# Single (M)Otherhood, “It’s Difficult, But I Can Do It:” Community-Building Practices for Single Mothers in Southeast Michigan

An Essay Presented

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## List of Abbreviations

| | |
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| 2GEN | Literacy and Beyond: 2GEN Learning Center (also referred to as Literacy and Beyond) |
| AFDC | Aid to Families with Dependent Children |
| BWATC | Blue Water Area Transit Commission |
| BWCA | Blue Water Community Action |
| B-WARM | Blue Water Area Rescue Mission |
| GED | Tests of General Educational Development |
| GSRP | Great Start Readiness Program |
| KIDS | Kids In Distress Services |
| OMA | Ontario Mother's Allowance |
| PHASD | Port Huron Area School District |
| PHHC | Port Huron Housing Commission |
| SCCCMH | St. Clair County Community Mental Health |
| SNAP | Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program |
| TANF | Temporary Assistance for Needy Families |
| WIC | Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children |

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INTRODUCTION

"If our lights were on, our heat was out. If our heat was on, the fridge was empty. We were always without something," a member of my family, who raised her children as a single mother for 19 years, shared with me about her childhood as I sat on her couch, days before Christmas. She continued, "I knew I never wanted my kids to go through that." She and I both grew up in southern Port Huron, the largest city in St. Clair County, Michigan. Economic disparities are apparent in the city, where people with more money tend to live in the northern areas, and in our area there are less resources for the local community. This conversation was not out of the ordinary; we both speak often about our childhoods. However, after this conversation I reflected on motivations during parenthood, especially for single mothers. How do single mothers, particularly in low-income households, conceptualize parenthood and how does that affect the way they choose to build community? How are support systems tiered, with formal support (like government assistance) functioning differently than informal relationships (with friends and family)? Where do semi-formal support systems, such as bonds within formal support systems (with teachers, social workers, and mentors) step in to respond to what is not addressed by the other systems?

How people are able to access support and build community is affected by the community they live in, and this is the case for single mother households in the United States. The ideals I grew up with in a low-income, single mother household, being raised by a village of women, are not universal. We call our close family friends "aunts" and "uncles," because the strength of platonic bonds

in our community transcend white, middle class conceptions of who is family.[1] We lean on people, sometimes strangers at food pantries and school events, to meet basic needs. Teachers are mentors, social workers, and friends who are integral parts of the lives of low-income students and young parents. Individuals within community organizations offer empathy, sometimes surpassing their job descriptions to ensure that people get what they need. We all need support, but what does that mean within low-income, single mother households in my home community? How do the implications of this question relate to other low-income communities, and other types of households?

Popular imaginations of motherhood, especially single motherhood, are rooted in misconceptions and harsh judgments. Until recently, single motherhood has been portrayed in popular culture as a monolith. In the twenty-first century, there has been more of a concerted effort within the media to change the "sidelin[ing] and misrepresent[ations]" of single mothers with more robust representations of their motivations, goals, and lived realities (Heffernan and Wilgus). While depictions such as those in the *Gilmore Girls* are loved and considered progressive,[2] there are still misconceptions about different groups of single mothers, particularly for women of color, low-income families, and those in non-heteronormative relationships. Representations of women from these backgrounds are less typically depicted in the kind, funny manners that mothers

[1] The official website of the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration defines "family" as: "a group of two or more persons related by birth, marriage, or adoption who live together; all such related persons are considered as members of one family" (Health Resources and Services Administration).

[2] Pamela Hill, a journalist who teaches at the University of St. Thomas, described how the Gilmore Girls finally offered a compassionate and realistic perspective of single motherhood. She described that the show allowed space for highlighting the love between a single mother and her daughter, as well as the difficulties within their lives.

like Lorelai Gilmore, a white single mother from a wealthy background, are given.

The implications for single mothers with intersectional, historically oppressed identities compound on each other to create greater stigma against some single mothers. In a heteronormative society, expectations of what family structures look like have immense implications for those who do not fit within this standard. The idea of the "welfare queen" comes from heavily classist, and especially racist and anti-Black sentiments about single motherhood (Cohen). Even for single mothers who are cisgender and heterosexual, they do not meet ideals about the heteronormative family as they are raising children while not being in relationships with men. Conceptions of who is "taking advantage" of government assistance, while inherently classist against all low-income, single mothers, rely heavily on racialized stereotypes against Black women and immigrant women. I interviewed mostly white women for this project (eight out of 10 participants), and all participants were born in the United States. Therefore, it is important to be clear about whose lived experiences my research is addressing and how their experiences are different from other groups of single mothers.

Public policy in the United States plays into the flawed support systems which fail to properly address needs in single mother households. Government assistance has focused on the disproportionate material hardship rates experienced by single mothers, who experienced five times higher than the national poverty rate for married-couple families in 2017 (Kim et al.). Temporary Assistance for

Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) focus on assisting single mother households facing material hardship. However, research shows that TANF, the "main form of poverty relief in the United States" negatively impacts the mental health of recipients (Davis 249). In particular, "states that have harsher sanctions, stricter job search requirements and higher expenditure on welfare-to-work policies, have worse mental health among low-educated single mothers." Constantly having to prove oneself as deserving of assistance, while simultaneously trying to meet work and childcare requirements to maintain benefits, is exhausting and taxing for individuals in states with especially harsh laws.

As formal support systems implement harsh barriers to entry and nearly impossible criteria to maintain assistance, single mothers attempt to fill in the gaps through informal systems of support. One 1996 study, among 900 African American, non-Hispanic white, Puerto Rican, and Mexican single mothers in Chicago, found that those with greatest access to resources through informal support networks were better able to maintain their jobs, which helped them maintain formal support (Lundgren-Gaveras). This study specifically analyzed the outcomes for families who did and did not receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The study was done one year before the dissolution of AFDC, but Lundgran-Gaveras' findings broadly illustrate formal and informal support as necessary systems for low-income single mothers.

While informal support systems serve a more compassionate and flexible role than formal support systems, they are less stable and secure. With less criteria to access, comes more unwritten and often unspoken expectations. These informal relationships, with friends and family members, can provide great comfort. Even extremely informal relationships with strangers in times of crisis (such as eviction from one's home) have been found to be comforting for individuals facing material hardship (Desmond). At the same time, single mothers with the highest need and greatest hardship tend to have the least access to informal networks of support (Radey, *Informal Support)*. Additionally, race and ethnicity play a role in perceptions of the role of informal support in single mother households (Radey, *The Role of Race/Ethnicity*). One theory about access to informal support networks is reciprocity, or expectations to "pay back," that are not always clearly defined (Nelson). Those who are not in a stable position to reciprocate support within these relationships are the least able to maintain them. Those with less time, money, and other resources are thus less likely to have stable informal relationships that would otherwise provide support when needed.

Semi-formal support systems attempt to fill in the gaps from harsh formal supports, and instability and barriers to access for informal supports. Some of the single mothers within St. Clair County, Michigan rely on semi-formal support systems to get the material and emotional support they may not find elsewhere. Community members directly respond to the needs within the community through mutual aid and community-specific program initiatives. Semi-formal supports possess pros and cons found in both formal and informal support systems. They

may contain the barriers to entry like formal support does, but they can facilitate friendship and mentorship within the programs that can transcend formalized agreements and expectations. To be clear, semi-formal support systems do not negate the possibility of instability or the potential for quick termination of informal relationships built within them. However, they do provide a context in which individuals can effectively ask for what they need, so the relationships they build within the programs have more realistic expectations for reciprocity.

One of the semi-formal support systems in St. Clair County is Literacy and Beyond: 2GEN Learning Center, which supports women in St. Clair County obtaining their GEDs (Tests for General Education Development, for those who were unable to obtain a traditional high school diploma). Six out of 10 interview participants participated in this program.[3] Many of the supports provided within the program address the kinds of needs that mothers in this project cited as most important, such as free childcare while they studied. The flexibility of the program, like other semi-formal supports in the community, to address the needs that mothers were asking for most explicitly was a benefit not seen in formal support like government assistance, where public policy hardly addresses the concerns that individuals bring up.

In order to get what they need, low-income, single mothers must navigate these systems of ineffective and stressful formal supports, unstable informal supports, and the initial barriers to entry seen in semi-formal supports. How, then,

[3] An employee through the Literacy and Beyond program helped with this project by distributing outreach materials to individuals in the program who she thought might be interested in participating in this thesis. While I did not originally intend for this thesis to examine this program specifically, due to the number of participants who were a part of this program it is used as a concrete example of the kind of semi-formal support that exists in the community.

do they respond to these systems by creating their own, that work for them? How do these individuals restructure their conceptions of support systems in order for support to function usefully in their lives? How do they access what is useful, and leave what is not? I am most interested in how the answers to these questions illuminate how single mothers in St. Clair County reframe these support systems to allow for love, comfort, and respect in their lives, in a system that is set up to prevent these things. I believe that the answers to these questions can provide guidance in the community going forward on how to best fill in the gaps that are left over. I also believe that pieces of the answers to these questions in St. Clair County, Michigan can provide guidance for the beginning of a dialogue in other communities.

*Introduction of Methods*

For this project, I conducted interviews with 10 women who identify as single mothers currently living in St. Clair County, Michigan. One participant identified partially as a single mother, stating that her partner who she lives with makes her technically not a single mother, but he works often and does not help with many of her needs, especially with childcare. It was important for me to conduct interviews for this project, as asking questions about personal perceptions of support and individual community-building practices could only be done effectively by asking single mothers about their experiences personally. Eight of the women I spoke with identify as white, one of whom identifies specifically as Arabic, and two identify as non-white Hispanic but did not further specify their

racial identification. The interviews took place between November 2021 and February 2022.

In total, I conducted 14 hours worth of interviews. The shortest interview lasted about 45 minutes, while the longest was nearly three hours. All took place over the phone or via Zoom video calls, depending on the preference of interview participants. All participants meet the criteria for being "modest means" as defined by the State Bar of Michigan.[4] This criteria was used for defining "low- to moderate-income" as, according to the State Bar, those who fit within these income brackets make moderate- to low-incomes by the standards of Michigan's cost of living today. All participants' incomes were well below this modest means threshold. I had originally set out to analyze the experiences of low-income, single mothers within the community, and hearing from those at the lower end of the income level gave me greater insight into how material hardship affects mothers' experiences with community building.

*Feminist Methodology and Researcher Positionality*

It was significant to me throughout the project to maintain a feminist methodology, and to be cognizant and intentional about my positionality within this project. I was raised by a single, Southeast Asian mother in Port Huron, Michigan. My mother was born in the Philippines, but she was born with dual United States citizenship.[5] I come from a mixed citizenship-status, multiracial family. Many of the mothers in my family are single mothers, and my entire

[4] Table 1, available on page 62, contains a chart with this threshold.
[5] Essentially, this means that she has always been both a naturalized citizen of the Philippines and the United States.

family is low-income. I was raised by many of these women, who came together to address each other's needs as a family unit, which made things easier for all of us. I built strong relationships with their children in my childhood, and our mothers were able to lean on each other in non-judgmental, flexible, and compassionate ways. I care deeply about this project because I lived it. And for the parts I have not lived, I care to listen and learn. I also understand that I lived it from the child's perspective, and I intended in this project to focus on mothers' perspectives as individuals, not just as parents.

While I have allowed my experiences to guide my initial research motivations, through each step of this project, I have been intentional about not coming into it with assumptions that I attempt to generalize to others' experiences because of my own. As philosopher Linda Alcoff writes, "location is not a fixed essence… [so] we cannot reduce evaluation of meaning and truth to a simple identification of the speaker's location" (489). I am a residentially housed, homeless college student. I grew up in extreme poverty, but I am able to have a savings account today. Some of my identities are fluid, which have marked my experiences but are impermanent. I am both an insider and outsider to the topics I write about in this thesis, and because of this I have done my best to let go of preconceptions and allow the people I spoke with for this project to guide its direction.

Patricia Hill Collins, a Black feminist and academic in class, race, and gender in the United States, speaks to the significance of personal experience in research and navigating one's insider and outsider status. About Black women

specifically, she argues that we have to "[challenge] the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood" through self-definition and self-valuation as researchers (309). One must account for the ways they are and are not a member of the communities they are speaking with, in order to facilitate a more robust relationship to their research. Instead of playing into the power dynamics of "researcher" and the "researched," one must commit to a continual participatory process of care, understanding, and active listening that Collins describes as crucial to Black feminist thought, and feminist theory more generally.

Feminist-Indigenous scholar Kim TallBear writes about this in "Standing With and Speaking as Faith." She argues that ethically, scholars must go beyond the unsatisfactory methods of simply checking the boxes of informed consent, and instead must have an ongoing, open, and honest dialogue with those they are speaking with to inform their research. Research, then, becomes a participatory process instead of a tool to further perpetuate researchers overspeaking for others. A process of responding to community concerns, and ensuring that research is informed continually by the voices of individuals speaking within the project, is essential in ensuring that the research is not one-sided, and harmfully attempting to "speak for" people who have their own, equally important voices.

A fear I had going into this project from the student researcher perspective was coming across coldly and unable to empathize. I also feared coming across too informally, with people sharing with me experiences they would not be comfortable being used in this thesis. Sociologist Barrie Thorne writes about this

phenomenon in “You Still Takin’ Notes?” She cautions that empirical research entails a trusting relationship between the community and individuals one is speaking with, while navigating an outsider status which entails active engagement with maintaining this trust. I tried to address these concerns with very clearly laid out privacy expectations at the beginning of interviews, plenty of time for questions, and an open dialogue between myself and the people I interviewed about the details of this project. I was clear with each person I interviewed that they were able at any time to end the interview, and that even after we finished they could withdraw all or part of what they shared in the interview from this research.

Thus, what has unfolded throughout this project is a careful balance between my insider and outsider status to the topic of low-income, single motherhood in the United States. This balance is between my experiences motivating a thesis on the topic within my home community, and a respectful understanding that this project is about the experiences of those who spoke with me during their interviews. I cannot separate my experiences from what is described in this research, but I have done my best in ensuring that I am not speaking for others based on my insider status within the topic, as I am an outsider to the experiences of the particular women I spoke with.

# CHAPTER ONE:

## "We were the *they* everyone talks about," Low-Income, Single Motherhood and Support Systems in the United States

"We were the *they* everyone talks about--the un-grateful poor," Dorothy Allison

## INTRODUCTION

In their 2016 book, "Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines," authors Gumbs, Martins, and Williams discuss that formal support and public opinion so heavily scrutinizing mothers, particularly mothers with historically oppressed identities, serves a function in capitalist society. They state:

> By discrediting the motherhood of women of color, poor white women, queer mothers, immigrant mothers, etc., this turns maternal virtue on its head, as these "bad" mothers are held responsible for all the ills of society from the Wall Street mortgage crisis to environmental degradation caused by climate change. Because our children (however mothered) are the product of "morally impoverished" mothers, our children become disposable cannon fodder for U.S. imperialism around the world or neo-slaves in the prison industrial complex. (xvii)

Those crafting government assistance legislation work harder to prove that mothers are not doing enough to support their children, as opposed to proactively supporting and meeting those who are seeking out support where they are. This is done through intense, and ever-increasing, government surveillance used to dictate who gets what support based on the way they choose to parent, the way

they handle finances, and their personal relationships with others (Maki). The purpose of this scrutiny is to minimize who receives support. Not only this, but according to the authors of "Revolutionary Mothering," its purpose is to position single mothers as scapegoats for the ills of an imperialist, capitalist society which aims to increase profits for the wealthy over creating equitable access for all.

What community-building practices exist for low-income single mothers in the United States? How do past experiences within informal and formal support systems, expectations within informal community support networks, and personal belief systems affect community-building? In the United States, formalized support systems such as government assistance programs have been notorious for discriminating against women of color, low-income women, and queer women and single mothers. The women I spoke with for this thesis described their own experiences of discriminatory practices affecting their lives and community-building. These policies tend to push blame and punitive policies onto mothers instead of providing more equitable access.

In interviews, individuals shared how they have had to restructure their community-building practices to navigate the blame and judgment they often face as mothers. These barriers to access for formal support systems make informal and semi-formal support systems (with less requirements than formal support and less expectations of reciprocating support than informal support) more crucial to the lives of these mothers. In this thesis, I am examining community-building practices and what they look like for low-income mothers in Southeast Michigan, specifically, where outside communities range from rural to urban. In order to

analyze this question, it is important to look into what these discriminatory policies are, their theoretical implications, and how single mothers' community building practices are shaped in order to push back against the effects of formal support systems.

*Government Assistance as Formal Support*

It is important, in talking about informal networks of support for low-income, single mothers, to discuss what formal support looks like and its limitations. There has historically been close attention paid to "care" for single mothers, in the sense of government assistance in the United States, which is affected by the social, political, and economic circumstances of mothers' lived experiences (Abramovitz; Coleman and Ganong; Falk). Who receives assistance, how much they are allotted, and for how long are central questions in research on government aid for single mothers. The goal of much of this research is to intervene in government policy to improve the lived experiences of low-income, single mothers (Burke et al; Davis; Gatta).

Particularly since the end of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) assistance program in the 1990s, government assistance has focused more attention on "deservingness" and criteria such as work requirements, rigid caps on how much monetary assistance one family can receive, and the amount of time a family can use a program (Falk). According to the Congressional Research Service, advocates for low-income families have long addressed the need for "substantial" change to general assistance and the TANF program (Burke et al. 5).

Specifically, an end to work requirements has been advocated for by these groups and the general public, as "jobs have failed to end poverty for some families and have not been possible for others because of personal barriers" (5). The focus from these systems is intense scrutiny to determine who should be deemed "deserving" of support through public opinion, greatly affecting accessibility of support.

Gendered, racialized, and class-based discrimination often come together to affect the lives of low-income, single mothers, and have been used as excuses to provide insufficient support and interventions that are even more damaging to their circumstances. For example, in the 1960s, government assistance for single mothers was heavily surveilled by the U.S. government under the guise of ensuring that mothers who were struggling the *most* financially as single women were the only ones receiving assistance. The U.S. government made the decision to implement a "man in the house" rule, where social workers would do home visits to look for any evidence that the single mother in the household was in fact single, and not living with or dating a man (Abramovitz). They would even go so far as accusing a woman of not being a single mother if there were a man's shoes by the door. The government dictated who was most deserving and in need of this assistance, and that those in relationships with men were not deserving. This hurt those women in relationships with men, *and* the women who were then forced to avoid relationships in order to retain the government assistance benefits they depended on. It was not until years later in 1968 that this policy was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court ("Man-in-the-House Rule").

Unfortunately, the dissolution of the "Man-in-the-House Rule" did not come with the dissolution of regulations that mimic its logic and methods. In 2020, Rahim Kurwa, Assistant Professor with the Departments of Criminology, Law, and Justice and Sociology wrote about the "new Man-in-the-House Rule." According to Kurwa, anti-family policies within U.S. government assistance legislation are the norm as opposed to the exception. He uses the case study of Housing Choice Vouchers, "the nation's largest rental assistance program" (1). Kurwa argues that this programs' focus on personal relationships functions in the same way as the "Man-in-the-House Rule," treating these bonds as liabilities. This framing of personal relationships as something that makes one less deserving or in need of support encourages individuals to hide and end these personal relationships so they can receive support. The disconnect between the requirements for support and the personal determination that one is in need of it, harms those who are looking for formal support.

*Work Requirements for Support*

Research on single motherhood in the United States also addresses the question of work and ensuring that mothers are able to make free decisions about employment. While research has developed to address the lived experiences of single mothers in order to improve government policy, there has been research specifically done to address working mothers' needs. Sociologist Mary Gatta writes that in examining government policy, it is necessary to acknowledge and address the particular challenges that arise for low-income single mothers, as

intersecting with race, ethnicity, class, and marital status. American author and journalist Judith A. Levine describes this phenomenon in her 2013 book, "Ain't No Trust: How Bosses, Boyfriends, and Bureaucrats Fail Low-Income Mothers and Why It Matters." According to Levine, there is a disconnect in work, relationships, and government assistance programs between what low-income mothers need and what they are asked to accept. This then leads mothers to distrust these individuals and systems, making accepting support from them more difficult (Levine).

Additionally, previous government policy has focused too directly on rates of employment as the major indicator of success, which funnels low-income single mothers into low-wage, entry-level jobs (Burke et al.). These jobs become increasingly harder to exit as the workforce calls for the need for more training and education qualifications, which these women are often unable to gain as full-time laborers who bear the brunt of unpaid childcare responsibilities as well (Mink). Feminist policy scholar Gwendolyn Mink argues that the divide here is between punitive framing of work requirements, instead of a reward-system and trusting individuals to determine what kind of support they receive and how much they are in need of. The focus on punishing those who are not meeting requirements, as opposed to rewarding mothers for the work they do, only serves the function of turning resources away from people who need them.

Gatta uses the example of the 2002 New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce development program to illustrate how policy can be successful when it does address these intersections and provides flexibility for single mothers to

provide feedback that is addressed on a rolling basis. However, she also argues that this program, while acknowledging racial difference, did not address it or provide innovative attention to the unique needs of women of color, which must be addressed in policy moving forward. As she states, "poverty is not gender or race neutral nor is the way that workforce development and welfare policy is implemented," (118). Thus, it is crucial that policymakers pair with experts on gender, race, and social inequality and partner with the low-income single mothers they serve to create and continuously improve policy and programs that provide workforce aid to these women and their families.

"Welfare reform" in the United States since the 1990s has focused much attention on increasing work requirements for single mothers, in an effort to push them into working, under the impression of trying to get them to a place where they would not need government assistance (Beland and Waddan). However, the larger culture of "deservingness" within formalized support networks in the United States is the underlying problem at hand. Work requirements simply feed into the "deservingness" narrative already perpetuated by public opinion. Additionally, the emphasis on work requirements within motherhood affect the barriers between working mothers and stay at home mothers within the United States (Harp and Bachmann). The way that the emphasis on work affects public opinion and government support feeds into the social identity of mothers whether they are employed or not.

The barriers to accessing formal support from the United States government has ensured that low-income, single mothers rely on strengthening

their informal networks of support in order to sufficiently care for themselves and their families. Community support, intergenerational family structures, and nontraditional family structure are integral to the ways these families function. These informal networks become even more crucial as government assistance leaves out those who are determined to not be in as much need, or those who have maxed out their benefits either monetarily or based on the amount of time they have been using assistance. For women who are already marginalized by their circumstances, the lack of formal support ensures that the ways community and support networks are built and accessed rely on informal networks.

*The Effect of Public Opinion on Government Support*

Very importantly, research has centered on the villainization of low-income, single mothers, in terms of hyper criticization of what support they choose to access, parenting decisions, and what they do as individuals. “We were the *they* everyone talks about--the un-grateful poor,” Lesbian feminist Dorothy Allison describes. Allison’s quote demonstrates the feeling of disconnect experienced between “us” and “them” in the context of class differences (Allison). Especially as a person living in poverty, she speaks of being criticized and othered by people of other socioeconomic categories. This perception of the “ungrateful” poor leads to an environment where it is understood that accessing or attempting to access government assistance is frowned upon. In particular, single mothers who receive government assistance have historically been portrayed within the general public as “deficient, failing parents" (Freeman). The particular

experiences of single mothers in low-income households includes class-based shaming from the public.

These character judgments on low-income, single mothers created by the public and elevated by the U.S. government have long informed gatekeeping of government assistance programs (leading to harmful policies such as the "man in the house" rule described previously). These character defamations of single mothers informed a history of U.S. government policy which centered on the perceived defectiveness of single mothers' work ethic as opposed to the structural inequalities that actually prevent them from being able to survive without government assistance (Handler & Hasenfeld 2007). By centering their focus on debunking these myths about the realities of low-income, single mothers, researchers have been able to focus on the damage done to these families while maintaining a focus on their humanity and shifting focus from what *they* can do to improve their own situations, to how the U.S. government and general public can shift *their own* focus to policy that will actually help these families.

Public opinion in the United States informs the way that the government provides or does not provide assistance and support. Who is deemed as deserving of support is determined by factors that are heavily classed, racialized, and impacted by the gender and sexuality of those requesting support. These severe limitations on formal measures of national support inform where mothers are expected to formulate and build their own measures of informal support. The conditions of their lived experiences determine what support they choose to access and where this support comes from. Mothers from different backgrounds,

income levels, and racial and ethnic backgrounds are affected in different ways by the ways the United States government chooses to situate support.

*Single Teenage Mothers*

Single teenage mothers face particular challenges and experiences, again also affected by their other compounding identities, race and ethnicity, family income, and access to resources. Assumptions regarding their reasons for becoming parents, moral policing, and age barriers affect their motherhood experiences early on (Abrahamse et al.). Research has focused on disparities in race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in who becomes teenage parents. However, new directions in research have focused on the roles of teenage mothers in particular communities and their desires before and during parenthood (Gilmore and Eisler). Elaine Bell Kaplan, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Southern California was one of the first to explore this direction for single, Black teenage mothers in 1997. She wrote that, Black teenage motherhood and its increasing prevalence in the United States was not the result of failing young women by not preventing their pregnancies (Kaplan).

Instead, Kaplan claimed Black teenage mothers were actively choosing parenthood, not being forced into following through with it. Since they were not fitting into others' ideals of parenthood, it was a popular misconception that the communities of these young women were failing them and pressuring them to follow through with pregnancies and parenthoods. Instead, the young women were choosing to follow through with parenthood and working tirelessly to ensure

that they and their children were able to get the resources they needed each step of the way. Kaplan used some of her personal experiences, having been a African-American teenage mother, to dispel the myths and speak of the joy of motherhood for these women. She also described their frustrations with the judgments and misconceptions placed on them by others due to their race, and being teenage mothers.

Challenging assumptions made about teenage parents is important in addressing barriers to accessing support, and dispelling myths of negative outcomes that come from public expectations for teenage mothers. In "Deviant (M)others," Wilson and Huntington described how popular perceptions of increasing teenage pregnancy rates and negative outcomes were not rooted in reality in the United States, United Kingdom, and New Zealand. Instead, these conceptions were rooted in ideas about dependency on government assistance and social exclusion, that were not necessarily real or as dramatic as assumed. While negative outcomes were not as prevalent as believed in the public's imagination, and teenage pregnancy rates were decreasing steadily, the authors argued that these myths serve the purpose of stigmatizing teenage parenthood even more. In fact, these myths about outcomes and prevalence of teenage pregnancy were more about punishing the women who were not fitting into the white, middle-class ideal of "motherhood" than about improving their circumstances (Wilson and Huntington).

*Racism and Discrimination Within Single Parenthood*

It is important to note that not all single mothers in the United States have the same experiences, especially when considering the racism experienced by Black mothers that is not experienced by white mothers, and how this discrimination is compounded on in the case of low-income mothers. American political scientist, and gender and sexuality theorist, Cathy Cohen describes how those who do not perform heteronormativity in the way they are expected to are oppressed within society. In "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," she argues that queer politics can encompass an analysis of race and socioeconomic status that supports those who may or may not be heterosexual but are certainly treated as sexually deviant within society.

Cohen's piece is rooted in the attention paid to low-income, single mothers (and particularly women of color) and how they are oppressed within the same system of rigid heteronormativity that queer people are implicated in. This is the case even while many or most of these women may be heterosexual. Cohen uses historical examples of how heterosexual but non-heteronormative relationships have been othered over time. Cohen particularly fleshes out how violent terminology, such as referring to low-income single mothers as "welfare queens," is weaponized against African American mothers in particular. This denigration of low-income single mothers, and especially Black women, is an active choice from heteronormative society to regard these women as deviant from the sexual norm, and thus marginalized within heteronormativity. Thus, Black low-income, single mothers are posited as specific targets of this villainization of all mothers who

receive or qualify for government assistance, when they are not even the majority of people who are in this group.

Racism has played a direct role not only in racialized terminology, but in actual refusal of assistance for low-income people. This has been highlighted in tensions such as the affordable housing crisis within the United States (Department of Housing and Urban Development). While the affordable housing crisis is a widespread issue in the United States, the racial homeownership divide disproportionately affects Black people and people of color due to the history of unfair lending policies targeting Black prospective homeowners (Calhoun). While gatekeeping government assistance and support affects low-income, single mothers on a large scale, racialized policies and sentiments cause Black mothers and other mothers of color to experience this difficulty in access differently.

*Past Research Directions*

Previous research has fleshed out how formal care networks, such as government assistance, purposefully leave out those who are in need through exclusionary policies. These policies reflect widespread biases and ideals about who is deserving of support, that leave individuals feeling guilty or apprehensive about accessing support. This was a sentiment echoed in all 10 interviews that took place for this project. Policies regarding welfare and government assistance in the United States reflect impossible standards that supposedly distinguish the deserving and undeserving poor (Handler and Hasenfeld). This stringent conditionality placed on who can and cannot receive benefits has been shown to

impact the mental health of single mothers in the United States who have participated in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program (Davis)**.** For mothers facing intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination, like women of color and immigrant women, these effects compound on themselves to make the outcomes even worse (Saasa et al.) The pressure of having to prove oneself as deserving, and having one's personal life scrutinized in order to receive support, has negative impacts on single mothers who seek formal support.

For example, extensive research has been done on the Ontario Mother's Allowance (OMA) in Ontario, Canada, which was in effect from 1920 to 1997 (Little).[6] According to Little, there were not only strict regulations on who was allowed to receive this "allowance," but the tight regulations led to a pattern of attempting to "morally regulate" mothers who received the assistance (76). As the standards of the program changed in its 77 years, it regulated the finances, personal lives, and even parenting styles of those who chose to participate in the program. The origins of the program, brought forward by mostly middle-class women in Ontario, who promoted values of domesticity and standards of mothering within the program's eligibility criteria. This led to negative implications for women from lower socioeconomic statuses finding it difficult to fit into these moral standards (Little 80).

Parents who attempt to access U.S. government support are often turned away because of the rigid restrictions on definitions of eligibility. The restrictions

[6] The allowance intended to support single mothers in low- to moderate-income households in Ontario, CA, providing a monthly allowance based on income to mothers of dependent children (Ontario).

are made on bases such as making slightly too much money to meet income requirements for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, regardless of still struggling to afford groceries at their income level (Abramovitz; Kandaswamy). This phenomenon has been present in the United States for as long as legal protections have attempted to exist. Racism, xenophobia, and classism have often prevented people from enjoying protections that were supposedly supposed to be enacted. The idea of the "deserving citizen" has been racialized, classed, and nativized by excluding people of color, poor and working class people, and immigrants from social citizenship (Fox). Ultimately, women who do not conform to traditional patriarchal, middle-class ideas about family structures are left out of the category of "deserving citizen."[7]

Discrimination based on race and ethnicity, such as segregated housing, further affects how individuals based on their lived experiences are either able or unable to access formal networks of support, to meet their most basic needs. While laws are typically in place today to explicitly protect individuals from these kinds of discrimination, it still prevails through the loopholes and oversights exisiting in legislation. Processes such as redlining illustrate this circumvention of the law versus reality. Redlining prevents those from socially marginalized backgrounds from gaining entry into political spheres, housing markets, and quality education (Lovett; Kummings and Tienken**).** The ways that public policy continues to willfully exclude people with historically marginalized identities in

[7] This exclusion from social citizenship was illustrated in times like that of the New Deal, in which white, European immigrants were able to easily access social welfare programs, while people of color, and particularly immigrants of color were prohibited and disproportionately deported. Ideas about who deserves access to support, particularly formalized government assistance are deeply affected by one's gender, race, and nationality.

the United States, even with supposed protections in place to prevent this, affects access to formal support for individuals who discriminatory practices are aimed against.

This past research has demonstrated how government assistance impacts mothers especially within the category of "single mothers," from the policy and administrative standpoint. The goals of much of this research posits itself as determining what government assistance does not do well, why it is not working, and what can be done to improve it (Calhoun; Coleman and Ganong; Davis). Research has shifted in the past decade or so to discussing how single mothers access care and support outside of government assistance, and incorporating their voices directly into the work. This research shows that the experiences of mothers in the United States who define themselves as single parents vary greatly on their intersecting identities, such as race, sexuality, class, citizenship status, and where they live regionally.

*Current Directions of Research*

Research on single parents has turned to asking significant questions about what happens within informal support networks, such as programs run by community members and interpersonal relationships with family members and close friends, when formal support is abysmal. Research has also asked the question of where low-income single mothers go from here, working to find community in ways that are uplifting, healing, and lack the judgment and scrutiny found so commonly in public images. Informal support is built on less of a stable

foundation than agreements with formal supports, and the politics of identity play into who has access to extended family support or close friendships. However, these supports play a crucial role in how many low-income, single mothers formulate their conceptions of care and how to access it for themselves.

*Community-Building for Single Mothers*

Single motherhood, especially for lower and lower-middle income mothers in the United States represents much more than government assistance, employment, and public opinion. While these aspects of life can have a great impact on mothers and families, the reality is that single mothers have been able to subvert negative public expectations to form their own unique ways of building community and ensuring that their families are able to survive and thrive outside of traditional norms. Not only subverting these expectations, but simply through different lived experiences single mothers are able to conceptualize and build community in ways that are separate from other groups of people, and there are many within-group differences as well. No matter the circumstances that brought on one's experience as a single mother, it is important to note that this is not an identity that represents a lack of something or that something is missing. Their unique experiences do, however, compound to make the experience different for everyone.

The ways in which single mothers are able to formulate their own ways of building support networks and forming community is specific to their race, sexuality class, and region. "Motherhood and Single-Lone Parenting: A 21st

Century Perspective" is a book from 2016 which examines the lived experiences of people who identify as single mothers, and how their particular experiences are affected by their intersecting identities and circumstances. In the book, feminist and postcolonial theorist Dr. Maki Motapanyane puts together stories of single mothers, such as those who chose to become single parents through adoption or other circumstances, lesbian single mothers, young single parents, and others. The overarching argument is that, while mothers of different identities share some similar experiences, the ways in which they access support and build community differ greatly depending on social capital and differing life experiences.

Access to external social support is available at various rates to mothers with different life circumstances and identities, and this has varying rates of impact on their lives. One study about single mother families in Canada showed that family support had a wide effect on single mothers and whether or not they felt they had "enough" support to meet their needs (Yanicki 2005). However, other studies reveal that for Latin American, with a particular focus on Salvadoran, immigrant women in the United States, perceived level of family support does not appear to have as much of an effect (Radey 2015). This study revealed that race and ethnicity has a broad effect on the social support networks and must be specified within particular groups of mothers, as the way mothers are impacted by social support is very culturally-specific.

*Reciprocity Within Informal Relationships*

In 2000, Margaret K. Nelson, Professor of Sociology and Women and Gender Studies at Middlebury College in Vermont, set out to examine these informal social relationships between white single mothers in rural Vermont. She based her finding heavily on the idea of reciprocity within these relationships, or social expectations of returning the favor when receiving support (time, energy, money, other resources, etc) from someone else. Theories of reciprocity, or mutual expectations of "paying back" for support, are higher when women perceive the other person as being of similar circumstances to them (such as needing the money borrowed or time spent assisting back in a timely manner) (Nelson). For individuals perceived to be more fortunate than themselves, the pressure and expectation of reciprocating support and "paying" someone back still exists, but not as strongly or urgently. Thus, informal support networks rely on more paying into and nourishing than the formal care networks, and flourish off of culturally and contextually specific norms set by the mothers and who they determine to be within their networks of support.

In some contexts, extremely informal networks of support with strangers have been found at times to be more significant even than those with friends and family. Matthew Desmond, American sociologist and Professor of Sociology at Princeton, makes this argument in his 2018 journal article about the crucial role of support systems for those living in poverty in urban environments. He compared groups of people from two separate low-income neighborhoods in Milwaukee - one majority-white trailer park and one majority-Black neighborhood (1). He

states that, in times of particular crisis such as evictions, individuals rely on the "disposable ties" of support from strangers and short-term social agreements. He noted that, for some of those he followed closely, this seemed to be the case because they had particularly unstable life situations, with little friend and family support to begin with. The limited expectations of reciprocity through support from strangers, limits the pressure of having to pay someone back, especially because the support is given freely in a time of crisis and no emotional relationship is on the line.

*Revolutionary Mothering*

The authors of "Revolutionary Mothering" spend time unpacking what they mean by their book's title. They describe how, over the years, the reproductive justice movement has supported a dramatic shift from mothering as a gendered prophecy and identity, into a transformative practice of liberation and choice (xviii). This idea is backed up by tk karakashian tunchez,[8] self-proclaimed "single m/other," in "Telling Our Truths to Live: A Manifesta" from the book. She discusses transforming the concept of motherhood coming first with honesty, recognizing one another's struggles, and honoring histories and current work being done by and for mothers. She states that:

> We do more than discuss the theoretical value of liberation. We practice lived, beauty-full and fragile liberatory models in our daily lives, constructing curriculums far more intricate than anyone will ever use in

[8] tunchez purposefully stylizes her name in lowercase for her piece.

> any classroom and practicing on the very most precious relationships we hold, our families, our communities (200)**.**

For tunchez, teaching, loving, and caring are at the core of self-liberation for mothers. Holding one another up in mutually loving relationships is what makes a significant difference in the lives of mothers like herself.

tunchez describes how, for mothers who have experienced obstacles and rejection from more formalized methods of support, there is an increased attention to informal support networks of being in relationship with one another. Receiving and reciprocating positive regard, encouragement, and respect are at the forefront of how she envisions the way mothers are and will continue to liberate and transform what being a mother means from the inside. In a loving, supportive community, the concept of motherhood shifts from being about who is deserving or not of support, to a system of understanding and care that encourages and uplifts, rather than questioning and scrutinizing. In this model of motherhood and community, ensuring that everyone has enough is prioritized over deciding how much is enough.

*Defining "Single Motherhood"*

Who is considered a single mother, and by whom? This is a significant question in this project. The reason that terminology is used at all is to distinguish between large factors that may influence the social support and experiences of the participants in this project. However, it is not an all-encompassing term, and the definition for the purposes of this project is very broad, ultimately determined by

the participants about whether or not they identify themselves that way. For some groups of unpartnered mothers, “single” motherhood does not resonate. This was the case in one study, which showed that for lesbian mothers in the United States, many did not identify as “single mothers” regardless of relationship status (Rensenbrink 2010). Many instead had considered themselves to have experienced parthenogenesis, or the phenomenon of ‘virgin birth,’ where a child is biologically only related to a lone “parent” and is thus not missing one. They conceptualized their parenthood not as “single” but simply as the only parent. On the other hand, partnered mothers may, for a number of different reasons, still consider themselves “single parents” even though they are in a romantic relationship (for example, because they are in a relationship with someone who is not their child’s biological parent, and the person does not contribute to childcare). So while they are not “single,” they are “single parents” (Coleman and Ganong).

“Single” status has been over-policed for heterosexual mothers, and used to disenfranchise individuals in queer relationships. As described previously, in the past and particularly in the 1960s, laws have been put in place in the United States for women who self-identify as single to try and prove that they were in relationships, specifically with men (Kurwa; “Man-in-the-House Rule”). For people in queer relationships, the term ‘single’ has been placed on them in order to take away rights that are given to heterosexual couples in formally recognized relationships, such as the ability to adopt together or to be recognized legally for tax or other purposes (Padavic and Butterfield). A rigid definition of the term

"single mother" gatekeeps resources from both groups. Thus, it was important in this project to allow for self-identification of single motherhood, instead of a formalized definition created by myself.

*Defining "Low-Income"*

Recent research has claimed that single motherhood has experienced a shift in the culture of modern society in the United States. Single motherhood is an experience that an ever-increasing amount of women are consciously and purposefully taking on (Jones). It is also an identity that does not automatically or necessarily mean that social and economic capital are unavailable to these mothers, contrary to continued public perception (Rothman). "Low-income," then, is used in this project to distinguish between the experiences of single mothers from different socioeconomic backgrounds. These backgrounds do not indicate that any mothers are deficient due to access to resources, but to indicate that access to resources and community-building processes are simply different for low-income individuals. Additionally, low-income communities function in their community-building and community-sustaining practices in ways unique to their own contexts. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between socioeconomic status of single mothers in examining how their individual circumstances influence the way they build and access support networks.

*Defining Care*

What is care, and what does it look like for low- and lower-middle income American mothers who take care of all or most of the childcare responsibilities? As tunchez elaborates, care and community stemming from mothers' most important informal support systems can be crucial in their lives. Harm done within the formal systems of support, like government assistance at the national level, is significant in the lives of many individuals on both the receiving and rejected ends of the spectrum. However, it is not the end-all-be-all of the circumstances of single mothers. In these situations, support systems from loved ones, and those in the community, become more significant and are flexible to fill in where formalized support leaves gaps.

Care can be defined in many ways, depending on its context and purpose, but broadly as "purposeful activity that seeks to restore wholeness in another" (Taylor). Care necessitates an engagement and involvement with the well-being of someone or something other than oneself. Care can be one-sided, for example with a person at a place of employment taking care of a client. It can be two-sided, such as acts done within a relationship. It can also be collective, within communities where care is central to the ways community members choose to live their everyday lives. Collective care can take place in times of particular turmoil, such as mutual aid projects created by and for communities impacted by the current COVID-19 pandemic ("Collective Care Is Our Best Weapon against COVID-19 and Other Disasters"). Care that takes place within communities, or

collective care, ensures that the people within the community are organizing the aid, giving what they have available, and receiving the support they need.

*Care Within Communities*

How care is conceptualized in specific communities is impacted by the cultural differences between groups within them. A 2015 article written by Dr. Melissa Radey,[9] discusses the relationship between public support and informal support for low-income, single mothers, as a distinct cultural group within communities. Radey specializes in how socioeconomic factors can impact the parenting practices of parents and their children's development, and much of her work focuses on understanding poverty as a mechanism of inequality. In her 2015 article, Radey argues that due to lack of public support available to low-income, single mothers through government assistance or other formalized support measures, informal social support becomes crucial in their lives. This is more than would be the case if there were more access to these formalized, and at times, more reliable, networks of support. She states that this is the case especially in today's society in the United States, in which an already insufficient welfare system is increasingly diminishing.

Radey also makes the distinction in another study that race and ethnicity has a large impact on the perceptions of adequacy of support in one's life, and that perceiving insufficient support affects one's vulnerability and stress factors

[9] In this article Dr. Radey, Associate Professor in the College of Social Work at Florida State University, writes about informal support networks for single mothers in the post-welfare reform era of the 21st Century United States.

(Radey, "The Role of Race/Ethnicity"). In her article, she describes how different groups of single mothers receive and perceive different levels of support in their lives. She explains that, in her research, Mexican and Puerto Rican mothers, single mothers, households experiencing neighborhood problems tend to perceive more of a gap between their responsibilities or expectations and the amount of support they receive. She also found that Hispanic immigrant mothers tend to perceive less excess burden in their lives, due to different expectations for the role of external support. This difference shows that cultural differences impact expectations of support, and at which point people feel that they are receiving too little external support.

Care within communities, how it is conceptualized, and how it is carried out is often very context-specific. Who is in the community? What is the context within which community members build relationships and relate to one another? A 2021 study done in Chicago focused on the concept of "restorative kinship" between women of color, most of whom identified as mothers or grandmothers. This concept was created out of the realization from Dr. Jennifer E. Cossyleon, who conducted the study, that these women's collective participation in their communities transforms their kinship relationships.[10] The interpersonal skills and guiding principles that shape relationships within their work translate into how they begin to conduct their personal relationships outside of their collective action work. Their community work informs the way they navigate these intimate relationships and how they build (both through giving and receiving) support.

[10] Cossyleon is referring to the women's interpersonal relationships with both family and close friends.

Cossyleon also found that, for those with less physical resources and ability to offer services to reciprocate support, informal networks of support become less stable, and at times obsolete. Informal relationships rely on often unspoken or unclear expectations of reciprocity. For those who are asking for support, and routinely unable to support others in the same way (through paying back money borrowed, or being able to offer a listening ear by having extra time to do so), there is a risk of losing the relationships which begin to feel one-sided. In these cases, people are at a much higher risk of social isolation. However, according to Cossyleon, this effect is avoided for people who are able to tap into community institutions and programs, which tend not to have these expectations of reciprocity especially for community members who programs are intended to meet where there are and provide support to.

Care for and between low-income, single mothers in the United States is created and performed in ways unique to their specific contexts. For mothers, their needs are shaped by their individual identities and lived experiences, plus the additional children's additional needs. Care and what it looks like is often community-specific as well. For low-income individuals living in low-income communities, there may be less overall resources available, but there is a baseline of mutual understanding of lived experiences. For low-income individuals living in wealthier communities, there may not be as many community resources targeted for them. For low-income single mothers, being in a community where one feels understood or where there are other people like themselves, can make a difference in how community is built by these women.

*Defining Formal, Semi-Formal, and Informal Support*

Previous research has delineated the distinctions between "formal" and "informal" support for the purposes of describing particular phenomena in certain populations. In one dissertation on the support systems of lone mothers in Germany and the United Kingdom, the author describes informal support as "provided by family and friends on the one hand, and by voluntary organizations on the other," while "welfare systems" consisted of the bulk of "formal" support (Hoff 2). Another study, which examined the racial and ethnic differences in friendships and kinship relationships between African Americans, Caribbean Black people, and non-Hispanic white Americans, defined the "informal support" term similarly. They list types of "informal support" consisting of friendships and family relationships, as well as church involvement, and "fictive kin" or close friendships so significant that they function like family relationships (Taylor et al.)**.** In general, "informal supports" tend to consist mostly of family relationships and friendships, as well as non-required relationships within services such as local organizations and church communities.

Unlike these other sources, which describe only "formal" versus "informal" supports, this project further hashes out differences in support systems by adding a middle category of "semi-formal support." For the purposes of this project, "formal," "semi-formal," and "informal" networks of support are separated in order to make the community-building practices of single mothers within this research very clear. Due to the background and continued power

dynamics within different systems of support, distinguishing between different systems of support, their functions, and their accessibility is important in describing how single mothers build community and access support. Adding "semi-formal" as a category helps to further understand dynamics within relationships between single mothers and these support systems.

The biggest differences between these forms of support are how much room is left for compassion and understanding within care relationships, expectations on both sides, and requirements for both access and termination. "Formal" support consists of the type of support one applies for, and is either accepted into or denied. This kind of support often comes with set, rigid criteria, such as TANF benefits or Medicaid. Reciprocity within these kinds of support networks tend to consist of checking in with social workers, reporting income, and agreements about time limits for accessing support. "Semi-formal" support systems make up for some of the gaps in formal support, through community response. Semi-formal supports can have criteria for access, but they tend to be more fluid and understanding of how personal circumstances cannot be determined simply by checking someone's annual income. Mutual aid within a community in response to a collectively traumatizing event, such as a natural disaster, is a type of semi-formal support. Reciprocity here comes from an expectation that community members will support each other as much as possible, and that individuals receiving support will ask for only what they need.

"Informal support" consists of individuals and small groups providing support to one another in often very reciprocal kinds of relationships. Reciprocity

of time, energy, resources, and respect is typically a value at the forefront of informal support relationship dynamics. Informal support networks consist of things like friendships, family relationships, and mentorships. While there are typically no sets of criteria for being in these relationships, there are always implicit expectations of mutuality that require being tuned in to one another. For informal relationships, there are not explicit, rigid criteria set in place, but implicit expectations of reciprocity still exist in their own form of an agreement. While informal support has less formal barriers to access for individuals on the receiving end, those on the giving end can choose to terminate the support at any time without any formalized agreements set in place.

*Desire-Based Research*

A desire-based approach to studying single motherhood is a key tool in ensuring that research does not fall into the trap it previously has with pathologizing assumptions.[11] With this previous, intense focus on the damage done to low-income, single mothers within research and government policy, there is also research on low-income, single mothers that is desire-based, as opposed to damage-centered. It is necessary to have a conversation about the lived experiences of low-income, single mothers and how the larger society in the United States affects their circumstances. This conversation provides important

[11] In her open letter, Eve Tuck, Associate Professor of Critical Race and Indigenous Studies at the University of Toronto, discusses how focusing on the damage done to communities serves a function only to an extent. She argues that, for many communities, we have moved far past the need to continue this focus and instead research on the desires of individuals and their strengths would do more good than a continued deficit-based framework.

information on some of the obstacles that these mothers may face in terms of what resources they have readily available to them, and where building their own networks comes into play. At the same time, it is necessary to ensure that there is not an over-pathologization of the ways in which support is built by these women. Formal support is certainly lacking for many people in these communities, but there is a significance in how informal networks of support are able to become even stronger and more effective in the absence of these other support systems.

Some research focuses on the desires of mothers for their children to have better circumstances than their own, and the care work done within mother-child relationships both by mothers and by children. For example, Amanda Freeman examines the strength of bonds between low-income single mothers and their children, and how this relationship is at the center of these mothers' efforts to do well. In highlighting these relationships, Freeman specifically addresses how previous research tends to focus on how having children has a negative economic and emotional toll on women living in poverty. By shifting the focus to how these mother-child bonds are incredibly important to these women, Freeman challenges the notion that by having children women have placed an unnecessary burden on their circumstances. The focus shifts to a positive one, with mothers' desires to improve their circumstances to better the lives of their children. Freeman proposes that government policy fails single mothers because there is too much focus on the mothers only, and their perceived need to be motivated to work harder. Freeman directly challenges the history of harmful policy focusing on punitive

blame on individuals. In doing so, she addresses how ignoring barriers from long-standing structural inequality is unproductive and destructive.

*This Project's New Research Initiative*

For this purposes of this project, there is a continued focus on how discriminatory policies in formal support systems affect the self-esteem and community-building practices of single mothers in Michigan. There is also focus on expectations of reciprocating support within informal support networks providing both positive feelings of being able to pay back support, and at times feelings of owing more than one can provide. One of the major contributions of this project is that the primary research comes directly from interviews with single mothers in the community. Hearing from them directly about how they build community and conceptualize support was most significant, instead of reading into the fine print of an administrative standpoint.

Overall, the main focus of this project is on the motivations for specific types of community-building and seeking out particular supports. In this project, I write about how the individuals I spoke with focused on more informal support from loved ones, and less on formal government assistance with rigid requirements. They also spoke highly of semi-formal support systems within the community, which focus on individual, informal relationships but provide the security of formal support's agreements and conditions. Their motivations for how they build community are shaped both by internal desires and beliefs about

the role of support, as well as necessity from exclusionary policies in particular networks.

# CHAPTER TWO:

## St. Clair County and Semi-Formal Support

### COMMUNITY BACKGROUND[12]

St. Clair County, Michigan, USA (also known as "The Blue Water Area") is home to 160,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau). The county's easternmost outskirts run along the St. Clair River, which feeds into Lake Huron. On the other side of the river is Ontario, CA, with the Blue Water Bridge connecting the two in Port Huron. St. Clair County is predominantly white, US-born, and middle class (U.S. Census Bureau). The County's eight cities and five townships house historic downtown districts, farming communities, and the highest number of boating registrations per capita in the United States (St. Clair County, MI). Local community members tout the aesthetics of the water and downtown districts, where people of all ages pass the time. Dispersed throughout the county are farming communities, as the southern region of Michigan's Lower Peninsula (where St. Clair County is located) "has the most farms, the largest amount of land in crops, the highest yields per acre, and the greatest volume and value of crops, animals, and animal products" (Schaetzl). The populations of the towns and cities in the county range from the village of Emmett's 200 residents to the city of Port Huron's 30,000. While the numbers say one thing, the difference in lived experiences is told through individuals and smaller local communities.

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[12] In this chapter, I lay out a general background of the community in St. Clair County, including demographic information. The semi-formal support systems described in this chapter were referenced in interviews for this project, and discussing them here will give necessary background to discussions of semi-formal support systems quoted from interviews in Chapter Three.

Looking at medians in St. Clair County paints a picture of residents' lived experiences that is misleading, given the wide ranges in experiences on either end of the spectrum. For example, in St. Clair County the median household annual income is about $57,000 (below the national average of about $65,000) (Data USA). However, 20,000 out of 160,000 (13%) of individuals live below the poverty line. The highest rate of poverty in St. Clair County is women between the ages of 25-34, followed by women between the ages of 35-44, and then women between ages 55-64 (Data USA). The unemployment rate as of November 2021 was 3.5% (compared to the overall rate in Michigan at 4.2%), and reached a record high of 29% in April 2020 (The Times Herald).

Due to the vast differences within the county, there is not a monolith in the regional experiences of citizens of St. Clair County. There are individuals and families that live on acres and acres of farmland, others in Section 8 housing, and others living in million dollar waterfront homes (Port Huron Housing Commission; Zillow). Economic inequity is noticeable when looking at housing even within walking distance of one another. One interview participant in this project spoke about living in Section 8 housing when she first became a mother as a teenager, and how she lived across the street from the police station. However, when her home was robbed, the police station was slow to respond to her request for an investigation, and were clearly disinterested in investigating. The economic disparities in the community have implications for the kinds of housing available to individuals, and their (in)ability to leave unideal housing situations.

For the different school districts within the county, the 4-year high school graduation rates tend to follow the trend of neighborhood income. St. Clair High School, one of the wealthiest schools in St. Clair County, had a 4-year high school graduation rate of 97.9% in the 2019-2020 academic year (MI School Data). A 14-minute drive away, in the same academic year, alternative high school Riverview East High School had a graduation rate of 62.9%. Simply looking at the data, economic disparities within communities, and where the most wealth is concentrated, is correlated closely with graduation rates and overall school performance and ratings within the County (St. Clair County RESA).

*Community Responses*

The community in St. Clair County has responded to some of the social inequities of the community through semi-formal supports such as various programs, organizations, and mutual aid endeavors. Many of these resources are based in or near Port Huron, the largest city in the county with a population of 30,000, on the easternmost side of the county and the state. However, these programs exist throughout the county and not all resources are based in Port Huron. Some of these programs include low-income housing and shelters, programs for low-income parents, affordable mental health services, and various pantries and soup kitchens. The projects tend to be community-led, and as a direct response to needs within the community. Their status as organizations and their community-driven purposes make them both formal and informal support systems, therefore semi-formal. For the purposes of this project, I will focus in

this section mainly on the semi-formal resources most cited by interview participants as resources they have heard of and/or used personally.

*Literacy and Beyond: 2GEN Learning Center*

One of the most heavily referenced community organizations spoken about in interviews was the Literacy and Beyond: 2GEN Learning Center (Literacy and Beyond, "2GEN Learning Center"). This was the case mainly because six out of 10 interview participants were recruited for interviews through the program. A previous teacher of mine helped in the interview recruitment process by spreading the word to an employee at the program. Literacy and Beyond, known colloquially[13] as "2Gen," program supports women in the area who are working to obtain their GEDs (Tests for General Educational Development). They provide free childcare while individuals are in the building studying for the exam, which helps to support parents in the program who are in need of these services. This program also optionally helps those who have obtained their GED to apply for higher education and scholarships to support their education.

Literacy and Beyond was founded in Port Huron's South Park neighborhood. They support women who live in the local community with GED preparation, Early Childhood Education resources and daycare within the building, in-building professional counseling services, a scholarship for those seeking to obtain their Associate's Degree after passing the GED exam, and more

[13] This was the way program participants referred to the program during interviews.

(Literacy and Beyond, "GED Prep for Women"). Particularly for parents in the community, there are programs aimed to increase access to resources for families, especially for those with young children. Literacy and Beyond's 2GEN Learning Center provides the flexibility for young parents to participate in their programming. The official mission statement on their website declares that they aim for "a holistic two-generation approach *(serving women and their children together)* that moves families toward economic security by improving educational attainment *(GED & Associate Degree for mothers and early learning skills for children)* in addition to addressing the non-academic barriers that hinder their success." While the program does not only serve parents, they actively ensure that they confront and help to problem-solve the unique kinds of barriers that parents especially face in obtaining their GEDs.

Literacy and Beyond is an example of a semi-formal support system in the community. There are requirements to participate in Literacy and Beyond (such as identifying as a woman and actively working to obtain a GED) that signify its status as a formal support system. However, there were aspects of interview participants' experiences in the program that conceptualized it as going beyond this formal category. The kinds of mentorship relationships formed within the program, as well as flexibility within the program based on compassion as a major pillar of the program, I found the program to be both formal and informal. The kind of community, care, and commitment to the success of program participants described in interviews transcended the formalities of a completely "formal" support system, making it in part informal. At the same time, requirements to

participate and the program's status as a nonprofit organization make it technically formal. Thus, the program exists within the community as a semi-formal support system, incorporating both formal and informal support elements.


*Fig. 1: The 2GEN building, pictured on their official website.*[14]

*Early Head Start Programs*

One interview participant who does not participate in the Literacy and Beyond program mentioned early head start programs helping her family with childcare concerns. The program she and her family use is the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP), also located in Port Huron and offered through the Port Huron Area School District (PHASD) (Port Huron Area School District).

[14] The official website for Literacy and Beyond: 2GEN Learning Center: https://www.literacyandbeyond.org/

The GSRP (Great Start Readiness Program) markets itself as a preschool for four-year-old children. Their website lists criteria for accessing the program, including proof of income. They also list that two forms of "proof of residency" are required for the program, implying that the program is only accessibly by U.S. citizens and permanent residents (thus excluding undocumented people, for example).

*Clothing Services*

There are also programs that exist outside of the city of Port Huron. One of these programs is called K.I.D.S., an acronym for "Kids in Distress Services." Their mission statement, listed on their official website, states that "We Exist So No Child Will Go Without" (Kids in Distress Services). The non-profit provides young people with free clothing and hygiene-related products. They particularly support those who have been "unexpectedly removed from their homes," but not exclusively as they also state that they support "any other child/teen in need." Their official website lists what items they are currently in need of, and how to donate. They also list 17 referring agencies, for those who are interested in accessing K.I.D.S.' support to know where to go for an official referral. The request for official referrals from those using the program adds a formal layer to the support system, mimicking the formal supports which require proof of need.

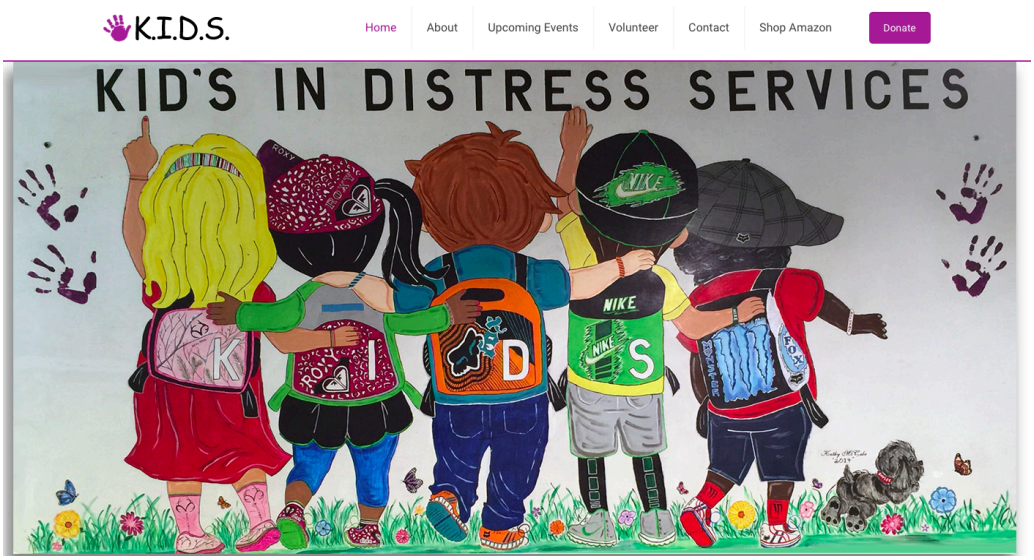


*Fig. 2: K.I.D.S. logo from their official website.*[15]

*Food Distribution Services*

Food distribution services, such as soup kitchens and food pantries, serve people throughout the county and constitute another set of semi-formal resources. A few of these services are run by faith-based organizations but open to the general public, like the Trinity United Methodist Food Pantry and Faith Lutheran Food Pantry (United Way of St. Clair County, "St. Clair County Food Pantries"). One interview participant shared that, although she is not personally affiliated with a church, local churches have supported her through donation drives and food pantries. "Operation Transformation" has a mission statement of "Churches Cooperating for a Changed Community," and lists some of these programs (Operation Transformation). The Blue Water Area Transit Commission (BWATC) provides public transportation in Port Huron and Fort Gratiot Township, with

[15] The official website for Kids in Distress Services: https://kidsindistressservices.org

dial-a-ride[16] services in Marysville, Burtchville, Fort Gratiot, and Port Huron Township (separate from the City of Port Huron) (Blue Water Area Transit Commission, "About BWATC").

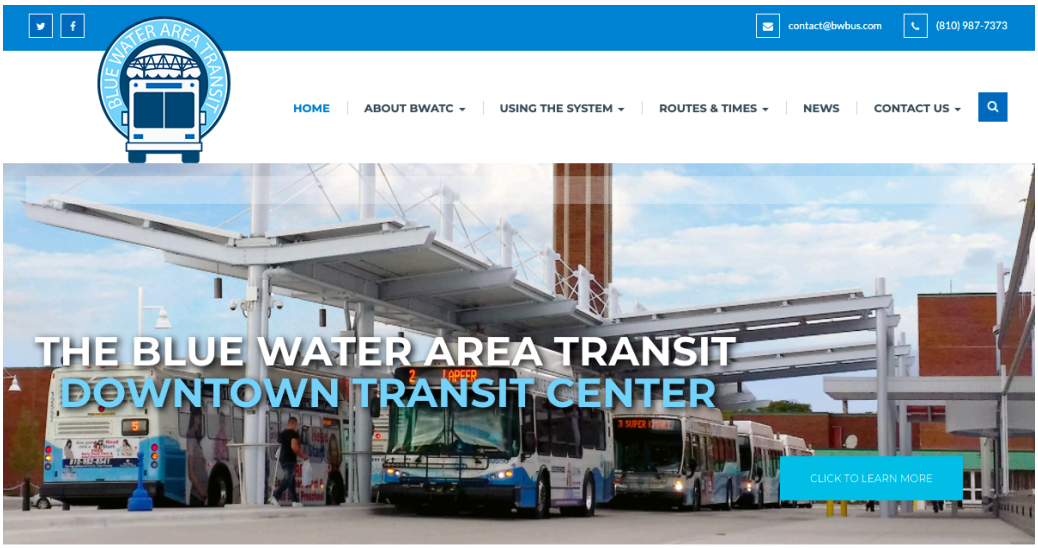


*Fig. 3: The homepage of the BWATC's website.*[17]

Other services, however, are community-led outside of religious contexts. One of these programs is Mid-City Nutrition, a secular food pantry in Port Huron (United Way of St. Clair County, "St. Clair County Food Pantries"). Some programs focus on specific populations, such as the Council on Aging and Senior Nutrition, and some programs are geographically focused, typically open only to St. Clair County residents or residents of the cities and townships surrounding the ones they are located in. Four interview participants mentioned food support programs like these as having been systems of support they have personally used

[16] Dial-a-ride services allow individuals to order a bus to come to their home to pick them up personally (Blue Water Area Transit Commission, "Dial-A-Ride"). Their website claims they can do so usually within an hour, but with 24-hour or more notice they can guarantee this.
[17] The official website for the Blue Water Area Transit Commission: http://bwbus.com/

during their time as parents. Even more services, such as backpack giveaways through organizations like Blue Water Community Action, serve families in the community by focusing on other specific needs, like disseminating free school supplies to young children (Blue Water Community Action).

*Low-Income Housing*

Low-income housing was also commonly cited in interviews, as a service currently or formerly used by participants personally. The four interview participants who spoke about their experiences with low-income housing in St. Clair County discussed housing run by the Port Huron Housing Commission (PHHC) specifically. The PHHC provides Section 8 Housing Vouchers, as well as general support for public housing for families and Senior Citizens (Port Huron Housing Commission). They list their "Family Housing" as Dulhut Village, Gratiot Village, and Huron Village. Locally, these and housing complexes and others (such as "Village Manor Townhouses" in Port Huron) are referred to as "the Projects," and were referenced this way during two interviews for this project. While interview participants spoke about low-income housing in Port Huron specifically, there are also housing commissions in Marysville, St. Clair, and Algonac, as listed on the Port Huron Housing Commission's website.

St. Clair County is home to shelters as well, serving specific populations of individuals facing houselessness or housing instability. Services exist to serve populations like only youth, only women and children, and only men, focusing on coordinating support that best responds to the particular needs of who they serve

(United Way of St. Clair County, “Shelter Programs, St. Clair County”). The Blue Water Area Rescue Mission (B-WARM), a Christian-affiliated organization serving community members experiencing houselessness, is one such shelter program, which focuses on short-term emergency housing (Blue Water Area Rescue Mission). Organizations such as Cypress Place in Port Huron, focus on providing “street-based outreach to runaway, homeless, and street youth between the ages 9-20” (Harbor and Wings of The Harbor). They describe themselves as an emergency shelter providing counseling, educational support, and material support to youth.

These kinds of support services were discussed by a few participants in this project. Multiple participants mentioned living in low-income housing, such as through subsidized housing, or having lived in shelters before. While participants who spoke about prior experiences with houselessness did not mention specific names of shelters they had lived in, they did vaguely reference these support systems when speaking about their experiences. The three participants who spoke the most about living in low-income housing, all currently live in Port Huron, Michigan and receive their housing subsidies through the Port Huron Housing Commission.

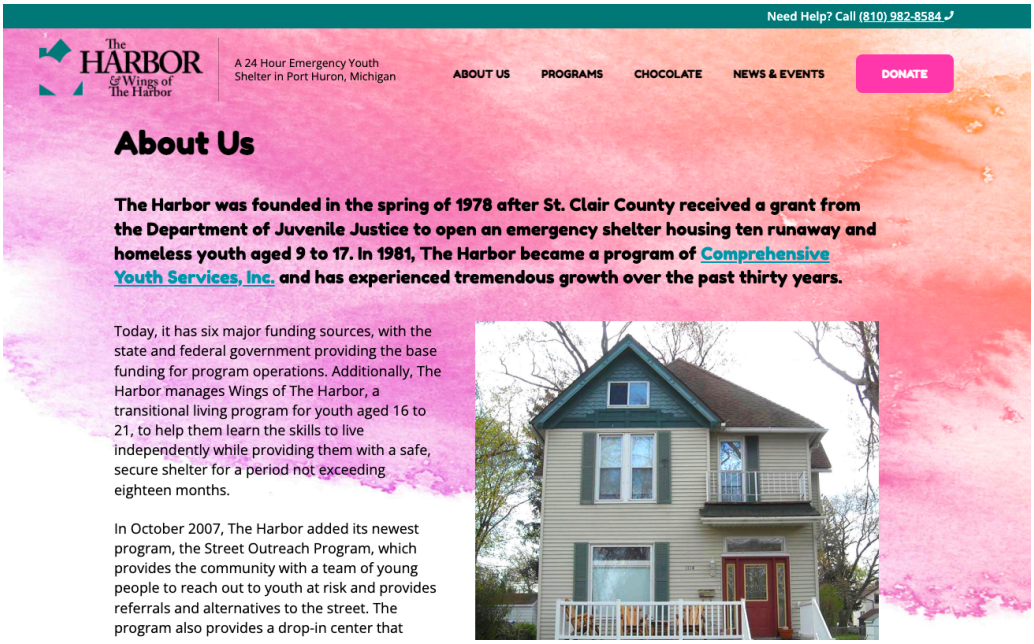


*Fig. 3: The Harbor and Cypress Place's website, including a photograph of their building.*[18]

*Mental Health Services*

Another community resource referenced in interviews (in fact, mentioned in eight out of 10 total interviews) were mental health services, especially through St. Clair County Community Mental Health (SCCCMH) services. They are the primary organization that exists for community members to access support such as therapy. Their website lists their ability to direct individuals to services such as for those living with "mental illness, intellectual/developmental disabilities, and substance use disorders" (St Clair County Community Mental Health). Interview participants discussed their mixed feelings about the organization, noting that there are many obstacles to access but benefits when access is possible. For example, one participant spoke of her son who is on the autism spectrum, and his

[18] The official website for Cypress Place, housed by the Harbor: https://harboryouth.com/about-us/

personal, socioemotional progress since accessing mental health services through SCCCMH. However, she and other participants spoke about being turned away by SCCCMH in the past for being seen as not “needing” the service as much as others. Thus, while beneficial for some, SCCCMH functions much like other formal systems of support that deem who is deserving or most in need of their services, without the flexibility for individuals to decide their need for themselves.

# METHODS

In this thesis, the central focus is on the lived experiences and community-building practices of women who identify as single mothers and who qualify as lower- to lower-middle income. The women all currently live in St. Clair County, MI. Some have lived in the community their whole lives, and some have moved away and returned. All participants were born in Southeast Michigan, either in St. Clair, Macomb, or Oakland County. The women who participated in interviews ranged from 18 to 40 years old, with many of the ages in between represented in the sample. Participants had between one and four children, with ages of a few months old to 19 years old. The majority of participants (60%) had their first child in their teenage years, and an additional 20% had their first child at 20 years old. The other two participants were 22 and 23 when they each had their first child. Half of those who participated in interviews have been married at some point in their lives, although all are in the process of divorce or are currently divorced.

## *Defining "Single Motherhood" (continued from Chapter One)*

As described in the first chapter, a loose definition of "single mother" was used in recruiting for interviews in order to provide flexibility for self-definition of participants and in contrast with formal support systems that over-scrutinize who is considered a "single mother." The term is used at all in order to attempt to describe the circumstances of a particular group of parents, while acknowledging that even within the category of "single mother" people's lived experiences can

and will be vastly different. “Single motherhood” is used in this project only to establish parameters that distinguish between key differences in the experiences between different groups of mothers. However, single motherhood in itself contains many potential differences in experiences, identities, and desires. The second reason for a very loose definition of single motherhood is to allow agency in determining how to define one’s own circumstances for the purposes of this project.

“Single motherhood” is typically conceptualized as mothers who are not in romantic relationships. However, it is no hidden reality that women tend to carry most of the childcare responsibilities in the United States. According to the U.S. Census in 2020, around 80% of single-parent households are headed by single mothers. Even in dual-parent heterosexual households, mothers take on most of the childcare responsibilities (Zamarro and Prados). Relationship status does not always equal shared childcare responsibilities. Therefore, single motherhood’s definition is guided by the researcher to narrow efforts in reaching out, but in the end self-defined by participants in this project. Where the term does not resonate in certain circumstances, there will be explicit distinctions made.

Finally, this project allows for self-definition of “single motherhood” as being a “single mother” is not a permanent identity. People who are at one point single parents are not necessarily always single parents, depending on their particular circumstances. There exist temporary separations in relationships, for which parents may identify as single parents for a specific amount of time. For people in relationships with incarcerated people, they may self-define as single

when they are a child's sole financial and physical caretaker, regardless of being in a relationship. Long distance or new relationships may diminish the "single" identity, but not the "single parent" or sole-caretaker identity of a parent. As single motherhood is a social identity, it simply makes the most sense to let individuals self-define using whatever distinctions or addendums they might offer to qualify or clarify that label.

*Defining "Low-Income" (continued from Chapter One)*

The definition of "low-income" is used loosely as well, in order to distinguish between the lived experiences and resource availability of participants, but is not used as an exact science. "Lower-middle" is an option for defining oneself as well, for those who are within close proximity to this identity. A somewhat broadened definition of low-income seemed necessary for some similar reasons to the definition of single motherhood. For one, once again in the case of government assistance, having rigid cut-offs based on outdated numbers for defining "low-income" has been used as an exclusionary practice. Additionally, income level and socioeconomic status are experiences that are not necessarily permanent, although difficult to change in terms of upward mobility in the United States. Finally, this term is used at all because, like "single motherhood," it is not treated as an exact and easily-definable category, but one that necessarily delineates large social factors that can impact the experiences of parents in particular ways.

For the purposes of this project, “low-income” is defined by the 2021-adjusted poverty guidelines in Michigan, as defined below by the State Bar of Michigan. In their adjustments, 200% of the federal poverty level is used to distinguish what is seen as the true poverty guideline for today. While the federal guidelines for the poverty threshold are updated each year, allegedly to adjust for inflation, they are insufficient in keeping up with the true disconnect between the cost of living and the income needed to afford meeting basic needs today.

**2021 Income Poverty Guidelines Chart**

| 2021 Income Poverty Guidelines (200%) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Family Size** | **Annual** | **Monthly** | **Weekly** |
| 1 | $25,760 | $2,147 | $495 |
| 2 | $34,840 | $2,903 | $670 |
| 3 | $43,920 | $3,660 | $845 |
| 4 | $53,000 | $4,417 | $1,019 |
| 5 | $62,080 | $5,173 | $1,194 |
| 6 | $71,160 | $5,930 | $1,368 |
| 7 | $80,240 | $6,687 | $1,543 |
| 8 | $89,320 | $7,443 | $1,718 |
| **Each Add'l Person** | $9,080 | $757 | $175 |

Table 1: The State Bar of Michigan’s “Modest Means” Calculation for 2021.

Like being a “single mother,” individuals can absolutely determine on their own whether or not they self-define as “low income.” As described in the first chapter, for the purpose of having a standard for recruitment at the beginning of this project, following the State Bar of Michigan’s definitions of “modest means” made sense as a jumping off point. Beginning with prioritizing those who

fit within these standards also ensured that hearing from those with the lowest incomes were able to share and voice their perspectives for this project. All individuals who participated in an interview did ultimately fit into the State Bar's "modest means" criteria, but individuals who did not fit within this criteria were encouraged to sign up for and participate in this research project as well.

Data on the income of participants was determined within ranges, for the comfort of participants. On the pre-interview Google form,[19] where participants were asked to indicate their income, 60% of participants reported making less than $20,000 annually. 40% make between $20,000 and $40,000 per year. The professions of participants included a Certified Nursing Assistant in the process of becoming a Registered Nurse, a general employee at a local grocery store, and an noon supervisor (known colloquially as a "lunch lady") at the school their children attend. Participants ranged from being currently unemployed, to working part-time, to working jobs with mandatory overtime. Two participants were unemployed at the time of their interviews, but both indicated that they were in the process of actively seeking employment.

*Interview Recruitment*

I did interview recruitment through several methods. First, through a program called Literacy and Beyond in Port Huron, MI. This program, which supports young women in the area who are working to obtain their GED, and optionally supports their attainment of higher education after receiving their GED.

[19] A copy of the Google form is available to read in Appendix A (CREATE APPENDIX).

This program supports many parents, and in particular single mothers. The next method of recruitment was through general social media posts on Facebook. I posted to my Facebook page a one minute and 30 second informational video as well as an infographic[20] about the project, and encouraged individuals to reach out to me, talk to people they knew, and share the post. This video and infographic were also dispersed by employees at Literacy and Beyond and several of those recruited via this method indicated that they had viewed the video or the infographic when they heard about the project. At the end of each interview, I asked participants if they knew of anyone else who might be interested in doing an interview, which helped in recruiting a few more people for interviews.

[20] Represented in Figure 4 below.


*Fig. 4: Infographic made for interview recruitment, dispersed through Literacy and Beyond and my personal Facebook account.*

*About Interviews*

For many of the participants in this project, there were very common themes in terms of personal goals and values, perceptions of others' expectations and judgments, and general experiences. This was certainly affected by commonalities between participants, not only in being single mothers but in similar geographic locations (all living within St. Clair County, at least at the time of the interview). One particular identity that appeared to be salient in their

descriptions of parenthood experiences, was that most participants identified with becoming a mother as a teenager or at least at a young age.

Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 3 hours, for a total of 14 hours worth of interviews Compensation for interviews was calculated on an hourly basis, with all participants receiving at least a baseline of pay for an hour. All interviews were conducted virtually, either on a Zoom video call or over the phone, depending on the participant's preference. Participants were informed at the beginning of each interview that their participation was voluntary, and that they could end the interview or skip a question at any time. They were also informed that they could omit their interview or specific statements at any point before March 2022, which they were informed would be the official point of submission for this thesis.

The original goal for interviews was to reach between 20 and 25, but 10 were ultimately conducted. This was the case due to difficulty with outreach, and general reasons for interview cancellations which were mostly due to childcare responsibilities,[21] work-related time constraints,[22] or pandemic-related difficulties.[23] After the first six interviews were conducted, the interview questions were revised for clarity and more questions were added on the basis of

[21] Many interviews were done while individuals' children were with them, but some people preferred to have help with childcare during their interviews and were not able to find that help, and thus opted out of doing an interview.
[22] Two people who were originally interested were not able to do an interview because they were working extra hours and did not have the energy to talk afterward.
[23] One person was scheduled for an interview when one of her parents was diagnosed with a serious case of COVID-19, and one other person was diagnosed with COVID shortly before our interview, and was not responsive to messages later on regarding rescheduling.

common themes from the first set of interviews.[24] Two participants participated in a second interview with me, while eight participated in one.

*Participant Demographics*

Before each interview, individuals were asked to fill out a Google form questionnaire to provide some information about themselves. Participants were asked to indicate information such as where they were born, their age, ages of their children, and the age at which they first became a parent. They were asked to self-identify their ethnic/racial background, and the ethnic/racial background of their child(ren). The ethnic/racial categories were taken from the 2020 Census, and individuals had the option to indicate a different category under the "other" category. The ethnic/racial identity of participants' children were asked in order to gain an understanding of parents' experiences in context with their children's identities. Four out of 10 (40%) participants had a different ethnic/racial identity than their children.

Most of the women I interviewed for this thesis identified as white women (eight out of ten), with one identifying specifically as Arabic and white. Four out of ten total participants indicated that they are the parents of multiracial children. Besides the two participants who were non-white Hispanic, who both had white and Hispanic children, the three other participants with multiracial children had

[24] In particular, the second version of the questions was aimed to use less language related to the terminology of this thesis (explicitly asking about "community" multiple times, for example) and more vague language to ensure that participants were given the flexibility to describe their support systems outside of preconceptions about what the questions were aimed to reveal about support systems.

children who were both white and Black. Two out of ten participants identified themselves as Hispanic in the "Other" category on the preliminary Google form, not resonating with any of the other particular racial categorizations on the form. Since the racial categorizations were taken from the most recent U.S. Census in 2020, it is admittedly not perfect. Since these categorizations were taken from the Census, it is not shocking that people who identify as Hispanic, a group which often does not resonate with Census racial categorizations, did not resonate with the ones on this study's Google form.[25]

Individuals were also asked to indicate whether they identify as a single parent, with the option to explain their answer. All individuals were recruited with the understanding that this was a project on single motherhood, but this ability to self-identify aligns with previously mentioned values in this project in allowing people to decide how they identify themselves. The question, "are you the primary person responsible for arranging childcare for your child(ren)?," which also provided an "other" option for nuance, was used together with the previous question in order to determine interview eligibility. One participant ultimately answered "yes and no" to the question of identifying as a single parent, as she explained that she has a partner but he does not contribute to her daily or childcare responsibilities. Since she identified partially as a single parent, I felt it was important to gain her perspective on this topic.

[25] While "Hispanic" is treated as an ethnic category for the Census, Parker et al write about how 67% of people who identify as Hispanic in the United States consider this identity to encompass either only their racial or both their ethnic and racial identity. This is most often the case for individuals with both white European and Indigenous Latin American heritage, who are neither fully white nor Indigenous American.

*Interview Depth*

From what I perceived, openness during the interview seemed to be somewhat related to the medium through which the interview was conducted. For example, those who chose to do an interview by phone seemed to be less likely to elaborate on their answers without prompting. When prompted, their answers tended to be shorter than those who chose to do a video call through Zoom. The three interviews done by phone were among the shortest interviews, the shortest one being only slightly over 30 minutes. Interviews done through Zoom, with both people's cameras on, brought more detailed responses and explanations, and longer overall interviews. The longest of these interviews was about three hours total. Duration of interviews and openness of participants also appeared to be impacted as questions were reformatted to flow more easily, revised for clarity, and as interviewer confidence and comfort grew as interviews progressed. For example, halfway through the interview process, I decided to look through my interview questions, reformat them, and edit them for clarity. I changed the wording of a few questions that had been commonly asked to be reworded in interviews.[26]

Overall, there seemed to be a lot of openness to sharing, even for those who had shorter interviews. I attempted to make people feel more comfortable upfront by sharing a little bit about my experiences both in recruitment materials

[26] For example, the question "how have the ways you build community changed since you became a parent?" was asked to be reworded in three interviews. The question was then swapped with "who are the people you surround yourself with?" supplemented by asking "what considerations do you make when figuring out who you want to be in your life?"

(a short video and infographic[27] describing the project), and at the beginning of interviews. In particular, I shared briefly about my experiences growing up in a multiracial family, raised primarily by a single mother in a low-income household. When appropriate, I shared other smaller details about my experiences, such as my father's current incarceration. I also shared how I was born in Port Huron Hospital and graduated from Port Huron High School. Two participants and I talked about teachers from the high school, which they had also attended. One participant and I realized during our interview that we had gone to elementary school together, a realization we laughed about before continuing. Another participant talked about living in Section 8 housing, to which she stopped herself, saying, "I don't know if you know what that means." I responded, "My family and I used to live in Village Manor, so I'm familiar."

As will be discussed below in chapter three, there seemed to be a common theme of desire to be in community with those who could empathize with participants' situations from similar lived experiences. This tended to come from a fear of judgment, which was typically not faced as harshly when speaking with and being in relationship with people who had experienced similar circumstances. Since this topic was very personal, and openness and honesty would generate comfort in interviews, it felt appropriate to ensure that those who did an interview knew my standpoint and why I was committed to the topic of community-building for low-income, single mothers in the community.

[27] See Figure 5.

*Privacy and Confidentiality*

I began and ended all interviews with a privacy agreement. I stated and reiterated that all interviews, questions, and information given would be completely voluntary, and that there was no requirement to talk about anything they did not want to. Participants were reminded that they could end the interview at any time, and that it was up to them if they wanted to reschedule if they decided to do this. The only interviews which were ended by those being interviewed were due to Internet instability (after which all picked up again when they were able to) or due to childcare-related reasons (such as children having a pressing need that came up during the interview). Participants were also told that, even after discussing something in an interview or through written communication, they could at any time let me know that they would not like that information to be used in the research. While no one explicitly chose to omit portions of what they spoke about, I chose to avoid writing about topics which seemed to be uncomfortable during interviews.[28] For example, in one interview, it was mentioned that a topic was a "sore subject" for the participant, so that portion of the conversation is not used in this thesis.

Full transcripts of interviews are not included in this thesis due to the desire to retain as much confidentiality as possible for participants, and because certain things shared in interviews were somewhat uncomfortable for participants.

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[28] In "Refusal as Care," anthropologist Ashanté Reese writes about the significance of ethnographic refusal as an act of care within research that focuses on individuals. She states that truly seeing someone and respecting their right to refuse information, or refuse for something they share to be used in research, is significant in creating appropriate boundaries within one's work. She writes that it is incredibly important within ethnographic work to understand that there is more at stake for the person sharing than the person listening.

All participants were asked at the beginning of interviews if it was okay to record and transcribe our conversation. I explained to each person that any recordings (audible or visual) taken during the interview would only be used for the purpose of my recollection for analysis. Since this was ensured at the beginning of all interviews, when deciding whether transcripts should be attached to the appendix of this project, I quickly decided that this would not be the case. Since participants were also ensured of confidentiality, it felt inappropriate to include full transcripts in the appendix of this project as almost certainly (even with omitting names used), it would be much more difficult to ensure this, due to the sheer depth of many of the anecdotes shared.

For the first five interviews on this project, I asked participants to read and sign a privacy agreement which mentioned all of what was discussed at the beginning and end of interviews. This was for the primary purpose of ensuring that participants understood and could look back on the privacy agreements for this project. However, it was logistically difficult to receive these for multiple reasons, such as how generally busy participants were in their daily lives, and access to resources that would allow them to electronically sign and submit the document. Therefore, at that time I decided against asking future participants to sign the privacy agreement. Nevertheless, interviews continued to begin and end with explicit explanations of privacy protections, with space for interviewees to ask questions at any point.

*About Participants*

For the purposes of this thesis, I have done my best to ensure confidentiality. Due to how personal many of the topics discussed in interviews were, it is important to maintain a sense of privacy for those who chose to graciously share in interviews for this project. All names used are pseudonyms, for the privacy of those who chose to participate in an interview. Pseudonyms are used in order to provide clarity for readers, and so participants who choose to read this thesis (Hello and thank you!) can determine which portions mention them if they would like to do so.

*Participant Descriptions*

The ten participants in the research for this thesis all lived in St. Clair County, MI at the time of their interview. Half of the participants lived in Port Huron when they were interviewed, and six were born in Port Huron. Six participants were referred to participate in interviews through the Literacy and Beyond: 2Gen Learning Center Program, indicating that they were currently working toward or had been working toward obtaining their GED. All participants became parents between the ages of 16 and 23 years old. The youngest participant was Jaide, a white 18 year old mother of two children in Port Huron. Two participants were in their late 30s at the time of their interviews. These participants had both become parents in their late teens. One was Lynn, a white 39 year old mother of three from Port Huron but living in Marysville. The other was Vanesa, a 37 year old Hispanic mother of three children in Port Huron. Hazel, of

Marysville, and Winona, of Port Huron, were also in their 30s. Hazel has three children, and became a parent around age 18. Winona became a parent to her first (of two) children around age 23.

One participant, Cass, was 21 years old at the time of our interview and living in New Haven, Michigan. She has one daughter, who she had as a teenager. Sienna and Emilia were both aged 24, and each are the parent of one child. Sienna, who identifies as white, was born in Port Huron, had lived for some time near the East Coast of the United States, but had moved back a few years ago to Algonac. She was about 20 years old when she became a mother. Emilia, who identifies as Hispanic, was born in another county in Michigan but currently lives in Port Huron. Emilia's daughter was born when she was 22. 25 year old Camille, who identifies as Arabic and white, is a mother of four living in Burtchville, near Port Huron. She was in her late teens when she became a mother. Melissa is a white 28 year old mother of four living in Port Huron. She became a mother at age 17.

The six participants who were recruited for interviews through the 2Gen program were Jaide, Melissa, Sienna, Winona, Camille, and Hazel. The other four participants (Vanesa, Lynn, Emilia, and Cass) reached out to me after having seen my recruitment materials on Facebook, or through word-of-mouth. Seven participants filled out a Google form before their interviews, which contained demographic information and space for any questions or concerns. The other three, who had reached out through other means (such as commenting on my

recruitment Facebook post) either filled out the Google form after the interview or were asked the questions at the end of the interview (as was the case for Lynn).

# CHAPTER THREE:

# "It's Difficult… But I Can Do It:"

# Community-Building Practices Among Single Mothers in St. Clair County, Michigan

## RESULTS

For single mothers in the United States, there are particular expectations placed on their roles in the household and in society that affect their lived experiences. This leads to implications for self-image and community building. Flexibility in community-building is necessary in order to ensure that material conditions and physiological needs are met both for themselves and their children, and to craft intimate environments in their personal lives which allow for thriving, love, and happiness. In a society that places so much responsibility, expectation, and blame on single mothers, it is no surprise that they have had to develop ways to circumvent harsh judgments to the best of their abilities, while finding their own ways of building trust and support systems in their lives that can center love.

### *External Judgments*

It was clear that this fear of judgment, for the most part stemming from actual events in which they were being judged, affected the relationships in participants' lives as well as the support they were willing to lean on generally. The participants in this research spoke about external negative judgments against them affecting their community-building processes, both in terms of seeking out

more understanding close relationships and working to change their behaviors to limit judgments (such as desiring to not use government assistance if they currently do). Most participants, to varying degrees, shared how they feel harshly judged by others when making decisions about their lives and their children's lives especially. They also described how this judgment typically comes from people who do not share their experiences as young, single parents and thus cannot fully empathize with them. Cass, a 21 year old mother currently living in New Haven, MI, talked at length about this experience. She shared how she feels judged by her own parents, who cannot fully understand or sympathize with her experiences as a single parent, and also by strangers. She stated that:

> I've gotten looks like going grocery shopping and using a food stamp card, you know what I'm saying? So I feel like there's a big stigma of young moms abusing the system or moms in general and people in general abusing the system.[29]

She indicated that, because of experiences like these and her own preferences, she has a strong desire to get to a place where she does not have to use any government assistance to meet her basic needs. She continued, "I don't want to be on government assistance. But right now I don't have any other choice. I need it." For Cass, this external judgment from a stranger left an impact on her self-esteem, even though she hoped that if they understood her personal situation they would be kinder.

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[29] Cass. Interview by Lucy Wickings. Video call via Zoom. New Haven, Michigan, USA. November 7, 2021. 17:39.

When that judgment comes from her parents, and particularly her mom, she similarly feels that if there were more ability to empathize how her situation is different from theirs as new parents, they would be less harsh. Cass emphasized that she does not feel this type of judgment from her daughter's other grandmother.

> If anyone understands, it's my daughter's dad's mom because she was a single mom. I get support from her because she knows what it's like. My mom would be like, 'Oh, well I had [kids] and I was in [school] and I was fine.' But my mom was married… before she had me. Just because you're married and your spouse is at work during the day, it's not the same as being a single parent… You still have that support system, that person coming home… to lean on. I feel like that's an issue from my mom… is she feels like, just because she was a stay at home mom and her husband works, that's equal to me being a single mom with my child all day. It's just not the same and I feel like people tend to think it's the same.[30]

Cass shared this point a few other times as well. In other interviews, though not always as explicitly, participants shared similar feelings of being judged for decisions they make, from people who cannot fully understand their situations. They connected these experiences of external judgments with their desires to feel empathy and understanding in their closest relationships.

[30] Cass interview 16:45.

*Empathetic Relationships*

Participants spoke of their most valued relationships being ones they felt understood in, or at least not judged negatively within. Cass spoke of her current boyfriend, and how she feels that his being raised by a single mother has helped him empathize with her. Melissa, a 28 year old mother of four living in Port Huron, illustrated this point as well when talking about her two closest friends.

> I probably only have like three friends that I really keep in touch with… But my best friend, I can talk to her every day, all day… She was there when I had my youngest son and she's like my backbone to everything if I need to call just to complain about something. She's my ear, just to talk to.[31]

For Melissa, having a few very close friends who could lend a non-judgmental "ear" provided great relief and comfort in her personal life. Her other close friend, a neighbor, provided a similar type of comfort, as she continued:

> And like my neighbor down the road, I'm grateful to have her. Because I don't really have [friends] to talk to around here. So I'm happy I [became] close with her just to have another mom to mom feeling… that some people don't really get.

Not only the non-judgmental listening "ear," but the "mom-to-mom feeling," or sense of similarity with this friend was very important. Not *feeling* judged by close friends, and additionally the sense of assurance that they were not *being* judged (and could know that because the friend was in a similar situation) was a

[31] Melissa. Interview by Lucy Wickings. Video call via Zoom. Port Huron, Michigan, USA. November 8, 2021. 15:03.

large factor in who participants decided to keep in their lives, for these most important relationships.

Hazel, a 31 year old mother of three in Marysville, shared how these pervasive judgments can affect relationship-building and support for her. She shared that, in communities where she feels that people can more easily empathize with her situation, she feels more comfortable and open to building relationships with others.

> I feel like I'm not the only one, you know, struggling or in the boat that I'm in. That's why I feel like the community is so good, because everyone really kind of like rallies together and tries to help out… We're not judging because everybody's kind of pretty much in the same boat that you're in.[32]

The community she is referring to is Marysville, where she shared that she feels people are generally more open to supporting others and where she feels a very strong sense of community in the city. She is originally from a city in Macomb County, Michigan, with a population over 13 times the population of Marysville. She stated that this sense of community also seems to come from a place of less competition, as there were never enough resources for single mothers, parents, and community members in general in her hometown. In Marysville, she explains that there is less competition, related to the fact that there are enough resources to go around, and more willingness within the community to share them.

[32] Hazel. Interview by Lucy Wickings. Video call via Zoom. Marysville, Michigan, USA. November 8, 2021. 32:20.

*Perceptions About Government Assistance*

When prompted to discuss these judgments, their origins, and their effects, it was evident that, for many, fear of judgment circumscribed the kinds of general support they were willing to ask for and use. One such area in which desire to tap into support was negatively impacted, was in terms of receiving government assistance. Cass shared very openly how she desired to not use any forms of government assistance in the near future, as did other participants. For Hazel, she described how she and her children are on Medicaid, and have SNAP benefits for groceries.

> Do I think it's sufficient? No, you know, I have to make sure our insurance even covers the medications that we need. Like, they won't cover inhalers or nothing like that, like I have to pay out of pocket for all that. I just don't understand because it's something you need.[33]

When asked how she would improve government assistance to be more efficient, she shared that she would give people more support for groceries, free and affordable daycare, and more robust insurance coverage. She continued that the goal with slightly improved government support would be to have the ability to stop using it altogether.

Multiple participants, though not all, felt this way even after sharing that they felt government assistance does not sufficiently support someone in their position. Most of the government assistance services used by participants were SNAP benefits (or food stamps), Medicaid (health insurance for themselves and their children), and some used or have used WIC (Women, Infant, and Children)

[33] Hazel interview. 29:27.

services. Many participants discussed this before asked, in their answers to other questions such as about the kind of support they receive and wish was more consistent.

Some participants, when asked, said that they believe government assistance is sufficient for someone in their situations, though seven out of 10 said that it is not. Free or more affordable daycare services and more SNAP support were explicit recommendations by nearly all participants. One participant even stated that, if she could, she would swap some of her SNAP money just to afford daycare, because that is what she needs the most right now. A few participants shared how their incomes were just high enough to receive little to no support, especially for SNAP, but that they do not believe these standards are fair.

*Judgment Internalization*

A few participants especially seemed to internalize many of the judgments they felt had come from others in response to their use of government support. They described that there were people who fit those stereotypes, but that it was not them. Vanesa shared that she felt that those misusing the system were a major reason why there is not much advertisement of resources available, especially within the community.

> There's so many things now that I wish I would have taken advantage of [when I first became a parent], that would have made a huge impact on where I'd be today. [Those things are] not on the commercials and they're not on Facebook and… in all the places that you would look for help. It's

> all like, under the rug… in [a] building somewhere you have all these papers, and nobody really openly talks about it, because it's embarrassing. I feel like most people think that. But also there's a lot of people that are abusing and overusing those lifelines of help.[34]

Mentioning these hypothetical people was often followed by fears that, because of those who abuse the system, programs more lenient about giving support were being taken advantage of. Vanesa expressed that her fear was that programs are not advertising themselves openly out of concern for people misusing their resources.

This sentiment was shared in certain ways by Lynn, who described believing that moms who work the hardest get the least formal support.

> How do I say this? Without being like biased or judgmental. Moms who work hard, tend to have a little bit harder of a time, in my opinion, from what I see. I mean, I'm not saying that I didn't have resources to help. I'm just saying that… it was fewer and far between because I [always] worked.[35]

For others, the internalization of the stigma of misusing government assistance was a major motivation in working toward not using it anymore, because of the idea that those who use it for too long are not working hard enough to get off of it.

Cass described a similar belief that, while there *were* people misusing government assistance, she was not one of those people. She implied that, because

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[34] Vanesa. Interview by Lucy Wickings. Video call via Zoom. Port Huron, Michigan. USA, February 3 and 5, 2022. 54:50.
[35] Lynn. Interview by Lucy Wickings. Video call via Zoom. Marysville, Michigan, USA. January 15, 2022. 3:50.

of these people who do exist, that the judgments are placed on mothers like her unfairly as people overgeneralize.

> That's a big thing too, is everyone thinks like… I mean, that is the case for some people, like some people are okay with living off the government and just popping out 15 kids and just calling it a day like, whatever. [36]

Participants who made comments like these appeared to be participating in the kinds of judgments they felt negatively impacted by, in ways that call back to what Cohen describes in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens." As Cohen describes, it is not only poor and young mothers, but women of color specifically "many of whom have existed for their entire lives outside the white, middle-class, heterosexual norm" who are "demonize[d]" in these conversations about taking advantage of government assistance (458). In a way, participants who made comments about "others" taking advantage of government assistance seemed to be participating in differentiating themselves from more (often) racialized stereotypes about single motherhood.

One mother spoke about feeling this kind of judgment directly. Her particular concern was not just about being a single mother who faces these judgments, but about being a single mother who, for various reasons, is not able to work more than a few hours per week. She shared that people have made comments either to her or in local Facebook groups that people who use food stamps or live in Section 8 housing do not deserve to have children. She stated that these comments are incredibly hurtful.

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[36] Cass interview. 35:07.

> This wasn't my game plan… to live off food stamps [and in Section 8 housing]. I don't want to live off food stamps for the rest of my life. This is why I'm going to 2Gen so I can get a job so I can get a better career. Because you need your high school diploma just to even go anywhere decent.[37]

She continued, stating that these comments made by various people have always been quite hurtful to her when they are said with the underlying assumption that she does not care about or deserve her children, or that she is willfully misusing any support. In fact, regardless of income or employment status, all participants talked about how there are barriers to receiving any of the support available in terms of government assistance, and how difficult it is to get it. One participant cited having a friend who made exactly $1 over the threshold for receiving food stamps, so she was not able to receive any. The lack of understanding for their situations and the judgments they perceive affected the mental health of participants in this project. However, there are several places that these mothers mentioned as easier to look to for support, where they can speak with people they feel more comfortable with.

*Community-Building for Different Age Groups*

Age differences between mothers appeared to show some significant differences in community-building practices, particularly those who described having previously felt a certain way but that they do not feel that way anymore. Although all participants were in their teenage years or early twenties when they

[37] Melissa interview. 19:40.

became parents, there was a fairly wide range of ages represented by interview participants. There were mothers who were still in their early 20s, with very young children, a few in their mid- to-late 20s, and some in their late 30s. The age differences tended to show some differences, especially in terms of increased positive self-image throughout motherhood. While this rule does not work all the time in examining the themes of interviews, at times the concerns that mothers in their early 20s felt, were things that mothers in their late 30s talked about having overcome.

For example, multiple participants described overcoming previous feelings of guilt or being hesitant to ask for help. Many of the mothers discussed their unease about asking for help, and how they preferred to do things on their own. This held true for most mothers, regardless of age group, at least to some extent. A couple of mothers shared how strong this feeling had been when they first became parents, but that it has weakened over time. One mother who described this change in comfort with asking for help was Winona, a 36 year old mother of two in Port Huron. She spoke about it being much easier to ask for help and not over-apologizing now, as a mother of older children (who are currently 13 and 11) than it was as a new mother. She shared:

> It was around 2013, 2014… I was lost for a while there even being out of [my previous marriage]. I [started] getting counseling for myself. I can remember at 2Gen, when I started there. I would say sorry [to the 2Gen staff] anytime I opened my mouth. Now, I don't apologize. Unless I really, you know, sometimes I have a colorful mouth **[both laugh].** But I don't

> apologize. If I'm asking for help, I'm not gonna apologize. [Especially if] that's what you're here for. I don't apologize unless I really did something to deserve to, but I'm not gonna apologize for who I am anymore. And that would have probably been about 2019 [when I got to that point].[38]

For Winona, she spoke about this shift with a sense of relief and pride. It was clear that, at both the points when she felt she was being overly-apologetic and when she overcame these feelings, her main concern was with ensuring that people are being treated well. The big shift came, then, when she began to realize that she was also a person who deserved to be treated well. The point that she no longer "apologize[s] for who [she] is" was a big indicator of where this shift came from. While she ensured that she does apologize when she has done something wrong, the emphasis on only doing it during those scenarios illustrated that she has felt an important change in her self-image in recent years.

While willingness and comfortability with asking for help is tied to judgments felt as a parent, multiple participants made it clear that becoming a parent has actually been a big catalyst in growing more comfortable with asking for and accepting help. While the aspect of external judgment still impacts them, the idea that they are asking for help not for themselves but for their children was a large theme for these participants. Their relationships with their children, then, have impacted their willingness to go out of their comfort zone (and sometimes out of their way) to ensure that they and their families are properly supported.

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[38] Winona. Interview by Lucy Wickings. Phone call. Port Huron, Michigan, USA. November 10, 2021. 36:10.

*Talk Therapy*

All but two participants discussed how talk therapy has been beneficial when thinking of the kind of support most important to them. Therapy is one of the covered services that is free for the individuals who are enrolled in the 2Gen program, and many of those I spoke with who do the program mentioned this being one of their favorite aspects of it. As described by multiple interview participants, group therapy is offered through 2Gen, and those who have exited the program can choose to stay in touch with the therapist if they prefer to do so. Sienna, a 24 year old mother of one from Port Huron, but currently living in Algonac, described how she had not had access to resources like free therapy before her involvement in 2Gen. She described:

> We also get three free therapy [at 2Gen] which has been seriously such a blessing because I've never, ever been anywhere that has offered something like that before.[39]

Those who shared that therapy through 2Gen had been beneficial, discussed how this being a free service was especially crucial. Literacy and Beyond provides this free service within their building and through referrals to Community Mental Health in Port Huron.

While talk therapy was beneficial for many participants, ease of access was a big factor in determining whether they would take part in it. For the most part, participants described the in-building therapist at 2Gen being the most helpful, as they did not have to go through the extra steps of finding an outside

[39] Sienna. Interview by Lucy Wickings. Video call via Zoom. Algonac, Michigan, USA. November 9, 2021. 10:21.

therapist and traveling to them. A few participants currently in talk therapy spoke of their therapists switching to a virtual option or telephone meeting, which has made accessing their support easier. Melissa and Hazel, in particular, spoke about how they text and call their therapists regularly, who are often very responsive to them.

For Jaide, therapy was something she had tried to access before being a part of 2Gen. She reported that she is able to access free therapy now through 2Gen, but when she previously tried to find a therapist through St. Clair County Community Mental Health, she was not able to do so and was consistently turned away.

> There's a lot of barriers to it. The only reason that I'm in counseling is because I'm a teen mom. Before I was a mom, I tried to get into SCCCMH. And they told me that I wasn't depressed enough, which is a good thing. I'm happy that I'm not depressed enough to qualify for this. But I [was] like, 'I need counseling.' And you're telling me that I don't need counseling when I just got discharged from a hospital telling me that I needed counseling. And that's not enough for you to determine that I needed it. So I feel like it's very hard for people to actually get into counseling. Not only that, but I don't feel like we have enough counseling agencies around here to give support.[40]

While she is able to access counseling now through the 2Gen program, Jaide reflected on how without access to this program she was unable to get into

[40] Jaide. Interview by Lucy Wickings. Phone call. Port Huron, Michigan, USA. November 8, 2021. 36:58.

therapy. This was regardless of a personal desire to do so and medical professionals recommending it for her. She was unable to access mental health support through SCCCMH, due to the organization's internal criteria for determining who needed it "enough." Additionally, 2Gen being only available to women and those who are actively working to obtain their G.E.D. means a limited amount of people are able to use their more easily accessible mental health services.

Vanesa, a 37 year old mother of three from and currently living in Port Huron, mentioned that talk therapy has been beneficial for her and the father of her youngest daughter, but that they accessed it in a different context. She spoke about how, when pregnant with her youngest child, she learned of the Spero Pregnancy Center program in Port Huron which offered free and affordable services to support her during her pregnancy.

> They had sent a huge basket over [after I gave birth], like a basket of things for just myself… [like] soaps or body wash or deodorant. It was like a small note of care from someone else, saying they think of you in that moment. And then also literature. They gave us so much other information. Even just to go and talk to them, they were open. It was like free counseling. Honestly, it was super nice. You know, they said even after the baby [was born, if] we wanted to go [we could]. It was super nice to go.[41]

Speaking to people at the Center who were non-judgmental in a counselor-like role was helpful for Vanesa: it brought her some amount of comfort and relief.

[41] Vanesa interview. 1:38:24.

She shared that, after speaking with them about her worries, they also had a better idea of what she might be able to use in terms of support. She stated that they also followed up with her after she had given birth, and asked how she was doing and whether she needed any other forms of support.

Talk therapy, formally or as an added bonus alongside other services, seemed to be especially beneficial for those who had access to it because of the non-judgmental (or at least not negatively judgmental) support. Melissa stated that, although she and her therapist are close enough for her therapist to share her opinion sometimes, she was clear in explaining that she felt understood and cared for by her therapist. In fact, because of these feelings of care, she welcomed and cherished advice from her therapist.

While talk therapy is not a compelling option for all people, especially when it comes to preconceptions about sharing personal information with a stranger, for many of the participants in this research, it was a welcome and beneficial service. For example, Winona described having tried therapy in the past, but how it was not very effective or beneficial for her at the time. However, when her mentor through 2Gen reached out to her about therapy services for herself and her son, she decided to try it again. This time, she shared, it has been much more beneficial. She described that the specialty therapy services her son began to receive as someone on the autism spectrum was especially beneficial. Ultimately, for those who had access to some form of free or affordable talk therapy, there were clear benefits in being able to confide in someone who could provide a non-judgmental listening ear.

*Growing as a Parent and a Person*

All participants were fairly young when they became parents, either having their first child in their teenage years or early 20s. Most participants became parents between 17 and 20 years old, with the oldest being 23 and the youngest being 16 when they had their first child. I asked each of them questions about how they felt things have changed and how they have grown over the years, as their children have gotten older. What became clear was the sense that, especially because they were young when they became parents, it did not make sense to try to distinguish which changes or lessons came from being a mother and what was simply the result of getting older. Ultimately, of course, it was both of these things: parenthood was an early catalyst but most participants admitted the kinds of realizations they have come to over the years would have come at some point either way.

Vanesa shared how the early years of becoming a parent, especially without having had very active, supportive caregivers when she was a child, was a difficult journey. She stated that she always wanted to be a mom, and that she vowed to be a better parent than her own parents, but that this ideal became much more difficult when motherhood became a reality.

> I was a teen mom. So a lot of it was trial and error. You're raising yourself and then raising other people who depend on you. And that in itself is already hard being a teen parent, because you don't really know how to be an adult. And you're [responsible for] another person. So that's a huge

> responsibility that you're learning as you grow… with your child. I went to parenting classes, and I went to a lot of teen mom things to learn. But nothing really helps you learn to be a teen mom.[42]

Vanesa's circumstances of "raising [herself] and raising other people" were certainly related to the difficulties she had in her home life growing up, but her quote above describes a sentiment relayed in other interviews as well. Vanesa had parents who were not around much to raise her, so the feeling of raising herself was not very new. For her and other mothers, like Camille, the sentiment of not having supportive caregivers as a child had an impact, which led to strong feelings of wanting to do better for their own children. This also led to struggling more in the earlier years of parenthood as they had even less of an idea of what healthy caregiving dynamics looked like.

*Maternal Instinct and Self-Protection*

Another theme within interviews was the idea that protecting oneself went hand-in-hand with the ability to properly protect their children. Cass, who shared that she believes mental health is severely overlooked for single mothers in the community, discussed how her daughter was her main inspiration in seeking mental health treatment for herself. Emilia talked about how her daughter has inspired her to focus her attention where it matters, such as focusing on friendships with people who share her values so that they are more likely to be instilled in her child. Lynn talked about how she has raised her dating standards since having children, because she always desired for her children to like her

[42] Vanesa interview. 18:01.

partners. As a result, she shared that she has dated people who have been far better for her than who she chose to be with before becoming a parent and divorcing her children's father.

Emilia shared how, not only is she protective of her daughter, she has noticed a heightened sense of protectiveness over everyone she cares about.

> I feel like I'm more protective of [my daughter] and also people that are around me that I care about. I'm just more protective. I feel like I take care of myself more… And I feel like you're more aware [as a parent] of when people are trying to be disrespectful to anyone. So, you get more protective of them [too].[43]

This stronger awareness of how other people are being treated, and desire to stand up for them, is something Emilia directly attributed to becoming a parent. Participating in more activities that brought her joy and wanting to protect the joy of others was an aspect of Emilia's personality that she had not noticed as strongly before becoming a mother.

Some participants talked about a quick shift in their viewpoints and morals when they became parents, while others described a more gradual shift. One example of the growth and maturity participants spoke about, that seemed closely tied to age, was immaturity within friendships and relationships when they first became parents. Vanesa described how, early on in her oldest child's life, she was yearning for the community and support she had yet to experience in 17 years of life. She shared that, at the time, she was willing and eager to become friends with

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[43] Emilia. Interview by Lucy Wickings. Video call via Zoom. Port Huron, Michigan, USA. January 31, 2022. 25:02.

anyone, which put her in some situations she later realized she did not want to be in. Since then, she shared that she is far more cautious about who she keeps in her life.

*Change in Self-Image as Parents*

A common theme in early interviews was that of participants' self-image changing over time, throughout parenthood, in both positive ways (like seeing it as a privilege to be in their and their children's lives) and negative. Participants spoke about negative changes, such as forgetting who they were before parenthood. They also spoke of more positive ones, which was the case for those who discussed becoming more protective of themselves and others in the previous section. This change in how some participants have viewed themselves since becoming mothers was implicated in other ways as well. For multiple participants, like Cass and Vanesa, there was an explicit description of some amount of loss or forgetfulness of their previous identity.

While change in self-image and its effect on community building were sometimes negative as described in interviews, some of these changes were positive. Participants like Cass and Lynn discussed an increase of positive feelings in terms of their self-image. Cass described how she sees being in her daughter's life, and inviting others into it, as a great privilege that she does not take lightly. She talked about this sentiment in relation to conversations she has had with her current boyfriend about her daughter's father, who has never been involved in her daughter's life.

> We were just talking about this today. Like, when [my daughter's] older, what if her dad wants to be involved? When she's 10? When she's 15? Like, for what? Like, honestly, for fucking what? You had no sleepless nights, you had no diaper changes. You had no staying up all night long. Like last Christmas… I literally ate like fucking only a couple times a week, just to make sure that I had money for Christmas presents.[44]

For Cass, the idea that she had been the one making all of the sacrifices (sleeping, eating, general childcare responsibilities), came to be a source of pride and positive self-image. The things she has been willing to do for her daughter have been proved through her actions. Her daughter's father has never had to make those sacrifices. The negative image she has of her daughter's father is a mirror of the positive one she feels about herself as her mother. Since she was the one who had always made the sacrifices, she was the one who deserved to be in her daughter's life, and in the future he would not be deserving of this.

The idea of this privilege of being in the life of participants and their children was touched on by Lynn as well. She described how, although her parents have certainly been there in various ways, they never helped her with childcare in the ways she needed it when her children were younger. Now that they are older, she described being hesitant to even visit them now, because she feels that this ability to spend time together is only because her children are older and do not need to be taken care of anymore. The memory of her parents not offering, and at times refusing, to watch her children or help with childcare left a bad taste in her mouth. Her youngest child is a teenager now, and she described

[44] Cass interview. 32:00.

how she is sparing about physically visiting her parents at times because she remembers how they were not willing to be there for her and her children in certain ways when they were younger.

As illustrated by Cass and Lynn, but certainly evident more implicitly in other interviews, there was an overarching sense that if they had to do the more difficult parts of parenting alone, then it was a privilege to be involved in the fun and rewarding parts of their children's and their own lives later on. There was a common feeling that the rewarding parts of being in their lives were earned through the hard work and sacrifices participants had to make for their children's safety and well-being. Thus, describing hesitancy in relationships with people who had not been there for them and their children in the past was an indication of this idea of earning the good times.

Cass, Vanesa, and Sienna described some of the negative effects of sense of self and community-building as single mothers. Cass discussed her loss of her sense of self since having her daughter almost four years ago. She pointed to how this was the case especially as a single mother, with very minimal time apart from her daughter. This loss of identity came from having so many responsibilities related to being a mother, and virtually no time to do things simply for enjoyment or relaxation. She shared:

> It took me a long time to realize I'm allowed to need a break as a mother. I don't remember who I was before I had a child like, I'm not [Cass] anymore, I'm just [her] mom. And that's it. I don't know who I am, as a

> person. People can ask like, 'Oh, what do you like to do?' I have no idea [because] I don't have time for myself.[45]

Cass went on to describe how, even now, with a little more childcare help from people like her daughter's grandmother, it is difficult to have actual time to herself. She shared that, even when someone is watching her daughter for short periods of time, she has to take those "breaks" to clean the house or take much needed naps. She continued:

> It's not time for me to do things that I personally enjoy. It's time to take care of things that are hard to take care of when my child is here, you know? You kind of lose your sense of self when you have a child. It's really hard, and it's hard to try and rediscover yourself when you have a child if you do start to get that support because it's a really big shift.

For Cass, having done all of her own childcare for so long, it was difficult for her to take time for herself even when she did start to receive more support. Additionally, her childcare support is still fairly minimal (with only one main person who does assist her with childcare), so it is easier for her to take the time apart from her daughter to do the things that are "hard to take care of when" her daughter is home.

Vanesa described how she cannot remember the things she used to do before having her youngest daughter. Describing conversations she and her older children have had together, she discussed their collective forgetfulness about what they were all so busy with before her youngest child was born.

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[45] Cass interview. 18:35.

> So being a teen mom and having a kid at 30… We all sit around together just wondering what our life was like before, like, what did we do to fill these days? She's stealing all of our attention. Like, what did we do all the time? [I do remember] we were never just sitting around. We [were always] busy but what were we doing? And none of us can really recall what we did with our time before.[46]

Vanesa laughed a few times recalling these conversations, indicating that this feeling of forgetting what everyone did before her daughter was born was not necessarily negative. However, it did point to a similar feeling of losing touch with things that were previously important and enjoyable before having her child, that was described by Cass and Sienna as well.

Sienna, who works long hours at her job, described some of the loss of community and sense of self stemming from having to work so often, do her schoolwork toward her G.E.D., and focus on ensuring that her daughter is enjoying herself when they do have one-on-one time. For her, living in a more rural area than many of the other participants was a big factor in how she described this feeling of loneliness and lack of time for anything aside from responsibilities.

> It feels kind of lonely, honestly… Because if I'm not at work, I'm doing something for school. And if I'm not doing something for school, I'm trying to do activities with [my daughter]. So she's not completely bored, because we live in the middle of nowhere. So it's kind of hard to find fun

[46] Vanesa interview. 28:05.

> things to do around here, because it's not even like woods we could hike through either, like, it's just land. That's it.[47]

For her, the combination of having almost no free time, and not much to do in her community with that free time, sparked her feelings of loneliness. Like Cass, even in her free time there was an emphasis on what would be done with or for her child. Cass' free time consisted of having someone to look after her daughter for a few hours, and Sienna's consisted of the time she does get to spend with her daughter. For both, however, ensuring that things were done for their children was the priority in both cases, and not doing enjoyable things for themselves.

*Fear of Judgment, Pride in Doing it Alone*

Hazel further parsed out the relationship between judgment, asking for help, and self-image when asked about the kind of support available in the community she lives in. She stated:

> Everybody's so welcoming, and always offering help. Or if someone's in need, a lot of people come together and help out. So that makes me feel really good. And it makes me not nervous or not scared or anything to ask for help, or ask a question… I don't want to say people aren't really judgy I guess, [but] if you feel like someone's gonna look at you a certain way, you would [be] less [likely to] ask for help. [But] because people are so willing and giving, I don't [think] most people feel like that [here].[48]

[47] Sienna interview. 10:44.
[48] Hazel interview. 6:51.

The idea that this hesitancy to ask for help comes from "feel[ing] like someone's gonna look at you a certain way," in a negative way, shows how deep the impact of these external judgments have impacted Hazel.

Lynn, a 39 year old mother of three from Port Huron, but currently living in Marysville, discussed her hesitancy to ask for help coming from a sense of pride. When asked about who she goes to in times of need, she shared:

> The most responsible people that I've been able to rely on [are] my mom and my best friend. My work has paid bills for me when I've been behind. Or the guy I'm dating, he's helped me with resources for the kids like paying for sports, or getting me caught up on my bills or whatever. He just recently helped me get caught up on all my bills. So that's a plus. But pretty much that's it, I haven't really been able to rely on anybody else for anything. Like as a person-wise. And I'm not saying that I couldn't. But I've never really asked, I've only asked those people that I'm closest to you know what I'm saying? Like, it's very embarrassing to have to ask anybody for anything in my opinion. I don't know why that is. Maybe it's pride.[49]

While she shared that it seemed to be pride that pushed her into not asking for help, the idea that it would be "embarrassing" to do so hints at the judgment that Hazel spoke about as well. She lists sources, such as her job and her partner, as having helped in her specific ways, and her mom and best friend as her strongest support systems. That she has "only asked those people that [she's] closest to" for

[49] Lynn interview. 8:13.

help, but no one else, comes from a similar place of a fear of judgment that Hazel also described.

Vanesa discussed a similar sense of pride and hesitancy with accepting help. She first became a mother at age 17, and had her second child at age 19. What was different about Vanesa's case from most other participants was that she had her third child in her early 30s. She is currently co-parenting with the father of her third child, but in her teenage years and 20s had no support from her other children's father and very minimal support from her own family and from the family of her children's father. She spoke quite a few times about how striking the differences have been between being a teenage mother and having a baby again in her 30s, and having both her child's father and his family as active support systems with her youngest child, which was not the case for her other two children.

For Vanesa, having raised her first two children almost entirely on her own, she has found it difficult to accept help from her youngest child's family, and even from her child's father directly. Co-parenting has been a challenge for her.

> Having a whole other family that is looking out for the well being of your kids [has been] different. Like at the beginning, it was that way with my firstborn, and then their [dad's] family moved away. And then I was alone. I know that they didn't love them any more or less [but] life pulls you in different directions or what have you. But with [my youngest child's dad],

> his family's close. And they're always involved and they're always in our business.[50]

For most participants, and even for Vanesa with her first two children, not only were they single parents but they were not co-parenting with their children's biological fathers. This was due to the fathers choosing not to be involved after a breakup or divorce (for those who had been married), or through physical barriers (such as incarceration). Vanesa's reflections on co-parenting were particularly insightful. She continued:

> At first, I didn't know how to take [the help]. I was really disgusted. I was like, 'These nosy people…' Oh, yeah. And now I'm like, I know that they're just checking because they genuinely care. They care about her and I can't miss a doctor's appointment, [but if] I can't make it… someone would be there.[51]

Co-parenting, at first, was *more* difficult for her. This difficulty arose from discomfort surrounding preconceived ideas about external support, such as thinking they were "nosy" instead of being helpful. It also came from simply not having experience with having to consider others' schedules or opinions in raising her children. However, in the long run it has provided benefits to her relationship with her youngest child's father and his family, and to herself in having more of a support system to rely on in difficult times.

For a few of the young mothers interviewed, the idea that they were in some way burdening others by asking for help impacted their willingness to ask

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[50] Vanesa interview. 26:48.
[51] Vanesa interview. 26:46.

for it. Jaide, an 18 year old mother of two small children from Port Huron, spoke openly about this. When asked "how do you feel in general about asking for help?" her immediate response was "I don't." She continued:

> A lot of people that know me know that I won't reach out for help. And I sometimes think that that's why they come to me [first]. But it's nice to know that they care enough to come to me and make sure that everything's going smoothly. They'll tell me, 'I know that you're not going to ask for help. But do you need anything?' And I'm like, 'No.' And most of the time even if there is something that I need? I still tell them no, because I don't know. I just feel bad asking for help.[52]

For Jaide, it was clear that she had meaningful relationships with people in her life that allowed for her to occasionally receive help when she really needed it. However, her guilt about asking for help (feeling "bad" about it) prevented her from reaching out to ask for it even within those meaningful relationships in her life. Additionally, Jaide's admission that even when people in her life will reach out to her first and ask if she needs anything, that she still says no, was telling. Her deep-seated guilt in asking for help is clear to those that care about her, who then come to her first to offer their support without her asking for it. Even with this understanding, that is still often not enough for her to feel comfortable enough to accept the support.

Reflections on judgments from others and asking for help were reflected in other interviews as well, manifesting in the types of relationships that were most important in participants' lives. The most important relationships for quite a

[52] Jaide interview. 21:51.

few participants were the ones in which asking for help did not have to be explicit. This was especially the case for Melissa, Cass, Hazel, and Lynn. Cass shared when describing her relationship with her daughter's grandmother in recent months:

> She started being involved again. She's been a good support system. And she'll take [my daughter]... [and] I don't have to ask. I don't ask anybody to take [her]. Yeah. But she'll just say, 'No, I want her for a little bit.' She'll take [her] for the night or take [her] to church. Like she just took [her] to church today.[53]

The framing of the support from her daughter's grandmother seemed to play not only in how comfortable Cass felt with accepting this support, but in how she chose to describe the support. Emphasis on not having to ask, and reassurance that she does not ask anyone to take care of or babysit her daughter, were key in the way Cass described this relationship and the support she received from it. Additionally, she made sure to emphasize that her daughter's grandmother poses this support through a statement of desire to see her granddaughter, as opposed to asking Cass if she needs help. That detail appeared to be quite important to Cass. Her daughter's grandmother stating that she would like to take her for the night because she misses her, or that she is heading to church and wants her granddaughter to be there, were significant in Cass' willingness to accept the support.

On a similar note, Lynn discussed her relationship with her parents, and how their dynamic has been beneficial to her especially as she typically does not

[53] Cass interview. 7:17.

have to ask them for help explicitly to receive it. She shared that she is able to call them whenever she needs to vent to someone, and that when she does they will typically try to find a way to help her out, even if she does not explicitly ask for the help. She added the caveat that they are certainly more supportive in some ways than others, but that they support her emotionally and financially when possible. While there have been limitations to their support in the past, such as with watching her children so she can have a break, she emphasized that her parents have gone out of their way to help her in other ways when she needs it, and that this has had a huge effect on her ability to get by.

*Informal Support and Reciprocity*

For Camille, Melissa, Vanesa, Lynn, and Cass, there was very significant emphasis placed on relationships in which reciprocity was the key to the strength of their bonds with friends. Reciprocity[54] is the idea that supporting someone with time, energy, or other resources is expected to be returned at a later time by the recipient of the support. A few participants discussed how close friendships with other moms were incredibly significant to them, for this reason. In particular, these relationships were soothing as they understood that when support was offered, that they would do the same thing in return for their friend whenever they needed.

Lynn's best friend, another mom in the community, has been in her life since mid-elementary school. Melissa's best friends have been in her life for at least four years, and one has been her best friend for a decade. One of the key

[54] Theories of reciprocity in informal relationships, as described in Chapter One by Nelson.

facets of these relationships was the idea that they were not being judged, and not burdening the other person by venting or receiving support, because they supported their friend in the same ways. Melissa's earlier points about her two closest friends illustrate this. She has close relationships with other moms who share the "mom-to-mom feeling" she spoke about, and because she knows each time they help watch her kids, she can reciprocate that another time by offering the same support back.

The idea that being supported and supporting others is a reciprocal practice that is inextricable from one another was prominent in these interviews. Camille is a 25 year old mother of four in Burtchville Township, living near the Port Huron area. She shared that one of her most important relationships is with her younger sister, who is also a mother.

> I'm very close with my little sister. She's two years younger than me. And she's also got two kids. So I help her, she helps me. We're close to one another. She's my support beam and it's the same vice versa.[55]

Camille's willingness to lean on her sister came up when she was asked specifically about who she feels supported by in times of need. Having someone who she shared a lifelong relationship with, as well as someone who was also a mother, was incredibly important to her when describing her relationship with her sister. Each time she mentioned how her sister supports her, she emphasized the reciprocation of support back to her sister. This emphasis on supporting her sister just as much as she is supported by her was clearly important to Camille.

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[55] Camille. Interview by Lucy Wickings. Phone call. Burtchville, Michigan, USA, November 5, 2021. 3:38.

Another interview in which reciprocation was heavily emphasized was in Melissa's. She shared that "basically all" of her friends are also moms. There was an often unspoken understanding, for Melissa and others in close relationships with moms in similar situations, of what support they were in need of. This understanding provided extra comfort for the mothers in these friendships. Melissa stated about her neighbor and good friend:

> I am so grateful for her. I know if something goes down, she can always watch my kids. Or even [more] simple: it's exhausting loading [my] four children up in the car, [when] I just need to run to the store just to go get a can of something. You know how hard it is to load children up [in the car] just to go for one thing, milk or something? So my neighbor's just like, 'No, just leave them here [with me].' And I'm so grateful. Just to have that type of backbone around here.[56]

Once again, the support coming in the form of a statement ("let me do this") as opposed to a question ("would you like me to do this?") was significant to the way Melissa relayed the support from her neighbor.

She also chose to describe an instance in which her neighbor supports her with watching her children, but how she is also able to help her neighbor in the same ways. Melissa immediately continued, "And… I try to help people. I feel like I help everybody else [to the point] where I put my needs in check." After discussing how her neighbor supports her, she followed up with discussing how she helps other people as much as possible. She described that she does this to such an extent that her own needs are put behind those she is supporting. It

[56] Melissa interview. 24:05.

seemed that her clarifications about how she reciprocated support back to her neighbor and others, even to the detriment of herself, was in anticipation that even I was likely wondering about how she was reciprocating that support back. This implied very strong expectations of reciprocity in the community-building process for participants, especially as they seemed to assume I also understood or was implicated in these expectations.

Preoccupation with reciprocation in relationships was not only related to physical support, but reciprocation of care for oneself and their children was a significant factor in accepting support related to their children. This was clear in Cass' explanation of her daughter's grandmother not necessarily asking to babysit, but taking care of her daughter out of love for the child and wanting to see her. While there were mothers who shared Jaide's sentiments of knowing people care for her and still not being comfortable accepting their support, it seemed that knowing someone cared for their children was a stronger motivator in accepting support. This seemed to especially cushion their feelings of guilt in asking for help or showing that they needed it. Relationships that centered bonds with their children as opposed to supporting them as parents were necessary for participants in soothing feelings of being seen as dependent on others to get by, which they felt was something that carried harsh stigmas and judgments.

*Quality Over Quantity*

All participants named between two and four most important relationships in their lives, often explicitly saying that otherwise they do not feel supported by

other people besides the closest few. In fact, some participants had suggestions about how communities could better support mothers to have more interpersonal relationships. For example, Cass suggested support groups for moms. A few participants, however, stated feeling content with just a few very strong relationships, placing little to no significance on acquaintance-level relationships.

Vanesa described how she used to have a deep sense of needing lots of friends, especially when she was a teenager, because she felt very alone. About five years after becoming a parent, she shared that she realized she wanted to, and had to, be much more careful about who she was keeping in her life. She shared, "You have to base your job around your children, your friends around your children. I mean, if you want to keep your kids, you have to keep your company different. Like everything has to change."[57] Today, she shared, her most important relationships are with friends who are older and more mature than the friends she had as a younger parent, and she does not feel an urge to branch out more in terms of friendships. Additionally, her fear of state intervention in saying "if you want to keep your kids," was a sentiment that revealed it felt safer to only lean on a few people, than to risk having people in her life who could jeopardize her custody.

Since there were a few major close relationships and supports in participants' lives, reciprocity expectations were concentrated into smaller areas. While this did not necessarily mean that they were expected to reciprocate support less than those with more acquaintances, it did mean that they were not as overwhelmed by having expectations to extend support to more people at the expense of closer relationships. Since there was little emphasis on

[57] Vanesa interview. 2:00:04.

acquaintance-level relationships, participants' few closest relationships were highly significant in their lives. Their parents or best friend or romantic partner were held in high regard in their lives and gratitude was expressed for these people prominently in interviews.

Lynn described her closest relationships being with her childhood best friends, her parents, and her boyfriend. Cass described how, besides her boyfriend and her daughter's grandmother, she prefers to "just kind of keep to [herself]."[58] For Melissa, she shared that keeping her friends limited to three very close ones was easier due to people betraying her trust in the past, and because she prefers to have people in her life she feels already understood by.

> It's been hard [finding friendships]. Nobody really understands what I've been through. [For instance,] I lost my parents in 2013. And I'm the type of person like, I don't want to hear 'Oh, I'm so sorry.' You know, like, I understand it's hard. But I think it brings me down more. Because it's already hard enough. So I try to keep my limited [friendships] because [they understand] and I'm not trying to dwell on the past.[59]

Thus, the quality of having a few close friends, who care for her and she cares for in return, and already understand her and her situation, was far more important than having a higher quantity of friendships. This was the case, explicitly or implicitly, for all participants, who also emphasized the quality of their current relationships and what they have learned from past relationships where they were not treated well.

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[58] Cass interview. 15:55.
[59] Melissa interview. 31:57.

For one mom, 24 year old Emilia of Port Huron, her immediate family were described as her biggest support system. Emilia discussed how she did not feel that she had any other close, significant relationships outside of her family, and how she does not desire that right now. For Emilia, becoming a parent during the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to greatly impact her overall desire not to have more relationships in her life. However, she indicated that in general her family has always been most important to her, and that they support her incredibly well.

> You don't bring your child around a lot of people. Even before [the pandemic] and now. Because you want to keep them safe from the virus and everything. But either way, you don't want to take your kid around [just] anyone. Also just keeping them more enclosed because of everything that's going on. But, right when she was a newborn, we wouldn't take her out much because she was a newborn, but at the same time, the pandemic started, like a month after she was born. So either way, everyone was still very cautious, and we wouldn't go out a lot with her.[60]

As Emilia described, she felt sufficiently supported by her family however she needed, and desired to be cautious about who else she let around her daughter. On top of this, the pandemic added another layer to this importance of having a few very close relationships, and limiting contact with less significant relationships like acquaintances and strangers.

[60] Emilia interview. 19:57.

*Relationships to Literacy and Beyond: 2GEN Learning Center*

A few participants listed the Literacy and Beyond program, and one or two mentors within it, when describing their biggest support systems. This was the most significantly spoken about semi-formal support resource, held with high regard similar to informal support systems. The program was particularly important to those who did not have other dependable childcare options or who were most in need of a change in career plans due to income concerns. The mentors within the 2Gen program were described in similar ways to those who most benefited from talk therapy as a form of support, as non-judgmental and encouraging supporters. Participants like Jaide described how one of their mentors through the program is very hands-on and proactive in asking how they are doing and offering support.[61] A few participants also talked about the encouraging environment of 2Gen altogether.

For participants in the 2Gen program, there was a clear common sentiment that the encouraging environment of the program had greatly impacted their community-building process, in terms of comfort in asking for help. As Hazel described earlier, being a part of a warm, welcoming community where people are willing to go out of their way for one another can reduce feelings of shame or guilt about asking for help. The 2Gen program seemed to do an incredible job at promoting this kind of environment.

[61] I believe it is significant to note that most of the participants who were recruited for interviews (six out of 10) were referred through the program by this mentor specifically. Their respect and high regard for her were large reasons that they trusted me enough to speak with me for this project, because their 2Gen mentor told them about me.

Winona described this environment explicitly being the product of the program being only for women in the community. She said, “It's nothing but women. So there's no drama. There's no ‘Oh, you looked at my man?’ type of stuff going on. It's women encouraging women.”[62] For Winona, there was great significance to 2Gen holding space for women encouraging other women. She described this culture in the program at two different times during her interview. She indicated that this simulated encouraging environment within their building is something difficult to find outside of 2Gen, which makes her that much more appreciative for having it at 2Gen. Participants who did not participate in 2Gen spoke about desires to have this kind of woman-to-woman encouraging spaces, such as Cass when she spoke about desiring single mother support groups in the community.

*“It’s Difficult… But I Can Do It”*

For most participants, there was a clear intention in seeking and holding on to relationships with individuals or programs in the community where asking for help explicitly was not necessary to be offered support. This was evident in Vanesa’s description of her positive experiences with the Spero Pregnancy Center, and for participants of the 2Gen program’s having the open option for free therapy whenever they needed. Participants spoke about the general balancing act of proving that they needed help (for things like government assistance services), and proving that they could do everything alone if necessary (especially in interpersonal and romantic relationships). For relationships (with people and

[62] Winona interview. 10:55.

programs) where proof was not a prerequisite for support, participants described more positive feelings and experiences.

For some, the attempt to balance proving a need for support and proving that they could do it all alone came from role models (such as those who were raised by single moms). Sienna spoke about feeling that there was a sort of expectation that she should be able to do things on her own, and how that makes it difficult to accept help. When asked where she felt that expectation came from, she shared:

> My mom, she divorced my dad when I was 11 or 12 years old, and that's when we stopped talking to my dad completely. [He kind of] dropped off the face of the earth, so I watched my mom do it all by herself, and she was really hard working. She still had her problems and it's still kind of hard to be around her, but I knew how hard working she was. She took care of all three of her kids very well. She had a lot of money and she was good with money. And she was just like a bartender so she just put a lot of money away and she was able to help us, and she wasn't on any kind of government assistance or anything like that. So just watching her do it all by herself makes me [think] if she can do it I can do it. So, that's kind of how I see it too.[63]

Having been raised for some time by a single mother affected Sienna's expectation for herself as a single mother. However, she also shared that even before she was a single parent (when she was married to her child's father), she felt an urge to do as much as possible on her own. This was affected by the

[63] Sienna interview. 20:10.

behavior of her ex-husband, who certainly did not go out of his way to support her, but she described that the feeling was also resonant of watching her mother handle so much when she was younger.

"But I can do it," or some variation of the phrase, was said in all interviews. It usually followed a sentence that portrayed something difficult in participants' lives. This was the case in Sienna's description of the influence of her mother on her own parenting ("if she can do it, I can do it"). Melissa described quite a few times how, although sometimes things have been quite difficult, she is grateful and feels lucky knowing that things will be okay. Cass stated that, as a mother, "you have no choice but to just keep just keep pushing. Just keep going."[64] A few participants followed the "can do it" phrase by clarifying that they are still grateful for circumstances in their lives, and that they did not mean to sound ungrateful.

> I'm grateful for the little bit of support I do [have]. It's really hard to ask for help. And nobody wants to say, 'I'm struggling.' Yeah, I wish I had more support. But at this point, like, what more could be done for me? You know what I'm saying? I feel guilty about asking for support. You feel guilty about having a night for yourself. So I just don't even know what I could ask for that wouldn't be too much. I don't know. Maybe it's just me. But I feel like I could definitely have more support. Like from [my parents].[65]

[64] Cass interview. 38:40.
[65] Cass interview. 40:15.

When it came to describing where they felt they could receive more support, multiple people shared in interviews similar concerns to Cass' above. There was an overall ambivalence, feeling that they could use more support, but feeling guilt and hesitation to ask for it in particular ways. There seemed to be a significant tension between understanding that they can do everything on their own, and asking for support simply because it helps to have it. This was especially the case for those who described reaching out for support in the past and being denied or shunned, or not having people to reach out to in the past at all. A few participants described how, because of these past circumstances, they knew they could do whatever they needed on their own, and had proved that to themselves even in the most difficult times.

*No Matter What, Things Have Been Worse*

Participants were very clear in describing that no matter how difficult things were, with or without support from others, that they would be able to figure things out. When describing how they would be able to get by somehow, there was a tendency to compare their current circumstances to a time when things were worse. As Cass described at one point:

> My biggest thing is, yeah, it's bad right now. It's terrible right now. But it's been worse. Like, I didn't have a car before. I didn't have my own place before. It's like, you just have to keep pushing forward and wait for shit to get better. Because I don't know. There's nothing I can do to make it better or to make it easier[66]

[66] Cass interview. 38:15.

This point came up when Cass was asked about whether there were ways people could better support her. Not focusing as much on a positive outcome, but remembering negative past circumstances, was what motivated her in the difficult moment she was in at the time.

Especially in difficult times, for many of the women interviewed for this thesis, there was always much more focus on difficult situations that they had survived. Multiple participants were survivors of domestic violence in former relationships (two had been married in these situations). Almost all could recall times when things were more difficult than they were at the time of their interviews, and recalling those more difficult times was a way to gather the strength to push on in similarly difficult situations. Not only was this recollection a way of garnering strength, it was also a source of great confidence in a few instances. Knowing they had little support in the past, but that they and their children were able to thrive regardless, was a reminder that they would be okay no matter what.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hazel considered the adversity she and her loved ones faced to have made them and their relationships stronger.

> [My relationships] have gotten stronger to be honest. Everybody has been going through the same thing. So I feel like we can relate to that. So I think it's brought us closer together and made us stronger. Because we're figuring it out together almost… negotiating through life and [what it is], you know?[67]

[67] Hazel interview. 14:54.

She shared that, even throughout the pandemic, things had been more difficult in the past but that she and her loved ones have adjusted to what life is like now. She attributed their ability to adjust to how strong they were, which she and other mothers discussed as being an incredibly important quality.

Regardless of the available support, the desire and ability to keep going no matter what showcased the sheer resourcefulness of mothers in their interviews. Camille, who discussed having experienced homelessness at a point during her parenthood, described how her current partner had been there for her and helped her get through. She described how even in this situation, and in what she described as a "toxic" relationship with her ex-husband, she was focused on discerning good and bad relationships in her life and choosing only what helped.

> At this point, I have all the support I need. I cut out a lot of my toxic family. A lot of the negative people around me, because it just brought me down to where I didn't want to do anything as a parent or anything as a person. So blocking out all that negative energy around me kind of lifted me up quite a bit.[68]

Camille's reflections on how her life has improved from negative circumstances, into more positive outcomes today, was centered around decisions she made in the past that allowed her to flourish going forward. Again, her confidence in knowing that she had made do with difficult circumstances before was the main source of motivation she needed in knowing that she would be okay in the future as well.

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[68] Camille interview. 8:10.

# CONCLUSION

Speaking directly to single mothers within St. Clair County, Michigan, for this project was significant in determining how they personally feel about the informal, formal, and semi-formal support systems in their lives. Their sentiments echoed much of what is in the existing literature about external judgments and expectations, while their reflections brought on more key insights about their motivations, conceptions about support, and personal belief systems. After all, for some, informal support comes in to assist as formal supports fail to be effective. At the same time, those facing the highest hardships in the current moment are the people with the least access to informal support networks (Radey, "Informal Support among Low-Income Mothers Post Welfare Reform"). Ultimately, they can and they will be able to make it, which they have proved to themselves in past situations where they have had to advocate for themselves and their children. However, by addressing the gaps in support, we can open a dialogue to improving it.

One of the greatest insights people spoke about was a need for more access to and advertising for support within the community. Participants spoke about incredible systems of support, especially the semi-formal support systems such as the Literacy and Beyond program. They spoke highly of the K.I.D.S. program, food support services, their workplaces offering rent and utility support, and all who were in therapy spoke about the incredible bonds and relationships they have with their therapists. However, with these programs and services came barriers to access and hardly any advertising outside of word-of-mouth. Four of

the Literacy and Beyond participants spoke of how they hardly see any advertising for the program within the community, and how they speak with friends about it who tell them they have never heard of the program. One participant shared how the program had recently been putting in more effort to promote themselves in the community. Although they are not fully there yet, the organization has shown responsiveness to the direct concerns and feedback of the people within the program.

Government assistance and formalized support systems are in need of extreme restructuring, beginning with soliciting direct responses to the needs low-income people are asking for, and developing informed, participatory policy that addresses these needs. Creating formal support systems that do not respond to direct needs within communities have been inefficient and, at times, harmful. This is evident in the counterproductive system which focuses on conditionality and work requirements, funneling those living in material hardship into low-wage, entry-level jobs (Burke et al.). Fueled by public opinion, the most unresponsive of these formal systems negatively impact the mental health of low-income, single mothers who attempt to navigate jumping through the hoops (Davis). Thus, by not responding and adapting to the needs within the communities they intend to support, formal support systems end up doing more harm than good.

While St. Clair County's formal and semi-formal support systems are guilty of creating barriers to access as well, community members have made concerted efforts to respond to direct needs within the community. Programs such as the semi-formal supports described in this thesis are examples of these efforts.

Semi-formal support systems are able to respond to the direct needs and desires of community members, because they are born out of people listening to these needs. They also tend to, though not always, do a much better job of ensuring that barriers to accessing the support are not deterring the people who are seeking the support. One participant I spoke with in this project discussed how, since graduating from the Literacy and Beyond program, she has become one of the organization's board members. The Participants spoke about the incredible community programs that have met them where they are, and how their desires to contribute to helping others after they have been supported have allowed them to volunteer and work within these programs.

Ultimately, the women whose voices crafted this project discussed the ways they have done their best to restructure the ways they conceptualize and access support. They have done this in ways that uplift the love and healing within their lives through informal and semi-formal support systems, and leave out the biases and judgments found in many formal support systems. The external judgments they face continue to hurt them, but they described how over time they have been able to reexamine what community should look like in their lives and what they expect from it. As tunchez argues, as single m/others "We practice lived, beauty-full and fragile liberatory models in our daily lives" (200). Single mothers respond to a lack of proper formal support by restructuring their conceptions of what community should look like and the purpose it serves. They all spoke of the uphill battle of getting to a point in their lives where they feel

unconditionally loved and cared for, and never failed to express their gratitude within interviews about the loved ones in their lives today.

I was immediately struck, in each interview, by the sentiment that things have been difficult, sometimes feeling insurmountable and inescapable, but that because they had come out on the other side, they knew they could do it. Regardless of the ways the community responds to their direct needs, or the support they choose to accept or turn away, these women have been able to build community in ways that fit into their own and their children's lives effectively. They have fought for what they know they want, and have decided to let go of those who are unable to sympathize with and understand them. They have figured out, over and over again, how to communicate and advocate for themselves and their children. Somehow, some way, they have been able to solve the trials and tribulations as they come, to the best of their ability.

For some, this strengthening self-advocacy skill has greatly increased their self confidence over time. For women like Winona, becoming more confident about advocating for herself first began with her understanding that she was in charge of advocating for her children. Her love for her children then allowed her to increase feelings of appreciation for her own strengths. The participants in this research described how, becoming a mother and being in charge of protecting their children, helped them in figuring out how to best protect themselves. Informal support systems are then able to be chosen based on the merit of the relationship, where mothers choose the quality of these relationships over quantity.

While these attributes were positive, people should not have to struggle to obtain access to the resources they need. These women would be strong, courageous, and compassionate without the need to constantly advocate for themselves and their families. Within communities that have the resources to support their community members, even if those resources are simply kindness and compassion, there should be stronger efforts to provide that support. The ways communities do this should be informed directly from those within the community. After all, if you have not lived in someone's circumstances, and you are not taking the time to listen to them about these experiences, it is impossible to offer the most effective kinds of support.

Through this project, I was able to reenter my home community and connect with some of the individuals and organizations within St. Clair County on the topic of how single mothers structure their support systems and build community. In particular, I heard from single mothers in low- to lower-middle income households who have found ways to restructure their conceptions of community in order to receive the kind of support they are unable to receive fully within formal and informal support systems. They shared with me how semi-formal programs like Literacy and Beyond, have provided them with the support they are looking for both in a formalized capacity in obtaining their GEDs, and an informal capacity through caring mentorship relationships and peer-to-peer support. For others, semi-formal support systems such as church donation and food drive were able to step in where formalized support was insufficient. Reconceptualizing informal support was also common, through

focusing on the quality and length of these relationships over the quantity of informal relationships in one's life.

Overall, in this project I set out to examine how the single mothers within my home community were able to survive and thrive in the ways I saw growing up. I learned that, through community support and an ability to let go of the kind of support that is not serving them, single mothers are able to restructure what support looks like and how they tap into it. By finding community with people in similar circumstances, such as neighbors, family members, and long-term friends, they are able to navigate the expectations of reciprocity that sometimes create barriers in these kinds of relationships. By de-centering a focus on seeking government assistance, due to being failed by it in the past, they find ways to get the support they need through semi-formal support systems instead. After all, life circumstances have been incredibly difficult for the women I spoke with in this project, but they were all clear about the fact that, regardless of the obstacles they face, they will find a way to make it through.

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