Growing up at the 'margins': Concerns, aspirations, and expectations of young people living in Nairobi's slums

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Abstract

We explore the concerns, challenges, aspirations, and expectations of sub-Saharan African youth, and investigate how these youth cope with neighborhood constraints to aspiration achievement. We draw on cross-sectional survey data from 4033 12-22 year olds (50.3% males) from two Kenyan urban slums and subsequent in-depth interviews conducted with a subset of 75 youth when they were 13-24 years old (45.3% male). We observe that despite the challenges characteristic of urban slums, some youth maintain high aspirations and try to achieve them through education, delinquency, residential mobility, and religion. We note that others adjust their aspirations to account for limited opportunities. Overall, our findings highlight positive youth agency and underscore the need to improve the quality of life in urban slums.

Keywords

Aspirations and concerns; Urban Context; Sub-Saharan Africa

Almost 60% of the populations of most countries in sub-Saharan Africa are young people aged below 25 (United Nations, 2011). Although these young people are by no means a homogenous group, many are growing up in contexts characterized by rapid urbanization, weak economies, limited educational opportunities, high unemployment rates, pervasive poverty, and other socio-cultural transformations resulting from globalization (Blum, 2007; Kabiru, Undie, & Ezeh, 2010). The realities of the socio-economic environment in which these youth are growing up, thus, may place significant constraints on their development. However, as Sommer (2010, p. 318) notes, "…while most urban youth in Africa are

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certainly poor and many are struggling …[cities] provide youth with opportunities, attractions, and possible trajectories that are simply not available in rural areas." In this paper, we examine the concerns, aspirations and expectations of young people living in marginalized urban areas in sub-Saharan Africa. We also explore how these youth cope with neighborhood constraints to aspiration achievements.

Youth Concerns, Aspirations and Expectations

The transition to adulthood is marked by refinement of self-concepts and life aspirations. This period of 'active exploration' where youth imagine different "possible selves" as they contemplate and aspire toward their future is influenced significantly by available opportunities (Furlong & Cartmel, 1995; Markus & Nurius, 1986). For example, exposure to high rates of violence and crime, which is typical in many resource-poor urban contexts, can have negative impacts on youth development. These include depression, poor academic performance, post-traumatic stress symptoms, delinquency, and aggression (Cooley-Strickland, et al., 2009; Patchin, Huebner, McCluskey, Varano, & Bynum, 2006; Selner-O'Hagan, Kindlon, Buka, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1998).

An extensive literature in Western contexts on the aspirations and concerns of youth shows that many adolescents are concerned about their future occupations, educational attainment, marriage and their families (Fogelman, 1979; Furlong & Cartmel, 1995; Hill, Ramirez, & Dumka, 2003; Nurmi, 1991). Much of this literature examines differences in aspirations and concerns of majority and minority youth living in socio-economically varied settings. The distinct contexts of African youth's transition to adulthood means that the substantial literature on youth growing up in Western societies (see for example Furstenberg, 2000; Hogan & Astone, 1986; Shanahan, 2000 for reviews) may only partially help understand the unique challenges that African youth face.

Maintaining high aspirations in the slum context

Youth may maintain high aspirations and strive towards achieving them despite harsh realities. Access to education has widely improved across sub-Saharan Africa. However, rapid youth population growth along with state-subsidized education programs in the 1980s-1990s has meant that providing an adequate educational infrastructure remains a significant challenge for most sub-Saharan Africa countries. In Kenya, citizens' belief in education as a means for success is so great that communities pooled resources to build community or "harambee' schools during the 1980-90s. By 1987, about 60% of Kenya's secondary schools were community schools (Bradshaw, 1993; Hughes, 1994; Mojola, 2008). In the context of high nationally-fueled educational aspirations, youth in urban slums may struggle to meet educational aspirations despite financial constraints. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and Kao and Tienda (1998) also suggest that a blocked opportunity structure may lead to overachievement as a means to compensate for disadvantaged status. In our context, this might be reflected in a continued statement of high aspirations, in particular educational aspirations, and expectations of meeting them despite challenges and barriers to achieving them.

Unfortunately, some young people may maintain high aspirations but turn to delinquency to fulfill them or to deal with the strain of disjunction. Merton's (1938; 1959) seminal work on social structures and anomie, and Agnew's (1992) work on general strain theory provide a useful framework for understanding high levels of crime and antisocial behaviors in environments characterized by limited means to achieve aspirations. They suggest that where the achievement of life aspirations is severely curtailed by the lack of opportunities to actualize these goals, undesirable ramifications, such as increased delinquency, are likely to occur. In our context, where success is defined by financial prosperity and where slums are situated in close proximity to well-to-do neighborhoods (UN-HABITAT, 2008b), attendant exposure to middle or upper class lifestyles may force some young people to resort to crime in order to achieve pecuniary success and fulfill their life aspirations.

Young people may also maintain high aspirations and express strong desire to move out of the slums, which they may view as limiting their chances for success. Previous work on youth living in the Danish-German border (Yndigegn, 2003) region shows that residential mobility is one of the strategies that young people adopt as they seek better opportunities to achieve their life aspirations.

Finally, a perhaps understudied aspect in the transition to adulthood literature has been the role of religion in both shaping, and helping young people manage their aspirations in a variety of life domains (Regnerus, 2003; Wagener, Furrow, King, Leffert, & Benson, 2003). Involvement in religious youth groups is associated with higher scores on purpose, a measure that takes into account aspirations and efforts to achieve them (Markstrom, 1999). As such, religion may play a role, especially among youth in resource-constrained environments, in providing alternative aspiration trajectories and a means of imagining a way out of poverty.

Adjusting aspirations to the reality of the context

When faced with significant barriers – real or perceived – youth may adjust their aspirations to the reality of constraints within their environment. Furlong, Biggart and Cartmel (1996), showed that living in deprived neighborhoods had a leveling effect on young people's occupational and educational aspirations, suggesting youth awareness of the opportunity structures available to them. Stewart, Stewart and Simons (2007) also found that neighborhood disadvantage lowered African American adolescents' educational aspirations leading to poor school attainment. A wide discrepancy between one's aspirations and expectations can impede education and skill acquisition as well as decrease motivation to attain these aspirations (Marshall, 2002). Finally, Uno, Mortimer, Kim and Vuolo (2010) found that youth were more likely to forgo high educational aspirations if they were able to establish their careers early. Limited educational opportunities in the slums lead many to make early transitions out of school and into the labor force (UNFPA, 2007).

Civic organizations may also play a key role in helping youth make sense of possible constraints, and enable them to recalibrate their aspirations accordingly. Some literature suggests that youth involvement in civic activities, such as volunteering, may be protective against risk behaviors such as crime involvement (Nicholson, Collins, & Holmer, 2004; Weitzman & Kawachi, 2000). Civic participation may not only give youth exposure to

positive role models, but may also help them avoid delinquent activity (Denault & Poulin, 2009). Civic organizations may also reflect neighborhood cohesion or collective efficacy, which could also be protective of youth (Larson, 2000; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998; Sampson & Wilson, 1995).

Age and Gender

Youth may value different goals based on their gender and have different responses to a disjunction between their aspirations and expectations. For example, females may adjust their expectations downward once they marry or have children, and may thus experience less disjunction than their male counterparts (Hanson, 1994). Similarly, crime rates are typically higher among males compared to females (Park, Morash, & Stevens, 2010; Staff & Kreager, 2008), also suggesting differential responses to disjunction. With increasing age, rising awareness of the environment, as well as the concrete realities of financial and other constraints may also result in a recalibration of youth aspirations and expectations, and therefore their level of disjunction.

Overview of Current Study

Using data from young people aged between 12-24 years living in two informal settlements (slums)—Korogocho and Viwandani—in Nairobi city (Kenya), we first characterize the neighborhood environment of the urban slums and describe youth concerns and challenges. We then examine a range of youth aspirations and expectations relating to their transition to adulthood, such as education, career and residence, and explore a) the level of disjunction between youth aspirations and expectations and b) how they cope with neighborhood constraints to aspiration achievement. With respect to the latter, we explore how youth negotiate their aspirations and expectations in the slums by examining how they a) maintain high aspirations and try to achieve them through: education, delinquency, residential mobility, and religion, and b) adjust their aspirations to the reality of their context. We also draw on literature on neighborhood aspirations and how youth cope with aspirations-expectations disjunctions in Western settings to critically evaluate the extent to which they are relevant to the Kenyan slum context.

Setting, Data and Methods

Setting

In Nairobi, 60 – 70% of the population (Zulu, et al., 2011) live in slums or slum-like conditions, and about half of the residents are aged below 25 (UN-HABITAT, 2008a). As "informal" or "squatter" settlements, these slums are often marginalized by the local and national governments. Consequently, slum dwellers have limited access to formal health, education and other social services, and live in environments characterized by poor housing, sanitation and infrastructure, high unemployment rates, and high rates of violence (APHRC, 2002, 2008). Despite these challenging conditions, cheap housing and close proximity to urban amenities continue to attract large number of in-migrants leading to the rapid growth of slum settlements, which, on average, house about 750 people per hectare (Alder, 1995). We collected data from two slums – Korogocho and Viwandani. Korogocho slum is one of

the city's most congested slums. Viwandani slum is located in the city's industrial area. Most of Korogocho residents have lived there for years, whereas Viwandani attracts a youthful, highly-mobile migrant population seeking employment in the industries. Thirty-five percent of residents in these slums lived below the poverty line in 2009 (Emina, Beguy, Zulu, Ezeh, Muindi, Elung'ata, et al., 2011).

Data

We use data collected during the baseline study of a 3-year prospective cohort study – the Transitions to Adulthood Project (TTA). The TTA study is nested in the Nairobi Urban Health and Demographic Surveillance System (NUHDSS), which routinely collects longitudinal health and demographic data from residents living in Korogocho and Viwandani slums. The TTA study followed a cohort of randomly selected NUHDSS residents aged 12-22 years (at baseline). In addition, we draw on subsequent in-depth interviews conducted in 2009 with a subset of 75 youth when they were 13-24 years old to contextualize and further unpack the baseline survey responses of young people's concerns, aspirations, and expectations or perceived life chances.

Procedures

Baseline survey—The baseline survey was conducted between October 2007 and June 2008 to collect information on sociodemographic and behavioral characteristics; parent-child relations; and adolescents' concerns, aspirations and perceived life chances (expectations). The development of the questionnaire was largely informed by existing instruments that have been used and validated in various settings (e.g., Jessor, Costa, & Turbin, 2002; National Study of Youth and Religion, 2002). Prior to conducting the fieldwork, the questionnaire was also reviewed by an international panel of experts and pilot-tested among adolescents in villages within the two slums but outside the demographic surveillance area. The questionnaire was translated from English to Kiswahili, the national language. The original and translated versions were reviewed by bilingual researchers and interviewers to ensure comparability. In total, 4058 (77% of those eligible) youth aged 12-22 were interviewed. Overall, refusals were low (<5%) and the relatively low response rate was primarily due to difficulties in locating some of the youth given the high mobility of slum residents (Beguy, Bocquier, & Zulu, 2010). Respondents were more likely to be from Korogocho ($p<.05$) and to be younger ($p<.10$) than non-respondents. There was no sex difference. In this study, we limit the sample to 4,033 youths (99.5% of those interviewed) who had non-missing data on the variables used for our analyses. Descriptive characteristics of the baseline survey respondents by age and sex are summarized in Table 1.

In-depth interviews—The 75 in-depth interview (IDI) respondents (45.3% male) were purposively chosen from baseline survey respondents to represent varying trajectories of experience with regards to the key markers of the transition from adolescence to adulthood —sexual debut, marriage, parenthood, employment, and residential independence (Lloyd, 2005). Interviews were taped and conducted face-to-face in Kiswahili by trained interviewers with previous experience working in the two slums. Interviews lasted 1-2 hours and were transcribed directly into English.

A semi-structured interview guide developed by a team of researchers with experience working with Kenyan youth was used for the interviews. Respondents were asked about challenges young slum dwellers face and their coping strategies. To ensure that a broad range of challenges identified in literature were captured, interviewers included probes on violence, harassment, insecurity, lack of employment, school drop-outs, poverty, HIV/AIDS, and ill health. Participants were also asked to describe their residential aspirations and expectations of achieving them. To capture livelihood and career aspirations, participants were asked to describe their most important life goal and the efforts they were making to achieve this goal and the anticipated barriers (coping). Where educational aspirations did not emerge naturally in the discussion, interviewers probed about the level of education needed to enable participants achieve their career goals. Participants were also asked to describe their career aspirations, the reasons for their career choices, and to state whether they had talked to someone about their career goals.

Because of the selection criteria for the IDIs, participants were on average older than baseline survey respondents (79% and 85% of male and females in-depth interviewees were aged 18-24 years). Just under half (47%) had completed primary school or had some primary-level education while 45% had completed secondary school or had some secondary-level education. The majority of youth (76%) were not married; however, the proportion of married respondents differed by sex, with 34% of females and 12% of males having been married.

Measures

Outcome variables—Our key outcome variables were concerns, aspirations, perceived life chances (expectations), and disjunctions between aspirations and expectations. *Concerns* were measured using ten items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .833$) that assessed how worried respondents were about key life issues including health, insecurity, marriage, and competing school, among others. Responses were given on a 3-point scale (1 = *not worried*; 2 = *somewhat worried*; and 3 = *very worried)*. *Aspirations* were measured using nine items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .665$) that assessed how important it was for respondents to achieve certain life goals (e.g., having a good job, getting married, and completing school). Responses were given on a 3-point scale (1 = *not important at all* or *not very important*, 2 = *somewhat important* and 3 = *very important*). *Expectations* were measured using 11 items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .835$) that assessed respondents' perceived chances of achieving certain life goals. Responses were given on a 3-point scale (1= *low*; 2 = *about 50-50*; 3 = *high*). Table 2 shows respondents reporting high levels (score = 3) of concerns, aspirations and expectations by age group for each of the measures. The items that comprise the concerns, aspirations, and expectations measures are listed in Table 2.

To explore disjunctions between young people's aspirations and their expectations about achieving these aspirations, we generated continuous indices of aspirations and expectations. To ensure reasonable interpretations of any possible moderator or interaction effects that might emerge in the analyses, we used standardized (mean equal to zero and standard deviation equal to one) values of individual items all scored in the positive direction. We also computed a *disjunctions* measure – the difference between an individual's scores on the

aspirations and expectations indices. To correct for skewness in the disjunctions measure, we created a normally-distributed log-transformed outcome variable (Table 3).

Independent variables—Sociodemographic characteristics used as independent variables include schooling status, marital status, childbearing history, residential status, slum of residence, civic participation, and volunteer work (Table 3). We also included a 3-category variable on religiosity: No religion, low religiosity and high religiosity. Those who reported a religious group affiliation were categorized as having low or high religiosity based on the median value on a continuous index (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.783$) computed using standardized values of four individual items related to religious teachings, beliefs, prayers, and the frequency of religious service attendance. Finally, we created a continuous delinquency index (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.708$) derived from standardized values of seven items that measured the frequency (0 = *never*; 1 = *once*; 2 = *more than once*) with which youth engaged in delinquent behaviors such as carrying weapons, selling drugs or alcohol, and fighting with others.

Data Analysis

We conducted tabulations for descriptive statistics (Table 1 and 2) and linear regression analyses to examine associations between the log-transformed disjunction measure and sociodemographic, behavioral, and psychosocial variables (Table 3). Models were adjusted for cluster effects as some households had more than one adolescent. Qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo 8. Transcripts were coded by the first author, a Kenyan researcher familiar with the urban slum context, into themes around challenges, aspirations and expectations of young slum dwellers. A second person independently reviewed the codes.

Informed Consent and Ethical Clearance

Ethical approvals for the NUHDSS and the TTA project were granted by the Kenya Medical Research Institute. All respondents provided informed consent prior to the interview. For respondents aged 12-17 years, parental or guardian consent was also provided unless the respondent lived alone.

Results

Growing Up in the Slums

Youth concerns and challenges—In the baseline survey, the key concerns that male youth reported being "very worried" about were: getting HIV/AIDS, insecurity, police harassment, and being unable to complete education (Table 2). In the youngest cohort (12-14 years), a third (34%) of respondents stated that they were *very worried* about insecurity while 29% were *very worried* about police harassment. Higher proportions of worry were observed among older cohorts (15-17 years and 18-22 years) compared to the youngest cohort.

Among females, key concerns they were "very worried" about were: getting pregnant, getting HIV/AIDS, police harassment, insecurity, being unable to complete education, and being unable to leave the slums (Table 2). Those under 18 years were more concerned about

pregnancy than older youth. A greater proportion of females aged 15-17 were very worried about not being able to complete education than those in the two other age cohorts. Compared to males (29%-42%), fewer females (25%-27%) were very worried about police harassment.

To examine the combined effect of age and sex, we analyzed the scores on the aspirations index through 2-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The ANOVA revealed significant main effects for age ($F(1,2) = 32.97$, $p < .001$). The interaction effect in a model including an interaction term for age and sex was significant ($F(1,2) = 4.70$, $p < .009$). Overall, the youngest cohort of respondents had fewer concerns than the two older cohorts ($p < .001$).

Responses from the IDIs help to contextualize and shed light on the numerous challenges and concerns that young people face in the slums. Many respondents discussed widespread violence in the slum, including homicides and rape, HIV/AIDS, and high levels of school dropouts. Underscoring survey findings, police harassment of young people, especially males, was frequently cited as a challenge. A 22-year, unmarried male for example noted, "…when the idle young [people] mug people and steal from them, other youths suffer for those mistakes. Police will ask you whether you are part of the groups that steal from people along the road, you try to tell them you are not and are from work, but they are not ready to listen…"

General life aspirations and expectations—Despite the concerns and challenges highlighted, over 75% of youth across the three age cohorts had high aspirations, rating all the goals in the survey as being "very important." As shown in Table 2, almost all male and female respondents in the three age cohorts reported that owning one's home, being able to take care of parents in their old age, and having a 'good' job were very important. IDI participants also expressed a wide range of life aspirations, including financial stability, ability to support next of kin, getting a good job, achieving recognition in one's chosen career, good health, and being independent. To examine the combined effect of age and sex, we analyzed the scores on the aspirations index through 2-way ANOVA. The ANOVA revealed significant main effects for both age ($F(1,2) = 9.26$, $p < .001$) and sex ($F(1,1) = 3.87$, $p = .049$). The interaction effect in a model including an interaction term for age and sex was not significant ($F(1,2) = 0.61$, $p = .546$). Overall, males had higher aspirations than females, while the two younger cohorts had higher aspirations than the oldest cohort.

In general, the youngest cohort of males and females were more likely than their older peers to have high expectations of achieving life goals. These high expectations decreased with age. For example, among males about 59% and 47% of the 12-14 year olds and 15-17 year olds, respectively as compared with 33% of the 18-22 year olds thought they had high chances of getting a well-paid job. To examine the combined effect of age and sex on expectations, we analyzed the scores on the aspirations index through 2-way ANOVA. The ANOVA revealed significant main effects for age ($F(1,2) = 363.57$, $p < .001$). The interaction term for age and sex was not significant ($F(1,2) = 1.31$, $p = .269$). Overall, the youngest cohort of respondents had highest expectations, while the middle age cohort had higher expectations than the oldest cohort (all $ps < .001$). In other words, for both males and

females increasing age may lead to a recalibration of expectations based on contextual realities.

There were no significant sex-differences with respect to the aspirations-expectations disjunction index. For both males and females, the youngest cohort of respondents had the lowest level of disjunction, while the middle age cohort had lower disjunction levels than the oldest cohort (all $ps < .001$). To examine the combined effect of age and sex on the disjunction index, we analyzed the scores on the disjunction index through 2-way ANOVA. The ANOVA revealed significant main effects for age ($F(1,2) = 176.32$, $p < .001$). The interaction effect in a model including an interaction term for age and sex was not significant ($F(1,2) = 0.91$, $p = .403$).

Negotiating Aspirations and Expectations in the Slums

Youth maintain high aspirations and try to achieve them through *education*— While over 80% of respondents felt that completing secondary school was *very important* (Table 2), the youngest respondents were more likely to rank completing secondary school as important compared to older youth. Over 93% of those aged 17 and below felt that secondary school completion was important compared to less than 86% among those aged 18 and over. IDI participants discussed the importance of education in meeting one's life goals and aspirations despite their sense that education may have little value due to financial constraints and given limited job prospects in the slum context. Even respondents who had dropped out of school expressed hope of returning to school once their financial status improved. As one 21-year old female participant explained, "If [I] get any finances, I intend to register in a private school so that I am in school for a certain number of hours and the rest I am either in employment or seeking how I can be self independent." Young people with dependants were also willing to defer their educational pursuits until a more opportune time. For example, one unmarried 23-year old male who had some college education noted that he had stopped going to school since he needed to work and pay for his siblings' education; however, he intended to continue with his education after meeting other financial obligations.

Education was especially important for those who saw it as critical to achieving their career goals. For example, one 16-year old female student wanted to be a medical doctor because she liked helping others; admired her aunt who was a doctor; and was very interested in biology and disease management. When asked what efforts she was making to achieve her goals, she noted that she was working hard in school, was respectful to her mother, and prayed for success. Further, she had shared her career aspirations with her teacher for further advice.

Among males and females aged 15-17 years and 18-22 years, those in school had lower aspirations-expectations disjunction (Table 3). Separate analyses (not shown) showed that in-school youth in these age groups not only had higher life aspirations but also higher expectations for achieving their aspirations.

Youth maintain high aspirations and try to achieve them through *delinquency* —Widespread poverty was identified as the underlying cause of most of the challenges

faced by youth in the slums. For example, high rates of robbery and rampant alcohol and drug abuse were largely attributed to high unemployment rates. Many young people were resorting to crime for sustenance, or drug use because they were idle or as a means to cope with challenges. In the words of one 19-year old, unemployed mother, "[Poverty] is the main problem that has brought all these problems in the community. If all of us were able, no one would steal from the other. Young boys [get] into mugging people and stealing…, young girls enter into prostitution and so many bad things that harm the households." Further, according to a 21-year old, unmarried male, "Life in the slum is very difficult … There is a high rate of poverty and many households have very many family members…and when you live in such difficult circumstance, you find that prostitution is high; everyone is looking for means of survival …"

Based on the literature, youth may maintain high aspirations and seek to achieve their aspirations through delinquency. To examine whether disjunction is positively correlated with delinquency, we conducted pairwise correlations between the aspirations-expectations disjunction and delinquency indices for each age group and for whole sample. Results showed a positive association between the two indices, indicating that the greater the disparity between aspirations and expectations, the higher the likelihood for delinquency. Spearman correlation values among males were: 0.06 among 12-14 year olds; 0.10 among 15-17 year olds; 0.11 among 18-22 year olds; and 0.10 for the whole sample (ps < .05, except for 12-14 year olds). Spearman correlation values among females were: 0.09 among 12-14 year olds; 0.16 among 15-17 year olds; 0.12 among 18-22 year olds; and 0.13 for the whole sample (all ps < .05).

Youth maintain high aspirations and try to achieve them through *residential mobility*—As illustrated in Table 2, most young people aspired to 'move out' of the slum, with the youngest cohort (12-14) significantly more likely to have this aspiration. In a representative comment, an unmarried, 21-year old male in describing his reasons for wanting to leave the slums stated, "…here… we are crowded in one place and live like sheep in a pen." For another male respondent, moving out to a formal residential development was his definition of success in life. In general, respondents described the 'ideal' residential area as clean, well organized, safe, spacious, not congested, serene and quiet, with employment opportunities, basic facilities, and where one could move freely. For some, this was the countryside, an aspiration contrary to expectations that urban centers are necessarily highly appealing to the youth.

Only about 20% of respondents had low expectations about their ability to move out of the slum. A 23-year old, married employed male with secondary education noted: "I really don't like this place, I would like to live in a place where the environment is clean, there is security and water … I believe one day I will live at a place where the environment is clean, water and sanitation is available, security and the place is quiet...There is no way it can fail and I believe with my hard work I will achieve that."

Among all respondents aged 12-14 years and among females aged 15-17 years, those living in Korogocho had higher levels of disjunction than their peers in Viwandani. As stated earlier, Viwandani's proximity to the industrial area makes it an attractive settlement for a

youthful population seeking employment. Migrants who have moved in search of employment opportunities likely represent a significant proportion of young people in Viwandani (Emina, Beguy, Zulu, Ezeh, Muindi, Elungata, et al., 2011).

Youth maintain high aspirations and try to achieve them through *religion*—A final avenue mentioned by youth was religion. In the qualitative interviews, some youth who were positive about their capacity to be successful pegged their optimism on their religious faith and the conviction that "*God will help me on that*" or "*I pray to God to fulfill my dreams*." Interestingly, both males and females aged 15-17 years and 18-22 years who reported high levels of religiosity showed higher levels of disjunction than their peers who reported low levels of religiosity. Investigating this outcome further, we observed that in both age groups, more religious respondents had significantly higher aspirations than their less religious peers but did not differ from them in perceived expectations for achieving their aspirations.

To examine the effect of religiosity on delinquency, we analyzed the scores on the delinquency index through 2-way ANOVA. The ANOVA revealed significant main effects for religiosity ($F(1,2) = 3.06$, $p = .048$ for males; $F(1,2) = F(1,2) = 7.11$, $p = .001$ for females). Irrespective of sex, youth with no religion were more likely to engage in delinquent behavior than those with low or high religiosity ($p < .10$ for males, $p < 0.05$ for females). Youth with low religiosity did not differ from peers with high religiosity

Youth Adjust Aspirations to Reality—Lack of finances leads some youth to realign educational aspirations to contextual realities and resulting in early transition out of school and into work. As one 22-year old male respondent noted, "Some children end up collecting plastics to sell so that they can have a meal on the table and that now replaces schooling; he cannot do the two at the same time." Many interviewees were pragmatic in defining their career aspirations, adjusting them to match the reality of their socio-economic context, noting trade, craft or artisan jobs, becoming business owners, drivers or mechanics (males) or hair stylists (females). A 19-year old male who wanted to become a mechanic stated "since nowadays one doesn't have to be a form four leaver [high school graduate], one can do many things. Girls can also get jobs and training in salon work which can sustain them." Respondents felt these career aspirations seemed more feasible in this setting.

In addition to recalibrating education and career aspirations, some interviewees also adjusted residential aspirations, not just out of resignation to the possibility that residential mobility was unattainable, but rather from a desire to improve their own environment, help other slum dwellers who were less fortunate, or simply accepted that the slum was home. An 18-year old female defined as her life goal her hope to "start projects that would assist many people in the slum because there are too many problems here." Linked to this, several participants pointed to the creation of youth groups that provide sanitation services in the community, and others where youth pooled incomes and established small businesses. Among respondents aged 12-14 years, civic participation and volunteerism were associated with lower levels of disjunction. Civic participation was also associated with lower levels of disjunction among females aged 15-17 years.

Discussion

The literature on youth in sub-Saharan Africa often focuses on youth as a population at risk. Consequently, many studies on African youth focus on risk behaviors and their correlates. Young people's challenges, concerns and aspirations, a critical ingredient for development of policies and programming, therefore, remain largely unheard. In this paper, we address this gap by characterizing the urban slum environment faced by youth, describing their concerns, challenges and aspirations, and finally, showing how they negotiate these aspirations and associated disjunctions in light of their resource constraints.

First, we note that many youth show great agency in addressing the unique and difficult circumstances in slum life. Their narratives challenge perceptions that young slum dwellers have misaligned expectations. Instead we note that similar to other youth growing up in resource-constrained settings, they shape their aspirations and goals in ways that account for the limited opportunities present (Furlong & Cartmel, 1995). The value they placed on education was shaped to some extent by their awareness of the local labor market and available opportunities, with many aspiring to trade, artisan or craft-oriented careers that required neither much start-up capital nor high levels of education. Instead of venting their frustrations, many worked within the system to find alternative, but socially-acceptable livelihoods. In contrast to studies cited earlier, however, civic engagement only partially helped in this re-calibration, as only the youngest respondents (12-14 years) and females aged 15-17 years experienced less disjunction. The fact that this did not persist among older youth suggests the potentially limited role of civic engagement, in contrast to continued education or early transition to work, in helping older youth deal with the challenges of slum life.

As suggested by previous studies on the precedents of crime (Merton 1938, 1959; Agnew 1992), we find some evidence that the likelihood of delinquency increases when young people's aspirations exceed their perceived expectations for achieving these goals. These results were not only reflected in the disjunction scale's prediction of delinquent behavior, but also in youth narratives discussing harassment by police as well as insecurity in the slums as challenges that youth face in the slums. This aligns with a substantial literature on disadvantaged minority youth living in resource poor settings who similarly turn to crime in the face of blocked opportunity structures (Anderson, 1999).

Highly religious youth, however, despite having a similarly high aspirations-expectations disjunction did not have a greater likelihood for engaging in delinquent behavior. Religion may provide youth with an ability to "develop alternative conceptualizations of life's possibilities" (Mattis, 2002, p. 314), and imagine a "possible self" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This may enable them to dismiss barriers that others in the same setting might view as insurmountable, find meaning amidst challenging circumstances, while continuing to engage in acceptable behavior (Crawford, Wright, & Masten, 2005). This may be particularly important in sub-Saharan Africa, where religion continues to attract large numbers of youth (Abbink, 2005). The centrality of religious beliefs in shaping goals and aspirations is consistent with previous work that shows that in situations where institutions and patronage

do not work because of poor governance, weakened social networks, and limited resources, people tend to look up to religious beliefs to see them through life (Mattis, 2002).

Our study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the sample for qualitative interviews was not diverse in terms of age, educational level, socio-economic status, and other socio-demographic characteristics. Further studies including a more diverse sample of youth would yield a wider range of experiences. In addition, the findings are based on cross-sectional data. Further studies examining the evolution of life aspirations and expectations from early adolescence to young adulthood would be insightful. Also needed are studies that examine actual outcomes and the factors that lead to successful actualization of aspirations.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The results of this study are significant in several ways. First, we move away from the focus on African youth solely as a population at risk and highlight positive youth agency. Further studies on resilience among urban youth are warranted. Secondly, the narratives from these young people underscore the need for policy and programmatic efforts to improve the quality of life in urban slums and make services, such as education, of which many youth were worried and concerned about, accessible to all. Further, the interest in trade, artisan or craft-oriented careers underscores the importance of government initiatives such as *Kazi kwa Vijana* (Jobs for youth), which engage youth in public work projects, and those promoting entrepreneurship such as the *Youth Enterprise Development Fund*, which provides start-up or business expansion funds(Government of Kenya, 2010a, 2010b), to facilitate the transition into gainful employment for many young slum dwellers. Additionally, investment in youth polytechnics is an additional avenue for providing slum youth with increased access to appropriate vocational and training opportunities.

Finally, the bulk of existing literature on how young people cope with neighborhood constraints to aspiration achievement is drawn from research conducted in the "Minority World" or the global North. In this manuscript, we critically assess the extent to which models describing young people's concerns, aspirations, and expectations – which are almost exclusively based on research conducted in the "Minority World" – are relevant to other contexts such as sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, we examine these models' application to examining young people's concerns, aspirations, and expectations in the unique context of slum settlements in Kenya. Overall, we note substantial similarities in how Kenyan youth cope with neighborhood constraints in comparison with to those in the global north. Our findings therefore extend the application of existing models on youth aspirations to cross-cultural settings.

Acknowledgments

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics by Age Group and Sex: Transitions to Adulthood Baseline Survey (2007-2008)

	12-14 Years		15-17 Years		18-22 Years		Total	
	Male n=616	Female n=587	Male n=580	Female n=497	Male n=836	Female n=917	Male n=2,032	Female n=2,001
% Currently in school [a, b]	95.1	94.4	73.6	72.0	26.6	16.4 *	60.8	53.1 *
% Ever married or lived with someone as if married [a, b]	0.3	1.0	0.7	4.0 *	8.9	37.4 *	3.9	18.4 *
% Ever had a child [a, b]	0.0	0.5	0.2	4.8 *	9.0	43.0 *	3.7	21.0 *
% Ever owned or rented own housing [a, b]	0.8	0.9	10.9	2.4 *	45.6	26.2 *	22.1	12.8 *
Area of residence [a, b]								
% living in Korogocho	41.9	46.7	54.5	52.9	46.9	44.5	47.5	47.2
% living in Viwandani	58.1	53.3	45.5	47.1	53.1	55.5	52.5	52.8
Religiosity (%) [a, b]								
Low religiosity	39.6	35.9 *	36.9	38.6 *	35.4	32.9 *	37.1	35.2 *
High religiosity	53.6	61.0	51.2	57.7	50.5	59.3	51.6	59.4
No religion	6.8	3.1	11.9	3.6	14.1	7.7	11.3	5.3
% reporting civic participation [a, b]	88.8	81.1 *	82.9	77.9 *	60.6	49.3 *	75.5	65.7 *
% reporting volunteer work [a, b]	32.1	32.4	39.7	29.8 *	32.2	23.6 *	34.3	27.7 *
Mean concerns (SD) [a, b]	−0.15 (0.60)	−0.08 (0.64)	0.10 (0.65)	0.06 (0.66)	0.06 (0.61)	−0.02 * (0.61)	0.01 (0.62)	−0.02 (0.63)
Mean aspirations (SD) [a, b]	0.07 (0.40)	0.02 * (0.47)	0.01 (0.56)	0.00 (0.55)	−0.02 (0.54)	−0.06 (0.59)	0.01 (0.51)	−0.02 * (0.55)
Mean expectations (SD) [a, b]	0.30 (0.50)	0.30 (0.49)	0.06 (0.62)	0.07 (0.58)	−0.23 (0.60)	−0.28 * (0.59)	0.01 (0.62)	−0.02 * (0.61)
Mean disjunction (SD) [a, b]	−0.23 (0.57)	−0.28 (0.66)	−0.05 (0.73)	−0.07 (0.74)	0.20 (0.73)	0.22 (0.76)	0.00 (0.71)	0.00 (0.76)

Note: The baseline survey did not include any questions on employment

[a] $p < .05$ for difference across age-groups (males) based on chi-square test (categorical variables) and t-test (continuous variables)

[b] $p < .05$ for difference across age-groups (females) based on chi-square test (categorical variables) and t-test (continuous variables)

*
$p < .05$ for male-female differences based on chi-square test (categorical variables) and t-test (continuous variables)

Table 2

Percentage of Youth Reporting High Level of Concerns, Aspirations, and Expectations by Age Group: Transitions to Adulthood Baseline Survey (2007-2008)

	Male			Female			Total		
	12-14 n=616	15-17 n=580	18-22 n=836	12-14 n=587	15-17 n=497	18-22 n=917	12-14 n=1,203	15-17 n=1,077	18-22 n=1,753
High level of concern about									
Health	4.6	6.7	5.5	6.6	8.1	7.5	5.6	7.3	6.6 [a]
Having enough to eat	7.6	10.0	7.8	9.2	9.1	8.3	8.4	9.6	8.1
Getting a good job	10.9	21.1	28.6 [a, b, c]	12.5	22.6	26.2 [a, b]	11.7	21.8	27.3 [a, b, c]
Getting (someone) pregnant	17.9	27.8	20.7 [a, b, c]	26.0	30.6	19.5 [b, c]	21.8	29.1	20.1 [a, c]
Getting HIV/AIDS	29.9	38.5	33.4 [a, b]	32.7	36.0	33.6	31.3	37.3	33.5 [a, b]
Insecurity	34.4	42.4	40.4 [a, b]	36.5	39.8	37.3 [a]	35.4	41.2	38.8 [a, b]
Police harassment	29.1	40.2	42.0 [a, b]	26.1	26.6	24.8	27.6	33.9	33.0 [a, b]
Being unable to complete education	28.3	41.7	33.3 [a, b, c]	30.6	40.5	30.0 [a, c]	29.4	41.1	31.6 [a, c]
Having to live in the slums	21.0	29.5	28.0 [a, b]	24.6	27.2	22.9 [c]	22.7	28.4	25.4 [a, c]
Not getting married	13.0	21.2	15.9 [a, c]	17.4	20.1	15.0 [c]	15.1	20.7	15.5 [a, c]
Achieving the following is very important:									
Finishing secondary school	96.3	93.4	83.6 [b, c]	98.3	93.4	85.6 [a, b, c]	97.2	93.4	84.6 [a, b, c]
Going to university	95.8	91.2	80.1 [a, b, c]	95.2	91.7	79.4 [a, b, c]	95.5	91.4	79.7 [a, b, c]
Owning your own home	98.5	96.2	98.4	96.3	97.4	96.3	97.4	96.7	97.3
Taking care of parents and rest of family when older	99.2	98.1	99.2	99.5	98.0	98.1	99.3	98.0	98.6
Moving out of the neighborhood	83.4	80.0	77.6 [a, b]	86.5	84.3	83.1	84.9	82.0	80.5 [a, b]
Being admired and respected by friends	96.8	94.3	95.0	96.6	96.0	95.4	96.7	95.1	95.2
Having a good job	99.0	98.6	98.3	99.2	98.8	97.3	99.1	98.7	97.8
Having children	84.6	87.9	90.9 [b, c]	78.3	82.8	90.8 [a, b]	81.5	85.6	90.9 [a, b, c]
Getting married or finding a partner	81.8	84.8	89.9 [b]	75.8	78.1	84.6 [a, b]	78.9	81.7	87.2 [a, b, c]
High expectations of									
Finishing primary school	91.9	73.2	33.3 [a, b, c]	94.1	76.6	22.2 [a, b, c]	93.0	74.7	27.1 [a, b, c]
Joining secondary school	75.1	44.8	10.5 [a, b, c]	77.8	50.0	8.9 [a, b, c]	76.4	47.2	9.7 [a, b, c]
Finishing secondary school	74.0	58.1	25.3 [a, b, c]	76.3	60.5	20.9 [a, b, c]	75.1	59.2	23.1 [a, b, c]
Joining the university	50.2	33.7	12.1 [a, b, c]	49.7	31.6	8.4 [a, b, c]	50.0	32.7	10.2 [a, b, c]
Getting a job that pays well	59.4	47.4	33.1 [a, b, c]	58.0	44.8	29.6 [a, b, c]	58.7	46.2	31.3 [a, b, c]
Owning home	68.3	62.3	51.2 [a, b]	65.8	56.3	49.3 [a, b, c]	67.1	59.5	50.2 [a, b, c]
Getting an enjoyable job	65.3	55.3	44.4 [a, b, c]	64.3	54.0	44.5 [b, c]	64.8	54.7	44.5 [a, b, c]
Having a happy family life	76.0	66.9	64.6 [a, b]	74.6	68.5	67.9	75.3	67.6	66.2 [b]
Staying in good health most of the time	70.9	61.2	58.6	68.8	62.4	60.3	69.9	61.8	59.5 [a]
Getting HIV/AIDS	2.1	4.5	2.9 [a]	3.1	4.8	3.1	2.6	4.7	3.0 [a]
Not being able to leave the slum	22.0	16.9	18.6	20.8	16.7	16.1	21.4	16.8	17.3 [a]

	Male			Female			Total		
	12-14 **n=616**	**15-17** **n=580**	**18-22** **n=836**	**12-14** **n=587**	**15-17** **n=497**	**18-22** **n=917**	**12-14** **n=1,203**	**15-17** **n=1,077**	**18-22** **n=1,753**
Being respected in the community	86.6	86.0	85.7	91.0	89.3	85.0	88.8	87.5	85.3

Note: Perceived chances of getting HIV/AIDS not included in the expectations composite index

[a] *p* < .05 for difference between 12-14 year olds and 15-17 year olds based on chi-square test

[b] *p* < .05 for difference between 12-14 year olds and 18-22 year olds based on chi-square test

[c] *p* < .05 for difference between 15-17 year olds and 18-22 year olds based on chi-square test

Table 3

Linear Regression Predicting Aspirations-Expectations Disjunction, by Age Group and Sex

	Male		Female	
	B	**SE**	**B**	**SE**
12-14 year olds				
In school (ref. out of school)	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.03
Married (ref. not married)[a]	--		--	--
Parent (ref. no child)[a]	--		--	--
Rent/owns house (ref. does not rent/own house)[a]	--		--	--
Korogocho (ref. Viwandani)	0.01[*]	0.01	0.03[**]	0.01
Religiosity (ref. low religiosity)				
High religiosity	−0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
No religion	−0.03	0.01	0.02	0.02
Civic participation (ref. no membership)	−0.04[**]	0.01	−0.03[*]	0.01
Volunteer work (ref. no volunteer work)	−0.02[**]	0.01	−0.02[*]	0.01
Constant	−43.14[**]	0.02	−47.13[**]	0.03
R^2	0.06		0.07	
N	616		587	
15-17 year olds				
In school (ref. out of school)	−0.05[**]	0.01	−0.05[**]	0.01
Married (ref. not married)[a]	--		--	--
Parent (ref. no child)[a]	--		--	--
Rent/owns house (ref. does not rent/own house)	−0.01	0.01	0.02	0.03
Korogocho (ref. Viwandani)	0.01	0.01	0.02[*]	0.01
Religiosity (ref. low religiosity)				
High religiosity	0.03[**]	0.01	0.02[**]	0.01
No religion	0.02	0.02	−0.02	0.03
Civic participation (ref. no membership)	0.00	0.01	−0.03[*]	0.01
Volunteer work (ref. no volunteer work)	−0.00	0.01	−0.00	0.01
Constant	−41.84[**]	0.02	−40.92[**]	0.02
R^2	0.05		0.10	
N	580		497	
18-22 year olds				
In school (ref. out of school)	−0.04[**]	0.01	−0.07[**]	0.01
Married (ref. not married)	0.00	0.02	−0.00	0.01
Parent (ref. no child)	−0.02	0.02	0.02	0.01
Rent/owns house (ref. does not rent/own house)	0.00	0.01	−0.01	0.01
Korogocho (ref. Viwandani)	−0.00	0.01	−0.01	0.01
Religiosity (ref. low religiosity)				

	Male		Female	
	B	**SE**	**B**	**SE**
High religiosity	0.02[**]	0.01	0.04[**]	0.01
No religion	0.02	0.01	0.04[**]	0.02
Civic participation (ref. no membership)	−0.01	0.01	−0.00	0.01
Volunteer work (ref. no volunteer work)	−0.01	0.01	−0.01	0.01
Constant	−39.08[**]	0.01	−40.67[**]	0.01
R^2	0.05		0.09	
N	836		917	

[a]Not included in regression models because of low numbers who have experienced these events

[*]
$p < .05.$

[**]
$p < .01$