

Oh, Yeah, the Uninsured

BY MARILYN WERBER SERAFINI ■

Elaine Gaither of Clarksville, Md., her husband and their three children have no health insurance. And she has reason to worry. One of the kids has asthma, and two have attention deficit disorder. "We coast every day and hope every day that our son doesn't have an asthma attack," she said. "I hope every day that one of the kids doesn't fall out of a tree. It's scary for a parent."

This isn't a family with a history of being on the dole. The Gaithers carried insurance until 1993, when

ABC News's Washington bureau laid off Gaither, now 44, as a television producer. Her husband, a self-employed landscaper, can't get group coverage. She could qualify for insurance through her part-time job as a department store saleswoman if she worked more hours. But with a household income as low as \$30,000 some years, she said, she can't afford day care for her 3-year-old daughter.

Congress has taken a few steps in the past couple of years to help families such as the Gaithers. This year's Balanced Budget Act contained \$24 billion over five years to cover kids who don't have insurance now.

Problem solved? Don't chill the champagne yet.

Yes, Gaither is hoping the new law will cover her kids. But what about her and her husband? They still can't afford private insurance for themselves. Nothing that Congress has done will take care of the unpaid bill sitting on their dining room table since last summer, when Elaine was rushed to the emergency room because she thought she was having a heart attack.

RICHARD A. BLOOM



CHRIS JENNINGS:

"It's hard to get the public to support comprehensive reforms."

PRESIDENT CLINTON DOESN'T TALK ABOUT IT MUCH ANYMORE, BUT THE RANKS OF THE UNINSURED KEEP GROWING—AND MAY SURGE AS HEALTH COSTS RISE. WILL WASHINGTON COME TO THE RESCUE? DON'T COUNT ON IT.

Even with insurance for children easier to come by, the overall problem of the uninsured—adults as well as kids—hasn't disappeared. Indeed, it's been getting worse.

In 1996, 41.4 million Americans were uninsured. That's 1.1 million more than a year earlier and 4.4 million more than in 1993, when the nation was mesmerized by the magnitude of the problem and Washington's top priority was the search for a universal solution.

And it's still growing worse. The costs of health care, stable for several years now, are about to ascend. The 3-4 per cent annual growth rate last year is expected to rise to 4-5 per cent this year and maybe as high as 7 per cent in 1999, according to an employer survey released last spring by Foster Higgins, a Washington-based employee benefits consulting firm. (See *NJ*, 4/26/97, p. 819.) More recently, other health care economists have predicted growth rates of 8.0-8.5 per cent in the next few years.

The rise in costs is

LYNCH
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THE GAITHERS:

Even if the daughter gets insurance, the parents can't afford it for themselves.

bound to swell the ranks of the uninsured, just as it did a decade ago, according to Paul Fronstin, an economist at the Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI). When health care costs grew at double digits in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many employers—especially small business owners—stopped offering health insurance to their workers or made them pay more for it. Many employers couldn't afford to keep their policies in place. In 1988, for example, 39 per cent of businesses with fewer than 10 employees offered their workers health insurance. After about five years of high premiums, only 33 per cent of them did.

"Swift action will be needed to stem the tide, or we will be faced with a problem of such magnitude, that it will affect every aspect—cost, quality and access—of our health care delivery system," according to a report last month from the nonprofit National Coalition on Health Care, a nonpartisan, Washington-based group of businesses, labor unions, health care provider organizations, and consumer and religious groups.

Clinton Administration policy makers and congressional Democrats say they're well aware of the situation. But don't expect a big attempt by President Clinton to fix it. And who could blame him? He got burned once. After his 1993 proposed overhaul of the health care system died a humiliating death, it got much of the blame for causing the Democrats to lose control of Congress in 1994.

Christopher C. Jennings, Clinton's top health adviser, offers practical reasons why the White House won't try anything big. Though costs are rising, "we have to decide how much time we spend on stuff that may or may not happen," he said. "In the absence of an economic crisis, it's hard to get the public to support comprehensive reforms. The question is whether there is the political support in this Congress to move forward. Not with this Congress."

Without political momentum for anything such as Health Care Reform II, something incremental could happen. Twice, it already has. A politically esteemed bill passed during last year's presidential campaign made it easier for people to carry their insurance from job to job and to get and keep insurance even if they have a pre-existing medical condition. Another measure would provide the money to cover—at best—half of the country's 10 million uninsured kids, though none of their parents.

What's the next increment that Congress might realistically pass in 1998? Whatever it is, it's likely to help low-income working families such as the Gaithers—too poor to buy insurance but not poor enough for government help.

"People are falling between the cracks," said Sen. Paul Wellstone, D-Minn., who's been active in advocating wider health coverage. "These are people who aren't old enough for Medicare, or poor enough for Medicaid. We're giving health care to the kids, but adults live in these families, too. They're as important."

THE FACE OF THE UNINSURED

Almost 23 million of the nation's uninsured are working people like the Gaithers. They're poorly paid, by and large. More of them work as cooks than as anything else, according to Fronstin, who this month issued the findings of a study identifying who the uninsured are. He found cashiers, salespeople, janitors, waiters, carpenters, gardeners, construction workers, secretaries, auto mechanics, painters, stock clerks and hairdressers. Sen. James M. Jeffords, R-Vt., the chairman of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, said last month that more than two-thirds of the working uninsured earn less than \$10.30 an hour.

Some of the uninsured work for large businesses, but most of them labor in small firms. Nearly half of all uninsured workers either work for themselves or for companies with fewer than 25 employees. Another 14 per cent are in companies with 25-99 workers. Only a fourth of the employees in companies with fewer than 10 workers carry health insurance.

Even when a company offers insurance, more and more employees are saying no, according to a Health and Human Services Department study published on Nov. 10 in the journal *Health Affairs*. More than 88 per cent of workers who could buy health insurance through their jobs did so in 1987, but only 80 per cent signed up in 1996.

For some small businesses, the cost of insuring workers is simply prohibitive. Others don't need to offer health care to attract workers, or they don't see it as their responsibility, said Judith Waxman, director of government affairs at Families USA, a consumer group.

Take Dale Gilliland. He and his wife own the American Foam Center in Arlington, Va., which has seven employees. The Gillillands first bought health insurance for their workers in the mid-1980s, at a reasonable price. But when their workers started filing claims and health care costs leaped nationwide, the company's premiums increased nearly fourfold within three years. So Gilliland stopped offering health insurance and gave each employee a pay raise instead.

What did the employees do? Several of the women joined their husband's policies, he said. Two remained uninsured, and a few bought insurance on their own. Several eventually took jobs with larger companies that offered health insurance. Gilliland and his wife joined a health maintenance organization (HMO) for \$500 a month—in after-tax dollars not the pre-tax money that businesses pay.

"Who can afford that unless you own a company?" he lamented. "Insurance companies will give anyone a good price to get them on board. Once employees start to depend on them providing this, the business owner is under pressure not to drop [the insurance] because they'll look like the bad guy."

Gilliland says he'd like to be able to offer insurance again. But he complains that small businesses are unfairly disadvantaged. Large businesses have the purchasing leverage that comes from buying in quantity, and more than half of them self-insure—meaning they pay their workers' health claims themselves and use insurance companies only to administer the programs. Self-insuring allows companies to ignore state requirements—notably, that certain benefits be offered—that make insurance more expensive.

Small businesses may self-insure, but few do, because an expensive illness could bankrupt them. So they say they're getting killed by mandates. Altogether, the 50 states have 1,000 mandated benefits, said Victoria D. Caldeira, a lobby-

ist for the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB)—and that doesn't include recent congressional dictates of more mental health coverage and up to 48-hour hospital stays for new mothers. In surveys conducted during the past decade, NFIB members have named the high cost of health insurance as their top problem.

Small businesses aren't the only reason the ranks of the uninsured are growing. Overall, private employers are insuring a few more workers than they used to. But that isn't enough to make up for declines in some government health programs. As the military has shrunk, Fronstin noted, so has the

government's insurance programs for military families—for the active-duty and retired personnel covered by the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services and for the dependents of disabled veterans covered by the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Veterans Administration. From 1994-96, the proportion

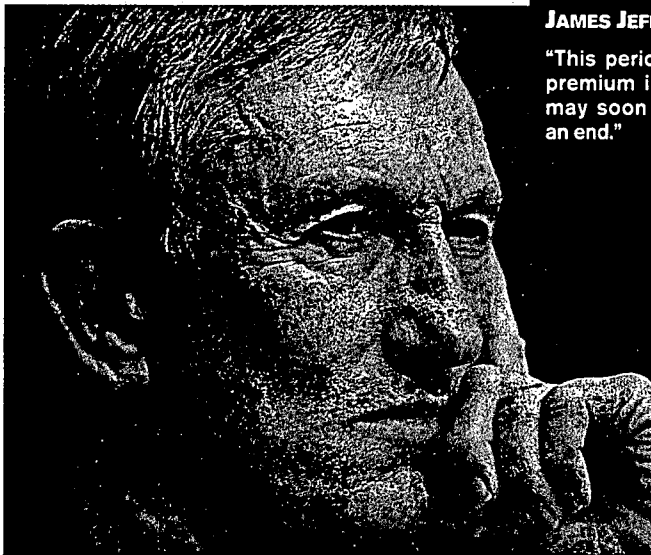
of nonelderly Americans these programs insure slipped from 3.8 per cent to 2.9 per cent. Similarly, the percentage of nonelderly Americans covered by Medicaid declined in 1995-96 from 12.5 per cent to 12.1 per cent as people left the welfare rolls and entered the workforce.

WHAT MANAGED CARE CAN'T DO

After Clinton's grand plan for universal health insurance wound up on the dustheap of history, the plight of health insurance seemed to improve without the government's help. Frustrated businesses insisted that insurance companies cut the costs of their policies. The insurers responded with an explosion of managed care.

Employers moved hordes of workers into the HMOs and the other types of managed care that keep costs down by requiring "gatekeepers" to curb patients' medical services. The theory is that close management reduces hospital stays and unnecessary expenses. Managed care was seen as the magic bullet by anyone worried about the high cost of health care.

But any savings due to the shift toward managed care appears to be slowing down. For one thing, most businesses that are switching to managed care have done so already. Besides, a spate of well-publicized complaints about the downsides of managed care—limits on medical services and on access to specialists—has prompted many employers to avoid the cheapest option, traditional HMOs. Many of them are signing up their workers for types of managed care that more closely resemble the old fee-for-service model of health insurance. Preferred provider organizations (PPOs), for example, offer a list of doctors a patient may choose and don't require a gatekeeper's OK. Or the patient may pay extra and try a doctor outside the network.



JAMES JEFFORDS:

"This period of low premium increases may soon come to an end."

RICHARD A. BLOOM

Other evidence suggests that the cost of insurance is about to rise. As the managed care marketplace has matured, hospitals and health plans have rapidly consolidated—eliminating some competition. Maybe most significant, insurers' willingness to forgo profits isn't expected to last, judging from the ominous statements they've been making. The premiums for federal workers, who have long had excellent but inexpensive health insurance, have already risen this year at an alarming rate—by more than 8 per cent. Private premiums usually follow suit.

In Washington and in the states, the authorities have been using laws and regulations to nudge employers into offering health insurance to more of their workers and to stop insurers from depriving individuals of coverage. But these efforts have had a minimal effect, said Waxman of Families USA. Last year's Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act forces insurers to sell coverage to small businesses. But because most states already had similar laws on the books, Waxman said, the federal action won't do much.

Many states have also passed laws letting insurers sell bare-bones packages of benefits to small firms that can't afford anything better, Waxman said. Some states have even adopted regulations limiting how much more insurers can charge for sick people than for healthy people. Still, Waxman said, "most small businesses that did not offer insurance before the reforms continue to not offer coverage."

So Now What?

Both parties considered expanding health care for children a major step toward helping the uninsured. But it may be impossible now, policy makers say, to find additional federal money to bring more people into the world of the insured.

Not that Democrats think the problem has faded. "We're trying to meet the President's goals of getting insurance for all," said Sen. John B. Breaux, D-La. "Kids are a big block of that. But I'm not sure the political climate has changed enough for employer mandates"—the centerpiece of his failed 1993 package.

Rep. Harris W. Fawell, R-Ill., has been promoting for years what he sees as a big part of the solution. Fawell and Sen. Tim Hutchinson, R-Ark., have offered bills making it easier for small businesses to band together to buy health insurance, by letting them ignore the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) and—thus—state rules. The House passed Fawell's bill as part of the recent balanced budget law, but the conference committee quashed it.

Administration officials, White House health adviser Jennings said, support the idea of setting up purchasing cooperatives, which were at the center of Clinton's original reform plan. But, he added, Clinton doesn't want to sidestep

ERISA, which provides some important consumer protections.

"Without a clear strategy to address the problem of the working uninsured, the problem will only get worse," Jeffords said at a hearing of his committee on the Fawell-Hutchinson approach. "We have enjoyed a five-year period of relatively slow growth in the cost of health insurance. Many feel that this period of low premium increases may soon come to an end."

But no clear strategy is obvious. Jeffords sponsored his hearing merely as a courtesy to committee member Hutchinson and as a springboard for a bill of his own, Caldeira said. Jeffords is opposed to letting groups of businesses escape from state regulation. California already has such a program, Caldeira noted, but it's been something of a flop. The cooperative offers insurance rates that aren't much better than what the businesses could get on their own, she said, so only 2-3 per cent of eligible employers have bothered to sign up.

Jeffords's own legislation would promote vol-

untary efforts by employees to expand health insurance coverage for working adults and their dependents that states would regulate—a proposal that NFIB officials doubt they can support. "He's on the wrong track for helping small businesses," Caldeira said. That is, expect an impasse.

Without a bill to help small businesses, Congress is expected to take up legislation meant to improve the quality of health care. Some Members will surely try to force insurers to cover more medical services, which the NFIB fears would jack up the price of premiums and put insurance out of reach for more people.

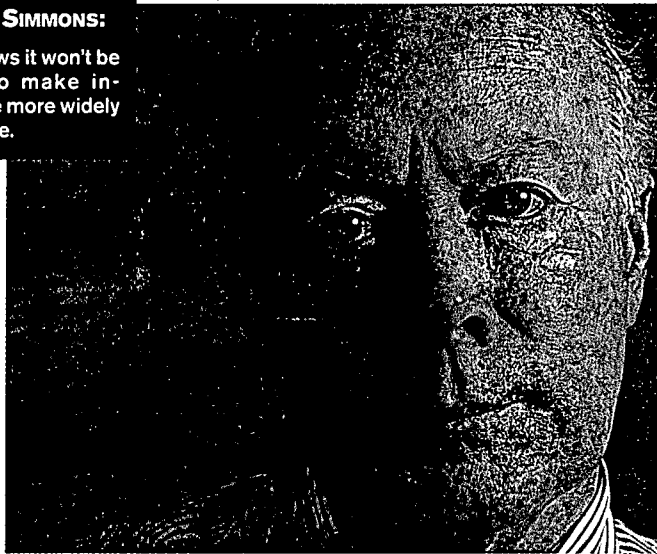
But to Henry E. Simmons, president of the National Coalition on Health Care, improving the quality of health care delivery is key to making insurance more affordable. "If you run any business or industry without attention to quality control and efficiency, you can assume you're wasting 30-50 per cent of your operating expenses," Simmons said. "And this applies to health care."

The drive for quality control is part of a more ambitious plan that the coalition has in mind to extend health care to all Americans. To that end, the coalition is trying its hand at public relations, hoping to change the public's perception that the problem of the uninsured has vanished and to create some momentum for action. The group plans five symposia for business executives next year to highlight the problem. Ads that it is running in several newspapers this month say: "Your health care costs are expected to rise nearly 90 per cent over the next decade. Please adjust your dreams accordingly."

But Simmons acknowledges that building enough political pressure won't get any easier than it's been. Uninsured families such as the Gaithers, after all, have been around for a long time—and they haven't prevailed yet. ■

HENRY SIMMONS:

He knows it won't be easy to make insurance more widely available.



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BYLINE: By ISABEL WILKERSON, Special to The New York Times

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BODY: A fourth-grade classroom on a forbidding stretch of the South Side was in the middle of multiplication tables when a voice over the intercom ordered Nicholas Whitiker to the principal's office. Cory and Darnesha and Roy and Delron and the rest of the class fell silent and stared at Nicholas, sitting sober-faced in the back.

"What did I do?" Nicholas thought as he gathered himself to leave.

He raced up the hall and down the steps to find his little sister, Ishtar, stranded in the office, nearly swallowed by her purple coat and hat, and principal's aides wanting to know why no one had picked her up from kindergarten.

'I Don't Know'

It was yet another time that the adult world called on Nicholas, a gentle, brooding 10-year-old, to be a man, to answer for the complicated universe he calls family.

How could he begin to explain his reality — that his mother, a welfare recipient rearing five young children, was in college trying to become a nurse and so was not home during the day, that Ishtar's father was separated from his mother and in a drug-and-alcohol haze most of the time, that the grandmother he used to live with was at work, and that, besides, he could not possibly account for the man who was supposed to take his sister home — his mother's companion, the father of her youngest child?

"My stepfather was supposed to pick her up," he said for simplicity's sake. "I don't know why he's not here."

Nicholas gave the school administrators the name and telephone numbers of his grandmother and an aunt, looked back at Ishtar with a big brother's reassuring half-smile and rushed back to class still worried about whether his sister would make it home O.K.

Of all the men in his family's life, Nicholas is perhaps the most dutiful. When the television picture goes out again, when the 3-year-old scratches the 4-year-old, when their mother, Angela, needs ground beef from the store or the bathroom cleaned or can't find her switch to whip him or the other children, it is Nicholas's name that rings out to fix whatever is wrong.

He is nanny, referee, housekeeper, handyman. Some nights he is up past midnight, mopping the floors, putting the children to bed and washing their school clothes in the bathtub. It is a nightly chore: the children have few clothes and wear the same thing every day.

Curbside Service

He pays a price. He stays up late and goes to school tired. He brings home mostly mediocre grades. But if the report card is bad, he gets a beating. He is all boy — squirming in line, sliding down banisters, shirt-tail out, shoes untied, dreaming of becoming a fireman so he can save people — but his walk is the stiff slog of a worried father behind on the rent.

He lives with his four younger half-siblings, his mother and her companion, John Mason, on the second floor of a weathered three-family walkup in the perilous and virtually all black Englewood section of Chicago.

It is a forlorn landscape of burned-out tenements and long-shuttered storefronts where drunk men hang out on the corner, where gang members command more respect than police officers and where every child can tell you where the crack houses are.

The neighborhood is a thriving drug mart. Dealers provide curbside service and residents figure that any white visitor must be a patron or a distributor. Gunshots are as common as rainfall. Eighty people were murdered in the neighborhood last year, more than in Omaha and Pittsburgh combined.

Living with fear is second nature to the children. Asked why he liked McDonald's, Nicholas's brother Willie described the restaurant playground with violence as his yardstick. "There's a giant hamburger, and you can go inside of it," Willie said. "And it's made out of steel, so no bullets can't get through."

The Family Many Eyes, Many Hands

It is in the middle of all this that Angela Whitiker is rearing her children and knitting together a new life from a world of fast men and cruel drugs. She is a strong-willed, 26-year-old onetime waitress who has seen more than most 70-year-olds ever will. A 10th-grade dropout, she was pregnant at 15, bore Nicholas at 16, had her second son at 17, was married at 20, separated at 21 and was on crack at 22.

In the depths of her addiction, she was a regular at nearby crack houses, doing drugs with gang members, businessmen and, she said, police detectives, sleeping on the floors some nights. In a case of mistaken identity, she once had a gun put to her head. Now she feels she was spared for a reason.

She has worked most of her life, picking okra and butterbeans and cleaning white people's houses as a teen-ager in Louisiana, bringing home big tips from businessmen when she waited tables at a restaurant in downtown Chicago, selling Polish sausages from a food truck by the Dan Ryan Expressway and snow cones at street fairs.

She is a survivor who has gone from desperation to redemption, from absent mother to nurturing one, and who now sees economic salvation in nursing. Nicholas sees brand-name gym shoes and maybe toys and a second pair of school pants once she gets a job.

Studying for Midterms

She went through treatment and has stayed away from drugs for two years. Paperback manuals from Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous sit without apology on the family bookshelf. A black velvet headdress from church is on the windowsill and the Bible is turned to Nehemiah -- emblems of her new life as a regular at Faith Temple, a Coptic Christian church on a corner nearby.

For the last year, she has been studying a lot, talking about novels and polynomials and shutting herself in her cramped bedroom to study for something called midterms.

That often makes Nicholas the de facto parent for the rest of the children. There is Willie, the 8-year-old with the full-moon face and wide grin who likes it when adults mistake him for Nicholas. There is Ishtar, the dainty 5-year-old. There is Emmanuel, 4, who worships Nicholas and runs crying to him whenever he gets hurt. And there is Johnathan, 3, who is as bad as he is cute and whom everyone calls John-John.

That is just the beginning of the family. There are four fathers in all: Nicholas's father, a disabled laborer who comes around at his own rhythm to check on Nicholas, give him clothes and whip him when he gets bad grades. There is Willie's father, a construction worker whom the children like because he lets them ride in his truck.

There is the man their mother married and left, a waiter at a soul food place. He is the father of Ishtar and Emmanuel and is remembered mostly for his beatings and drug abuse.

The man they live with now is Mr. Mason, a truck driver on the night shift, who met their mother at a crack house and bears on his neck the thick scars of a stabbing, a reminder of his former life on the streets. He gets Nicholas up at 3 A.M. to sweep the floor or take out the garbage and makes him hold on to a bench to be whipped when he disobeys.

Unemployment and drugs and violence mean that men may come and go, their mother tells them. "You have a father, true enough, but nothing is guaranteed," she says. "I tell them no man is promised to be in our life forever."

There is an extended family of aunts, an uncle, cousins and their maternal grandmother, Deloris Whitiker, the family lifeboat, whom the children moved in with when drugs took their mother away.

To the children, life is not the neat, suburban script of sitcom mythology with father, mother, two kids and golden retriever. But somehow what has to get done gets done.

When Nicholas brings home poor grades, sometimes three people will show up to talk to the teacher -- his mother, his father and his mother's companion. When Nicholas practices his times tables, it might be his mother, his grandmother or Mr. Mason asking him what 9 times 8 is.

But there is a downside. The family does not believe in sparing the rod and when Nicholas disobeys, half a dozen people figure they are within their rights to whip or chastise him, and do. But he tries to focus on the positive. "It's a good family," he says. "They care for you. If my mama needs a ride to church, they pick her up. If she needs them to baby-sit, they baby-sit."

The Rules Ready to Run, Quick to Pray

It is a gray winter's morning, zero degrees outside, and school starts for everybody in less than half an hour. The children line up, all scarves and coats and legs. The boys bow their heads so their mother, late for class herself, can brush their hair one last time. There is a mad scramble for a lost mitten.

Then she sprays them. She shakes an aerosol can and sprays their coats, their heads, their tiny outstretched hands. She sprays them back and front to protect them as they go off to school, facing bullets and gang recruiters and a crazy, dangerous world. It is a special religious oil that smells like drugstore perfume, and the children shut their eyes tight as she sprays them long and furious so they will come back to her, alive and safe, at day's end.

These are the rules for Angela Whitiker's children, recounted at the Formica-top dining-room table:

"Don't stop off playing," Willie said.

"When you hear shooting, don't stand around -- run," Nicholas said.

"Why do I say run?" their mother asked.

"Because a bullet don't have no eyes," the two boys shouted.

"She pray for us every day," Willie said.

The Walk to School

Each morning Nicholas and his mother go in separate directions. His mother takes the two little ones to day care on the bus and then heads to class at Kennedy-King College nearby, while Nicholas takes Willie and Ishtar to Banneker Elementary School.

The children pass worn apartment buildings and denuded lots with junked cars to get to Banneker. Near an alley, unemployed men warm themselves by a trash-barrel fire under a plastic tent. There is a crack house across the street from school.

To Nicholas it is not enough to get Ishtar and Willie to school. He feels he must make sure they're in their seats. "Willie's teacher tell me, 'You don't have to come by here,' " Nicholas said. "I say, 'I'm just checking.' "

Mornings are so hectic that the children sometimes go to school hungry or arrive too late for the free school breakfast that Nicholas says isn't worth rushing for anyway.

One bitter cold morning when they made it to breakfast, Nicholas played the daddy as usual, opening a milk carton for Ishtar, pouring it over her cereal, handing her the spoon and saying sternly, "Now eat your breakfast."

He began picking over his own cardboard bowl of Corn Pops sitting in vaguely sour milk and remembered the time Willie found a cockroach in his cereal. It's been kind of hard to eat the school breakfast ever since.

The Children When Brothers Are Friends

Nicholas and Willie on brotherhood:

"He act like he stuck to me," Nicholas said of Willie. "Every time I move somewhere, he want to go. I can't even breathe."

"Well, what are brothers for?" Willie asked.

"To let them breathe and live a long life," Nicholas said. "Everytime I get something, they want it. I give them what they want after they give me a sad face."

"He saves me all the time," Willie said. "When I'm getting a whooping, he says he did it."

"Then I get in trouble," Nicholas said.

"Then I say I did it, too, and we both get a whooping," Willie said. "I save you, too, don't I, Nicholas?"

"Willie's my friend," Nicholas said.

"I'm more than your friend," Willie shot back, a little hurt.

Once Willie almost got shot on the way home from school. He was trailing Nicholas as he usually does when some sixth-grade boys pulled out a gun and started shooting.

"They were right behind Willie," Nicholas said. "I kept calling him to get across the street. Then he heard the shots and ran."

Nicholas shook his head. "I be pulling on his hood but he be so slow," he said.

"Old slowpoke," Ishtar said, chiming in.

No Friends, One Toy

In this neighborhood, few parents let their children outside to play or visit a friend's house. It is too dangerous. "You don't have any friends," Nicholas's mother tells him. "You don't have no homey. I'm your homey."

So Nicholas and his siblings usually head straight home. They live in a large, barren apartment with chipped tile floors and hand-me-down furniture, a space their mother tries to spruce up with her children's artwork.

The children spend their free time with the only toy they have — a Nintendo game that their mother saved up for and got them for Christmas. The television isn't working right, though, leaving a picture so dark the children have to turn out all the lights and sit inches from the set to see the cartoon Nintendo figure flicker over walls to save the princess.

Dinner is what their mother has time to make between algebra and Faith Temple. Late for church one night, she pounded on the stove to make the burners fire up, set out five plastic blue plates and apportioned the canned spaghetti and pan-fried bologna.

"Come and get your dinner before the roaches beat you to it!" she yelled with her own urban gallows humor.

Rhinestones in Church

Faith Temple is a tiny storefront church in what used to be a laundry. It is made up mostly of two or three clans, including Nicholas's, and practices a homegrown version of Ethiopian-derived Christianity.

At the front of the spartan room with white walls and metal folding chairs, sits a phalanx of regal, black-robed women with foot-high, rhinestone-studded headdresses. They are called empresses, supreme empresses and imperial empresses. They include Nicholas's mother, aunt and grandmother, and they sing and testify and help calm flushed parishioners, who sometimes stomp and wail with the holy spirit.

The pastor is Prophet Titus. During the week he is Albert Lee, a Chicago bus driver, but on Sundays he dispenses stern advice and \$35 blessings to his congregation of mostly single mothers and their children. "Just bringing children to the face of the earth is not enough," Prophet Titus intones. "You owe them more."

Nicholas's job during church is to keep the younger children quiet, sometimes with a brother asleep on one thigh and a cousin on the other. Their mother keeps watch from her perch up front where she sings. When the little ones get too loud, their mother shoots them a threatening look from behind the microphone that says, "You know better."

Grandmother, Empress

On this weeknight, Nicholas and Willie are with cousins and other children listening to their grandmother's Bible lesson.

She is a proud woman who worked for 22 years as a meat wrapper at a supermarket, reared five children of her own, has stepped in to help raise some of her grandchildren and packs a .38 in her purse in case some stranger tries to rob her again. On Sundays and during Bible class, she is not merely Nicholas's grandmother but Imperial Empress Magdala in her velvet-collared cape.

The children recite Bible verses ("I am black but beautiful," from Solomon or "My skins is black," from Job), and then Mrs. Whitiker breaks into a free-form lecture that seems a mix of black pride and Dianetics.

"Be dignified," she told the children. "Walk like a prince or princess. We're about obeying our parents and staying away from people who don't mean us any good."

The boys got home late that night, but their day was not done. "Your clothes are in the tub," their mother said, pointing to the bathroom, "and the kitchen awaits you."

"I know my baby's running out of hands," she said under her breath.

This is not the life Nicholas envisions for himself when he grows up. He has thought about this, and says he doesn't want any kids. Well, maybe a boy, one boy he can play ball with and show how to be a man. Definitely not a girl. "I don't want no girl who'll have four or five babies," he said. "I don't want no big family with 14, 20 people, all these people to take care of. When you broke they still ask you for money, and you have to say, 'I'm broke. I don't have no money.' "

A Sister Safe

Ishtar made it home safely the afternoon Nicholas was called to the principal's office. Mr. Mason was a couple of hours late picking her up, but he came through in the end.

Nicholas worries anyway, the way big brothers do. He worried the morning his mother had an early test and he had to take the little ones to day care before going to school himself.

John-John began to cry as Nicholas walked away. Nicholas bent down and hugged him and kissed him. Everything, Nicholas assured him, was going to be O.K.

GRAPHIC: Photos: Nicholas Whitiker (Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times) (pg. 1); Nicholas Whitiker, standing at right, with his mother, Angela, and his four siblings at their home in Chicago; "I don't want no big family with 14, 20 people, all these people to take care of. When you broke they still ask you for money, and you have to say, 'I'm broke. I don't have no money.' " (pg. 20)

TYPE: Series; Biography

SUBJECT: CHILDREN AND YOUTH; SURVEYS AND SERIES; URBAN AREAS

NAME: WILKERSON, ISABEL; WHITIKER, NICHOLAS

GEOGRAPHIC: CHICAGO (ILL)

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The New York Times

April 25, 1993, Sunday, Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section 1; Page 46; Column 1; Metropolitan Desk

LENGTH: 445 words

HEADLINE: Accounts of Struggles Prompt a Flood of Help

BODY: The public response to the profiles of 10 inner-city youths published by The New York Times over the last three weeks has been as personal as the stories themselves. Hundreds of readers across the nation unexpectedly reached out to offer support and encouragement to the young people. In addition to letters and telephone calls, readers sent job offers, checks, clothes and toys.

Some readers said they had grown up in tough neighborhoods and understood the problems faced by this generation; others said they were simply moved by stories of survival.

Ladeeta Smith, a Brooklyn teen-ager, received a handwritten note from President Clinton, and a New York City businessman offered to pay for her college education.

"I just want to encourage you in your determination to get a good education and make a good life for yourself," Mr. Clinton's note said in part. "You can do it. You are clearly a remarkable young woman."

A member of the Alameda County Board of Supervisors offered an after-school job to Jerina Gervais, an 18-year-old from Oakland, Calif. And a record company has offered an internship working with rap artists to Freddie Cherokee Brown, an aspiring rap artist from the Bronx.

Within two days of the publication of the article about Derrick White's struggle for an education that would propel him out of poverty in Memphis, 35 readers, from Minneapolis to Miami, had called to say they wanted to help pay his college expenses.

A San Francisco group called Aim High wrote to offer Marcus Tramble, a Chicago high-school dropout, a position as a teacher's assistant in its summer academic program for middle-school students.

Many professional women were moved by the plight of Crystal Rossi, a 12-year-old Brooklyn girl doing poorly in school. Several women who are lawyers said they wanted to serve as mentors for Crystal and offered to have her accompany them to work on Wednesday, when the Ms. Foundation sponsors Take Our Daughters to Work Day.

The story of Nicholas Whitiker, a Chicago fourth grader who at 10 functions as the man of his family, prompted an outpouring of checks, clothing and toys.

A New York City reader flew to Chicago to meet the Whitiker family. He gave them a Super Nintendo game and clothes and ordered bunk beds for the five children because they sleep on mattresses on the floor.

To manage the response to the Children of the Shadows series, The New York Times Company Foundation has enlisted the Children's Aid Society to administer donations to the children at the society's expense. Help may be addressed to Martha Cameron, Children's Aid Society, Fifth Floor, 105 East 22d Street, New York, N.Y. 10010.

SUBJECT: Terms not available

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The New York Times

April 18, 1993, Sunday, Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section 1; Page 1; Column 2; National Desk

LENGTH: 2388 words

HEADLINE: Provider, Protector and Felon: Freddie, 17

SERIES: Children of the Shadows/ The seventh of ten lives of the cities.

BYLINE: By MICHEL MARRIOTT

BODY: When night draws across the broken-faced tenements of the Hunts Point section of the Bronx, Freddie Cherokee Brown's teen-age eyes narrow and his boyish face hardens.

On the dark and dangerous streets where Freddie regularly moves like a shadow, harm's hand beckons from nearly every turn. Crack fumes curl out of a grimy doorway. Prostitutes troll lonely street corners for easy customers and hard cash.

For Freddie, these threats can usually be navigated with a knowing ease. But despite all the hubris he displays as he talks about "beating down" anyone who poses a danger to him, Freddie says he is unsettled by a larger, tougher, well-armed crew: the New York City Police Department.

'A Badge and a Gun'

"Once they get a badge and a gun, they're the law," he said, in a hiss mixed of resignation and indignation. "They got all the authority in the world."

To be young, male and black in a neighborhood so riddled with fear and the fearsome, Freddie says, is to grow up under the unblinking eyes of an occupying army in blue.

"They really disgust me," he said in his typical rapid-fire tumble of words as he shouldered past two uniformed officers walking their beats along Hunts Point Avenue near the muffled whoosh of the Bruckner Expressway. "They cruise right behind you. You're looking at them, and they are looking at you. But if you look back at them, they want to get out of the car and search you and rough you up a little and throw you against the wall."

Freddie's relationship with the police is, to say the least, very complicated. For Freddie, the constant presence of the police utterly unhinges him, and he certainly does not respect them. At the age of 17, he is two years into five years' probation for a felony conviction involving a stolen credit card. Still, he approaches the law and its enforcers with something of the self-destructive logic of the streets. One thing Freddie and his friends like to do is to call 911, then run away when the squad cars arrive.

Freddie may be on probation, may be failing the 10th grade for the third time. But adults who know him say his arrest has pushed him to reform his life. He is concentrating so hard on the now that he has a hard time fixing on the future. In a barren apartment on a street bristling with criminality, he has become provider and protector to his 10-year-old brother and chronically out-of-work, widowed mother. He worries about them constantly. The money he contributes from his after-school job may well be the margin that keeps them alive.

To Freddie, standing guard over his family, the Police Department's brand of justice is a commodity he cannot afford, a protection he cannot count on. Not only don't the police shield him and his family from crime, he says, they harass him and treat him as if he were the criminal.

"Police, they rather bother with the small, petty stuff, things like running up on two kids arguing in the street and not stop somebody selling drugs," he said. "Police will go pass some prostitutes on the corner and harass some kids having a disagreement. It's because we're young."

The beating of Rodney G. King, he added, only confirmed what he had long known: The police can be vicious, and they always stick together. "They are no better than us," he said. "Cops are just a little gang."

Officer Robert E. Butler, who has been working in the local precinct, the 41st, for more than 20 years, says he knows many of the young faces of Hunts Point, "and I get along with them fairly well."

"The kids are doing basically what they are supposed to be doing," he said, "and they have no problems with police." It is the youngster who plays too close to the line of illegality, he said, who draws the suspicion of the police.

Focal Point for Alienation

But for young men like Freddie, in places like Hunts Point, the police become an easy focal point for all manner of alienation.

"Some of the kids who are troubled by the police are real law-and-order types," said Paul Lipson, a worker at the Seneca Center, a youth center where Freddie has been a fixture the last two years. "They are angry at cops for harassing them, and they are disappointed in cops because they aren't aggressive enough in policing what they see as the real crime, activities that really bring down the quality of life for these kids' mothers, little brothers, grandparents."

Freddie and the friends who make up his "Bitty Crew" — named for its five members' "itty bitty" physical stature — say one of their greatest pleasures is to corner a youngster they know, pull their hoods down over their faces and pelt him with punches. But they also consider themselves real law-and-order types: On their regular tours of the neighborhood, they chase away prostitutes and drug addicts, usually with shouts, sometimes with fists, rocks and bottles.

"It's only like when somebody like a crackhead is smoking crack in the building, we say, 'What you doing? What you doing?,' " explained Freddie, who says he carries no weapons and has only experimented with marijuana. "If they said something smart, the first thing that comes to everybody's mind is 'Set it!' " a street call to attack.

One day, Freddie saw a man snorting cocaine in plain view of a neighborhood woman who is known to be very religious. Freddie, who is generally warm and good natured, followed the man for 20 minutes. Eventually the man, with tears in his eyes, turned and cried for Freddie to leave him alone. The teen-ager walked away, his disgust tinged with satisfaction.

If the man had snorted cocaine in front of Freddie's little brother, Amin Apache Taylor, Freddie said, he would not have let him off so easily. "I would have beat him down savagely," he said.

The Streets Looking Out For One Another

Not long ago, Mr. Lipson was outside the Seneca Center on Seneca and Lafayette Avenues, paying some of the black teen-agers who work there. "An officer came up to me and said, 'Is everything all right, sir?'" Mr. Lipson recalled. "He figured I was being mugged by two black guys."

For Mr. Lipson, who is white, the incident was just one more illustration of the way the police simply assume the worst about black and Hispanic teen-agers.

Freddie does not deny that race has something to do with the way the police treat him and his crew. But he insists that the relationship is defined more by the fact that the police, white and black, are adults leery and afraid of youngsters — particularly those on streets as mean as the ones in Hunts Point.

"I get in trouble for being in the wrong place at the wrong time," said Freddie, adding that he has no animosity toward whites. "It's not my fault I be living in Hunts Point."

At his mother's insistence, Freddie has formulated some rules of disengagement from the police. He tries to spend as much time as he can in school, in an after-school program, at his job at the Seneca Center and in an orbit of late-night Laundromats, Chinese take-out restaurants and video arcades.

Inevitably, though, he finds himself out on the streets where he has spent most of his life. Out on those streets, the Bitty Crew, formed more than a year ago, is his defense against boredom and danger. "We look out for each other," Freddie explained. "For each one of us, we are our own police. For me, if I get in trouble, I'm not calling 911." Instead, he will call his crew.

Mischief and Danger

In the South Bronx, childish mischief often comes with a strong helping of danger.

After the first big snowfall of the winter, Freddie and his friends took to the rooftops and zeroed in on the heads that passed below.

"We were throwing snowballs, and then somebody called the cops on us," Freddie recalled. "So then we all started throwing snowballs at the cops."

When the police went up to the roof, he said, he and his friends skipped from building to building until they escaped.

"It's not like we were doing it to be bad," Freddie said. "It's just that Hunts Point is boring."

Doing such things could "blow probation, blow the program, blow everything that he has accumulated," said Paul B. Dudley, a caseworker who has worked with Freddie. But, he added, "A lot of the kids say to themselves, from time to time, that they are in a hopeless situation."

Violence, either using it or observing it, seems to dominate Freddie's world. When he and the crew talk about going to the big multiplex cinema up in Whitestone, they shun almost all but what Freddie calls "destructive movies," the ones with titles like "Sniper" and "Dead-Alive."

Surrounded by so much violence, Freddie is basically a stoic. He has an understanding with his mother, he explains, that if she does not hear from him in 24 hours, he is either dead or in jail.

The Family 'Being the Man Of the House'

Freddie was born in the Bronx — he does not know the hospital — and he lived his first years with his mother, Deborah Taylor, and his great-grandmother in a apartment just north of Yankee Stadium.

By the time he was 6, his mother had moved the family out of the Bronx and in with his father, Freddie Brown, at a shelter on Staten Island. Three years later, the family moved to Hunts Point, and it was there, when Freddie was 16, that his father died.

Freddie's mother says her husband, a construction worker, died of internal bleeding from an injury suffered on the job. But Freddie blames himself.

For years, his father had been shuttling in and out of the family's life, and whenever he returned, father and son would tangle over control of the house. "I was used to being the man of the house," Freddie says. "When he came back, he tried to take over." Sometimes, Freddie would end up running away, and he is sure his father died of pneumonia, caught chasing him out into the streets.

Sometimes now, Freddie says, he rides the ferry back to Staten Island.

"I just ride there and back," he says of his flights from the South Bronx. "It's peaceful."

It was about two years ago when Freddie, while with a friend in Manhattan, suffered what he regards as his gravest injustice at the hands of the police. Since he is considered a youthful offender, records regarding the incident are closed and officials refuse to discuss the case. But Freddie gave this account:

Dressed in his usual street gear of an oversized black vinyl field jacket, a black hooded sweatshirt, a baseball cap, baggy slacks, and \$100 Timberland work boots, he recalled, he found a credit card in a discarded wallet on the street. Eyeing the card as he walked to the subway to return home, he was stopped by a police officer who believed, despite his protests, that he had stolen it.

"I was going to show it to my mother and tell my mother, 'Look what I found.'" Freddie said. "Anything I find I show my mother."

Freddie recalled that there was a scuffle and he found himself arrested and charged with robbery. Unable to reach his mother, who has no telephone, he spent two nights "with all these men" in the Tombs.

On his lawyer's advice, Freddie, who had no previous convictions, pleaded guilty to avoid even the slightest possibility of prison, he said. Tales of prisoner slashings and rapes terrify him.

"If he told me to take 20 years of probation or go to jail, I would take the 20 years probation," Freddie explained. "Rikers Island? I ain't going out like that."

There is another reason, Freddie says, why he could not go to prison: his family. Since his father's death, he has truly been the man of the house. Much has been placed on his shoulders. Without the pay from his job chopping wood at the Seneca Center — as much as \$200 in a good week, he says — his mother could not pay her household expenses.

Mrs. Taylor, a slender 38-year-old woman who seldom strays far from home, says she would like to find a job, but she is a high-school dropout and has few skills. Her rent is entirely subsidized, but her monthly income is only \$187 in Social Security and \$100 in food stamps. The apartment, two rooms for three people, is neat because it has almost nothing in it. When burglars broke into the apartment recently, the only thing taken was a Nintendo game; the two old televisions were left behind.

Freddie's mother says she prays for him.

"If anything is going to change it's probably going to be because of him. We always said he was the One," she said, recalling that Freddie had started speaking as clearly as an adult at the age of 1. "We knew he was going to be special."

But one dream at a time. Sitting in her bare bedroom (really the living room) with its flimsy curtain of a door, she said she wanted to get her family into a housing project. "We're on a waiting list," she said.

For his part, Freddie says he would like to be "any kind of lawyer or a rapper or an accountant or something." His mind is nimble and sharp; he is as comfortable with the computers at Seneca as with the video games at a midtown arcade. But when he talks about his ambitions, his eyes blink back the uncertainties, and he declares that he will just do what he plans to do. "By the time I get off probation," he says, "I'll be in college."

But he still must finish high school. Right now, he says, that might mean leaving Adlai E. Stevenson High School, where he is in danger of being left back yet again, and enrolling in an alternative high school. School, he says, is simply not challenging enough for him.

Freddie says he tries not to let his probation shake him; he regularly reports to his probation officer. "I don't plan to get into any more trouble," he said. "It'll go fast."

A Grisly Discovery

On one of their occasional jogs through the neighborhood recently, Freddie and a friend made a grisly discovery: the mangled body of a prostitute.

Freddie and his friend appeared unmoved, but deeply fascinated.

"Somebody threw her off the bridge," Freddie said, to anyone who would listen. He said seeing death, even raw and up close, did not bother him.

"She wasn't mutilated," he said. "It's just part of life around here."

Then Freddie flagged down a police officer; it was his civic duty, he said. But he did not hang around when they began arriving to investigate.

Flashing the broadest of grins, he added, "They might start asking me where I was the night of . . ."

GRAPHIC: Chart: "The Children of the Shadows"

Sunday, April 4: Nicholas Whitiker, a Chicago fourth grader growing up fast.

Tuesday, April 6: Ladeeta Smith, a Brooklyn teen-ager orphaned by alcoholism and AIDS.

Thursday, April 8: Crystal Rossi, a Bensonhurst school girl, losing focus in class as she is tempted by the streets.

Friday: Marcus Tramble, a Chicago youth frustrated by fears.

Tuesday, April 13: Fernando Morales, a Connecticut drug dealer, full of fatalism.

Thursday, April 15: Jerina Gervais, an Oakland girl coping with teen-age sex.

Today: Freddie Brown, a Bronx youth haunted by the police.

Tuesday, April 20: Asenhat Gomez, a new immigrant isolated in Brooklyn.

Thursday, April 22: Derrick White, a Memphis teen-ager, groping for a road map out of the projects. (pg. 42)

Sunday, April 25: Shawn Hunt, a one-time messenger for Brooklyn drug dealers, closing in on success. (pg. 16)

Photos: Freddie Cherokee Brown (Lee Romero/The New York Times) (pg. 1); Freddie Cherokee Brown, crouched at center, hanging out on Longfellow Avenue in the Bronx with some of his friends. (Angel Franco/The New York Times); Freddie Cherokee Brown: "We look out for each other. For each one of us, we are our own police. For me, if I get in trouble, I'm not calling 911." (Lee Romero/The New York Times) (pg. 42)

TYPE: Series

SUBJECT: CHILDREN AND YOUTH; BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION; SURVEYS AND SERIES; URBAN AREAS

NAME: BROWN, FREDDIE CHEROKEE; MARRIOTT, MICHEL

GEOGRAPHIC: NEW YORK CITY; BRONX (NYC)

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The New York Times

April 20, 1993, Tuesday, Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section A; Page 1; Column 3; Metropolitan Desk

LENGTH: 2437 words

HEADLINE: New Country Is Like Prison to Asenhat, 18

SERIES: Children of the Shadows: The eighth of ten lives of the cities.

BYLINE: By DAVID GONZALEZ

BODY: Asenhat Gomez used to peer out the windows of her childhood home in the Dominican countryside and relish a landscape of willow palm trees and verdant fields where her extended family would gather for daylong reunions.

In her new home in Brooklyn — a cramped apartment on Williamsburg's South Side — the windows frame a claustrophobic vista of brick walls, and the few relatives she has in this country are so preoccupied with making ends meet that family get-togethers seem as long gone as the father who died a dozen years ago.

It has been nearly a year since Asenhat was reunited with her mother, who six years before had left her children with their aunt and illegally entered the United States in search of the opportunities that had eluded the family in the Dominican Republic.

Longing for Home

But the immigrant journey of Asenhat Gomez is only beginning. For 18-year-old Asenhat, the joys of reunion are constantly tempered by the struggles of life in a hard new land. Hundreds of miles from all that was familiar, unable to shake her longing for home, she tentatively ventures into a future that beckons with equal measures of promise and fear.

In many ways, hers is the oldest of immigrant stories, played out time and again by wave after wave of newcomers to America's shores. But for today's immigrant children, in places like Williamsburg, that process of adjustment is made all the more difficult by the modern plagues of drugs, guns and recession.

Asenhat, a shy girl, has become even shyer since arriving last May, the strangeness and the frustrations coalescing in a sometimes overwhelming feeling that she is trapped.

'Sense of Confinement'

"Everybody talked about the sense of confinement," she said recently, recalling her first weeks in New York. "I expected that, but just not so much.

"Lying in bed I would think about what I left behind. There you got accustomed to visiting people, my friends from school, since we were infants. The whole place was different; you could go out to play. I miss my school." Williamsburg — its bumpy narrow streets lined with age-worn two-family homes and apartment buildings closed in by the shadows of hulking waterfront factories and the Williamsburg Bridge — can seem forbidding to someone used to the easy freedom of the countryside. The family's two small bedrooms are shared by six people who subsist on meager earnings.

Still, even as she bristles at her confinement, it has become her defense mechanism in a city whose ways and language are not her own. She seldom ventures beyond her neighborhood, partly from fear of getting lost on unexplored streets and subway lines and partly from fear of drug dealing and violent crime on nearby blocks.

"It makes you feel insecure," said Asenhat, a short girl whose floppy ponytail and baggy jeans give her the look of someone just entering her teen-age years. "You can be going down the street and not know what can happen."

She has few friends, feeling that she has little in common with American-born teen-agers, who she says are too "liberal" — so preoccupied with boyfriends, clothes and the latest fads that they squander the opportunities available to them.

She has tried, and failed for lack of English, to find a job. Even her hopes for improving the family's lot through education are in limbo. An honor student who breezed through high school and a year of premedical studies in the Dominican Republic, she plans to continue her studies at Hunter College in Manhattan. But she has been forced to sit out a year while she learns English and qualifies for financial aid.

In her own reticent way, Asenhat (pronounced ah-seh-NET) will admit to a certain disappointment with her new life. "It's been more difficult than I thought," she says. And while she allows that "there are more opportunities here," she is quick to add that "there, people looked out for you."

Still, she resolutely hews to the immigrant dream.

"After a while I'll feel better," she said. "Especially after I learn English. After I begin school. I like to study, and that's the best way to progress."

Death on a Farm

Asenhat Gomez was born in the countryside near Moca — a farming community in the Cibao region of the Dominican Republic — where her family owned a comfortable three-bedroom house, with a big yard filled with fruit trees, on land where her father and uncles grew plantains and cassava.

She still recalls how on weekends, her father, Vicente, would take her and her friends to fairs or for a cool ice cream, or how they would all gather with relatives to spend the day eating, talking and playing.

But there were hints of darker times ahead, she said; her father suffered from depression that seemed to feed on itself.

"When he got sick with that problem, he would get depressed because he could not work," she said. "He went into a clinic." "There Was No Other Way"

When Asenhat was nearly 6, he accidentally shot himself to death while cleaning a pistol, the family says. She was in the room when it happened. She talks little about it.

With three children and no husband, Asenhat's mother, Esperanza, tried in vain to keep the family afloat, getting money and food from her in-laws. But seven years ago, she took the children to her sister's house, told them she was going to take a nursing course in a nearby city and slipped off on a nine-day journey through Guatemala, Mexico and California and finally to New York.

"There was no other way," she says now. "A mother does it only thinking of her children."

Working as a live-in maid in Brooklyn, she would send money back home, promising to send for the children as soon as she had legal residency, which happened last year.

Esperanza had told them some of what they could expect, but she knew, too, that her advice could go only so far.

"Talking about it," she said, "is very different from living it and seeing it."

Arrival Disappointment, 4 Flights Up

Asenhat had barely arrived in New York last May when the disappointment hit. In her new home four flights up a dimly lighted stairway, she and her 20-year-old brother, Harold, shared a bedroom with their sister, Amalia, 14, who had preceded them to America by several months. Her mother slept in the bedroom off the kitchen with her new husband, Jose Aybar, and their 3-year-old daughter, Josephine.

"This house looked so strange to me," Asenhat said. "It was so confining, such a big building with so many people and such little apartments."

Life inside the apartment, with her new family, was strained. At first, Josephine would jealously cry "Mami mia!" whenever Asenhat approached her mother. Relations with her stepfather have remained cool.

"He is almost illiterate," she said. "We don't have that much in common." They barely speak.

"I would like to talk about my dreams," she said. "Sometimes I miss my father a lot because he was close to us. He was very caring, very sweet with us."

'I Don't Go Out Alone'

For a while, however estranged she felt, fear of what lay outside, of being speechless in an English-speaking city, kept her imprisoned in the apartment. She spent her days reading the Bible or absent-mindedly watching television. She lost weight.

"There are no places for people to go around here," she said. "I don't go to the park. I don't go out alone."

While her block is relatively calm, the surrounding streets have seen an increase in drug dealing and violence. There was a shooting at her sister's school. Sometimes, she hears gunshots at night.

She remembers how in Moca, gunshots were sometimes heard ringing out in celebration of some holidays. "Here," she said, "it's not because people are happy."

The one solo venture she made early on -- to enroll in a summer youth program -- ended in tears in Bushwick after she couldn't speak English with the person taking her application, who angrily shouted at her. Her frustration and fear only increased when she wandered outside and quickly got lost.

"I was scared to ask for directions because I didn't think anyone spoke Spanish," she said. Finally, she got up enough courage to ask a Spanish-speaking passer-by.

"He said I was lost," she said. "I knew that."

Even now, her daily schedule is an unwavering routine played out within six blocks of home: a noontime visit to her mother's job, English classes, several hours at a local youth center and back home to her family.

Asenhat's confinement can be as much emotional as physical, made worse by being sidetracked in her schooling. While her parents were never able to go to college, they wanted to make sure their children would. Asenhat's belief in the bedrock American value of success through education seems absolute. When she talks about becoming a doctor, "a professional," her face brightens and she sits up a little prouder.

Both Asenhat and her brother Harold -- who studied civil engineering and worked in a medical laboratory in Santo Domingo but now works six days a week at a bodega -- plan to attend the City University of New York. But they have had to wait a year to qualify as New York City residents for the cheaper tuition and to learn English.

The only studying she does now is in her daily English class at the Brooklyn Public Library, where her afternoons are filled with children's songs and dialogues.

"It's like being little again," she said of the class, though she might have been describing the entire humbling experience of learning English.

Asenhat also realizes that while the constant presence of Spanish in her neighborhood makes it easier to adjust, it makes it harder, too.

"It's more difficult to learn English here because everybody speaks Spanish," she said. "If you hear more English, your ears get used to it faster."

A few nights ago, Asenhat slowed down as she approached her building, where two boys boxed playfully. As she got nearer, one of the boys smoothly pulled out a knife, opened it and feinted a slash at his friend. She barely blinked as she sweetly asked them if they had a key to the wrought-iron lobby door that always is locked.

After 11 months in Brooklyn, she still finds it hard to decipher the rituals of her American-born counterparts.

"For me the most important thing is to study," she said. "For them it's boyfriends, going places and buying clothes. That doesn't matter to me. A person's worth isn't what they wear, but what they are and how they feel."

Her friends at home, she insists, were different. "We were more united over there," she said. "I think sometimes that those who grew up here are more superficial. There may be more opportunities here, but over there people looked out for you."

Even the people she meets at El Puente, a youth center two blocks from her home, don't always understand what she is going through. Some don't even understand her language, although they are children of Hispanic parents. Her closest friends are Lilin Fong and Danilda Torres, both of whom came from the Dominican Republic several years ago.

The three are active in a natural healing class at El Puente, and they often sit together, chatting in Spanish. Lilin thinks Asenhat is adapting as well as she can.

"I used to count the days I had been here," she said. "I knew the hour I arrived."

Asenhat nodded. "I count the months, too," she said. "I wanted to return home." She lowered her voice. "Sometimes I still feel like going."

Dona Mercedes Dispensing Advice To 'Daughters'

Good thing Mercedes Mendez didn't hear that. The last time Asenhat revealed her homesickness, Dona Mercedes — as she is known to all — looked at her as if she were insane. "Don't even think of going back!" she scolded. "You have to be with your mother."

Each day, Asenhat passes by Dona Mercedes's apartment for lunch and a brief visit with her mother, who works as a home attendant caring for the 71-year-old Puerto Rican woman. Dona Mercedes, who walks stiffly because of knee replacement surgery a dozen years ago, busily looks after Asenhat, calling her "one of my adopted daughters."

Dona Mercedes is one of several women who have rallied around Asenhat, intent on making sure that nothing keeps her from her goals. Dona Mercedes, who came to the mainland in 1946 and worked for years packing tomatoes and cooking for the field hands on a New Jersey farm, often regales her with tales of how hard her life was when she arrived. She cautions her against talking to strangers or following the crowd. *Mother's Worries*

"Most of all, take care of your virginity," Dona Mercedes admonished. "Don't wander off with boys; you can get easily lost out there."

Esperanza nodded in agreement. But far from worrying that her daughter will be led astray by friends, she frets that she spends too much time alone.

She also wishes Asenhat would be a little more accepting of her new husband, who, she says, has had a hard enough time coping with his extended unemployment and his mother's illness.

Asenhat would like to get a job, to help the family out. She has looked a few times, to no avail.

"She talks about work, anything she can do," said Cecilia Figueroa, a health coordinator at El Puente. "But there's not much she can do with no language and no experience. She doesn't have anything."

Esperanza says she only wants her daughter to keep striving toward her goal of becoming a doctor. To help her learn English, she is buying her a \$950 set of language cassettes, on the installment plan.

"There are few mothers who would do what Esperanza did," said Dona Mercedes. "She's only had God's help."

And the help of Esperanza's sister, Mirope Ortiz-Lisardo, who took in the three children when she came to the United States. Asenhat is so close to her aunt that she calls her "Mami," and after almost a year apart, she could barely contain her glee during Mirope's recent visit.

When it came time to leave, on a bitter-cold Saturday, the house grew quiet. Mrs. Ortiz-Lisardo walked up to Asenhat and reached out to her. They hugged, gazing into each other's eyes. A kiss, another hug, and then her aunt stepped into the hallway and began her journey back to the friends and places in the homeland her niece had left behind.

Quietly, Asenhat flopped onto the couch and sank into a corner, clutching her sister's talking teddy bear. Her mother sat next to her and stroked her arm. The girl shook her head when asked if she was sad.

Asenhat hugged the toy, and its voice broke the silence.

"Dream with me," the bear sang in tinny, electronic tones.

She hugged it tighter.

"Dream with me."

GRAPHIC: Photos: Asenhat Gomez (pg. A1); "Everybody talked about the sense of confinement. I expected that, but just not so much. Lying in bed I would think about what I left behind." — ASENHAT GOMEZ; Asenhat Gomez studying English at the Brooklyn Public Library. (pg. B6) (Photographs by Monica Almeida/The New York Times)

Chart: "The Children of the Shadows"

SUNDAY, APRIL 4: Nicholas Whitiker, a Chicago fourth grader growing up fast.

TUESDAY, APRIL 6: Ladeeta Smith, a Brooklyn teen-ager orphaned by alcoholism and AIDS.

THURSDAY, APRIL 8: Crystal Rossi, a Bensonhurst schoolgirl, losing focus in class as she is tempted by the streets.

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SUNDAY, APRIL 18: Freddie Brown, a Bronx youth haunted by the police.

TODAY: Asenhat Gomez, a new immigrant isolated in Brooklyn.

THURSDAY, APRIL 22: Derrick White, a Memphis teen-ager, groping for a road map out of the projects.

SUNDAY, APRIL 25: Shawn Hunt, a one-time messenger for Brooklyn drug dealers, closing in on success.

(pg. B6)

TYPE: Series

SUBJECT: CHILDREN AND YOUTH; SURVEYS AND SERIES; IMMIGRATION AND EMIGRATION; URBAN AREAS

NAME: GONZALEZ, DAVID; GOMEZ, ASENHAT

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HEADLINE: Finding a Way: The Quest of Derrick, 19

SERIES: Children of the Shadows: The ninth of ten lives of the cities.

BYLINE: By PETER T. KILBORN, Special to The New York Times

DATELINE: MEMPHIS

BODY: Derrick White rides through the crumbling asphalt roads of the Hurt Village housing project where he played tag among the steel clotheslines and shot baskets through bent and wobbly hoops. He passes the trash bins where men with black plastic bags mine for cans to sell to a recycling center. He passes the "dope track," where he saw a friend shot in the neck and killed.

Beyond the project, he passes the supermarket that refused him a job interview because, he believes, his address marks him as a project kid. He passes Northside High School, where he graduated 15th last year in a class of 299, third among the boys, and was king of the senior prom. He stops at a McDonald's restaurant, five miles away, where he worked 20 to 25 hours a week throughout the 11th grade.

A Graduate in the Grease Pit

Inside, he points to the spot where he grilled hamburgers. "You get tired of it," he said. "You be back there cooking and cooking." Startled, he recognizes the fellow there now, a classmate at Northside High. "Man!" he whispered. "He got a diploma and he's working at McDonald's."

Derrick White believes he has left that world behind. From his mother, Shirley White, his stepfather, Wardell Horton, and his high school counselors and neighbors who have heaped their own hopes upon him, he has soaked up the message that the safest and surest route out of welfare and the project is a good job.

Yet to go much beyond McDonald's, Derrick, who is 19, needs college. And his prospects have blurred since his dashing performance at Northside High. In September he fulfilled a dream, going to the other end of the state to attend the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga on a full scholarship. But in January, worried about fees and troubles at home, he dropped out.

A Northside counselor then steered him to a college in Memphis. But for lack of financial aid, he left in February. He says he will enroll in still another college in June. Even if he does, he will have lost a semester of his freshman year and sidetracked his progress toward a career.

Derrick is burly and 6 feet 1 inch tall, his close-shaven hair cut with the stripe of a mock part. He has a tiny fake diamond in his left ear that cost \$7. His family sometimes calls him Bernard, his middle name. He is unhurried and soft-spoken, amiable but not jovial. Around Hurt Village he commands the sidewalk by merely being on it. Over the years, he said, he has had very few fights, but those few were over money.

"What makes me mad is people trying to use me," he said. "Use me as a fool, trying to play you over." He recalled a fight over whether he had repaid a man who had lent him \$5.

"He pushed me," Derrick said. "That's all it took." Striking the air, he replayed the blows — a right, a left, a right. He said the fellow went off with a bloody nose.

Derrick says he wants to be a doctor, an obstetrician. On a school trip last year to colleges and medical schools, he met a black pediatric neurosurgeon in Baltimore named Ben Carson. After a childhood of poverty and delinquency, Dr. Carson won renown six years ago for successfully separating Siamese twins joined at the head.

"At least I know there's one person like me helping people," Derrick said. He cannot recall ever needing a doctor, and he does not know an obstetrician. But in a time of fewer secure and stable jobs everywhere, he reasoned: "Women will always have children."

Medicine also pays good money, he said. How much? "Man!" he said, as if he had to guess the distance to a star. "One hundred thousand? Two hundred fifty thousand? Probably more." With that, he said: "I'll start a bank account, get a car, get a house, a huge house. Put money away for my children's education. Help my mom. Give money to the church."

While he waits to return to school, he scrounges for work. In March, he earned \$276 working for a radio station that put a temporary studio in Hurt Village. Since then he has been tutoring the 16-year-old granddaughter of a prominent black Memphis woman in math and science, and is paid \$10 a visit.

His mother had a good factory job once, but quit when Derrick, the first of six children, was born. His stepfather has had several jobs but none for very long. Of the 1,365 people living in Hurt Village at the end of last year, only 46 had jobs.

He says he just barely avoided one form of employment that entraps many young men. The summer before he started the 11th grade and his job at McDonald's, he considered quitting school to sell drugs.

"I wanted some things my friends had," he said. "I knew what they were doing to get them." He recalled a friend, Kermit Smith. "He had everything," Derrick said.

One day Derrick, Kermit and some other boys were shooting baskets. Kermit left to buy a snow cone near the dope track.

"We heard a shot," Derrick said. "He was running. 'Boom.' Running. 'Boom.' He fell and I went to him. He said his neck was burning." Kermit was pronounced dead at a hospital. To hustling drugs today, Derrick says: "No, no, no! Look at the consequences: jail, death."

However grim the odds against him, Derrick says he will make it because of two little secrets: "getting people behind me" and playing by the rules.

Family 'They Didn't Have A Chance'

The low-rise project where Derrick White has lived since he was a few months old was built in the 1950's and named for H. P. Hurt, a black Memphis doctor. The Whites pay \$35 a month for their apartment, which measures about 850 square feet. Derrick lives there with his mother, who is 42, his four half brothers, Kevin, 17, Mareco, 12, Brandon, 11, and Jason, 10, and his half sister Tiffany, 13.

All but Derrick are children of Mr. Horton, 34, who married Ms. White two years ago. To insure the family's eligibility for welfare, Mr. Horton lives with his mother nearby. But he is frequently around, cooking and helping with the kids.

Derrick hardly knows his own father, a bus driver in Madison, Ark. "He asked his daddy for a pair of pants to graduate in," Ms. White said, "and he wouldn't do it." Derrick said, "If something happened to him, I wouldn't care."

In the living room, 10 trophies shine on the stereo cabinet. Seven are Derrick's: two for academic honors at Northside, three for outstanding band member (he plays the tuba and the saxophone), one for highest grade point average on the football team and one for senior prom king. In a picture on an end table, King Derrick, in a tuxedo, stands behind the prom queen.

Upstairs, Ms. White has one of the three bedrooms; until February, the five boys used another that has two sets of bunk beds. Derrick, who weighs 230 pounds, shared a bottom bunk with Mareco. Mareco complained, so he has moved into Tiffany's room, which has a queen-size bed.

The family lives on about \$10,000 a year — \$540 a month in food stamps and \$305 in Aid to Families With Dependent Children, the Federal welfare program. Derrick's dress shoes wore out last summer, and on Sundays he has not been joining his family at the Friendly Missionary Baptist Church.

"I don't want to go to church with tennis shoes on," Derrick said. "People talk." Ms. White said she told him, "I don't believe God is looking at what you got on." But for his birthday on Feb. 3, she found \$69 to buy him a new pair at Sears.

A First Job, a First Child

Ms. White, who is working toward her high school equivalency degree, grew up in Forrest City, Ark., near Memphis, the seventh of 18 children of a maid and a sharecropper. Ms. White said that when she was 17 she had to drop out of the ninth grade because her mother had a stroke.

Two years later she took an assembly job in a television set factory. She held it for five years, until Derrick was born. Derrick's father was uninterested in his new family, she said, so she moved to Hurt Village and onto the welfare rolls.

Twenty-four then, she soon met Mr. Horton, who had grown up in the project and, like Derrick, graduated from Northside. Mr. Horton once worked for a heating and air conditioning contractor. A fellow worker who gave him a lift to the job quit, so Mr. Horton quit too. He had a job as a janitor for two years but found it gone when he returned from jury duty.

Last year, he lost a job as a hospital kitchen helper after he was arrested on what he described as a trumped-up charge of drug solicitation. He served seven months of a three-year sentence.

"I been wondering why it's me," Mr. Horton said. "I tell the kids: 'Don't be hanging out on the street like I used to. Be somebody one day.'"

Derrick said, "I look at them and see they didn't have a chance." If there is a lesson in his parents' work histories, he said, "It's not to have children when you're young. That is the only thing that could mess me up." He said he hopes not to become a father before he is 28 or 30.

Drills for Life

Derrick says his mother drills the kids with her maxims for making it:

"Never come home with a C."

"Speak like you know something."

"Don't cut your words off."

"Have a firm handshake."

"Look me in the eye."

"High school, diploma, college."

Ms. White introduced the children to work by assigning them chores. A sheet of yellow legal paper is posted on the refrigerator.

"Kitchen Detail," it says in Mr. Horton's hand. "You will sweep and mop the kitchen floor when you are through with washing dishes. And clean stove too and the cabinet and microwave." Each child is assigned a day except Sunday, the parents' turn.

Ms. White makes the younger children show her their homework. One afternoon she is in the living room when Jason, a fourth grader, comes in, looking fretful.

"My teacher said she was going to call you," he says.

"About?" Ms. White asks.

"Homework."

"So you're not turning your homework in."

"I was thinking it was going to be wrong."

"So what's that supposed to mean? Make no mistakes? You can make mistakes."

Jason bows his head. "Yes, ma'am."

"So that's what I washed in your pants," she says. "All that paper in the pockets was your homework."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ms. White said mothers should push their kids. "I feel as the young black men could have the best jobs if they are determined," she said. "A lot of them are not determined, and it would have to be the mother's fault."

"If the mother stays on them, not let up for a second, it make them mad. You get their eyes rolled at you. But I just don't pay any attention."

School and Work A Semester Lost, A String of Jobs

During honor assemblies, Northside High erupts in catcalls when students are beckoned to the stage for awards.

"Most will not stand up," said a teacher, Josephine Young. "Derrick always would."

Derrick said: "Well, yeah. I'm a nerd."

Getting into the University of Tennessee was a coup for a kid from Hurt Village. But Derrick said he had to leave Chattanooga after the university sent him a bill for fees, \$660 that he could not pay.

He might have dropped out anyway. He spent his first semester worrying because his mother went to the hospital to have gallstones removed.

For part of the year his stepfather was in jail. His brother Kevin's grades were flagging under the pressure of the football season.

"She was calling me saying, 'I need help,' " Derrick said of his mother. "I was thinking, She's not going to make it on her own."

Until Derrick left for Chattanooga, he and Kevin, a junior, did homework together on the kitchen table. "I was telling Kevin, 'I don't know how you're going to get into college with grades like this,' " Derrick said. By March, with Derrick home and the football season long past, Kevin's grades had recovered to a high C.

Derrick had no clear idea about how he would get back on track to medical school. At first, he thought of going to Shelby State Community College, a junior college where yearly tuition is just \$900. He could become a nurse and use that as a steppingstone to medical school.

But his career counselor from Northside, James Thompson, recommended LeMoyné-Owen, a predominantly black, private four-year college where a semester's tuition is \$2,100. Mr. Thompson led him through the application process.

Derrick said he had attended classes for three or four weeks, but the scholarship he was finally granted was \$1,200, leaving him \$900 short. He considered borrowing the money, but he said his mother had dissuaded him. "I had to stop classes," he said.

Now he wants to enroll at Memphis State University in June. It costs about \$1,000 a semester, and Derrick should be able to qualify for aid for at least part of that. He says he will get a job to cover other expenses.

McDonald's and Onwards

Derrick landed his first job, the one at McDonald's, after a friend who worked there had told him of an opening. He was interviewed on a Sunday and asked to start the next day. His pay, at the minimum wage of \$4.25 an hour, usually came to \$100 a week.

Since McDonald's, he has had four jobs -- the two this winter, one the summer of his junior year cleaning public parks and roadsides, and one last summer as a clerk at the Memphis Health Center.

Derrick White doesn't have a real role model nearby, but Hurt Village might have one in him. He will get past his unsettled debut in college, he said.

"I know what I got to do," Derrick said. "There's so much I want, that my family wants. They see me giving up, then they think they should give up."

Obstacles are just part of the game. "It's like a hand being dealt you," he said. "You just got to play it. Get people behind me. I know I'm going to make it."

GRAPHIC: Photos: Derrick White (Pg. A1); "There's so much I want, that my family wants. They see me giving up, then they think they should give up." -- DERRICK WHITE; Derrick White helping his mother, Shirley, work on a math problem at home. (pg. B10) (Photographs by PAUL HOSEFROS/The New York Times)

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SUNDAY, APRIL 4: Nicholas Whitiker, a Chicago fourth grader growing up fast.

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TUESDAY, APRIL 20: Asenhat Gomez, a new immigrant isolated in Brooklyn.

TODAY: Derrick White, a Memphis teenager, groping for a road map out of the projects.

SUNDAY, APRIL 25: Shawn Hunt, a one-time messenger for Brooklyn drug dealers, closing in on success.

(pg. B10)

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HEADLINE: Shawn, 17: Running Past Many Obstacles

SERIES: Children of the Shadows/ The tenth of ten lives of the cities.

BYLINE: By SARA RIMER

BODY: "I'm a powerful, intellectual man going somewhere," said Shawn Hunt, talking about his future as he hurried from high school to a track meet. His hair was newly cropped in the trademark close fade that inspires his friends to call him Baldheaded Shawn, or Barkley, after Charles Barkley, the basketball star. Around his neck he wore a small gold lion, a gift from his older brother, a sergeant in the Army. His backpack held his track shoes and his books.

Not long ago, Shawn Hunt, who at age 11 was a messenger for the neighborhood drug dealers and three years later was packing a .25-caliber pistol, seemed headed only for jail. But this year, at 17, almost everything has changed: He is an honor student at Bishop Loughlin Memorial High School in Brooklyn, co-captain of the track team, a youth leader at his church. He holds down a part-time clerical job at Downstate Medical Center. Next fall he plans to attend Clark-Atlanta University in Georgia. He would like to be a psychologist or a sports-medicine doctor.

But even now, when everyone who knows him is predicting a bright future, when he is only months away from escaping the streets of New York, Shawn is haunted by recurring violent dreams.

"People be fighting in front of me," he said. "I don't know who they are, but I know they're youths. Two youths, and they just keep fighting. It just seems like nobody's winning. I know I have to get out of there."

The dream reflects the story of Shawn Hunt's life so far, his struggle to survive in a world that seems to conspire against young men like him who are trying to forge an identity amid powerful, conflicting forces.

On one side is the Shawn who is trying to swallow the old anger at a father who drank and did drugs and left when Shawn was 13. On the other is the Shawn whose mother has worked three jobs so her son could have a parochial-school education and a nice apartment on a relatively safe block in Flatbush. On one side, too, is the Shawn who has been tempted by the drug dealers, who promise fast money, protection and popularity. On the other is the Shawn whose mother, minister and teachers have insisted that he can go to college and achieve professional success.

"I used to think that all black men were like my father," Shawn said. "They stood in front of a numbers hole, drinking. I thought, 'If that's all that's waiting for me, I don't want to grow up.'"

The Shawn he has become is a source of inspiration, a success. His pastor has taken to announcing his grades from the pulpit. But still, Shawn says, he has to contend with all those who see, not him, but the stereotype — one more teen-age black thug, as faceless as the youths in his dream.

Returning from a track meet the other evening, he stopped to admire a shirt in a store window in midtown Manhattan. He was neatly dressed in a brown leather jacket, loose-fitting beige pants he had ironed himself and black Nikes with the shoelaces tied. Seeing him, a man inside the store shut the door and locked it.

Such incidents only fuel Shawn's ambition. "Whether there's racism or not, I still have to make it," he said.

Many young people with Shawn's ambitions are obsessed by the Scholastic Aptitude Test scores needed to get into certain colleges. Shawn knows those numbers, too, but there is a determined edge to his voice as he quotes another set of statistics that could define his life if he let them — the high percentage of young black men who end up dead, or in jail.

"I have a lot of statistics to prove wrong," he said.

Three years ago, he had visited friends at the city jail on Rikers Island. What he saw there terrified him. "Everyone looked like me," he said. "I felt so down, so low."

To get where he is today, Shawn had to have a vision of a future beyond Rikers and all the other roadblocks -- the statistics, the dealers, his own father. It was not a public institution or program that infused him with that vision and held him to it. It was a collective of people from his own community, starting with his mother, 42-year-old Rotha Hunt, one of 11 children who grew up poor in South Carolina, who is no longer poor but is working very hard not to be.

"I was worried I'd lose my son to the streets," she said. "But as long as I had breath in my body, I was going to fight for him. I wasn't just going to turn him loose. But I knew I couldn't raise him by myself."

Ms. Hunt knew, she says, that her son needed strong, compassionate black men as role models, men who could win what she sees as nothing less than the battle for his soul.

She persuaded Argle Whitfield, a onetime tight end for the Dallas Cowboys, to take Shawn into his small private school after the boy had been kicked out of parochial school in the sixth grade. And she brought him to the attention of Johnny Ray Youngblood, the pastor at St. Paul's Community Baptist Church, who is on a mission to reclaim the Shawn Hunts who he says have been written off all over New York City.

"Rev snatched me up," Shawn said. "He's a very powerful person."

But it is all still tenuous. The beauty salon on Fulton Avenue pays Ms. Hunt a decent wage -- about \$25,000 a year -- but there is no health insurance for her or for Shawn, no sick days, no paid vacation. For years, she has had to stretch her money to help out her mother and 10 brothers and sisters back in South Carolina. There is nothing to fall back on, only a mother's faith.

The Family Torn Asunder By Alcoholism

Just inside the entrance to Rotha Hunt's two-bedroom apartment on Ocean Avenue is an aquarium with a pair of tropical fish swimming through clear waters above rainbow-colored pebbles. Shawn named the fish: Shawn and Rotha. Shawn and Rotha Hunt have been swimming upstream, from the Coney Island projects to Flatbush, since Ms. Hunt left her husband seven years ago.

Rotha and Burnett Hunt met in high school in Bucksport, S.C. "His family had a lot more than we did," said Ms. Hunt. "I thought he would do a lot with his life."

She hadn't intended to get pregnant, but in her senior year she had Eric and still managed to hold down a job in a laundry and graduate from high school. She left Eric with her mother and invested her savings in a one-way bus ticket to New York. "I was determined to have something," she said.

She went to work as a typist in a bank. Eventually, Burnett joined her with their baby. He got a job as a porter with the Transit Authority. Shawn was born. The family moved to Coney Island Houses and there, in an apartment beside the Atlantic Ocean, Ms. Hunt's dreams for her husband's future slowly ebbed away.

"He was drinking and not supporting his family," she said. "He always told me, 'I'm living for today. Tomorrow is not promised.'"

'Your Father Loves You'

Whatever anger Ms. Hunt may have toward her husband, she keeps it to herself.

On a table in her living room is a picture of Burnett Hunt, in a three-piece suit, his arm around Rotha, standing proudly behind his sons.

"He just got caught up," she said. "It's difficult being a black man today. I always tell Shawn, 'Regardless of what he does, your father loves you.'"

Later, Shawn was more explicit about what happened on Coney Island.

"I hated my father for what he was doing to my mother," he said. "He was hitting her. He'd take me to these numbers holes, and I'd watch him drinking and getting into arguments and fighting. Once I found a crack vial in the house. I took it to my mother. I said, 'Yo, he's doing drugs now?' I felt my world was falling apart."

He was only 10 years old. His voice was pained as he recalled the day he was on the roof of his building, playing, when he looked down and noticed his father weaving through the courtyard below. "He was drunk," he said. "I knew he was going to go upstairs and start acting funny."

'It Was a Deep Hatred'

Shawn's makeshift playground was littered with empty bottles; he began hurling them at his father. "I was trying to hit him, but I didn't," he said. "He was looking up, but I ducked. He couldn't see me. It was a deep hatred, like raw, from inside."

Ms. Hunt knew her son was in trouble. "He had so much anger in him," she said. "He used to just hit people." But she was preoccupied, trying to earn enough money to leave her husband, working days at the bank and nights at the beauty salon. Weekends, she sold Tupperware door to door.

Only recently did Shawn confess that he, too, had been working in those days. His job was to ride his bicycle along Surf Avenue after school, delivering empty vials and messages for the neighborhood dealers.

"I looked up to them," he said. "They had all that money. They wore all the latest styles — goose jackets with fur hoods and Patrick Ewing Adidas shoes. They offered me protection. They'd pay me \$20, \$25 each trip. Sometimes I'd do two or three a day. I thought, 'I'm making me some money.' "

He worked for them for less than a year. When his mother moved him to Flatbush, he was out of a job. "I thought, 'Damn, I left all that money behind in Coney Island.' "

And he missed his father and asked if he could go back and live with him. "I just saw this grown-up black man," he said. "That attracted me."

Less than a day later, he was back in Flatbush. "The atmosphere was real negative," Shawn said. "He bought me some Nathan's food. Then he wanted to go out and drink with his friends."

Shawn hasn't seen his father since he searched him out two Christmases ago. He doesn't even have a telephone number for him. The last he heard he had lost his job.

The Therapy Group Agonized Words About a Father

The young men's therapy group was in session in Dr. Youngblood's study at St. Paul's. The subject ranged from friendship to women to college to black men.

"I still have this problem with black men I need to get over," Shawn said. "My father, he showed me what a black man can fall victim to. I have a lot of questions: Why, why, why did he do this? I don't want to try so hard not to be like my father that I turn into him."

Later, Dr. Youngblood's 18-year-old son, Joel, told the group how he had been inspired by his best friend, Shawn.

'Not a Nerd'

"Shawn goes to school, he does his homework, he has track, he works," said Joel, a freshman at Medgar Evers College. "Shawn has a great effect on me. I think, 'If he can do it, I can do it.' "

There is also something, important to everyone in the room, that his best friend is not. Shawn, Dr. Youngblood said, "is not a nerd." Or, put another way, he doesn't act white, or talk white.

"I don't lose my identity with my own people — like with my friends in the projects," Shawn said. "I don't lose what they're going through, how they act."

How does he talk to white people? "Regular, straight up and down English." But, he adds, regular English wouldn't go over too well with some of his black friends. "They'd be like — that's not what they're used to. They wouldn't take too good to that. They'd think I was funny."

In conversation, Shawn projects authority. At parties, if anyone says a word when he is guzzling orange juice — his favorite drink — he tells them, "You know athletes don't drink."

He doesn't have a girlfriend at the moment, but Dylana, Teresa, Keisha and Katheia telephone him several evenings a week. (Fortunately, he has call waiting.)

Until this year, Shawn's grades were average at best. "I thought 70 was O.K.," he said. "I'd get into the military." His brother, Eric, had enlisted after graduating from Lafayette High School with top grades. The Army was a ticket out of New York — and to a free college education. But Dr. Youngblood, along with Ms. Hunt, had other ideas for Shawn.

"Rev said I needed to think seriously about going to college," he said. "He had to keep kicking it into me, and kicking it into me, and kicking it into me."

That is how it has been between them since Shawn's mother started dragging him to church seven years ago.

"He'd be preaching, and I'd be in the back sleeping or eating Chinese food," Shawn recalled. "He'd call out, 'Shawn, Shawn,' and he'd make me come down there in front of the whole church. I'd be like, 'Why you be calling me down all the time?' He'd say, 'Why do you always have that scowl on your face?'"

It was on Dr. Youngblood's advice that Shawn chose Clark Atlanta, a black college.

"I want to go somewhere where I'm going to feel comfortable for four years," he explained. "I'm going to be in white mainstream society for the rest of my life."

The Outlet 'Feel So Free' When Running

Some nights it is after 11 when Shawn laces up his green and black running shoes and sprints several miles along Ocean Avenue to Joel Youngblood's house in Crown Heights. "Running is my outlet," he said. "I run off my anger. I feel so free when I'm running."

It is while running that he has one of the few chances to be free from worrying about getting robbed or shot. Shawn is 5 foot 7 and muscular, and when he is walking, he is ever watchful, never relaxed, his face closed, his mouth a tense line. He looks intimidating, and he means to.

"Your face is not mean, not happy, just a look that's trying to portray nothing," he said. "You know sometimes people get on the train, they're smiling, and saying, 'Excuse me, excuse me?' You don't want people to read you like that." If you do, he explained, "They think they can get over on you."

Shawn doesn't carry a weapon. Three years ago, when he was new in the neighborhood and at Loughlin, he borrowed a gun for protection. He never told his mother. During the day he kept it, loaded with four bullets, in his locker, behind his books. At night he hid it under his mattress — and agonized over it. After a few months, he gave it back.

'A False Power'

"I realized Loughlin was a safe and secure place for me to be," he said. "I felt relieved. I felt like I was master of things when I had that gun. But it was a false power. I was scared of shooting somebody. You think about things like that when you have a gun under your bed at night."

He fired a gun once, when he was about 11, back on Coney Island. "We were messing around under the boardwalk," he said. "It was a .25-caliber. It was one of my quote, unquote friends. I didn't know it was loaded. I shot it. I was like, 'Yes!' It went 'Poom!' 'Poom!' I was feeling so many feelings. I was scared. I was just feeling this power."

Now, he said, the people he fears most are the young men with guns. Last year, he was held up at gunpoint as he emerged from a check-cashing establishment with \$125 — a week's pay. His assailants were straight out of the dreams that disturb his nights — "eight black youths about my age."

GRAPHIC: Photos: Shawn Hunt (Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times) (pg. 1); Shawn Hunt running on the indoor track at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn; "I don't lose my identity with my own people - like with my friends in the projects. I don't lose what they're going through. (Photographs by Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times) (pg. 47)

TYPE: Series

SUBJECT: CHILDREN AND YOUTH; SURVEYS AND SERIES; URBAN AREAS; DRUG ABUSE AND TRAFFIC; BLACKS (IN US)

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HEADLINE: Children of the Shadows

BODY: When the rest of America even bothers to think about youngsters in inner cities, it resorts, too often, to stereotypes. Menacing young men with baggy pants, reversed baseball caps or hooded parkas. Dropouts who carry guns, deal drugs, mug the unwary. Gum-smacking young women with huge gold earrings who are more interested in getting pregnant than getting ahead.

But a 10-part New York Times series, which ends today, has presented the faces and voices behind those simplistic images. These "Children of the Shadows" are desperately trying to make it, while fighting against tremendous odds. Their ability to cope is not only astonishing but admirable, from 10-year-old Nicholas Whitiker, forced to be the man of his household, to 17-year-old Shawn Hunt, who abandoned life as a drug messenger to become a model student headed for college.

Listen to 19-year-old Marcus Tramble of Chicago, whose life is governed by fear of the mean streets that surround him: "You got to watch your back all the time. There's never no time to rest. But you adapt to it or you die. That's the law of the street."

Living in neighborhoods infested with crime, some have succumbed to drug dealing or other offenses. Even those trying to do better fear they will not be accepted by a society that seems distant and alien. As 18-year-old Ladeeta Smith of Brooklyn expressed it: "Sometimes I think, how far am I going to be able to go being female and black -- two things against me. . . . I'm afraid people will think that I'm no good, that I can't do anything."

Despite her apprehension, Ladeeta is determined to go to college and succeed in life. Her high school English teacher's description of Ladeeta as "an old soul with a whole lot of strength [who] refuses to go out without a fight" could apply to many Children of the Shadows.

These courageous youngsters shouldn't have to fight so hard by themselves. Too often they are neglected while society debates whether government intervention is an appropriate solution or a waste of money.

It's true that no government or private program can substitute for a loving and functioning family. But social supports can make a difference.

Nearly all of the families described in the Times series could have been helped by better housing, comprehensive health care, better drug and alcohol prevention and treatment programs, and more employment opportunities that would allow minority men to take care of their families with dignity. Most of the children could have been helped by more personalized public schools and greater availability of recreational, cultural and social enrichment programs.

Private individuals can do a lot. But rebuilding the safety net of services that was badly neglected over the last decade is a public responsibility, and opportunity. It costs about \$25,000 a year to maintain a youngster in prison, more than in the Job Corps or college. Society has a choice: keep these children in the shadows or bring them into the light.

TYPE: Editorial

SUBJECT: Terms not available

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Children of Working Poor Are Day Care's Forgotten

By SARA RIMER

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — At 5 the other morning, Marlene Garrett had her 11-month-old baby in her arms and was guiding her other two sleep-dazed children, ages 3 and 4, through the darkness to the baby sitter's.

"Mama has to go to work so she can buy you shoes," Mrs. Garrett told them. She had just that day moved up the economic ladder, from a job selling sneakers for \$5.25 an hour to a job behind the counter at a bagel cafe for \$6 an hour. Her shift started at 6, and she did not want to be late.

Seven blocks on foot, and then she was hugging her children and handing them over to Vivierine, a Bahamian woman who works nights at the self-service laundry where Mrs. Garrett does her wash.

Vivienne's small apartment was clean but sparsely furnished. There were no toys or books in sight, just a television that the children spent most of the next 10 hours watching. For this, Mrs. Garrett scrapes together \$50 a week — a little less than half the cost for just one child in most licensed day care centers here.

Mrs. Garrett hurried down the stairs and set off for work, three miles away. The family car died a month ago.

"It breaks my heart, leaving them there," said Mrs. Garrett, who arrived in Florida from Jamaica in 1989. "I want them in a learning environment. This is the best I can do right now. It's an emergency situation."

The experts agree: for Mrs. Garrett and tens of thousands of other low-income working parents nationwide, child care is a perpetual emergency.

Low-income working families are, in many ways, the forgotten class in the national debate over child care. They make too little to afford the choices of professional women — whether to use a nanny or an au pair, to work part time or full time. And many make too

much to qualify for government programs; Others make little enough to qualify, but are low on long waiting lists while priority is given to women leaving the welfare rolls for jobs.

Florida offers a good illustration of this squeeze on the working class. More Federal money is available for child care here because of the new welfare law: Florida added over \$100 million to its child care budget this year. And the state has a program to provide assistance to nonwelfare families whose income is below 150 percent of the poverty level (\$17,775 for a family of three).

But like other states under

Continued on Page A22



Cindy Karp for The New York Times
Kelly McKnight dropping off her daughters at a Florida day care center before work.

After Welfare Law, Children of the Working Poor Are Day Care's Forgotten

Continued From Page A1

pressure to meet the work requirements of the new law or risk severe penalties, Florida has budgeted the bulk of its child care money to welfare recipients moving to jobs.

There are 25,000 children of low-income families receiving no welfare benefits who are on the waiting list for assistance in Florida, and an additional 39,000 who are eligible, according to Susan Muenchow, executive director of the Florida Children's Forum, a statewide nonprofit child care resource and referral agency. Marlene Garrett's children are among those waiting.

"From a child-care standpoint," Ms. Muenchow said, "you're better off on welfare."

When Staying Home Is Not an Option

The lives of women like Mrs. Garrett are ruled by hard economic facts. "If my finances permitted, I'd love to stay home," said Mrs. Garrett, whose husband, Rod, works in a factory making hospital curtains. "Who's a better caretaker than Mom?"

But staying home is not an option. Her husband takes home about \$250 a week. Her own \$200 a week helps put food on the table and pay the \$400 monthly rent. Mrs. Garrett, who keeps a folder with her expenses neatly itemized, says she owes nearly \$5,000 in medical bills. The family does not have health insurance.

Welfare is not an option. "I don't want to plant that seed in my children," she said. "I want to work."

When it comes to child care, Mrs. Garrett, who is 36, has almost no choices. She would like to put her children, Hasia, 11 months; Angeliq ue, 4; and Scherrod, 3, in her church day care center and preschool, Holy Temple Christian Academy, but at \$180 a week — about \$90 less than what most licensed day care centers in Fort Lauderdale charge for three children — it is beyond her reach.

The church day care center had seemed possible back in September, when Mrs. Garrett was earning \$8 an hour as a home health aide for the elderly. (It helped that she was often able to bring her children to work.) She took her children for their shots and put money down on school uniforms, at \$32 apiece. But then her car gave out, and with her hours long and unpredictable, and bus service irregular, she had to give up the work she says she was born to do. There was no money for another car. Overnight,



"Mama has to go to work so she can buy you shoes," Marlene Garrett told her children, Angeliq ue, Scherrod and baby Hasia, on a recent pre-dawn seven-block walk to the baby sitter's in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

her family was downwardly mobile.

"I took back the uniforms," she said. "They credited me for them."

Mrs. Garrett has to make do with the child care she can afford, and Vivienne is what she can afford.

Mothers like her improvise fragile arrangements that inevitably break down: The friend, neighbor or relative who was looking after their children gets sick, or goes to work, or moves away, or simply becomes unavailable, and they have to find someone else to take their children.

"How can you get a job if you don't have day care?" said Christina Burdimo, 26, a waitress who is raising two children, ages 2 and 4, alone. But without a subsidy — she is also on a waiting list for one — she cannot afford day care. A lot of places want \$94 per week per child," said Ms. Burdimo, who is divorced.

Her father and her mother-in-law have been alternating baby-sitting duties. "My mother-in-law will do it a couple more months," she said.

Regulated child care in Florida

costs \$4,000 a year or more, and many families are doing without other essentials in order to pay for it. Kelly McKnight, who earns \$8 an hour monitoring burglar alarms, moved her two daughters, ages 3 and 4, into her father's mobile home, in Hollywood, after her husband left her. It was the only way she could afford the \$135 a week for a licensed day care center, she said.

Her father, a retired correctional officer, helps with the child care, but the situation is far from ideal: the mobile home is in an adults-only community. Ms. McKnight's children can be there only temporarily. After two years on the waiting list, Ms. McKnight began receiving her subsidy six months ago.

In rural areas, where people are spread out, and with public transportation often nonexistent, makeshift arrangements with friends and family can become even more difficult.

Wendi Slay has a 3-month-old baby and works for \$7.20 an hour as a collections clerk for a credit union in

ty. "They're desperate," said Helen Blank, director of the child-care division of the Children's Defense Fund. "They miss a day of work, and they lose their job."

Recent research on rapid brain development shows that an enriching, nurturing environment is important for infants and toddlers. Studies show that children in low-quality care can have delayed cognitive and language development, behave more aggressively toward others and react poorly to stress.

Mrs. Garrett, who keeps on a shelf in her children's bedroom a set of 1961 World Book Encyclopedias that was a gift from the family of an elderly man she was caring for, does not need experts to tell her that her children need stimulation. That is what her church offers.

"The children play games," she said. "They go on field trips. They teach them, they train them. My children are bright. You would be amazed at what they would acquire in a year."

But for her, and for many other low-income parents, it is all they can do simply to find a safe place for their children.

Two years ago, state social service inspectors in Pensacola found a woman running an illegal day care center in her trailer for 20 children under age 4. According to their report, the children were hungry, and watching soap operas and game shows. Two of the children had chicken pox. "There appeared to be a total lack of stimulation for the children indicated by the abnormal inactivity of all the children," the report stated.

The parents, who had no other day care they could afford, were angry that the operation was shut down, according to Becky Kirsch, the executive director of the Children's Service Center, Pensacola's child resource and referral agency.

Waiting for Help; Not Likely to Get It

The Florida Legislature has recently passed two budget amendments, transferring some surplus child-care money for welfare recipients to low-income working families. But there is still a freeze on helping low-income families on the waiting list, and advocates fear that as increasing numbers of welfare recipients go to work, they will need more money for child care — leaving even less for low-income working families who have not been on welfare.

"We're pitting one group of poor people against another," Ms. Muenchow said. "Many of these parents

have no choice but to leave the children in substandard arrangements that are roting their brain and jeopardizing their futures."

She and other advocates say the states should base eligibility for child-care subsidies on income, not welfare status. Only a few states including Illinois, Washington and Rhode Island, have taken that step.

"The country is focused on moving mothers from welfare to work," said Ms. Blank, of the Children's Defense Fund. "It's not nearly as focused on mothers who are already working give them the support they need to stay independent, and to keep the children safe."

There are other sources of assistance: Florida has established a nationally recognized child-care partnership program that encourages businesses to help low-wage employees with child care. About 4,000 no-welfare children are getting help.

Tammy McLamore, who works for \$6.25 an hour as a reservations clerk for a transportation company in Fort Lauderdale, has watched the youngest of her five children, shy, 3-year-old Katie, blossom this fall. The reason: She began attending the high regarded Jack and Jill Nuser School on a scholarship provided by the school. Last year, her mother says, Katie spent her days stuck in baby sitter's crowded, dirty apartment, in front of a television with five or six other children.

At 7 one morning, Katie was eagerly boarding the school bus. "She sing and dance," Ms. McLamore said. "They do activities. Katie talk about all the teachers. She come home from school and says, 'I want me to teach you a song?'"

One recent Sunday, Mrs. Garrett who credits God and her Pentecostal religion with her relentlessly positive attitude, was near tears. "Vivienne told me she cannot keep my child so early," she said. "She has to take her little girl to school. Her husband's work schedule at the Landromat is about to be changed. I have to try to find somebody else."

A day later, Mrs. Garrett said she had offered Vivienne an additional \$25 a week. "She said she will keep my children," said Mrs. Garrett, who is still hoping to send her children to Holy Temple Christian Academy.

To that end, she had a promise interview the other day for a secret job working room service nights at the local Marriott hotel. She says she will pay Vivienne another \$15 to care for her children the extra hours. "I hates it that she will have even a time with them, she said.

"It is temporary," she said. "I doing what I have to do."

Quality Bows To Availability

In all this scrambling, many experts say, low-income women do not have the luxury to worry about quali-