

Introduction

When Aisha left Uganda for Massachusetts at the age of eleven, she had, she said, “no idea what America was gonna look like.” She hoped to find “heaven, with a lot of candy.” Instead, Aisha moved with her mom and two older brothers to North Cambridge, or NC, a place she described as “the hood, the modern-day hood.”

It was not what Aisha had imagined. But when she enrolled in seventh grade and met Joanne—her “first American friend”—things started looking up. The girls grew close, fast. Like Aisha, Joanne was driven and creative. Also like Aisha, Joanne had come to NC from another country, emigrating from Haiti when she was five. The girls played together after school, dashing through the housing project where their apartments were minutes apart. Years later, as seniors in high school, their friendship was deeper than ever.

Aisha, who had a tense and often painful relationship with her mother, spent as much time as she could with her friends. She rarely felt particularly relaxed at home, where the fridge was mostly empty and where paint flecked from grime-streaked walls. Aisha preferred to pass her hours outside—walking, talking, and hanging out. When a curfew or bad weather kept her in, Aisha headed straight for the computer, a small desktop in the corner of her living room. Cross-legged on a blue desk chair whose cushion had worn down flat, Aisha

opened Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. She shared streams of filtered selfies—all glamour and edge—and watched likes tick in.¹ Dubbed “Miss Social Media” by her best friends, Aisha knew her photos were cool. She had come a long way since the media diet of her childhood back in Kampala: Jean-Claude Van Damme and Rambo. Online, Aisha polished her profiles and caught up with friends until she could head back outdoors.

Joanne, by contrast, spent much of her time at home. Ten family members shared her apartment, which Joanne warmly called a “theme park.” Inside, children gleefully shrieked, their small feet thudding on big stairs. In the kitchen, food sizzled in oil, and Kreyòl crackled from a small TV. Two yellow birds in a white cage squawked and pecked at each other’s beaks; “they’re kissing,” Joanne liked to say. Friends and neighbors dropped in through the back door, often joining Joanne’s grandma at the table. Outside, commuter rail trains thundered down tracks yards from the house. The trains ran thirty-four times each day, from 6:35 a.m. until twenty minutes after midnight. Visitors sometimes raised their voices to be heard over the din. But Joanne and her family knew to pause at a train’s first tremor. Several seconds later, suspended sentences resumed.

Joanne’s mother worked in the janitorial department of a neighboring town’s hospital. During her mom’s shifts, Joanne faithfully watched her four young siblings. She prepared snacks, helped them color, and occasionally threw at-home spelling bees using lists of grade-appropriate words she found using Google.

When she needed a moment alone, Joanne retreated to her bedroom. She had her own room, as did her twenty-year-old brother. Joanne’s mom took the third bedroom, with her partner and their baby son. The fourth was for the other five family members: Joanne’s grandma and four-year-old sister slept in one bed; her six- and seven-year-old brothers slept in the other; and on a fold-up camp bed in the corner slept a cousin who had moved in after fleeing an abusive uncle.

To relax, Joanne clicked the door closed and lay on her bed, joining the stuffed teddy bears—one from her boyfriend, another from Aisha—propped on her pillows. Around her, pencil drawings were pinned to the walls: self-portraits sketched in art class; copies of a Picasso painting she liked. Tubes of lotion and some bottles of jewel-toned nail polish sat on a dresser, beside a bulk-sized tub of Ibuprofen she kept on hand for her migraines.

In her room, Joanne journaled, messaged friends on her phone, and eased into novels. She also wrote poems. *Writing brings me peace, I can get lost in a page and words for hours*, she once tweeted. Joanne wrote through grief and gratitude. She wrote to indict social inequality and a school system she often felt was failing her peers. Sometimes Joanne performed her poems at slams, joined by Aisha and other friends from school. Sometimes she kept them to herself.

Aisha, Joanne, and all the girls I met had unique personalities and dreams. They had distinct families and life experiences. Yet as young women of color growing up in a poor neighborhood, they faced some similar hardships, including the daily assaults of white supremacy and poverty. These made even more challenging a time of life known to be vulnerable: adolescence. To get by, the girls leaned on their friends.

Peer Effects and Social “Contagion”

The NC girls were not alone in relying on their friends.² For teens from all backgrounds, friendships offer vital comfort and understanding.³ In fact, friendships are so elemental that of all the factors shaping young people’s experiences—including schools, neighborhoods, and families⁴—most teens say the most important part of their life is their peer group.⁵

Teens spend countless hours with friends—at and after school and, increasingly, on social media—and they jointly form identities,

habits, and norms.⁶ Unsurprisingly, friends have a large and measurable impact on one another, an impact social scientists term “peer effects.”⁷ Peer effects mean that teens tend to match their friends in multiple realms, ranging from academic achievement to moral values and more.

Often, however, researchers studying peer effects focus on something else: what they label “risk behaviors,” like drinking alcohol, using drugs, getting pregnant, or committing crimes.⁸ Such risk behaviors, researchers argue, are socially transmissible: “social problems are contagious and are spread through peer influence,” claims the sociologist Jonathan Crane.⁹ Researchers worry that in poor neighborhoods in particular, peer effects transmit beliefs and activities that harm communities and derail teens’ trajectories.¹⁰

Certainly, teens’ trajectories are precarious, particularly for young people of color living in poor neighborhoods, like Aisha and her friends. For teens who face more surveillance and punishment than white and middle-class teens, adolescent mistakes can be enormously costly.¹¹ “Putting one puzzle piece in the wrong place can drastically alter trajector[ies],” explains the sociologist Ranita Ray, “as the formidable constraints of poverty . . . leave no room for minor mistakes.”¹²

Yet researchers and policy makers too often frame *friendship* as a threat to young people of color growing up in poverty. As such, some suggest that social isolation can protect teens from peer effects and peer pressure, and help them “get ahead.” For instance, writing about the children of immigrants in New York City, the sociologist Philip Kasnitz and colleagues note, “Being heavily ‘embedded’ in networks . . . among the worst off can be a real disadvantage. In such groups, many of the most successful members describe themselves as ‘loners.’”¹³

It is not only academics who take this view. Some parents in poor neighborhoods force or cajole their kids to stay away from others.¹⁴ And some young people themselves shy from peers to avoid

“trouble.”¹⁵ In Chicago’s infamous Henry Horner Homes, for example, the journalist Alex Kotlowitz met a boy who “figured the only way to make it out of Horner was ‘to try to make as little friends as possible.’”¹⁶ Similarly, the sociologist Nikki Jones found that young Black women in a poor Philadelphia neighborhood used “relational isolation” to dodge friendships’ costs—like the duty to physically defend a friend who was attacked.¹⁷ “By avoiding close friendships,” Jones explains, “girls reduce the likelihood of their involvement in a physical conflict.”¹⁸

Peers can, of course, be harmful. But the focus on these harms—and on negative peer effects that spread “social problems” through friendships—tells only a partial story.

Partial Portraits of Friendship

Teens like Aisha, Joanne, and the other girls I got to know are often overlooked in research. Instead, social scientists have written disproportionately about young people labeled “deviant,” like gang members, teen parents, drug dealers, “fighters,” and “fugitives.”¹⁹ This outsized emphasis is problematic; even so-called sympathetic studies—those that show, for instance, how teen parenthood or selling drugs can be rational choices amid few school or work opportunities²⁰—risk, especially in the aggregate, entrenching negative stereotypes about poverty.²¹ In reality, most young people in poor neighborhoods—like most young people in any neighborhood—are not involved in what researchers label “deviance.” Given this, some researchers, including Ranita Ray, have written recently about young people “who, having grown up in marginalized families[,] . . . play by the widely accepted ‘rules of the game’—by avoiding drugs, gangs, and parenthood and focusing on education.”²² Still, the stories of teens like the NC girls, who generally “play by the rules,”²³ remain underrepresented.

Along with this overemphasis on “deviance,” girls get short shrift in research about poor urban communities.²⁴ Black and brown boys and men are more exposed than girls and women to harms including police brutality, incarceration, and interpersonal violence. But, as Nikki Jones explains, “girls are not isolated from the social consequences of racial segregation, concentrated poverty, and inner-city violence.” Rather, “girls are touched—figuratively, literally, and daily—by violence.”²⁵ Girls face different risks from boys, including domestic violence and “the female fear” of sexual harassment and assault.²⁶ They also face different demands, including family care.²⁷

Yet boys and men dominate the urban ethnography canon, albeit with critical exceptions.²⁸ “For over a half a century,” explains the anthropologist Aimee Meredith Cox, “Black girls have been the absent referent in urban ethnographies[,] . . . which instead have been chiefly invested in explaining the life patterns of poor young and adult Black males.”²⁹ Many studies about women focus on mothers,³⁰ and the few books that center low-income girls of color often feature fighting and violence.³¹ This is for good reason, since these hardships harm girls. Yet the daily lives and friendships of girls like those in NC—who rarely faced social violence—also warrant attention.

A final factor limits what is known about young people like the NC girls: cell phones. Ninety-five percent of American teens, from all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, have a smartphone,³² and 89 percent are online “almost constantly” or “several times per day.”³³ In NC, the girls used their phones around the clock. On waking up, they scrolled through content posted overnight and shared a “Good Morning” tweet or Snapchat. Before bed, screens beamed as fingers swiped a last refresh. The girls’ connection imperative made no concessions for meals, movies, or school, where phones were slipped into pockets, tucked into Ugg boots, or lay cabled into outlets like IVs.

Phones were non-negotiable. Girls unable to afford cell service paired a secondhand phone with Wi-Fi, the hunt for which shaped

their social geography. Ideal hangouts, which had free and reliable internet service, were typically sites of consumption, like malls or coffee shops. But other places made the cut too; as Aisha once noted, “Half my church can get Wi-Fi. The left side.”³⁴

As well as Wi-Fi, phones needed power. Teens monitored their battery percentage, and unease grew as the number fell. Eyes scouted for outlets in classrooms, cafés, or friends’ kitchens. Arriving at a local hotel one afternoon for a banquet to mark a cohort’s graduation from an after-school program, the girls filed straight to the corner table. They claimed the nearby outlets before taking their seats. One of the organizers approached, warning, “Girls, if you sit there, you won’t be able to see the stage or all the videos we have!”

“No, we’re good,” rang their chorus.

Heavy social media use has costs, some of which this book explores.³⁵ But social media’s impact is more complex than sensationalist headlines warning of cyber-bullying, online predators, alienated young people hiding behind screens, or dopamine-hungry teens “tethered” to their phones.³⁶ In reality, social media has not replaced adolescent friendships; instead, it mostly involves and deepens friendships that exist “face to face.”³⁷

Still, cell phones and social media have transformed adolescence. They have also transformed the experience of poverty. Historically, *disconnection* has been a key feature of American urban marginality; many classic ethnographies chart how people survive isolation.³⁸ But with cell phones the NC girls could access endless connection and information, just like their middle-class peers. In this way, their lives diverged starkly from earlier research on young people living in poor neighborhoods.

New technologies pose important questions about place, poverty, connection, and community. As studies begin to offer answers, many focus on crime, gangs, and violence—understandably, since social media can expose people to injury and arrest.³⁹ Yet as this book

shows, social media can also enable peer support and help teens build what the communications scholar Paul Byron calls “digital cultures of care.”⁴⁰ On their cell phones, girls passed time, made plans, broke news, shared jokes, processed trauma, and more. The NC girls skillfully used multiple apps and platforms to care for one another and protect their friendships.⁴¹

Drawing on four years of ethnographic fieldwork, this book centers friendships often missed by research: those between young women of color growing up in a poor neighborhood, girls not involved in what researchers label “deviance” but who used their constant contact—in person and online—to survive adversity and plan for the future. Friends met needs that adults could not or would not meet, including social and emotional needs that were essential to their flourishing.

In the Field

I met Aisha and most of the other girls who appear in this book at their high school. Starting in February 2012, I volunteered once per week in a community service-based elective class, where I got to know some juniors and seniors. Months later, as summer break approached, I told a few teens that I was writing about growing up in Cambridge. I asked if I could spend time with them over the upcoming vacation to learn about their lives.⁴²

Through the summer, I spent days and weeks with some of the young women and met their families and friends. That fall, I moved into an apartment across the street from the housing project where all but one of the girls lived with their families. I lived in NC for one year and conducted fieldwork during that time, with follow-ups over the next three years.

Mostly, fieldwork involved “hanging out,” after school, on weekends, and during vacations. I joined the girls on their everyday er-

rands and activities, like going to sports practices, movies, or the mall and visiting friends on shift at fast-food restaurants. The girls brought me to birthday parties, cookouts, baby showers, house parties, and graduation celebrations. I also went to a prom, a homecoming game, and two Thanksgivings.

I spent most time with nine girls, six of whom were high school seniors the year I lived in NC. All nine were young women of color, and all were from low-income homes. Eight were the daughters of immigrants—six girls were Haitian American, one was Indian American, one was Ugandan American—and one young woman, born in Cambridge, was African American.⁴³ I also met and spoke to some of the girls' friends, siblings, and cousins, as well as other teens I met at school or around the neighborhood.

The nine central girls split into two social cliques. Aisha's best friends were Joanne, Brittani, and Seeta. Joanne's older brother, Vincent, had a long-term, on-off romantic relationship with Florence, who was in the other clique, together with Florence's sister, Faith, and their friends Stephanie, Zora, and Rosie (see table 1). Growing up, the nine girls had all been close, and they accounted variably for their eventual estrangement. Some blamed tension between Florence and Vincent; others blamed different sources of drama.

All the girls but Brittani lived in Jefferson Park, a North Cambridge housing project.⁴⁴ The low-rise development was bounded at the front by a busy main road and at the back by commuter rail tracks. A bustling convenience store, Foodtown, sat by the entrance to the project. Foodtown had seen better days; gray dirt marred its white paint, and graffiti tagged the public phone outside. It was also, as the girls grumbled, much more expensive than stores farther away. But Foodtown was a local institution. Customers bought basic grocery items as well as lottery tickets, household goods, and beer and wine. Beside a small deli at the rear, a handwritten sign taped to the wall offered "Fried Dough." Next door, customers in the adjoining