'll talk to us. I even had one man before, where I am walking around, and he was like: "There is two kids in that one down there." So they have very much started to learn who we are, and will help us [connect with the children.] They are very, very nice people. As opposed to, I have seen before where they shut their doors and they don't really come out to help you or talk to you. There are still some of those, but I would say that the majority of them are welcoming.

Consistently across many interviews, residents called out the Bethlehem Center as a remarkable place and resource for children, teens, and adults. In addition, schools and programs including Mary H. Wright and Meeting Street Academy were mentioned frequently by residents as bright spots that offered children a chance to learn and thrive. Annalee told us that the only reason she lives in Norris Ridge is so that her son can attend Meeting Street Academy.

The hope and care we heard from residents was echoed in the voices of the educators and program providers we spoke with, who appreciate the welcoming and trust of Highland residents. Sarah told us:

We work hard to establish that relationship and we go out into the neighborhood. That is where we are pulling these kids from, so we are out there recruiting. [Name's] face is the first face they see from [learning program provider]. So it's not like: Oh, there is a

stranger here. It's just like that person is here again. Is she ever going to stop? Because even in the registration process, to get them signed up, if [Name] has to bang on that door ten times to make sure they get all their paperwork in, then that's what she'll do. So they get really used to seeing us, and at that point, especially when their child is in they typically let us right in the home or they will be like: Hey, Ms. [Name], or Ms. [Name]! As long as we have established a relationship, they are pretty welcoming.

Thinking back to the Boston Basics and the emphasis on minimizing stress and maximizing love and engagement, Sarah made clear her awareness of how stress and daily difficulties can interfere with caregivers' ability to give children the needed interaction. She wished that schools and other organizations would do more to help caregivers with their own lives instead of just with the children:

I think that it is going to boil down to the parents. I think that we need to be giving the parents as many opportunities to learn, and assisting not enabling, assisting these parents. So, offering these classes. "Hey, I know money is tight but let's look at your budget. Let me help you budget. Let me help you grocery shop." Because if that gives you more money, and more food on the table, it is going to give you more mental space to work with your child and help them. At the end of the day they are with us for four to eight hours, but they are still going back home. We are doing everything we can to help these kids. I think that the game changer will be teaching the parents and helping the parents. That is going to be the biggest long-term impact. I think that if we could help provide them with more ways to be able to provide themselves that stability, that will be the secret sauce.

5. Preliminary Recommendations

The heterogeneity of voices in the Highland data points to a need for individuals outside the neighborhood and unfamiliar with the diversity of experiences of those within the census tract to pause before action and listen before initiating interventions. Informed by the data gathered, we make the following preliminary recommendations:

- The demolition of Norris Ridge and the relocation of residents is slated for the near future. As the date for relocation approaches, it will be important for local organizations to collaborate to share information and support residents, and especially caregivers of young children, who are relocated from Norris Ridge to new housing. Based upon the data, the following areas of work will be of importance: clarity of communication among organizations and with residents about available resources (related to moving and that may be accessed from new housing); facilitation of positive rapport between residents with school leaders and staff from a number of D7 schools, especially if relocation will mean a change in schools or a change in transportation to a school in which a child will continue enrollment; access near new housing to spaces that are safe and inviting for leisure and social connection for those of a range of ages and identities (from grandparent caregivers to teens and toddlers); access to groceries and services.
- Access to safe, affordable, stable housing in positive neighborhood environments is critical for all households and especially to households with children. In light of the

- growth of development and redevelopment in the City of Spartanburg and in Spartanburg County as a whole, advocacy by coalitions around housing; safe and vibrant neighborhood life; safe and accessible public recreational spaces suitable for a range of ages and abilities; and neighborhood connectivity for residents of all ages and income levels is an area for priority attention in both the City and the County.
- In both the Forest Park neighborhood and Highland, transience, or short-term residence, was associated with a number of families with children. Because children move from place to place over the course of their childhoods, and sometimes over the course of a school year or even a school day, it will be important to think about supporting children who are most transient within the County in all ways possible. Undertaking this effort will likely require new conversations and data-sharing in partnership with schools to identify the most transient children, reasons for transience, and interventions that may be effective for increased residential stability.
 - It is important to have a diversity of voices involved in information gathering, dissemination, and data informed decision-making, at levels of scale from the neighborhood to citywide and countywide institutions and funders. Fostering and encouraging a diversity of participants, and signaling the importance of constructive critique and dissent, in data gathering, sharing, and decision-making will build on the foundations laid by past efforts. Doing so may require the need for lengthier timelines, increased access to training, new roles or duties associated with existing roles in organizations, and/or new metrics for measuring outcomes.