The losses in Keith’s young life continued to mount. In his early 20s, he lost two close childhood friends to a car accident. No other car was involved; drugs and alcohol were found in their systems. At age 25, somewhat optimistic about the future, and gaining confidence that his troubled past was behind him, Keith married his longtime girlfriend, got a job, and prepared to grow their family—his wife entered the relationship with a very young daughter whom Keith embraced as his own. Unfortunately, six months into her pregnancy with their first child, her wife, who suffered frequent and violent epileptic seizures, miscarried. This was a huge blow to the couple, but Keith remained optimistic. They were young and would be able to have kids in the near future. Within six weeks, however, his wife died in her sleep, likely the result of another massive seizure.

All told, in his 28 years Keith had lost at least 16 very close friends and family members to death (or presumed death). The majority of these deaths were violent. All were unexpected. And almost all were concentrated during the last half of his life, from early adolescence to the present. Nine deaths resulted from homicide, three from accidents, and four from illnesses. This is an estimate based on loved ones that Keith happened to speak of during our conversations; if I had taken a proper survey, it very well might have revealed even more.

Consistent with various folkways for death in such communities, which include memorial T-shirts and sidewalk shrines, especially among the young, Keith pays tribute to each of his lost family members, including his mother, with tattoos of their names blanketing his right arm. His left arm, however, he has reserved for the names of close friends who have died since early adolescence, most of whom were victims of gang-like warfare or petty neighborhood grievances. Extending the length of his left bicep, the tattoo consists of an unfurling scroll. The scroll’s heading reads *The Ghetto Heaven.* Two columns of five names each, street names all, are drawn in fancy script. At the scroll’s bottom reads “Rest In Peace.” Because he cannot imagine a life without constant loss, Keith has organized the names so that ample space remains, on the inside of both his right and left forearms, for the names of the not-yet-dead.

Although Keith’s experience is probably not atypical of young men and women from low-income communities of color, especially those beset by high rates of violence and crime, to my knowledge few researchers have examined this question in-depth, and so we actually know little about the extent and nature of traumatic loss such as the sudden and violent loss of a loved one to homicide, suicide, and accidents, in such communities. The neglect of this issue is curious for two reasons.

First, in low-income black urban communities, rates of premature death are significantly higher than in other communities, as a consequence of illnesses (primarily cardiovascular and metabolic), accidents, and homicide. If the prevalence and incidence of sudden and violent deaths are higher in these communities, it stands to reason that rates of traumatic loss are higher as well. Descriptive analysis of the General Social Survey does suggest higher rates of traumatic loss...
among blacks, but especially the black poor. Between 1978 and 1994, 2.9 percent, 3.6 percent, and 3.2 percent of 18- to 30-year-old nonpoor whites, blacks, and Latinos, respectively, reported losing one relative in the last year. Relative to their nonpoor counterparts, the figures for poor whites are little different (at 3 percent), and those for Latinos are roughly 25 percent higher (at 4.2 percent). But among poor blacks, rates of loss are two-thirds higher (at 6.1 percent).

Descriptive analysis of the Black Love Survey, 2010, a web-based survey to an online panel of a representative sample of African Americans, is also suggestive. It reveals that 10 percent had lost a spouse or partner, child, sibling, or parent to violence. Another 23 percent lost some other relative to violence. These findings are instructive, because they suggest higher rates of traumatic loss among blacks, and especially among low-income blacks, than among whites and Latinos. But these data fall far short of informing us about the prevalence, incidence, and nature of traumatic losses in low-income communities of color, relative to other communities, and so more research is needed to fill this significant gap in the literature.

Second, the neglect of this issue is odd because traumatic loss is also a strong and positive predictor of depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and complicated grief. A large and growing body of research indicates that in low-income black urban communities, rates of PTSD and depression are substantially higher than they are elsewhere, and these mental health disparities have largely been attributed to exposure to community violence. This is for good reason, because rates of exposure to violence are very high in poor communities of color, and exposure to violence is a strong and positive predictor of poor mental health outcomes.

Few researchers, however, have investigated the extent to which high rates of PTSD and depression in poor black urban communities are also attributable to traumatic loss, despite previous research linking PTSD, depression, and complicated grief to experiences of traumatic loss, especially so when the loss is the result of a homicide. Drawing from a national sample of 1,753 young adults, for instance, Zinzow and colleagues examined the mental health consequences of losing a loved one to homicide and reported that homicide survivors were nearly twice as likely to experience PTSD symptoms, depression, and drug abuse or dependence in the past year than did those who had not experienced such loss. Freedy and colleagues also report that those who have lost a family member to violent death have higher PTSD prevalence rates than do those who have lost loved ones to suicide or accidents or those who have themselves been victims of direct crime. The latter finding suggests that the effects of traumatic loss on mental health outcomes might actually be greater than the effects of exposure to violence. This circumstantial evidence implies that traumatic loss plays an important role in high rates of depression and PTSD among poor urban blacks. To date, however, we lack sufficient insight into the consequences of such losses for profoundly affected individuals, families, and communities.

Filling this gap in our knowledge is important, because traumatic loss likely has far-reaching implications not only for mental health, but also for social isolation, and orientations—expectations and aspirations, and therefore investments—toward the future. See Figure 1 where I diagram a model of the potential effects of traumatic loss. Not only has previous research established higher risks of PTSD and depression among residents of low-income black communi-
ties, but reports also indicate that they are more likely to be socially isolated, to engage in deviant behavior, and to have leveled aspirations and lower expectations about the future.\(^1\) And these potential effects of traumatic loss may be especially salient for young adults, who are still in the process of deciding what they want their lives to look like, and who may therefore experience greater long-term impact of these adverse effects on their own psychosocial development and socioeconomic and health trajectories.\(^2\)

\(^1\) Although Keith loved his grandmother dearly, her loss, though unexpected, was somewhat less complicated. It was easier for Keith to make sense of his grandmother’s passing, even if her death was sudden. He had far greater difficulty, however, accounting for the losses of the others who died far too young and often violently.

\(^2\) Keith theorized that his mother’s own inability to cope with the loss of her daughter and “son” led her to behave in such extreme and bizarre ways.

\(^3\) The new job was actually a temporary, government-sponsored internship program. It was one of the few opportunities available to Keith, whose spotty work history and criminal record made finding a real job extremely difficult, if not close to impossible.

\(^4\) I learned that in the fall of 2013, months after our last set of interactions, Keith lost another first cousin, this time to homicide. His cousin had been killed in a drive-by-shooting.


\(^8\) Keith theorized that his mother’s own inability to cope with the loss of her daughter and “son” led her to behave in such extreme and bizarre ways.

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