

structural level, these lessons challenge the objectives and organization of the crime-fighting community and strengthen calls for a more effective, inclusive, and liberating form of organization that would build buffers and bridges for youth most vulnerable to violence and contact with the criminal justice system.

An appreciation of these lessons can improve current efforts to support people and programs that are committed to helping people change their lives. The conclusion moves beyond the Fillmore to programs that embrace these principles. These lessons are necessary but not sufficient components to addressing the persistence of violence in poor, Black neighborhoods. As I describe in the final pages of this book, reaching that objective requires a commitment from social institutions to create the conditions for change and, more importantly, freedom for those most vulnerable to violence.

1 **Eric's Awakening**

You either gonna kill someone, get killed, or go to the pen. What are you goin' do?

—Eric

Eric was born in 1974. Like many other Black residents in San Francisco, Eric's grandparents migrated to California and the San Francisco Bay Area from the Deep South.¹ Eric's father, in his mid-twenties at Eric's birth, was born in California's Central Valley. His mother, about a decade younger than Eric's father, was born in Louisiana. She moved with her family from Louisiana to California when she was about twelve years old. Eric's maternal grandmother purchased a home in the Lakeview district of San Francisco, a former African American enclave near the city's southwestern borders. Eric remembers little about his maternal grandmother, except for that she was shot and killed in a bar. Eric grew up in the home that she left behind. He remembers splitting time between his home and his aunt's apartment in the Fillmore neighborhood as a child. His aunt's apartment was in a housing project owned by one of the Black churches in the Western Addition. Eric remembers the home as the gravitational center of family gatherings. It was a place where all in the family were welcome. In the early 1980s, Eric's family left his late grandmother's Lakeview home and moved with his parents and two sisters into a home just a couple of blocks away from his aunt's apartment—and just footsteps away from the housing complex where he would first enter the neighborhood's drug trade: "That's where I guess the trouble started."

The "trouble" Eric refers to here would last for over a decade, deepening as his involvement in the neighborhood's illicit drug market and his commitment to the street family (a phrase he uses as an alternative to gang) he took up with as an adolescent boy deepened over time. As he neared early adulthood, Eric realized that if he continued his troubled trajectory, his life would be limited by the three options he refers to above: kill someone, be killed, or go to the penitentiary.

In this chapter, I provide a life history account of Eric's turbulent adolescence and early adulthood to illustrate how Eric crafted a *fourth* option for himself—one that would allow him to shed the criminal career and associated lifestyle he had invested so deeply in for over a decade, while continuing to live in the neighborhood he had called home for most of his life. I begin with an account of how experiences in various social settings, like school, the home, and the neighborhood, shaped Eric's drift into delinquency. This account demonstrates how Eric's early life history is shaped by the unique set of social, historical, and economic shifts that came to characterize life in poor, urban, African American neighborhoods from the mid-1980s to the end of the twentieth century. This period marked crack's earliest appearance in the neighborhood to the rise of the War on Drugs, which took aim at the type of open-air drug markets that took root in the Western Addition during Eric's adolescence.² Episodes of violence would fracture the neighborhood into warring pockets of youth, and the shockwaves from these violent episodes would reverberate in the neighborhood for years to come. It is within this context that Eric's moral dilemma emerges. It is also within this context that Eric develops a way to break free from the street and to make himself a new man in his old neighborhood.

Eric's account of how key events, like witnessing his uncle's exploitation at the hands of neighborhood drug dealers or becoming a father at age twenty-three, shaped his efforts to break from the street. In particular, his story illustrates the role that *awakening moments*—brief episodes of reflection triggered by external events that encourage a person to think, even in the most fleeting ways, about changing the direction of their lives—can play in the process of change. Eric's account of his turn away from the street as he approached his mid-twenties challenges understandings of change as the result of an epiphany. His process of change was protracted and extended from late adolescence into early adulthood. Through Eric's story, we learn how being "half-and-half," as Eric describes it, can operate as a key phase in a young adult's movement away from the street. Young men who are half-and-half may straddle the line between the street and decency for months or years before completely giving up on the lifestyle associated with the street. By the end of the chapter, we come to see Eric's transformation—his final break from the street—as the result of a gradual awakening over time that was deeply influenced and eventually supported by his relationships with others. In this way, Eric's story helps to reveal how change is a *group* process embedded in distinct situational and relational contexts. Put simply, Eric's story reveals how young men change first for themselves and then *with* and *for* others.

ERIC'S DRIFT INTO DEALING

As I explain in greater detail in chapter 3, the image of the young Black man as “thug,” an image that exploited long-held stereotypes of Black men as dangerous or criminal, came to dominate representations of Black masculinity over the course of Eric’s adolescence. As Eric grew closer to the “trouble” he alludes to above, beliefs about the inherent criminality of Black men were hardened by now infamous (and wholly unfounded) warnings of the rise of a criminal class of “superpredators.” Among the many flaws of such warnings, from the implicit racial bias that lent traction to such a theory to its deeply problematic empirical assumptions, is that such theories simply mischaracterized the problem of crime and violence in inner-city neighborhoods and how young people like Eric were most likely to become involved in the new drug economy of the city and its associated violence. Eric’s pathway to dealing drugs and, later, crime was not determined by internal characteristics; rather he, like many others, seemed to drift into delinquency over the course of his early adolescence. In this way, Eric’s trajectory is much more consistent with early discussions of delinquency than with the now-defunct “superpredator” theory of the late twentieth century.

As David Matza puts it in a classic study on delinquency, a range of underlying influences or events “so numerous as to defy codification” often guide an adolescent’s involvement in delinquency.³ Though difficult to isolate, as I attempt to do in some part in the following pages, such influences and events operate in ways that “make initiation more probable.” Today, such experimentation with delinquency is widely regarded as age-appropriate behavior for most adolescents. However, the circumstances in which youth come of age vary by place and socioeconomic status. These differences shape the forms of deviance one is exposed to at an early age. As is evidenced in the following sketch of Eric’s life history, his involvement in the underground economy as a pre-teen was determined, in part, by the circumstances in which he came of age. He was not, as Matza writes, “wholly constrained” by these circumstances. Yet, that he was also not “wholly free” became ever more clear as law enforcement bore down heavily on his neighborhood and peers as Eric entered early adulthood.⁴

For Eric, as it is with many young people who first enter the underground economy, getting into the illicit business of drug selling was as easy as child’s play. An older person in the neighborhood might ask a youth to hold something in exchange for some money or to act as a lookout for the police, and, just like that, an adolescent becomes a small part of a much larger market in illegal drugs.⁵ It appeared to be this easy for Eric, who once

explained his entrance into the drug game this way: you find a person with a little money and a little drugs then you go and get a deal. Fifty dollars buys you a 50 shot of crack-cocaine. From there, you start the process: sell drugs, make money, replenish your supply, and on and on, until it ends. Although getting in appears to be nothing more than the outcome of a simple transaction, it is rather the culmination of a longer process—a final submission to the gradual pull toward participation that began years earlier, building strength as circumstances in other domains of a young person's life, like school or the family, worsen over time.

Trouble at School and Home

Eric says that while his other siblings, two sisters and a brother, “excelled in school, I never really cared for school.” His older brother graduated from a local state university. One of his sisters earned a degree from an elite university in the state. Another sister went to college in Southern California and “never came back,” he says. As a boy, it was hard for Eric to measure up against his high-achieving siblings. He was held back in second grade. He was “made” “Special Ed,” Eric says. He believed this label, and the tracking that comes with it, hindered him in his life and made him question himself, “because I seen my sisters excel and I always wondered why I was in Special Ed.” In middle school, Eric felt like he was always in the long shadow of siblings, especially his sisters: “And it was just like my sisters are so educated and I’m sittin’ here in Special Ed classes and they in gifted classes. When they [teachers] hearin’ my last name immediately it’s like, ‘Okay, I know your sisters, they gifted and everything,’ and I’m just sittin’ here in the Special Ed classes and it’s like, what am I doing here?”

As an adult, Eric has a much more critical understanding of what Special Education is used for in public school settings: “It’s just a place where they shift you to” if you “act up a lot . . . it’s just like ‘okay, we’ll put you in Special Ed.’” The only positive reflection on his early schooling is a class he was referred to after he “got into problems as a juvenile.” One of his father’s friends taught the class on African American History at the local community center. He remembers learning about the Egyptians and the Moors. “That was interesting to me,” Eric says. When he “finally” started going to City College years later, he remembered this experience and enrolled in classes in African American Studies. His interest in these classes helped him to recast himself as a student:

I’m like okay, well I guess this is the problem. This [African American history] is what is interesting to me, but you’re not taught until you go to college and things like that, then you can take the studies. In your

younger years, in elementary, high school you hear about Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, but you don't get the detailed history of who you are. That scared me away from it, or school, or what it was. I just didn't like the whole school thing.

Eric's sense of disconnection from school was exacerbated by the troubles he encountered at home, where Eric's father and mother fought often. When he was around, Eric's father was an imposing force in his life. Eric's parent's eventually split up, and Eric felt the absence of his father as abandonment. He recalls his father, who had already moved out of the family's home and, by Eric's account, was losing his grip on Eric's life, coming up to school after he got into trouble:

He came up to my school, I guess they had called him and he had sat in the office and he was just asking me what was going on with my life and you know, of course when he came up there he kinda scared me. Then he got upset and left and that was the end of it. It was like you're not going to be at home when I get home, so I guess this conversation is over with.

Even as he engaged in troublesome acts, Eric made attempts at involvement in more positive social settings, but he found that each institutional actor—teachers, principals, and even coaches—simply reinforced the negative feelings he already had for himself. He remembers these slights more than twenty years later: "I tried to join the basketball team and the coach didn't like me, he said I wouldn't amount to nothin' wouldn't be nothin'." He also remembers how school officials steered other students away from associating with him: "The principal, it was a younger class comin' up after me and the principal was tryin' to steer them away from hangin' out with me. He said that I'm a loser and all this type of stuff."

Eventually, Eric was kicked out of his middle school "because of the fights, the horse playing, and things like that that I was involved in. Not doing my homework, not really going to class, acting up in class." He was transferred to another school "out in the Avenues" with a history of conflicts between "Asians and the African Americans." "From that," Eric says, "I got into a lot of trouble because of the racial thing [animosity among racial groups in the school]": "It was more so as a social hang out up there than anything. We had to fight with the Asians. It was more so the African Americans had to stick together because the Asians will clique up. There were many fights on campus behind that."

Despite his poor performance, Eric eventually graduated to high school. "That's where I lost all interest," he says. "High school is like okay, well

you're really on your own," Eric explains. "The teachers aren't really on you as much and I found out how to cut class and once I found that out I was like, okay it's on." Notices sent home were not responded to: "The notices and things use to come to the house but my mother was basically trying to get her life together by being abused from the time of her and my father's marriage. So, she just kinda stepped out and I had two older sisters you know so it was the whole thing we were all transforming to and I was like the last of the bunch and it was time for me to grow up and everything was at its point where everybody was trying to get their stuff together." Eric felt as if he was on his own as he entered his high school years. He grew tired of a school system that made him feel badly about himself. These feelings were made worse by financial pressures at home, where Eric struggled to find a way to buy the most basic necessities: "Finances at home wasn't going too well, I didn't have clothes to wear. This impacts this point of your life right there when you're a teenager, you gotta have clothes, you know."⁶

"The Weed Man"

It was during this turbulent adolescent period in his life that Eric became drawn to the activity that buzzed around the housing complex across the street from his new home in the Fillmore. OGs (a colloquial term for "Original Gangsters," or more experienced members of a crew, set, or gang) were hanging out playing dominoes; younger guys were hanging out too. Eric found a level of sociability that drew him closer to a group with a "lifestyle" filled with "cars and things like that." Eric found a "fun environment" among his peers. He also found a way to make money. Eric's association with a new group of youth and OGs, along with his newfound career in the drug economy, helped him to build an identity that carried a positive status among his peers and that made him feel good about himself—a feeling that often eluded him at home and school: "It was like a high itself, just to be known." Eric's entrance into the drug game also helped him to garner a new reputation on his high school campus. Although he rarely attended class, he continued to visit the high school where there was a steady market for marijuana. By his account, he "became the weed man on campus." Eric learned the importance of diversification at an early age. At high school, he sold weed. In the neighborhood, crack.

Over time, hanging out selling dope became Eric's "lifestyle," as he describes it. It also became something of a job for him: "Seven in the morning, I try to get out here before anybody else, make my money, hang out all day and hang out all night, drink. It was the hang out place, and it became

the place for me just to have fun." Eric's drift from school to the street was accelerated, by his account, by his father's final departure from his home: "My father is not around to control me, so I'm hangin' around a whole bunch of people that are under no control." Eric's father left the home for good just when Eric was entering his teenaged years. Eric saw his departure as a sort of liberation: "It was open season for me."⁷

Crack Comes to the Fillmore

Eric was one of many young men on the block who, in his words, "got into sellin' crack cocaine" in the mid-1980s. The "easy money" that came along with this new trade was a draw as cash began to flow quickly into the hands of young men who, like Eric, had little financial support at home. The social structure of the new drug economy also strengthened bonds of affiliation among groups of young people, like Eric's newfound street family, who cliqued up so they could offer some protection to one another in the landscape of the new urban drug economy. Eric explained the formation of these groups this way: it's "not really a gang thing, but a set, up here, we call them 'sets' out here, sets." Set is a term that is still used to refer to smaller geographic units—sometimes as small as a block—that fall within a larger geographic area. People who grow up in or around a housing complex, including those not directly involved in the drug trade, may describe themselves as part of that set. Within each set, young people are typically divided into age-ordered cliques. The names of sets change over time, as adolescents move up the age hierarchy that organizes the set and make their own claims on the space.⁸

When Eric was hanging out in the Carter homes (a government-subsidized housing project), the group of young people he associated with was known as the "Young Warriors." A central member of the street family that Eric ran with as an adolescent boy once explained to me how the group emerged to organize young people who had been forgotten by the city and needed protection from players in the new drug economy:

We created the Young Warriors because it was an extension of our family. You selling drugs and you get robbed on Monday, you got to make a decision: either you going to stop selling drugs or you going to protect yourself. So, the little brother next to you, he selling drugs, the little sister over there she wanna be the lookout. You three or four sit down and say, "Hey, we need to protect each other." We from this area and everybody is claiming they area and now we are forming a group to protect our interests. That's smart. That's intelligent. It's unintelligent *not* to start a gang.

The group's founder no longer engages in the criminal activity that eventually led to his incarceration. His thin short mustache, which must have been just peach fuzz when he founded his street family, is now spotted with gray whiskers. He has traded his career as a hustler for a part-time job at a nearby convenience store and a series of entrepreneurial ventures. He is deeply involved in grassroots activism in the city—fighting for the well-being of the city's Black community at community meetings. Still, like Eric, he resists shedding his association with his "family." He holds tight to the sense of belonging and shared identity that comes along with joining a street family at an early age. He has never removed the simple "YW" tattoo on his arm that marks this association. He won't remove the tattoo, he says, "because that means something." He remains, in his words, "Young Warrior for life."⁹

In addition to serving as an impetus for strengthening bonds among young people at a time in their lives when they are especially susceptible to peer pressure, the new drug economy also reordered the neighborhood's spatial boundaries. Young people in nearby housing complexes joined forces much like the youth of the Carter homes and Eric did. Their conflicts often escalated into feuds that exploded on neighborhood street corners. Eric explains:

It got [to] a point where it was beyond, it was a drug but you had the money involved, you had the affiliation of the group you was hanging out with. So if we are fighting down here in [another housing complex in the Lower Fillmore], it's not like you gotta stay up here, you got to go down there and fight and go do this thing.

He continues, "It wasn't even the drugs, but the whole mentality of protecting something that's not even ours." The new economy also encouraged fights among older and younger generations. Drug dealers who traded in heroin, for example, had devised a way of doing business in the neighborhood. They typically instructed others involved in the trade not to make the block "hot" by engaging in conflicts that might escalate and attract the attention of the police. Fights between sets in the same neighborhood, which became more common after the introduction of crack, as Eric notes above, violated this rule. According to Eric, OGs also became upset about the loss of business as the drug economy shifted from heroin to crack. Sometimes, Eric explains, you "had to fight with some of the older guys because the money issue, you was taking away some of their clientele, so they didn't like the youngsters out there and things like that."

In addition to the newly erupting battles between sets, involvement in the drug trade also brought a level of risk and danger into Eric's life. Eric was "robbed a couple times" by "stick up kids" who developed a sort of cottage

industry out of robbing drug dealers during the crack era: “[I] had a guy put a Tech 9 to my head, take my money, take the dope that I had.”¹⁰ Another morning, Eric says, he was on his way down to the Employment Development Department when he was robbed: “I had on my leather coat on, my gold chain” when “these guys jump out of a Jeep and come out with a pistol.” The guys took Eric’s coat and chain. He jumped into his own car bent on retaliation, “rollin’ around tryin’ to find them.” “That whole lifestyle had its ups and downs,” Eric says. Included among “the downs” was the devastation that the new drug trade was having on his and his peers’ social networks.

Although much of the moral panic associated with crack addiction has been discredited, many in the neighborhood remember, as Eric does, how crack’s arrival damaged already strained social networks, “devastated families,” and, in the words of one neighborhood resident, “killed everything.” “I could actually see the destroying of families from this new drug,” Eric told me. Eric’s uncle was among the casualties of this new economy, whose addiction, Eric says, was “destroying the whole family.” Other dealers in the neighborhood would exploit his uncle’s addiction, selling him crack rock “on credit,” charging \$50 for what would have been a \$10 cash sale. His uncle would buy from sets throughout the neighborhood, racking up debt along the way. Eventually, Eric reached his tipping point, “I’m like, okay, this stuff has to stop.” He got into a “situation” with dealers from another set over his uncle’s debts. His uncle’s addiction and its fallout led Eric to consider how *his* behavior—selling drugs to some of the more vulnerable members of the neighborhood—was “destroying other homes too.”

The Changing Urban Landscape

Eric entered the underground economy in 1988, when he was just fourteen years old. In the United States, the mass incarceration era began around 1965 and picked up steam in the 1980s and into the 1990s.¹¹ Men who lived in neighborhoods like Eric’s would become the most vulnerable to the shift toward incarceration as the primary response to drug selling and possession. This new legislation came on the heels of decades of disinvestment in poor, urban neighborhoods and simultaneous investment in the creation of the White suburbs. In the years following World War II, the Fillmore, like Black neighborhoods in cities across the country, became the target of slum clearance efforts. These urban renewal efforts quickened the pace of demographic change in urban neighborhoods as White residents left the city for the suburbs, many taking advantage of FHA mortgages that did not prohibit racial restrictions. After these restrictions were rendered unconstitutional by civil rights legislation in the 1960s, middle-class

African American families also left these neighborhoods. Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson has provided the most cited account of what happened to those remaining in neighborhoods like the Fillmore from the 1970s onward. Low- and semi-skilled workers were left disconnected from the nation's shift from a manufacturing to a service-based economy. Black workers, especially Black men, were most alienated from the nation's changing economy and much of life in the city beyond the boundaries of the neighborhood.¹²

The mass incarceration era would hit young Black men coming of age in the 1980s—young men like Eric—hard. Tough-on-crime legislation would shift misdemeanor offenses to felonies. Crimes that once led to jail sentences in California would now lead to state or, in some cases, federal prison time. The new legislation introduced the now widely known 100:1 disparity in which the possession of one gram of crack triggers the same punishment as one hundred grams of cocaine, even though the substances are the same. The legislation also introduced “mandatory minimum” sentences that made the possession of five grams of crack a felony punishable by a minimum of five years in prison.¹³ Anti-crime bills also funded the development of multi-jurisdictional task forces. The legislation intersected with an overall shift in law enforcement that included the funding and development of para-military SWAT units and special units within police departments, like the San Francisco Gang Task Force. These changes brought the War on Drugs to the streets where Eric grew up, as task forces made up of local, county, state, and federal law enforcement personnel would periodically raid public housing complexes where the making of crack and drug selling were concentrated.¹⁴

One such raid brought an end to what Eric described as “five good years” of selling in the neighborhood, which spanned from Eric's late teens to his early twenties. From 1993 to 1998, there was “money coming through,” Eric explains, and relatively few arrests among his group. But then law enforcement began to crack down more heavily. In 1998, when Eric was twenty-four years old and still in the game, they “had that raid up here, on Carter. I mean they ran in people houses, I mean the Feds came, police came and knocked on people's doors, they kicked in doors.” The raid really shook people up, Eric says, and effectively ended the five-year run. The underground economy marched on, the ties to the geographic spaces that took on great meaning during this time carried into the next century, but the crack-down disrupted social networks as some were arrested and others evicted.

Although Eric was not a target of the raid, the dramatic show of force on the part of law enforcement influenced him too. It was clear that the law

enforcement regime in the city was changing, as policing practices shifted from abdication to penetration.¹⁵ Eric avoided long-term incarceration, but he realized that he was also in the sightlines of law enforcement. In the late 1990s, Eric participated in what he called Operation Ceasefire, a new program targeting young men involved in the drug trade and violence in the city.¹⁶ The young men identified as the most troublesome in the neighborhood were called in to meet with members of the community, from clergy to people who work in nonprofits. They were told that they must stop what they were doing. If they didn't, then the force of the criminal justice system would come down on them.

Eric was again brought face-to-face with the intense surveillance of the neighborhood's drug economy and his role in it after an arrest. During questioning by an officer, Eric remembers his shock at the degree of detail that officers had in their possession. "They knew my whole operation," he said, "somebody had told them my whole operation." Using confidential informants to get information from neighborhood drug operations was another practice that became more common in the War on Drugs.¹⁷ Typically, informants, even informants with long criminal records of their own, were allowed to remain free as long as they agreed to provide ongoing insider information on the local drug economy and possible related crimes. Over time, others would refer to informants as "snitches." Snitching went against earlier codes of behavior adopted by older OGs. Yet the pressure felt by younger men to provide information was far greater than when heroin dealers were plying their trade on the same streets. In contrast to previous periods, prosecutors now had the power to threaten individuals with decades-long sentences in exchange for information. This information often came at a high price, as residents circulated stories about the murders of people suspected of cooperating with the police.

In the interrogation room, Eric quickly realized that the officers were trying to pressure him to snitch, too: "They said, well, we are giving you a chance to give us something."

Eric refused. He defiantly told the officers that they could just take him down to the county jail.

"So they did," Eric said, "they took me down to [the county jail] and gave me possession and possession of sales. The whole time I was down there I was like I'm on court probation, what am I going to do?" Eric was caught with only a small amount of marijuana and suspected that he would not face long-term incarceration for the charge. "I sat there and they got three days to charge you, so I sat there for three days, they never charged me so they had to release me." Although he evaded long-term incarceration, Eric knew

his brief stint of incarceration would cost him. By the time he got back to the neighborhood, his entire stash was gone.

"You Have to Be Ready to Shoot"

In the beginning, Eric's involvement in the underground economy was motivated by financial need as well as an adolescent's search for "fun," as Eric once described it. As Eric got older, he felt more affected by the moral dilemmas that characterized the career of a drug dealer in the city. Eric once explained it to me this way:

"As you get older [and more] involved, you start seeing more [that] you can't just be out here and just be a part of the drug selling. This [selling drugs] comes with a territorial attitude . . . so you have to be ready for whatever challenges that come through . . . it's not a gang, but you guys are together, so whatever happens to one happens to all of us."

"So you have to be ready to engage in violence?" I ask.

"Right, right," he confirms.

Eric felt the increasing pressure to be ready to use violence at a moment when gun violence was increasing in San Francisco. There were ninety homicides recorded in 1988, the year that Eric entered the drug game. Of those homicides, less than 40 percent were the result of gun injuries. That would change dramatically as Eric entered his late teens. Of the 102 homicides in 1990, 60 percent were the result of gun injuries. Over 80 percent of the 129 homicides recorded in 1993, one year before Eric's twentieth birthday, involved guns. From the early 1990s on, gun homicides would overtake non-gun homicides in the city—and this pattern would remain consistent through the start of the new century. The impact of this shift would be felt especially hard by youth in the city, as the homicide rate for those twenty-four and under doubled from under 20 percent in 1988 to just over 40 percent by 1993.¹⁸ As was the case with the arrival of crack in the neighborhood, friends and family members would be among the casualties of the changing patterns of violence in the neighborhood.

"Now you're seventeen, eighteen [years old]," Eric says, "and you have to be ready to shoot and be involved in gun play if you want to stay out on the street."

This is not what Eric bargained for when he first took up with his crew as a pre-teen, but as he got older, he became convinced, as so many other young men do, that "that's what you had to do and I knew at some point it was either murder or be murdered." This created a moral dilemma for Eric: "I'm really battling with 'do I commit one [a murder]?" His dilemma was also shaped by an understanding of what it means to shirk away from

demonstrations of dominance on the street, especially for a young Black man in his position. If you don't take part (in a shooting), Eric explains, then you're labeled as "a punk"—a label that is likely to make you more vulnerable to exploitation and injury in the future.

The choices before Eric—kill, be killed, or go to the pen—were not theoretical. One moment in particular stands out in Eric's mind. There was a beef going on in the neighborhood, Eric explains. Somebody was shot and killed, and the word on the street was that the shooter was somebody from Eric's crew: "So they was coming for the retaliation." Eric was in his house when his "partna" came to get him. They knew that Eric had a gun in the house, he says, that's why they came to his house. Eric placed the gun in the belt of his pants. The group waited for the others to arrive on the scene. Eric came out of the house. "They was lookin' for one of our partnas," he explained, "and they was asking questions and things." Eric suspected that the group had guns too. He felt that his small group was outnumbered.

A member from the opposing group placed his hand at his waist, took one of Eric's partners, and announced that they were going to look for this guy inside the house. "I was like, you can't take him in there," Eric said, "so he came after me." "One of them hit me," Eric recalls, "and I tripped and fell, so I got jumped." The whole time he was getting jumped, Eric knew that he had a gun on him. Instead of grabbing for his gun and firing at the group, he took the beating: "I still had this gun on me and I was still lookin' like okay, if I start shootin' around here right now, I know that not only am I gonna lose my life, some of my partnas are going to lose they lives." Instead of risking his life, or the life of his friends, Eric waited until the fight eventually broke up. His decision met with different reactions once word hit the street. "Some of the brothas that came up there [said] 'we didn't know you had the pistol, we didn't come up there for that.'" As Eric had predicted, others questioned his reluctance to shoot: "Some people was like man you should have killed them in there." In light of these critiques, Eric felt that he made the right decision. If he had pulled his weapon, he felt that "that was going to take out all of us. It was more of them with more pistols than just mine." Eric knew what was at stake when he decided not to pull his weapon, from his reputation on the street to the lives of his peers. Pulling the trigger may have led to a deeper commitment to the street—the consequences of which, whether it be from street justice or the formal justice system, would be difficult to escape. Eric was not ready to kill someone, but choosing not to do so still left two other undesirable choices on the table: be killed or go the penitentiary.

It is impossible to know how close Eric came to option two—being killed—in the incident described above, but he is well aware that there were

other close calls. At times, he seemed to court death. For example, Eric recalls a time when he dared a man who had already pulled a gun on him to pull the trigger:

He pulled out the pistol and I asked him to shoot me and he shot and I still don't know to this day if there were blanks in the gun or what happened but the gun went off and it was just I don't know what happened to this day. But I thought that I was just that hard to where he wasn't gonna pull the trigger. I thought I was scaring him but, he pulled the trigger and I don't know what happened.

In addition to surviving these sorts of risky encounters, Eric also survived the drive-bys that characterized much of the violence in the 1980s. One shooting took place at a time when the violence in the city was neighborhood-on-neighborhood, not block-on-block: "It was a Fillmore against Hunters Point against Sunnydale."¹⁹ Eric and a "partna" were hanging out in another set's turf. A friend of his, a "show off" as he describes him, began to "do donuts" (spin the car in circles, with tires screeching, leaving skid marks on the asphalt). Eric knew that such an act would be seen as a provocation, "Man, what is wrong with you?" he asked his friend. "You doing donuts on these people's set?" Some time later, the same friend bought a new car and once again "rolled through" the set. They stopped at a coffee shop at the bottom of a hill. Eric walked into the store to buy a sweet potato pie. When he came out of the store, "a guy had a pistol and he was pulling it out." Eric continues, "and before I could even get in the car to tell my partna that he fittin'na shoot, he [the guy] just started shootin'. And the bullet went through the windshield and it just missed where he was sitting at the driver's seat." Eric did not really know who the intended target was: him or his "showoff" friend. Either way, these near misses, along with his observation of the changing law enforcement regime in the neighborhood, encouraged Eric to imagine a *fourth option* for himself, one that would provide an option beyond killing someone, getting killed, or long-term incarceration. As Eric described it, "It's like okay, you gonna have to change your life."

ERIC'S AWAKENING

The teenaged brain is not well suited for the consideration of long-term consequences. That this is true is one of several findings that have fundamentally changed our understanding and, in some settings, our approach to delinquency and crime among youth. We know now that adolescent brains continue to develop into early adulthood. During this period of development, adolescents are more susceptible to peer pressure and impulsivity. As

their brains develop, young people get better at imagining the long-term consequences of their behaviors, but their social maturity does not converge with their chronological maturity until their late twenties. This appreciation of the changing adolescent brain across the life course has encouraged key stakeholders in juvenile and criminal justice systems across the country to reconsider culpability when it comes to youth violations and, in turn, appropriate justice-system responses for young people aged twenty-four and younger.²⁰ As I explain in greater detail in chapter 3, this sort of advanced understanding was not the dominant framing of youth, especially Black youth, during Eric's childhood or adolescence. Consequently, Eric and his peers witnessed and experienced a seemingly universal shift to ever more harsh forms of law enforcement intrusion and punishment as they entered their late teens and early twenties. These shifts shaped the context within which Eric struggled to make sense of what was unfolding before him, which led him to reconsider his behaviors and actions.

Eric began to take notice of the changing patterns of policing and punishment in the neighborhood as he neared his late teens and early twenties. Some of his peers were being processed through the juvenile justice system, he noticed, but others, including those he considered to be at his level, were "going to the pen." These changes encouraged Eric to think seriously about getting out of the streets before it was too late: "So it was like you gotta do somethin'. You don't have any felonies, you haven't been caught with any drugs, you been blessed, you better figure out somethin'."

Over the years that Eric and I discussed his trajectory from adolescence to adulthood, I was struck by how often he punctuated the recollection of particular events with a phrase similar to "*what are you goin' to do?*" Each time he used the phrase it was as if he could feel once again the binds that constrained his choices as an adolescent. It was not uncommon for him to accompany such a reflection with a shake of the head and a long, distant stare, as if he were rethinking each option again, struck by the poor choices that seemed destined to determine his path. I came to think of the reflective moments that Eric included in each recollection as *awakening moments*: brief moments triggered by external events that encourage a person to think, even in the most fleeting of ways, about changing the direction of their lives. These awakening moments do not necessarily operate as "turning points" or "trigger events" in the ways typically imagined by scholars. In perhaps the most prominent study of desistance, for example, Robert Sampson and John Laub introduced a theory of desistance rooted in informal social control—the type of control that is placed on us by ourselves, peers, and intimates. Based on a life-course analysis of a cohort of White,

male, "previously criminal youths" from Boston, the authors argue that external events, such as job stability and marital attachment (often referred to as the "good marriage effect") act as "trigger events" that redirected the men in their study toward desistance.²¹

As is apparent in Eric's case, the dramatic events he experienced during his adolescence did not lead him to turn away from the dangers associated with his lifestyle. For the most part, Eric would continue his career for years after some of the most dramatic incidents he describes above. Instead of turning points like a good marriage or conscription into the Armed Forces, the awakening moments I describe here are better imagined as *the moments that precede a turning point*; the accumulation of such moments over time *set the conditions for a turning point to take hold*. These moments are also of a smaller unit than the cognitive shifts described by Peggy Giordano and colleagues in their analysis of the life history narratives of 210 women and men who were incarcerated in Ohio in 1982. In that study, the authors identified what they described as "hooks for change," such as church involvement or a good quality marriage, as key factors in cases of successful desistance. The authors also found that "cognitive shifts" significantly influenced the desistance process and that explanations for desistance varied by gender: "Many of the women who were more successful as desisters crafted highly traditional replacement selves (e.g., child of God, the good wife, involved mother) that they associated with their successful exits from criminal activities." In contrast, "Men more often assigned prominence to prison or treatment, or focused on family more generally (the wife and kids)."²²

The moments Eric returned to again and again, at times with no prompting from me, seemed to occur long before he had constructed a new "replacement self" or reached any obvious turning point in his life. In some ways, Eric's accounts of these moments were more similar to what has been described as "the crystallization of discontent," a phrase used to describe the linking of single, seemingly unrelated events that become "*part of a pattern* that might not easily be fixed, be ignored, or disappear [without] a serious reevaluation or reassessment of one's current situation."²³ The accumulation of seemingly "minor discontents" is said to motivate one to reconsider their path in an effort to avoid becoming a "feared self" in the future: the person who, in Eric's case, kills, gets killed, or goes to the pen. My ability to observe Eric's reference to these moments (rather than his retellings in retrospective interviews) revealed how this crystallization unfolded in a nonlinear way over time and overlapped with key stages in his adolescent development. A close look at these moments also revealed

important distinctions, highlighting the moments that matter most when it comes to motivating change.

“Half-and-Half”

The accumulation of awakening moments over time, especially as young people are developing in key ways cognitively over the course of their adolescence, tips a person toward change. Such moments may encourage a young person to seek out experiences or opportunities in other settings that might provide the type of fourth option that Eric was searching for as he entered early adulthood. This sort of seeking behavior may operate *in parallel with* an ongoing commitment to the street. Even as Eric retained some commitment to his lifestyle, for example, he also sought out opportunities to secure the credentials that are typically valued in a legitimate work setting. He tried to go back to school a few times to get his high school diploma, he once told me, but lacked so many credits that he eventually gave up. It took him a few more years to try to get his GED. He passed three of the tests but flunked the math section twice and eventually gave up on that effort, too. That was over a decade ago. He recently found out that they change the test every ten years. When he learned that, he thought, “Man, I missed my opportunity.”

Why would a young man like Eric—a young man who, to outsiders, appears to be deeply committed to the street—seek out a credential like a high school equivalency degree? I asked him this question during one of our earliest conversations.

“It’s just something that, I don’t know, it’s just something that I guess I wanted,” he said. “You know, somethin’ in me said, ‘Go get your GED.’ It wasn’t for no job or anything like that, I had a job.”

The job that Eric is referring to was what he had in addition to his job as a drug dealer: part-time work that he secured when he was in his late teens as part of the mayor’s program for at-risk youth. He explained that the mayor’s office was “giving a lot of the brothas little jobs, you know like at the recreational centers, you know, things like that, then they started this Mayor’s Youth-At-Risk thing where you get a job anywhere in the City or County at City Hall or wherever you wanted to work at.” Eric explained that he chose to work at the Department of Public Works. He worked there for about six years, but he lost the job when he lost his driver’s license after a series of suspensions and an arrest: “So I never went back there.” Instead, he says, he “continued to do my thang out here.”

To an outsider, Eric may have looked like a typical “gang banger,” a person with a deep, unyielding commitment to the street. Yet, during this phase of their lives, adolescent boys and young men may straddle the line

between the street and legitimate work opportunities. They might, as Eric did, hold a job with a local agency while continuing to put in time dealing drugs. To others, these kinds of efforts at change may seem disingenuous, yet they represent a key phase for those who are thinking about changing their lives but are unsure about how to do so. Eric now refers to this period of his life, and of the lives of young people he encounters in the neighborhood, as “half-and-half.” Using the top of a notebook lying on the coffee shop table where we are sitting, Eric demonstrates what he means by “half-and-half.” Sometimes you are over here, he says, placing the notebook on the left side of the table. You know you want to be over here, he continues, dragging the notebook over to the right side of the table, but you are not able to get there yet. Eric puts the notebook in the center of the table. After a brief pause, he moves the notebook back and forth, from left to right, as if crossing over an imaginary line, and concludes, “So you’re half-and-half.”²⁴

Eric’s description of “half-and-half” echoes research on desistance that describes it as a slow, gradual process that unfolds over time, a process in which people may “try out” other identities on the road to change. Eric’s description of his experience also resonates with writings on religious conversions that describe “the surprising degree to which—and the frequency with which—a transformation of religious identity, behavior, and world view can occur quite tentatively and slowly.”²⁵ In such cases of conversion, a person takes on a “try-it-out” orientation toward the possibility of change; “the actual transformation of identity, behavior, and world view commonly called conversion” can unfold over a “relatively prolonged period—often months or even years.”²⁶ This is the sort of change that is described here. It is a form of situational, behavioral, *and* cognitive adjustment that unfolds over the course of late adolescence and early adulthood and ends, eventually, with a commitment to change. Until then, young men like Eric continue to hustle as a sort of “side bet,” something they can fall back on if their efforts to secure legitimate employment fail.²⁷

Fatherhood and Change

Awakening moments that accompany key events, like becoming a father, may help to bring young men like Eric more firmly across the dividing line of half-and-half.²⁸ They may begin to spend more time in a setting other than the street while spending less and less time on the side of half-and-half that is likely to lead to violence, victimization, or incarceration. This was true for Eric, who became a father at age twenty-three. Becoming a father made Eric think ever more deeply about changing his life: “I got my daughter and she is the thing of my life now, so I’m like okay, I don’t know what to do.” Eric remained

half-and-half, seeking out other opportunities beyond the street. During this time, he was offered the opportunity to work as a Black Male Involvement Specialist for a nonprofit agency. A lady who knew his mother, who at one time owned a preschool in the city, gave him a chance. This work allowed him to see fatherhood through a new lens. He met a man there, a professor at a state university who studied fatherhood in the Black community, who would inspire him to think more seriously about the role of fatherhood in his life and his new role as a father, even as he remained somewhat committed to his street lifestyle: "You know, I went through a training with him and he kinda gave me an overview of this fatherhood thing. So, I'm sittin' there listening to him and I'm still selling drugs and still being the weed man, I had people coming to meet me at my job [to buy drugs]. I was the 'Male Involvement Specialist' plus 'Outreach.' You know, my outreach was of course, you know I hang out, still talking to brothas, still selling drugs, still doing these things."

Despite his continued involvement in the underground economy, Eric had been thinking deeply about what it meant to be a good father: "I'm really trying to be a father and impact my daughter's life, so at a certain point that's where it really begins to really hit me, *what am I going to do?*" Eric had been going to court regularly in an effort to secure custody of his daughter. He had also participated in the routine activities associated with caretaking. This new routine shifted his work schedule on the block: "I would hang out at night and take care of her during the day." This pattern continued even after he ended his relationship with his child's mother. The threat of missing those caretaking moments with his daughter seemed to affect Eric more deeply than brief stints of incarceration had in the past: "[It] really starts hitting me after taking care of her and being with her and not being able to pick her up on schedule. [That] really made me think, *man, you got to start doing something.*"

The reality of this threat was driven home during another run-in with the police. Eric recalls driving around with a friend. Eric was driving the car, even though he had a suspended license. The two stopped to greet a friend on the street. A police car came up behind his car. Rather than subject himself to a search that would almost definitely lead to an arrest, Eric took off, leading the officers on a chase through the city's streets. Eventually, he was caught and booked at the city's criminal justice center. The district attorney was pushing for a "real lock-up," Eric says. Unlike thousands of others who funnel through the court system each year, Eric was able to make use of a private lawyer. He was placed on three years' court probation.

The real awakening moment for Eric was not his arrest: it was the consequences his arrest had for his daughter. He could not pick up his daughter

from school, which troubled him greatly: "All I'm thinking is that I got to pick up my daughter from school." While fatherhood prompted Eric to begin to change some of his routines, he did not immediately sever his ties to the street. Some part of him decided that he wanted to live, and that he wanted a life off the streets, but he still didn't know, as he would tell me, *how* to move beyond half-and-half: "I was like man, you know, something got to give . . . , you either gonna kill someone, get killed, or go to the pen. What are you goin' do?" This silent battle continued, part of the pull that brought Eric back-and-forth across the dividing line of half-and-half.

Bids at Change

The conversion experience is, at times, slow and tentative. For young men like Eric, the effort to seek out experiences and legitimate employment opportunities during the half-and-half stage is a way to gather information or to try out the makings of a new identity. These efforts represent bids at change—how people respond to these bids is consequential for what young men learn from seeking efforts. Perhaps the most transformation-seeking effort for Eric was his agreement to attend a new church with a cousin and a friend (the friend was convinced that the church would be a good place to find potential dates). In contrast to the large Black churches that had acted as a hub for the political and social life of the Black community in San Francisco for decades, this church was a storefront church across the Bay in Oakland.

Eric was now in his mid-twenties; he had been half-and-half for his entire early adulthood. After attending the church for some time, Eric reached out to his pastor for guidance: "I started talking to the pastor." Eric remembers one day when the church called and asked Eric to come down to provide some help. This surprised Eric: "They called me and asked me for my help, and I was just like, what?" Eric went to the church and helped out. Then he got another call. The pastor told him that he was going on his honeymoon and needed Eric to set up the church. Again, Eric was surprised: "I'm like, you want me to do what?" Again, Eric went to the church. He realized that the pastor had a plan for him. He continued to recruit Eric for help, and Eric continued to show up.

After some time, Eric decided to call upon a few other people he knew who had lived the same lifestyle he had lived for years. Eric gathered a small group of men around a table, he says, to figure out, as a group, "a way for some brothas to get some help." Up until that point, nobody at the church really knew the lifestyle that he lived, Eric said, so he shared his story with the group. They then began to meet regularly at the church. Eventually, they named themselves: Brothers Changing the Hood.

Eric was twenty-six years old. He would continue to sell drugs for another two years.

He found it difficult to relinquish the pull of the street, especially the income it provided. The time spent in legitimate settings—work and the church, for example—provided Eric with some space to rethink the trajectory of his life, yet these experiences did not provide all the information Eric needed to break free from the lifestyle he grew up in: “I didn’t know how to stop,” he said, “even though I had got a job, I didn’t know how to stop.” In the end, how to stop would be easier than Eric thought; the work of constructing a new identity—and of finding a new place in his old neighborhood—would take much more time.

The Final Act

In Eric’s memory, several events clustered together over a short period to mark the end of his days in the underground economy. Efforts to target gang violence had intensified as Eric entered early adulthood. A friend was labeled as a gang member. Eric knew that such a label could have consequences for him, too—the label of gang-associated would make it ever more difficult to avoid long-term incarceration if he were arrested again. Two of Eric’s partners were arrested. One was sent to the penitentiary. The other’s arrest led to the loss of a significant amount of product. Looking back, Eric sees that he ran into the same sort of trouble that many other dealers run into eventually. The drug economy is a hamster wheel. It takes only a little money—fifty dollars in Eric’s case—to get started. From there, the hamster wheel begins to spin. You make money on product; you spend profits on product. If you lose the product to arrest or a robbery, you lose the money too. You get in the hole. “Sooner or later,” Eric says, “you ain’t got nothin’.” The phone call he got about his business partner’s arrest, the impounding of his car, and the loss of the product, reinforced this point: “You taking a risk in this whole drug scene. There’s nothing that you can really hold onto.”

After this setback, Eric would make one last attempt to get back in the game, but it was short lived. The balance of half-and-half was shifting toward his involvement in the church and his commitment to being an active father in his daughter’s life. Eric was also wise to how the space he grew up in was changing once again. Another generation was coming up. The behavior of some of the youngsters in the neighborhood was unpredictable. Eric believed that “one of these youngsters would love to say they took you out.” That worried him. Instead of fighting to maintain his perch atop the set’s pecking order, Eric decided to cede public space to the next generation. After over a decade that spanned early adolescence to early

adulthood, Eric decided to end his career as a hustler. He was now twenty-eight years old with a rap sheet, a daughter, and no high school degree.

IDENTIFYING THE MOMENTS THAT MATTER

Eric describes giving it all up on one night, but the process of getting out of the game began years before he made the decision to let it all go. For him, making this change in his life was not the outcome of an epiphany. Eric's account of how he left the lifestyle of the street reveals how changes happen—or begin—over the course of urban adolescence. To summarize: As a boy, Eric drifted into a street family that was fun and exciting. He also learned that he could meet some of the financial necessities that his mother, who was struggling with her husband's departure from the home, could not provide. His new lifestyle brought him positive affirmation from others—he became known in the neighborhood. Becoming known gave him a measure of self-respect and confidence. He felt little of this in his turbulent home or in school. He also felt abandoned by his father; once he left, there was little social control left in Eric's life. It was "open season" for him, as he says. He became committed to developing a career as a drug dealer. He lived this lifestyle for over a decade. Yet, even as he did, he took notice of the circumstances that were changing around him. People were going to the pen. Peers and OGs were now doing serious time for crimes that would have garnered them more lenient sentences in the past. People who grew up together in the same sets and cliques were now turning on each other. The new drug economy was also having a devastating effect on families and friends. His involvement in the drug game also brought him into riskier situations. He was getting robbed, almost killed.

Years after we first met, I sat down with Eric to review what I considered to be key events in his life—the moments that, from his perspective, were central to helping him break free from the street. These events were akin to what John Lofland and Norman Skonovd describe as the "motif experience": the salient thematic elements and key experiences identified by the person "doing" or "undergoing" a conversion and the objective situations in which the conversion unfolds.²⁹ In my notes, Eric's retelling of these events were often followed by phrases like the following:

- "You better figure out somethin'."
- "It's like, okay, you gonna have to change your life."
- "What are you going to do, man?"

After poring over Eric's timeline again and again, it appeared to me that this internal line of questioning certainly reflected signs of an awakening—an

awareness that he needed to pursue a fourth option—but it was not entirely clear which moments mattered most. To answer this question, I decided to review these moments systematically with Eric. Before our meeting, I created a table with columns that included the year in which these moments occurred, Eric's age at the time the moment occurred, a description of the moment, and a column labeled "AM?" to indicate whether a moment was, in fact, considered to be an awakening moment by Eric. In preparation for our meeting, I wrote down a brief shorthand description of each moment that appeared to play a significant role in Eric's life story on the front of an index card. On the back of the card, I included a brief description or a significant quote from Eric's description of the event. I left the year and age columns blank and filled this information in as we went along. This was an opportunity to confirm observations or facts previously recorded in my notes.

Eric and I met in a small room in the main branch of the city's public library on a weekday afternoon to review the cards. I introduced the exercise to Eric.

"It seems like you have these different kind of awakening moments," I began, "[moments] when you're saying to yourself: I gotta figure out a way to do something else." As an example, I described a moment that I wrote about earlier in this chapter, when Eric had to decide if he would use a gun on a group of men who had come to his house bent on retaliation. I suggested that, from the way he tells it, becoming a father was another such moment for him. As I explain what I mean, Eric utters "uh hm" in agreement. I continue, explaining what I would like to do with the stack of cards in front of us: "Let me go through them with you, and you can tell me whether that's true or not."

I began the exercise with fourteen index cards that I had categorized as key moments in Eric's life. As we moved through the list, I also sketched out a timeline so that Eric and I could get a better understanding of the timing of these events in his life. I had organized the cards chronologically before our meeting, but I wanted Eric to provide corrections as necessary. After I selected a card and placed it face up on the table, I would briefly describe the moment in an effort to jog Eric's memory. Eric would look at the card and consider it. We would talk it over and categorize it as an awakening moment or not and then place it in the order in which it occurred chronologically in his life. In asking Eric about the intensity of the moment, I provided strong, medium, or weak as possible selections. I also asked Eric to describe the transformative potential—the degree to which the moment *actually moved him to change his behavior*—of each moment as high,

The Moments That Matter

<i>Intensity</i>	<i>Transformative Potential</i>		
	<i>High</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Low</i>
Strong	Fight, doesn't shoot Becomes a father Witnesses uncle's addiction High-speed chase; can't pick up daughter		
Moderate			Doing donuts Carter raid Arrest . . . 3 days [in jail]
Weak			Ceasefire*

NOTE: The final table includes only the moments that Eric identified as awakening moments.

* Eric described this event as "Ceasefire," though it was most likely an initiative inspired by Operation Ceasefire that took place in the city in 1997. I provide a more detailed discussion of Operation Ceasefire in chapter 2.

medium, or low. I used these categories to distinguish among those moments that may have encouraged a period of reflection but did not necessarily provide a strong motivation for Eric to change his life and those moments that were perceived by Eric to be deeply transformative. As we made our way through the cards, some key moments came up that I had not included in my batch. I created cards for those moments on the spot, and we placed them along the timeline with the other cards.

In the days following our meeting, I created a new table that documented the intensity level and transformative potential of the moments that Eric had categorized as "awakening moments" (see table). Systematically categorizing these moments with Eric revealed an interesting pattern. First, for Eric, few moments fell in the middle. Instead, moments were most often categorized as strong or weak in intensity and high or low in transformative potential. Also, the most dramatic moments—like Eric having a gun pointed at his face by another young man—were not necessarily awakening moments. Awakening moments *may* be dramatic in nature, but they can also be more mundane, like the time an arrest interfered with his ability to pick up his daughter from daycare.

Reviewing the timeline with Eric also revealed that, for him, the most powerfully transformative awakening moments clustered within a key developmental period in his life and in the lives of adolescents generally. Eric begins making minor bids at change around age eighteen, when he takes a job with a city program for at-risk youth, but his most meaningful awakening moments occur near his mid-twenties, as he enters early adulthood. This exercise also revealed that the moments that mattered most for Eric—the moments that he categorized as high in intensity and transformative potential—were those events that were embedded in the context of personal relationships. Eric's desire to prevent the deaths of members of his street family, becoming a father, witnessing his uncle's addiction, and the risk of not being able to accomplish the fatherhood practices that come along with that role were the four key moments that encouraged Eric to change his life. The exercise revealed a simple yet profound observation regarding the importance of social relationships in the process of desistance, one that has been documented but is still often overlooked in scholarly discussions: people often change *with* and *for* others. Put simply, change is not merely an individual accomplishment; it is a group process.

Understanding Change as a Group Process

Eric's movement beyond the dividing line of "half-and-half" was not only encouraged but also *aided* by his relationships with others. Before joining his street family, Eric was something of an outsider at school. His new street family provided a social setting in which Eric could construct a new identity—a place where he could become, as he has recalled with pride, "known." Over the course of his adolescence and early adulthood, Eric had invested deeply in his reputation as a hustler: each buy, each arrest, reaffirmed this reputation. To secure his place on the other side of half-and-half, Eric would have to find a new setting in which to craft a new identity. Fatherhood and, as I describe below, his assimilation into a new faith community provided a new set of relational contexts within which Eric could prove himself as something other than a dealer. Together, the practices associated with faith and fatherhood operated in concert to push Eric across the dividing line of half-and-half.

"I Had to Step up to the Plate"

Fatherhood provided Eric with a new relational context in which he could revise his sense of self. Becoming a father also reoriented Eric's daily routine in a way that drew him away from the street, much like the seemingly banal tasks he was called upon to perform by his pastor. Eric's commitment

to childrearing intensified once his baby's mother returned to work and Eric became the baby's primary caregiver during the day. He describes his new daily routine this way:

You know, so, it was more, you know, the responsibility was on me because she was a baby so, you know, *I kind of took care of the responsibilities during the day* and when she [the baby's mother] came home at night, you know, I went on about my way. It was more or less that I was becoming more responsible for my daughter. It was like okay, I'm hanging out all day, but *I have to go pick her up by a certain time* and then *I got to feed her by a certain time. I had a whole schedule, you know.* And then finally [his daughter] moved in with me and my mother, so I had to transition from *now I can't just jump out the house and do what I want to do no more.* [emphasis added]

I once asked Eric what made him, at age twenty-three, choose to embrace the various responsibilities associated with parenthood. Although he usually had little difficulty providing a quick answer to my questions, this one, like my question about what motivated him to get his GED, appeared to stump him. When I asked the question a second time, he responded, "I don't know," as if it was a question he had never considered before. "It was just a challenge where I didn't have a choice. You know, I mean it was either that I let someone else take all the responsibility of raising her or, um, I just figured I got one [a child] or something but . . . I felt like, you know, I had to do it; you know, it was my responsibility. I had to step up to the plate."

For those who are at the half-and-half stage, as Eric was for years, becoming a father can help to reorient daily practices in ways that loosen ties to life on the street. For Eric, stepping up to the plate meant that he had to be physically and emotionally present for his child and that he had to provide financially for her. He met the latter responsibility, in part, through his dealings in the underground economy. Since Eric relied on his income from hustling to provide for his daughter, becoming a father did not lead directly to salvation from the streets, but it did alter his daily routines and the set of people to whom he was accountable.

The Relational Role of Faith

The network Eric assimilated into at church and the new organization he created helped to serve a need not dissimilar to what Eric's street family had provided him at an early age. For Eric, fatherhood provided a new relational context within which he could revise his sense of self—he could see himself in a new light. The storefront church community provided Eric with a new set of relationships within which he could establish himself as a new kind of

person. Eric did not necessarily go to church *to* change. Yet, when his friend went to the pen, his participation in this new faith community took on greater significance for Eric. He thought he had missed an important opportunity years earlier, when he failed to complete the series of GED tests, but he was not going to miss this one, he thought to himself. Instead of scoffing at the seemingly menial requests made by his pastor, like setting up chairs while his pastor was away, he would perform each one without complaint.

Eric did not share his career as a dealer with people at church, not right away. At church, he once explained, people knew him for something else—something other than “the weed man.” He strengthened this new identity with the completion of each task. Eventually, Eric gave up on pretending to be someone without a street history. He asked his pastor for guidance. With his pastor’s encouragement, Eric called a group of men together with the objective of helping him to change his life—something he found difficult to do on his own—and to change the lives of other men. Eric believed that this new group would help to reinforce his efforts to construct an identity as a changed man. As Eric moved further beyond half-and-half, he would garner a new credential—as pastor—that would trump the street credentials that he had acquired over more than a decade in the underground economy.³⁰

AFTER THE AWAKENING: SHOWING CHANGE

Once Eric made his break from the street, he “took off running” with his commitment to his new identity. Even though he would always be associated with the street family he took up with as a youngster, he was committed to being known for something else now: “I have to be known as change now. Even now I can be identified as a Young Warrior member, so I have to show myself as change.”³¹ Despite Eric’s commitment to change, it did not mean that the street was done with him, at least not right away. Eric’s identity as a drug dealer had been constructed over time by a series of situated interactions that played out on the street again and again each day. His efforts at change would also have to be reinforced by a new set of interactions in the neighborhood. In all, he says, it took about three to four years *after he made his cognitive turn away from the street* to secure this new identity in the neighborhood.

Looking back, Eric acknowledges that it took some time to give up on the behaviors, like partying and drinking heavily, that went along with his 24–7 life as a dealer. During this time, Eric would learn that simply giving up on the practices associated with drug dealing was not enough for him to be known as a new man by others—that, too, would be a process. Early on, Eric

had to resist the pull back toward his old lifestyle and career. In the days following his commitment to give up on the game, his phone rang constantly, he says, with requests from old clientele. He also had to manage face-to-face confrontations with people in the neighborhood who knew him only as the man he used to be: "Everywhere I go, it don't matter where I'm at, everybody knew I sold marijuana. So, it's like I can't go anywhere. If I see somebody, they want some marijuana. [I tell them] I don't sell that anymore. I don't do that anymore. It's just everywhere I went. 'Do you have any marijuana?'"³²

For Eric to change his reputation, he had to change his routine behaviors. He tempered his association with people and places that might pull him into past behaviors. In the neighborhood, he cut off his involvement with certain people, including those that he "grew up with all my life." Not that these people didn't support his efforts to change—they did, by Eric's account. "That's what you're doing now, no problem," they would say. At the same time, as an act of sociability, friends or family members might offer an opportunity to engage in the sort of activities associated with his old lifestyle, like smoking marijuana or drinking, which were activities that Eric was now trying to avoid.

Eric is distant from the drug scene now. Since his exit, he says, the game has evolved to yet another level in the neighborhood. The violence there appears to have little to do with drugs; it is about beefs between adolescent boys in different sets in the neighborhood. Eric's expertise is no longer in the game but in the challenges that come along with exiting the game, especially the barriers facing Black fathers with criminal histories. Eric now wants to draw on this expertise to make good in the neighborhood. In the same way that it took time for Eric to build up his reputation on the street, it would take some time and work for others to accept Eric's efforts to change his reputation. It would take even longer for him to find a new place in the neighborhood's crime-fighting community.