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**HEADLINE:** Why Are These Girls Laughing?

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**BODY:**

I visited Anacostia High in Southeast Washington for the screening of a documentary, "**Thug Life** in D.C.," which aired last night on HBO. It was something of a "scared straight" production about a young black male gunman who used to hang out near the school before being sentenced to 25 years to life in prison.

But what struck me most was the frequent laughter of a particular group of girls in the audience. They seemed taken with the thug on the screen.

In the film, Pat Jackson, then a warden at the D.C. jail, asked Aundrey Burno, then 17 and the star of the show, what had made him into a thug. When he replied, "I guess it's in my blood," the girls burst out laughing.

When Burno compared the Lorton prison system to Potomac Gardens, a public housing complex in Southeast -- "society and prison is the same" -- they laughed again.

And when Burno declared that he was prepared to kill in prison -- "I'm too skinny, I can't take no . . . whipping" -- the girls nearly fell out of their seats.

The more pathetic the scene, the louder the laughs.

When Burno was asked whether he was afraid, being one of the youngest people ever to do time at Lorton's Maximum Security Unit, he replied, "No. A coward dies a thousand deaths; a soldier only once."

Now the girls were chuckling in admiration.

While the subject on the screen was the plight of the young black male in the District, I couldn't help but sense that it was this feminine background noise that really needed decoding.

So I asked Lisa Savoy, Anacostia's assistant principal, about it.

"Sometimes it's nervous laughter and sometimes it's ignorance," she said. "Some of them may be dating the kind of boys that the film was about, and they laugh because it hits close to home. Of course, you never know. Are the babies crying because they need to be held or because they want milk? The laughter you heard could be a cry for attention."

I think so.

This is not to stereotype female students at Anacostia High. The school has just under 900 students, about 60 percent of them female. Most of the girls are smart and well behaved. Many of the graduating seniors will be going to college, having overcome or sidestepped all manner of obstacles that await urban adolescent girls.

One of them, Nicole Monk, strongly objected to even showing a film like "Thug Life" at Anacostia High.

"We have made so much progress as a school; why would they bring something so trifling like that for us to see?" she complained. "Our test scores are up. Our standards are higher. We want scholarships, not some film filled with curse words and criminals. It was inappropriate and an insult to our intelligence."

Ralph Neal, assistant D.C. superintendent for high schools, saw it differently.

"Sure, we have many positive things happening in our schools, but we can't downplay the negative," he said. "Every school has a small group of students who are on the brink of making decisions that could ruin their lives. My hope is that by showing a film that did not glamorize the thug life, we might help someone make the right choice."

Still, the focus of the film was only on troubled black boys, even though it was obvious that girls have a powerful influence on their lives. Much of what the boys want in life -- admiration, attention, sex - - came from girls. And they could not have any of it unless they brought something to the table, such as cash, clothes or cars. It also

helped to have a gun.

When Burno's girlfriend said she liked him because his reputation as a thug kept people from picking on her, some girls laughed and nodded knowingly.

Somewhere in that dynamic, where two people with holes in their souls seek in vain to make each other whole, a cycle of pain repeats itself: More babies are born without fathers. And more little boys end up being yanked around, slapped and cursed by mothers trying to make it on their own.

Although black men are most adversely affected (half of all black males in the District ages 18 to 35 are somehow caught up in the criminal justice system), women can play a vital role in helping them change their ways.

Imagine what would happen if all the girls discovered that they could tap into a power within and not have to latch on to a man for a feeling of security. Suppose a girl no longer needed the attention of a boy to give her a sense of self-worth.

Suppose all girls just decided one day not to have sex until they were ready to get married.

Unrealistic as those things may be, the fact is that the "thug life," and a whole lot of other madness, would end overnight.

At Anacostia High, school officials say they are developing several programs just to help girls build character and self-esteem. One is a more modernized Girl Scouts, "not the geeky sort of thing that people think," Savoy said. The other is a Sister-to-Sister mentoring program that helps young women learn leadership skills.

Both would be a great start.

Before "Thug Life" was shown at Anacostia, director Marc **Levin** said he felt that the answers to the questions raised in the film "are in the audience, in the students themselves."

That includes the girls.

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