



Three generations of Sandtown-Winchester residents: Janice Walker (center, top row), her grandchildren (clockwise from left) Kiera, Ashley, Cortary, Mikeal, Shanna, and Travon, and her mother Minerva Briscoe.

Family Portrait

Life is hard in one of Baltimore's toughest neighborhoods. But for Janice Walker, it's home

BY CHARLES GERENA

Editor's Note: *The following article on urban poverty approaches the topic from a different angle than most articles that appear in Region Focus. It does not explicitly discuss the public-policy issues at stake or proposals for reform. Instead, it tells the story of one family in Baltimore's Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood. This approach, we hope, will provide a broader understanding of the problems facing the urban poor.*

When tackling difficult issues such as urban poverty, one must be careful not to draw broad conclusions from

specific examples. We urge you to keep this in mind when reading this article. The family we profile is in many ways representative of households in Sandtown-Winchester and other communities throughout Baltimore. But, like all families, their story is unique.

Finally, we would like to thank Janice Walker and her family. They have very generously shared their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and recollections with us, so that we can share them with you.

Sheltering herself from the chilly November winds, Janice Walker stands behind a gated screen door on the concrete stoop of her house. She awaits the arrival of her six grandchildren from the community center across the street. It's almost dinnertime and it gets dark early.

Janice keeps watch over these children as well as many other neighborhood kids who hang out at her small three-story rowhouse every evening until their parents pick them up. They live in Sandtown-Winchester, whose 72 square blocks in west Baltimore are home to some of the city's most economically

PHOTOGRAPHY: SCOTT SUEHMAN

distressed streets. Janice has lived here almost her whole life.

By the time everybody gets home at 7 p.m., there are 10 children crammed into the small living room. Most of them squeeze into two leather couches around the TV to watch "Teen Titans." Mikeal, 7, sits on the floor beside a small round table while his older sisters, 13-year-old Kiera and 15-year-old Ashley, help Janice prepare dinner.

Tonight's meal is spaghetti and meat sauce. Each person gets a bowlful of pasta and a slice of garlic bread, along with a 32-ounce cup of punch-flavored soda. Four children eat at a wooden table tucked into one corner of the kitchen while six gather around a glass table with Janice. There are only four seats to go around in the dining room, so some of the kids use green, stackable patio chairs.

Janice Walker, 50 years old, makes \$12.25 an hour fixing sandwiches at the Terrace Court Café at Johns Hopkins University, working nine months out of the year. She became a mother at 16 and never finished high school. She describes her first husband as violent; her second died suddenly more than six years ago.

Janice's son, 33-year-old William, is serving a 35-year sentence for murder. Her 26-year old daughter, Cynthia, is a single mother of six who has been unable to hold down a job. Many of Janice's grandchildren have been in and out of foster care and none of their fathers is consistently in the picture. So, Janice feeds, clothes, and shelters six of her grandchildren, ranging in age from 6 to 15 years old. Three are from her son's side (though Mikeal is actually not a blood relative) and three come from her daughter.

For Janice, it was a choice between making room in her rowhouse in Sandtown-Winchester and letting the kids go into foster care. "I don't think anyone with a heart and a conscience could do that," says Helen Causion, one of Janice's three sisters. "Janice wouldn't have been able to sleep at night."

Family members pitch in whenever

they can, plus Janice has medical insurance and receives food stamps and some cash assistance from the Baltimore City Department of Social Services. But she is laid off from her job every summer, so her compensation falls below the poverty threshold of \$27,159 for a family of seven.

Janice puts off dealing with an inner ear problem she developed a few years ago or following up on a diagnosis of heart palpitations. Getting a GED or seeking opportunities beyond the backrooms of Johns Hopkins' dining halls isn't on her radar screen, either.

She says she's tied up with the kids right now, so she doesn't think much about what she'd like to do, other than maybe learn how to drive. Her sister, Causion, says otherwise. "There are times when [Janice] cries because she's tired. She wants a break and wants to do the things that we get to do."

Janice also chooses to remain in Sandtown-Winchester. In 2000, this African-American community had 52 percent of working-age adults not in the labor force. The median household income was \$11,000 less than the city median of \$30,000 a year, and one-third of homes are vacant. Single women head 64 percent of the households in Sandtown, while only

half the adults are high school graduates. The neighborhood is poor, and that's what makes it an affordable place for Janice to live.

"I'm not going to go somewhere and live beyond my means," she explains. Janice has a checking account and a small nest egg to cover home repairs, and no credit card debt. She owns no car, relying instead on friends or public transit to get around. "I can afford this house ... and still manage to get extra things." She has a cell phone, for example.

Janice's family is close by. Her mom and her sister Cynthia are less than a mile away on Division Street. Many of her friends live in the neighborhood, and she has come to depend on local resources like the health clinic on Division and the community center across from her house on Mount Street. This past holiday season, someone submitted her name to St. Gregory the Great Catholic Church to receive a basket for Thanksgiving.

Her home is part of a revitalization effort that has slowly spread through Sandtown since the late 1980s. Even so, the neighborhood has a long way to go. Police cars patrol the streets while video cameras mounted atop light poles keep watch over hot spots. This fall, officers

Baltimore/Sandtown-Winchester

The 72 square blocks that make up Sandtown-Winchester are home to some of the poorest streets in Baltimore.



scared Janice's mother out of her sleep after mistakenly kicking in her door. Janice makes sure that the kids go straight from school to home to the community center, keeping them off the streets where she and her sisters saw their share of drug dealing and spilt blood over the past 40 years.

Janice knows she's poor and has learned to accept that. "You're used to not having certain things. But you make sure you have your basics," she explains. "With me, I make sure that I pay all my bills. Once I get all of my bills out of the way, then I see where I can go from there. If there is something the kids need, I'll see what I can do. If I can't pay my mortgage and my gas and electric bills, that's going to be a problem. That means I have to get another job."

This is Janice Walker's life. It is filled with hostile surroundings and heartbreaking choices. It is ultimately about the difficulties in breaking the grip of poverty.

* * *

Janice has just finished loading a cart with tuna salad sandwiches when a co-worker pops her head into the kitchen. She asks if Janice can prepare today's special — a turkey chipotle sandwich — for the Megabytes dining area upstairs.

"Yeah, how many do you need?" Janice replies.

"Ten — we don't know how well it will move."

Janice reluctantly fills the order. "That's frustrating," she mumbles to herself. A few minutes later she is told to whip up another last-minute order for several smoked turkeys on focaccia bread.

Then Janice's cell phone rings. It's the nurse at Gilmor Elementary, one of the four schools that serve Sandtown-Winchester. Her granddaughter Kiera has a headache and needs someone to go home and get her some medicine. (Baltimore schools cannot administer medications without a parent's written consent.)

Janice asks the nurse to put Kiera on the phone. At first, she angrily

tells Kiera that no one is home to get her medicine and she can't leave work to do it. "I've got to make a living," she tells her. After listening for a bit, she offers to call a neighbor, but that's not good enough. Kiera hangs up.

Such confrontations come with the territory for a grandmother rearing six children on her own. "Sometimes I have to remind them who's the boss," Janice says. "But, on the same token, I let them know they can come to me and talk to me about anything. They tell me stuff that other kids' parents don't hear."

For example, Janice talks with Kiera and her sister Ashley about boys. She constantly tells the girls not to be pressured into having sex. "Don't let nobody tell you that they're crazy about you and madly in love with you, because it doesn't work like that," she says. She speaks, of course, from experience.

Janice also talks with her grandchildren about the importance of education. She hopes they will listen, even though she herself never liked school and chose to stay home at 16 with her newborn son instead of earning her high school diploma.

"The kids are always telling me that they want these high-priced jobs," Janice says. "Cortany talks about being a doctor. Well, she has to go to school to be a doctor. I tell them that so that they'll know that if they don't finish school, they're not going to be able to accomplish what they want."

Janice shows off the certificates earned by each child, proud of what they have achieved. "When Travon graduated first grade, I felt really honored," she recalls. "All of my fussing wasn't in vain."

During a recent homework session, Travon quickly loses interest in

For more than two decades, Janice has worked behind the scenes at the dining facilities of Johns Hopkins University.



what he is doing and starts looking through the sales sheets on the table. "Out of these pictures, what can you pat?" Janice asks Travon, trying to get him to focus. "What can you pat?" she repeats, patting herself on the head. "That's a pat." Travon looks blankly at his worksheet and points at a cat, but he calls it a dog. Then he calls it a map.

* * *

Janice and her three sisters were raised in and around Sandtown-Winchester. Today Janice lives only a few blocks from her childhood homes.

Growing up, both of Janice's parents worked. Minerva Briscoe, Janice's mother, says that her husband's bouts with alcohol abuse often forced her to carry the ball, however. "You couldn't find a better person than my husband Clarence," Briscoe says. "But he just loved to drink, he loved to drink. ... It got to be tiring."

Janice's father soon left the family. So Briscoe cooked homemade dishes at a popular local restaurant called Covington's, then worked at Western Electric. For the last 25 years, she has

been a cook at a home for abused and neglected children in Catonsville.

"Our father wasn't in the home much," Helen Causion says. "He left my mom to raise four girls on her own. We all learned to become independent enough to look out for one another."

Back in the 1960s, Sandtown was just beginning its decline. Up to that point, it was one of Baltimore's working-class communities for African Americans. Music spilled onto the streets from various night clubs and venues, including the Royal Theater where performers like Billie Holliday and Louis Armstrong played. (In fact, Holliday was born in Sandtown.) Briscoe remembers having a good time at the dance halls along Pennsylvania Avenue.

Then the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968 sparked riots throughout the nation. Baltimore was especially hard hit, particularly in the city's western neighborhoods like Sandtown. The riots accelerated the flight of affluent residents to Baltimore's relatively stable suburbs and exacerbated economic problems that were already developing in some communities.

Briscoe tried to shield her daughters from the growing criminal activity. Before it started getting dark, they all had to be back in the house. If anyone strayed away from the immediate area, she would come looking for them.

Briscoe couldn't protect them from everything. Drug deals happened right outside their window. "We still saw a lot and experienced a lot at a young age," Causion recalls. "We've seen people's bodies laid out on the street and covered with sheets until the people from the morgue came to pick them up. ... We've had several relatives killed. [Our uncle] was killed by the police in a shoot-out right in back of our house."

Briscoe didn't let her daughters see their slain uncle. But she saw something just as bad. Two men standing on a street corner got into an argument. One decided to settle things

with a gun, shooting the other in the head. "People told me not to go up there, but I wanted to see," she says. "This man lay out there. As he was breathing, blood was gushing up like a fountain out of his bullet wound. I was scared to go out of the house for months — all I could see was this man. I could imagine how people could be traumatized by seeing different things like that."

While the sisters did what they could to keep an eye on each other, Janice assumed the role of mother hen since she was the oldest. "She made sure that we all got off to school because my mom had to leave for work early," Causion recalls. "She did everything that my mom would have done. ... She was raised to protect."

But she was still a kid. Janice admits to being "sneaky" as a teenager. Her mother describes Janice as being good-hearted, but temperamental and stubborn. Briscoe begged Janice to talk to her about sex, to no avail. "I was like, 'How am I supposed to talk to her about that?'" Janice recalls. "And I didn't go to her, either. That's where I made my mistake."

* * *

In 1971 at the age of 16, Janice began dating an older boy nicknamed Burl who she had a crush on. A few months later, Janice knew something was up.

"I started getting sick. I couldn't eat and I couldn't stand the smell of food," Janice says. "I had no idea what was going on [but] my mother knew exactly what was wrong." She asked one of her sisters if Janice was sleeping a lot and throwing up in the morning. When she said yes, her mother knew that Janice was pregnant. "That was the worst thing I could imagine."

William Lewis was born in July 1972. Briscoe paid a neighbor to watch him; she wanted Janice to finish high school. But Janice kept skipping class to spend time with the baby and his father. "When I found out that bit of news, I told her, 'Being that you'd rather be home with him

and be a mother, if you want somebody to watch the kid you'll have to pay for it.'" Briscoe stopped paying for a babysitter and, eventually, Janice dropped out of high school.

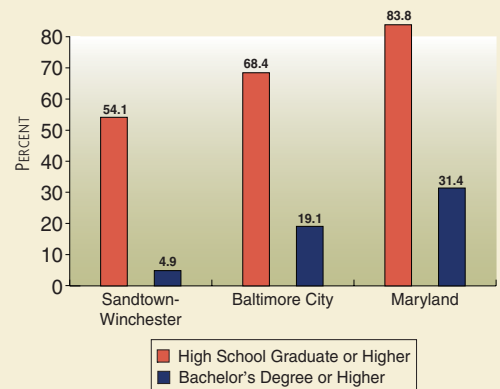
Janice never returned to school and is the only one among her sisters without a diploma. Helen Causion and Sharon Adams earned degrees from Coppin State University. Today, Causion is an executive assistant at Johns Hopkins Community Physicians and lives in Owings Mills, an affluent community north of Baltimore. Adams works at Bank of America as an analyst and lives in a predominately white neighborhood in northeast Baltimore. The third sister, Cynthia Briscoe, graduated from Carver Vocational-Technical High School and currently works at the state's Department of Juvenile Services. She still lives in Sandtown.

Janice moved out of her mother's house in the mid-1970s. She never married the baby's father, though he tried to help out for a while. Eventually, though, he became part of Sandtown's drug scene and wasn't in any shape to help anyone. (These

Poverty and Education

Almost half of the adult residents in Sandtown-Winchester haven't earned a high school diploma, while less than 5 percent have gone on to college and graduated.

Educational Attainment, Population 25 Years and Over

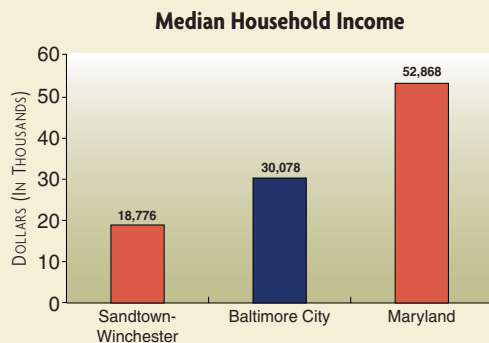


NOTE: Sandtown-Winchester data is for Census Tracts 1501, 1502, 1601, 1602, 1603, and 1604, some of which cross over into surrounding communities.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000

Poverty and Income

Households in Sandtown-Winchester earn substantially lower amounts than those in Baltimore as a whole and Maryland.



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SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000

days, Burl visits Janice on occasion to fix things around the house.)

Then in 1978 she married a man named George. Moneywise, it was perfect timing. “Financially, I didn’t want for anything,” Janice says, although she continued working.

Since George didn’t have any kids of his own, Janice tried to get pregnant again. Janice gave birth in 1979 to a daughter, Cynthia, named after her sister.

Meanwhile, Janice’s marriage was falling apart. “George was a real violent person. ... He was one of those controlling men, and he was much older than I was.” They divorced in 1982.

Janice and her two children moved into their own place on Division Street, right down the block from her mother. They wouldn’t be alone for long. Her uncle’s two sons moved in, then her sister Cynthia when she lost her home to a fire, then her stepsister Pam when she was evicted from her house. Janice paid the bills by taking on multiple jobs.

Her co-workers at Johns Hopkins recall that Janice was difficult to work with when she started there more than 20 years ago. Longtime friend Gladys Burrell says she was put off when she met Janice. “Let me put it this way — saying she was a handful is

putting it mildly. She didn’t take any mess,” Burrell recalls. Now, “she has mellowed out so wonderfully. I prayed that she would calm down.”

In 1990, Janice re-married to a man named Larry Walker. In 1999, she was planning his funeral. He choked to death during a diabetic seizure. “It just tore her to pieces,” Burrell describes. Janice still visits Larry’s grave.

* * *

Janice moved into her home on Mount Street in 2004. She tried to buy one of the houses developed on Riggs Avenue by a partnership of the Enterprise Foundation and a coalition of Baltimore churches, hospitals, and union organizations called B.U.I.L.D. Each two-story house has large rooms and patches of grass in the back and front yards instead of concrete, perfect places for the children and Janice’s cook-outs. But the homes were snatched up before she could get one.

So, Janice settled on the Mount Street home, built in 1920 and sold by B.U.I.L.D./Enterprise Nehemiah Development for \$71,500 through a special first-time homeowner’s program. It has four bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a small backyard, including a tiny brick patio with just enough room to hold a grill.

When she bought the house, Janice assumed that its main residents would be herself and three of her grandchildren — Cortany, Shanna, and Travon, now aged 10, 8, and 6, respectively.

These are the children of her daughter, Cynthia. They first came to live with Janice five years ago, when Cynthia lost her job and started falling behind on her rent. Janice and one of her sisters gave her money, but they later found out that it was barely enough to cover past-due payments that totaled in the thousands. Cynthia eventually received an eviction notice, forcing Cortany, Shanna, and Travon to find refuge with various friends and relatives.

Although they had a roof over their head, Cynthia’s kids weren’t in the best shape and Cortany — then 5 years old — was missing kindergarten. Baltimore’s Department of Social Services intervened, taking the kids away from Cynthia and placing them with temporary foster families. Cortany and Shanna — just 3 years old at the time — stayed with one family while 1-year-old Travon went to a different family. “The boys don’t go with the girls,” Janice says.

Janice didn’t know how bad things had gotten until her daughter called her. “She said, ‘Ma, they’re taking the kids.’ I was like, ‘Huh? Who took the kids?’” Janice contacted the child protective services division and was told that Cynthia had said she didn’t know where Janice was. Within days, Janice was at the courthouse to claim her grandchildren.

“I was sitting there in the hallway, and Shanna and Cortany came flying towards me because they saw me,” Janice recalls. They immediately burst into tears. “Cortany said, ‘We don’t know where Travon is. I kept telling them to call you.’” Travon did show up minutes later, but they were still frightened. “They said, ‘Don’t let us go, grandma. Don’t let them take us back.’ The kids were stuck to me like I was a sticky trap. ... They wouldn’t let me go to the bathroom or nothing.”

Janice obtained custody of the three kids, bringing them home to live with a boyfriend whom they called “Mr. Charles.” But he wasn’t crazy about the idea of three youngsters living with him; his own children were already grown and out of the house. “It was too much madness for him,” Janice explains, so the couple went their separate ways, with Janice eventually settling in her current Mount Street rowhouse.

Janice hopes things will get better for her now 26-year-old daughter. Cynthia has taken parenting classes and says she is going to school, though she hasn’t said what she’s studying. She remains unemployed. “Cynthia hasn’t finished school, but there is so many things she could do,” Janice says. “She

knows how to do hair. She can do tattoos.” (In fact, Janice has a tattoo done by Cynthia, as do two of her other grandchildren, Kiera and Ashley.) Still, Janice is not overly optimistic.

Three more children joined the Janice Walker household just last year, these from her son’s side of the family tree.

William, 33, had been in and out of jail ever since he was a teenager. Helen Causion, who took him in for a while, says: “William was defiant and out of control. He wouldn’t go to school because he admired the guys who were out on the corner selling drugs and getting involved in all kinds of criminal activity.” She believes that William and Cynthia were enticed by the fast money of drugs and crime. “You know, there’s two things that come with that — jail or death. But they didn’t grasp that.”

William’s home today is with the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. He has served 12 years of a 35-year sentence for gun possession and second-degree murder. After his 1993 conviction, Ashley, Kiera, and Mikeal (now 15, 13, and 7, respectively) moved in with their mother, Carrie. (William and Carrie conceived Ashley and Kiera in between jail terms, according to Causion, while Mikeal is the product of a relationship between Carrie and another man. Carrie and William are now divorced.)

About a year ago, Carrie lost her job and apartment due to “circumstances beyond her control,” according to Janice, who agreed to take custody of the children because their other grandmother couldn’t take them in. Janice believes they would have been split up between different foster families if she didn’t step up, making it much harder for Carrie to get them back.

That is how six children ended up sharing Janice’s Mount Street home. Crowding is a bit of a prob-

lem but, mercifully, lead paint isn’t. Three of her grandchildren had elevated levels of lead in their blood from their previous home.

In addition to other pluses, the home is across the street from the Sandtown-Winchester Community Center. This imposing building was once part of Coppin State University. Then it was one of the first renovation projects of Community Building in Partnership, a coalition of local residents, city officials, and the Enterprise Foundation formed in the early 1990s. Now CBP operates the center, which remains under city ownership. Janice loves it.

“The children go over there and learn, play, and mingle with other kids,” Janice describes. Also, “sitting down to do homework with six kids was hard.”

Within the building are a variety of after-school programs, as well as a job readiness and placement program, and a Neighborhood Service Center that administers social services from the city of Baltimore. When Janice Walker broke her leg six months ago, a community center employee pitched in by taking her back and forth to the doctor and doing other things.

On a brisk fall morning, Janice takes the day off from work to tend to “family matters.” Kiera and Mikeal have a date with a dentist to check on their fillings. Then, they will go with Ashley for a trip downtown to the courthouse. A judge will determine whether the three children will be returned to the custody of their mother, Carrie, William’s ex-wife.

But first, they all have to get to Total Health Care in time for a 9 a.m. appointment. Janice hustles the kids out of the door at 8:30 a.m. so they’ll have plenty of time to walk the dozen or so blocks to get there and beat the crowd. The community health center on Division Street is funded with public grants.

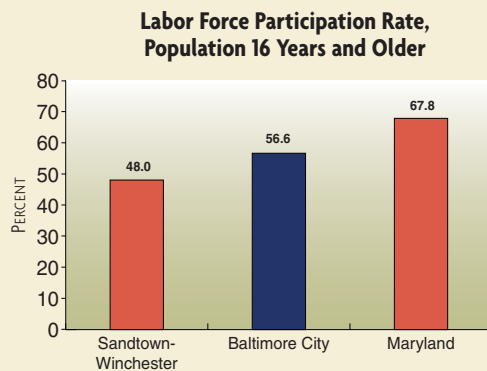
Janice and the kids take Riggs Avenue most of the way to Division Street. They’re too busy clowning around and laughing to dwell on the stark contrasts between new housing, rundown buildings, and vacant lots that await redevelopment. One of the kids does make a big production out of spotting a dead rat in a gutter. “Don’t touch that,” Janice admonishes. “It could have disease. Don’t ever touch anything like that with your bare hands.”

Nor do they pay much attention to a group of young men standing in the middle of an intersection. But the men notice the two adolescent girls. Kiera is wearing jeans and a pink jacket with grey stripes on the sleeves. Her hair is neatly braided, though she complains that it feels too tight on her head. Ashley is also wearing jeans plus a pair of sneakers with rust-colored accents that coordinate with the brown and white stripes on her layered shirt. On top of the shirt is a jeans jacket that is cut off at the midsection. Her hair is tightly pulled together to form puffs on either side of her head.

“Good morning, ladies,” a few of the men say. Janice replies with a terse “good morning” without making eye contact. Once they

Poverty and Labor Force Participation

Sandtown-Winchester residents seek work at much lower rates than their counterparts across the city of Baltimore and Maryland.



NOTE: Sandtown-Winchester data is for Census Tracts 1501, 1502, 1601, 1602, 1603, and 1604, some of which cross over into surrounding communities.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000

are beyond earshot, she disparages the group for just hanging around all day. "Why are they standing in the middle of the street like that?" she tells her grandchildren. "They need to get a job."

Even with these diversions, plus a quick break to pass around a pack of gum, Janice manages to get everyone to the clinic with 15 minutes to spare. The good news is that barely anyone is waiting at the check-in desk or at the dentist's office upstairs. The bad news is that Kiera's Medicaid health insurance hadn't been renewed.

Without the coverage, the appointment will cost \$40. Janice hasn't received her paycheck yet. The clinic can send her a bill, but Janice decides to reschedule the appointment instead. Kiera's mother, Carrie, could soon be regaining custody, so Janice figures the bill is her problem.

"It could be a year before it gets done," Kiera complains, disappointed that only Mikeal will see the dentist today. Janice replies that her mother will make sure that her teeth are taken care of too.

"And why does it have to cost so much?" Kiera whines. "Because the doctors have to get paid for the work they do," Janice answers. "People have to work to make money."

After the dentist, Janice takes the kids home for a quick breakfast and a respite before heading to the courthouse. Kiera and Ashley take turns cooking up some scrambled eggs and a couple of thick pork sausages for everyone to eat. Invariably, the smoke alarm goes off and someone rushes to plug in the box fan sitting between the kitchen and the dining room.

Kiera makes a quick wardrobe change and unties some of the braids in her hair before the family embarks on the long trip ahead of them. They walk east to the Upton/Avenue Market subway station on Pennsylvania Avenue, with the kids goofing around loudly every step of the way.

Janice stops at a corner store to make a quick withdrawal and buy

a few things. The store isn't much to look at from the outside, and it's even dingier inside. Bulletproof glass divides the small store in half, leaving a narrow space for customers on one side and a narrow counter area for the two Asian workers on the other side. The walls behind the counter are filled with goods, mostly shelves with various permutations of alcoholic beverage. A mini-ATM is crammed into one corner and several video games line the adjacent wall, including a video slot machine that has the complete attention of an older man.

While Janice withdraws money from the ATM, the kids occupy themselves. Mikeal fiddles with the large, bright buttons of a casino game without putting in any money, while the girls decide what they can buy with the \$5 they have to spend. They ask Mikeal what he wants and end up buying a bottle of soda, candy, and an "onion pickle" stored in a plastic bag. While riding the train and bus, the kids pass around the pungent slices of pickle to eat.

It takes about an hour to get from Janice's home in Sandtown to the Juvenile Justice Center downtown. The subway ride to the Lexington Market stop is pretty quick, but it takes awhile to transfer to the #15 bus that goes to the courthouse.

Music blares from a clothing store across from the bus stop, prompting Ashley and Kiera to show off their latest moves. Janice recognizes a few of the tunes, but leaves the monkey business to the girls. "Wiggle it, wiggle it, and jiggle it," Ashley keeps singing, long after the tune has stopped playing.

As the kids' boredom grows, they start playing around with the onion pickle because nobody wants to get the juices in the bag on them. At one point, Ashley tries to slip a piece of pickle into Janice's mouth. Janice pushes Ashley away as soon as the pungent taste hits her mouth. She warns them that they'll go back home and miss seeing their mother, Carrie, if they don't calm down.

* * *

Janice meets up with Carrie on the second floor atrium of the Juvenile Justice Center. They sit on one of the wooden benches near the windows overlooking North Gay Street. Others are sitting nearby or milling around, cooling their heels until they have to walk down one of the many long corridors to the courtroom where someone's fate will be decided.

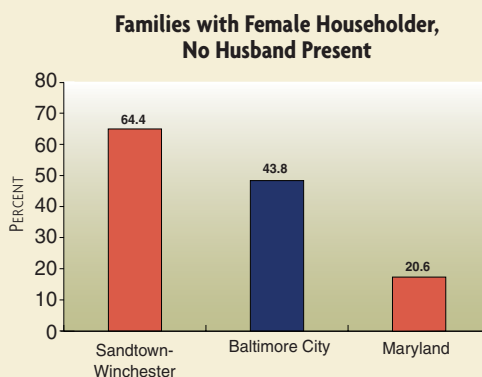
Carrie dotes on Mikeal, kissing him on the forehead and checking his ears to make sure they are clean. She asks Ashley to get a wet tissue so that she can clean him up, which just makes her mad. Ashley defiantly thrusts the palm of her hand at her mother's face and walks toward the bathroom.

Ashley's mood has changed completely. Until now, she has been animated, outgoing, and full of energy. But when she comes back and hands over the tissue, Ashley silently plops down on the next row of benches. Her tattooed back is turned from Carrie and everyone else sitting behind her. (The tattoo is Carrie's name.)

Ashley opens up a plastic grocery bag full of papers and pulls out an orange report cover with her name written across the front in big letters. She flips past a

Poverty and Single Parenting

Sandtown-Winchester has a disproportionate number of families headed by a single mom.



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SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000

few pages of artwork and poetry, then finds a blank page and starts doodling.

Meanwhile, Carrie talks with Janice about whether the kids will stay with her so they can continue to go to the same schools. Janice reminds Carrie that the whole point of her taking the kids was to give Carrie time to get her life straightened out.

The family was told to be at the courthouse at 1 p.m., but several hours elapse before a lawyer finally stops by to fill everyone in. The details are still being worked out, but it looks like there should be no problem transferring custody of the kids to Carrie — she has a steady job at a local dollar store and a place to live. Privately, Janice doesn't think Carrie realizes what she is getting into.

The group takes a long walk to one of the overbooked courtrooms and waits for Ashley and Kiera's case to be heard (their case is separate from Mikeal's). They create such a loud ruckus in the hallway that an officer comes outside and tells them to be quiet. That admonishment doesn't go over too well — Carrie wonders out loud why the "rent a cop" was harassing them.

Later, Carrie grabs Mikeal and scolds him: "If you don't cut it out, you're not getting anything from me." Mikeal whines and continues acting up.

In the first juvenile court case involving Ashley and Kiera, the judge — called a master in this setting — must sign off on an order of supervision that allows the girls to live with their mother. The mother must provide access to her home for visits from social workers until the supervisory period is over. Then, they will go back to court in March to finalize the transfer of legal custody from Janice.

The whole process seems quick and painless, except for when Janice's son, William, is brought into the courtroom in order to provide his consent for the agreement. He enters wearing a plain shirt and

sweatpants, and shackles around his ankles and hands. He sits quietly on a bench to the right of the master, but flashes a quick smile and waves at his family in the rear of the courtroom. Ashley glares back, sitting huddled against the wall in the last row of benches.

Seeing her father in shackles is apparently too much for Ashley to bear. A short time after leaving the courtroom, she slumps down against the wall and starts sobbing. Janice rushes over to offer comfort while the others — including her mother — watch from nearby. She whispers softly to Ashley for a little while and caresses her face. Once she manages to get a laugh or two from Ashley, she pulls her up from the floor and tells her it's time to go on.

The group trudges over to the next courtroom where Mikeal's case will be considered. While waiting in the hallway, Ashley walks up to Janice, stands nose-to-nose with her and asks, "You're going to miss me, aren't you?" Janice replies playfully that she won't miss her one bit, but Ashley insists that she will and throws her arms around Janice, dragging her to one side.

The second case is over just as quickly. The master rescinds an order that made Janice the little boy's legal guardian. Carrie whisks away the kids, who barely have a chance to say good-bye to Janice before they rush off to the subway. Kiera and Mikeal will come back to Janice's house to live until the school year is over, visiting their mom on holidays and weekends. Ashley will box up her stuff to move in with Carrie right away. For now, it's after 5 p.m. and everyone is starving for dinner.

Janice is left alone in front of the courthouse. It has been a long day of sitting and waiting and nodding off.



Janice walks to her house with Kiera, Ashley, and Mikeal to grab a quick breakfast before heading downtown for the children's custody hearing.

But she is relieved that some responsibility will be taken off of her shoulders.

As the evening approaches, Janice rushes back to the train station on Charles Street to catch the train home so that she'll be there when the other grandchildren leave the community center. She has worried all day about the kids getting to the center safely and talked to someone on her cell phone a couple of times about it.

Walking back to her house, Janice stops to talk to a couple of boys sitting on the steps of the makeshift church next door, a rowhouse converted for that purpose by two simple additions: a wooden cross attached to the front and cling-on decals in the windows that look like stained glass. "The girls are going home to their mother," she tells them, so they won't be around as much to get into arguments.

With that, Janice drags herself up the steps and unlocks the security door. In the back of her mind is following up with a doctor about her dizzy spells and heart palpitations. Right now, she has to start dinner to feed her charges and other neighborhood kids. She'll put off taking care of her problems until after Thanksgiving. **RF**

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