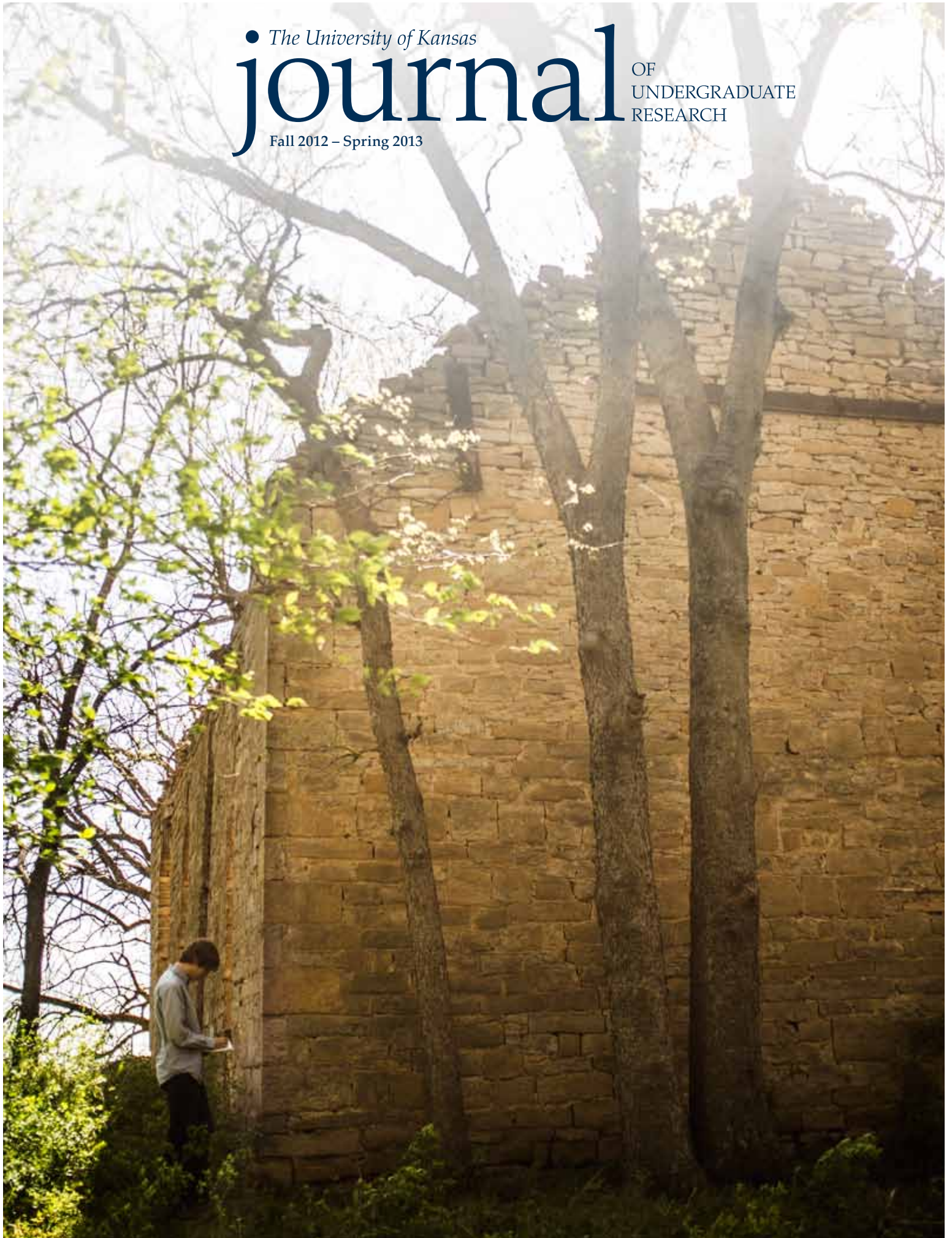


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## About Adam Nicholson

### HOMETOWN

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## Q&A

### ***How did you become involved in doing research?***

I was introduced to research through the McNair Scholars Program. This is my second independent research project, as well as my sociology honor's thesis. I decided to pursue this topic after taking a social inequalities class with Dr. Hill.

### ***How is the research process different from what you expected?***

It's much more rigorous than what is referred to as "research" early in college. The bar is set much higher and you're usually trying to add a very small piece to the puzzle, rather than tackling large issues. The revision process is also demanding and the final work rarely looks much like the first draft.

### ***What is your favorite part of doing research?***

I love the in-depth learning experience and going beyond the surface of a problem to see what the root might be. Research forces you to lay out the evidence and let it speak for itself. You don't try to pull the pieces to get your own ideas across, you interpret the data and try to convey what it's saying objectively.

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# Social capital in the experience of homeless mothers

*D. Adam Nicholson*

Homelessness in the United States affects many different people. In 2012, of the estimated 633,782 people experiencing homelessness in the United States (National Alliance to End Homelessness), an estimated 37.8% were homeless families. Of this group, an increasing number are women and children. These numbers may underestimate reality, as at any given moment it is nearly impossible to accurately identify how many people are homeless. Generally, counts of homeless populations are based on usage of public services and the amount of people in shelters. Additionally, homelessness can often

be hard to identify in those who are in and out of housing situations. Those affected by homelessness often experience it sporadically as they remain unable to secure a stable situation. These situations can fall along the spectrum from living on the street to periodically living with family members. Nevertheless, this instability in housing at varying degrees can be described as experiencing homelessness.

This study took place in a small Midwestern town I will refer to as Liberal. Liberal has a population of 88,000 and recent data estimates the homeless population in Liberal

at around 226 people. Of this total, 157 are adults and 169 are minors. Additionally, 42 are classified as being "chronically homeless," meaning they incur frequent or long-term bouts of homelessness, often due to mental/physical disability. This study seeks to understand how those facing homelessness came to be in this situation by exploring questions pertaining to social capital. My two primary research questions guiding this study are: Does the homeless population lack significant social capital? If so, did social networks exist at one point and deteriorate over time? Or, are the networks

insufficient or lacking in some way that allows homelessness to occur? The interviews were analyzed to determine common themes and patterns, including the role of social capital and the future outlook of those interviewed.

I will begin by defining several concepts, including homelessness and social capital, including a brief summary of social capital theory. I will then discuss reoccurring themes which emerged throughout the interviews, including the causes for homelessness and how social capital fits into the picture, and the effects on families in terms of social capital, as well as their outlook for the future. Finally, I will discuss some of the challenges involved in attempting to alleviate homelessness, including the impact of community living environments, as well as the role of stigma, on developing social capital.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, there is little in the existing literature in recent time which examines the role of social capital in the homeless experience. Second, the findings could have significant impact on how homelessness is addressed for the majority of those affected. Up to this point, much attention has been given to dealing with the chronically homeless, yet they represent a small percentage of those experiencing homelessness. This study will help to build a better understanding of how policy and community action should address homelessness.

### **Defining homelessness**

Colloquially speaking, a home can be defined as “one’s place of residence” or as “the social unit formed by a family living together” (Merriam-Webster 2013). In policy, the approach can vary. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) recently released its updated definition of homelessness, which includes four broad areas: 1) People who

are living in a place not meant for human habitation, in emergency shelter, in transitional housing, or are exiting an institution where they temporarily resided. 2) People who are losing their primary nighttime residence, which may include a motel or hotel or a doubled up situation, within 14 days and lack resources or support networks to remain in housing. 3) Families with children or unaccompanied youth who are unstably housed and likely to continue in that state. 4) People who are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, have no other residence, and lack the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing (National Alliance to End Homelessness).

For the purpose of this study, I examine homelessness with the colloquial concept of a “home” in mind, while focusing on elements of HUD’s four categories of homelessness. This study specifically focuses on the social capital aspects alluded to in the second definition when HUD includes those who “lack resources or support networks.” All participants for this study are defined as homeless as a result of their living in a temporary community housing program.

### **Homeless mothers**

While the sociological literature involving social capital and homeless mothers is limited, research from other academic fields which discuss support systems or social networks is useful. In what they call “the first systematic comparison of homeless and housed families,” Bassuk and Rosenburg found several differences between low-income housed and homeless women (Bassuk and Rosenburg 1988:786). Among their findings, they noted that “the support networks of the homeless women were fragmented and included proportionately more men, while the housed mothers had frequent contact with their mothers, other

female relatives, and extended family living nearby” (786). As both the housed and homeless women were found to have similar levels of education and employment history, this study introduced the importance of social support. Shinn, Knickman, and Weitzman reinforced this idea, stating that social support networks played an important role and that low social support increased vulnerability to becoming homeless (Shinn, Knickman, Weitzman 1991). Additionally, trust in these networks is important, as those in vulnerable positions are hesitant to utilize or leverage some relationships (Goodman 1991).

In 2000, Lin found that “social groups (gender, race) have different access to social capital because of their advantaged or disadvantaged structural positions and associated social networks” (793), concluding that “the research literature, by and large, confirms the disadvantages of females and minority group members in social capital” (793), while also adding that more direct research was needed in terms of social capital (Lin 2000). Toohey, Shinn, and Weitzman reiterated that past studies (Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988; Wood et al., 1990) have repeatedly suggested that women who are homeless may have fewer sources of social support than other poor women also adding that even when network sizes were similar, they may vary in “type or quality of support given” (Toohey, Shinn, Weitzman 2004:13). In addition to size, a meta-analysis of twelve studies of homeless women revealed several additional relevant aspects of social support, including composition of the social support network, contact with members of the social support network, and perceived support from members of the social support network (Meadows-Oliver 2005:43).

In addition to this stream of research, related studies show the importance of social capital in social mobility for mothers and

the importance of parent to child connections in the long-term success of the children. For minority groups, such as African-American and Latin-American low-income mothers, social capital plays a vital role in social mobility by creating opportunities through network resources (Dominguez and Watkins 2003). In terms of the children's success, Anderson found that the role of parents in investing social capital into the development of their children was significant and that this connection must be given the opportunity to develop, something which proves challenging in instances of homelessness (Anderson 2004:21).

### **Social capital**

Social capital is a concept without one singular definition. The modern conceptualization of social capital has its roots in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and was built upon by others like James Coleman and Robert Putnam (Carroll and Stanfield 2003; Lang and Hornburg 1998). Each author has various interpretations of social capital yet they share common ground in the incorporation of social structures and the ability to initiate certain actions through others within the structure.

Bourdieu is responsible for bringing the concept and term social capital into present-day discussions. In his landmark piece, *Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu begins:

"The social world is accumulated history, and if it is not to be reduced to a discontinuous series of instantaneous mechanical equilibria between agents who are treated as interchangeable particles, one must reintroduce into it the notion of capital and with it, accumulation and all its effects. Capital is accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups

of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor." (Bourdieu 1986: 46)

Bourdieu later described three separate forms of capital which he used to expand on the above statement: most relevant was social capital, which he defined as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital" (51). This definition sets up social capital as being centrally about connections and social networks: who you know matters.

As one of the founding theorists in this subject, Bourdieu's approach was more theoretical than those who followed such as Coleman and Putnam, who included empirical data. In his paper entitled *Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital*, Coleman presents social capital as a conceptual tool at the intersection of economic and sociological theory (Coleman 1988:96). According to Coleman, "social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities having two characteristics in common: They all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure" (98). Coleman goes on to establish that social capital, like other forms of capital, makes possible ends, which without the means of social capital, would not be possible (98).

Through empirical evidence, Coleman illustrates the importance of social capital to families. As one example, Coleman offered the case of Asian immigrant families who purchased additional textbooks, so

that the mother could study and help the children do well in school (110). While the human capital of these families may have been low, the social capital exercised between the mother and child was quite high and the results evident. Similarly, research has shown that younger siblings and children from larger families get less attention, which produces weaker educational outcomes (112).

Political scientist Robert Putnam made powerful assertions about the role of social capital in his ground-breaking article "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" (1995). According to Putnam, even though the United States had historically been a bastion for civic engagement, social capital had been steeply declining in the US, as evidenced by low civic participation and voting turn out. Putnam defines social capital as the "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 1995: 2).

Like Coleman, Putnam also addresses families in relation to social capital, calling them the "most fundamental form of social capital" (7). Putnam's hypothesis of social "decapitalization"—a decline in social capital—is exemplified in the decaying social bonds of the American family. Perhaps as a result of these decaying family ties, our ties to greater community are also declining. When Americans were surveyed in 1960, 58 percent of respondents said they believed most people could be trusted, as compared to only 37 percent giving this same response in 1993 (8).

According to Putnam, mobility, demographic transformations, and technological effects on leisure may be to blame for this decline (9). The effect of mobility is summarized by his "re-potting" hypothesis: "Mobility, like frequent re-potting

of plants, tends to disrupt root systems, and it takes time for an uprooted individual to put down new roots" (9). As Americans become increasingly mobile, possibly due to increased ease of mobility, search for work, or a variety of other causes, it becomes increasingly difficult to build strong social networks. Demographic changes such as fewer marriages, more divorces, and fewer children, may also be a contributing factor, as married, middle-class parents are statistically more civically engaged (9). Finally, Americans' leisure activities have shifted in favor of more private or independent pastimes (9). Whereas Americans used to spend more time out in the community with friends, families, and neighbors, they are now increasingly likely to watch television or spend time on the internet, activities with considerably less real social interaction.

Social capital has many implications in relation to homelessness. For some, high levels of social capital prevent homelessness, while others with low levels may become homeless without the connections to prevent this from happening. For those who do become homeless, social capital may help them find stable employment and housing, among other opportunities. A significant life event, such as experiencing homelessness, can also significantly limit a person's ability to develop social capital.

## **METHODS**

### **Procedure**

The study was conducted using qualitative interviews with five women experiencing homelessness in Liberal. Interviews were conducted in a private environment at a local community living program which will not be named in order to protect the anonymity of the study's participants. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed, with the exception of those two

participants who did not wish to have their conversations recorded for confidentiality reasons. In these instances, in-depth field notes were taken and analyzed after completion of the interview. Special attention was given to the role networks play in the status of the participants. Interviews included basic demographic information, including education and work history, and then questions related to family and community relationships and support (See Appendix A).

Participants were recruited in person and through directors and organizers using convenience sampling methods as well as fliers with contact info in order to set up interviews. Directors of the facilities and program coordinators were provided with interview guides, consent forms and Human Subjects approval letters prior to the interviews to ensure the safety, confidentiality, and wellbeing of their clients. Coordinators of these institutions provided assistance recruiting participants for the study, as well as serving as a means of communication with the clients, who were often difficult to contact.

### **Participants**

Participants included five women whose ages ranged from 22 to 45 years old (See Appendix B). Racial composition included two white females, one black, one Hispanic and one Native American. Four of the women were unemployed, but seeking employment, while one was taking college courses full time. All women were mothers, having from one to three children ranging from six months old to sixteen years old.

While this sample is small, it was the entire population in this particular program. Participants included those who are currently homeless due to reasons other than mental illness or drug and alcohol addictions, including economic hardship and family instability.

## **RESULTS**

As was hypothesized, the role of social capital had significant implications on the participants in the study. Several themes developed throughout the course of the study and held true almost universally. While it is certainly not exhaustive, and cannot fully explain why one may experience homelessness, three themes were reoccurring and contributed greatly to the situations our participants found themselves in, including: economic hardship, lack of or deteriorating family ties, and legal trouble.

### **Economic hardship**

As expected, economic hardship played a role in many of the situations of those interviewed. It could be said that homelessness is an economic state in itself, and therefore all experiencing homelessness would experience economic hardship. That may be true, but it is interesting to note the different experiences and how they vary from what one may expect. There were, for example, no cases of those one would consider to be established, middle-class, falling into hardship or foreclosing on a home and finding themselves in a homeless situation. Rather, those who are experiencing homelessness typically came from a history of economic hardship. Mary, a 45-year-old woman, originally from Texas, told me about her family and their background: "Well, my father's side my grandparents were in concentration camps in WWII so my father's family came over here [and they] were naturalized. They were extremely poor. Came over here, had nothing... Then my dad joined the Air Force and met my mom, and my mom's side of the family: poor. So it's like two poor families came together."

Some of the women came from families where the bulk of their income was made illegally through sales of narcotics or other illegal activities. In these cases, there was often a lack of work experience,

which disadvantaged them when they became homeless and sought employment. This was the case for Anna, a 22-year-old white mother of two, who had her first child at age sixteen and relied on others for support. "Really, I've like never had a job. I worked for two weeks at KFC. Then at a Wendy's...like twice, so I can get Christmas for my kids, but I had boyfriends with jobs, so I didn't really work." In this case the absence of social capital being built through work experience and social ties to healthy economic activities resulted in a dependency on these relationships, with serious consequences for Anna when her family got into legal trouble. "My boyfriend had a good job whenever my mom first went to prison. He was making \$20 something an hour doing construction, building the interstate, but it wasn't 3 months after my mom went to prison, that he got arrested for armed robbery. So, after that I started staying with a sister-in-law and a friend and really just started making money on the streets however I could; selling weed really."

In many cases, we see that employment is not necessarily the solution to homelessness. Mary, a 45 year-old white mother with a teenage daughter, had been steadily employed doing clerical work at a major facilities operation company for over 5 years. When Mary's office moved, she was asked to commute to the new location, nearly fifty miles away. "I couldn't afford to work," she recounts. The financial implications of the extended commute were serious, but more complex issues led to her eventual termination:

"I didn't want to be fired because I had just got in this program, thought I was going to be here short term and then get into my own place, but I got fired, not having been here two weeks and this program played a big part in me losing my job, because there are

responsibilities you have to do here to stay here. You stay in a different church every week and you have to leave the church by 6:30, well I'm working in [the city] and have to be at work by 7:30. I leave the church, get here, I'm gone. Gone all day, then I come back, takes me an hour to get back to the church, so I was just literally on the road like the whole time. And it was just so much stress. I didn't know how I was going to make it to and from work, the structure of my day had changed, everything, the whole thing had changed... It was like this as the last straw for my employer because I had been through so much family wise, and they just weren't going to wait for me to get my shit together."

When asked if her employer was supportive of her trying to remedy her difficult situation, she expressed quite the opposite:

"No, not at all. And as soon as they found out how bad it was I really feel they got rid of me. It was like, 'Oh we can't have a homeless person working here. Yep... it's like, it takes down the level of class of their business. I'm like 'well, if you had paid me commensurate to what I should be paid or compensated, I probably wouldn't be homeless right now.' And I think that job played a big part, because they moved me from Kansas to Missouri. And they forced me to go to a different location and lose my job. Ya know, I was making really good money, like \$15 an hour plus benefits, so ya know, I held on as long as I could. I did not see that termination coming."

Still, even given the potential complexities, employment is essential in gaining independence and moving out of a homeless situation. The women interviewed for this study are all actively seeking employment, with some being currently involved in work programs, such as vocational rehab. Homelessness complicates the

search process though, with issues such as stigma, discussed later, having a negative impact, but more practically in simply being available for interviews and providing a home address. The problem is compounded for those with children, as Callie, a 23-year-old mother of a six-month-old daughter, spoke about: "Interviewing is hard with a kid. I don't have a car, so I can only go whenever the bus is running and I got to find a babysitter at the last minute. Nobody wants a baby in the interview. SRS will pay for a babysitter, but only if I got a job."

### **Lack of or deterioration of family ties**

Family plays an incredible role in our social lives, leading Putnam to label the family as the "most fundamental form of social capital" (Putnam 1995). A strong family leads to better outcomes and more opportunity, while weak ties or no ties can limit them. For some, weak or even negative family ties led them to seek out better opportunities. Mary spoke of her decision to move to a new area: "I'm originally from Texas and I moved up here about 30 years ago, I guess... just looking for something new. [I'm] from a mid-sized area, with small town values, I was just looking for something bigger. Wasn't really fond of Dallas, it had a lot of drugs, stuff like that, so I thought the Midwest would be better." This response is characteristic of many in families with low social capital. Many decide to uproot and seek out opportunities elsewhere, because their families provide little to no support; as one summed up, "I have a mom and sister... but they're worse off than I am." This re-potting, as Putnam calls it, is damaging to the growth of social capital and social networks. It puts those who choose to make these moves at high risk of homelessness.

Others spoke of similar situations where re-potting was necessary. Anna described her situation after her family went to prison: "My family has a really bad reputation in that town for the drugs and stuff like that. I was never really big into the scene and stuff like that, I was a little bit... but I was known for that because of my parents. And here I'm getting my GED, looking for a job, my sister works up here, my brother's wife, sister-in-law, but he's dead, I still consider her my sister-in-law, she's going to help me get a job...and her husband is going to help my boyfriend get a job. All the kind of stuff we didn't have [there]." In this case, we see the negative effects when social capital is not necessarily absent, but rather present but in a negative manner. We also see a move from a situation with little social capital to one with positive sources of social capital, specifically those leading to employment possibilities.

Many times, when these moves were made to utilize family connections, they were not successful because of various forms of family tension. Difficulty rooted in unstable upbringings, such as families with drug and alcohol abuse or legal problems, got in the way of utilizing social capital within the family. Several respondents from unstable backgrounds moved in with family to maximize meager incomes, but found themselves just as bad off when things didn't work out. Anna described living with her sister for a period of time:

"Yeah, she lived with me for a year...it was a mess too. We love each other, we're sisters and all, but we're not really compatible personalities. We just argue about everything and don't really get along much. I think she resents me a lot. She's ten years older than me and I think she was instantly jealous of me, even as a baby. I'm pretty sure. We have different dads, but my dad has been

her dad since she was about seven and her dad was never really around, so she really always wanted, and felt like she had to have, that approval from my dad. Then I came along and was daddy's girl [and] she was the red-headed step child, literally! (laughs) That's horrible...but yeah, it's like that."

Mary responded similarly,

"I've been struggling with homelessness for about, now I'm looking at over a year. My sister and I thought it would be a great idea for us to move in together, you know, share expenses and it just didn't turn out how we thought it would. Because I did have my own place before that, but it was expensive, and I just thought 'oh I can cut costs, I can live with my sister.' No. It didn't work out... tension in the family, finances just stuff going on with my daughter, her getting older and looking to do adult stuff and, ugh, just a lot of stress."

Unstable family situations early in life such as this often result in these seemingly innocuous family tensions preventing families from maximizing their uses of social capital; but sometimes the outcomes are considerably worse. Some moved in search of what they thought were better opportunities, but fell victim to negative situations, ranging from simple family disagreement and conflicting personality to domestic abuse. Callie spoke of moving because her hometown lacked jobs, good childcare, and public transportation. She jumped at the chance to move in with her boyfriend, into what she thought would be a more stable situation for her and her child, but soon after, her boyfriend became abusive, and she fled to a women's center for domestic violence, which then directed her to the program she is currently in. Those with lower levels of social capital may fall victim to circumstances such as these more easily. Because opportunities are

less frequent, they must be acted upon when they are presented possibly leading to situations such as the one described above.

### **Legal trouble**

For some, the decline into a homeless situation is swift, as negative family situations leave them with nothing. This is especially true when legal trouble is involved. When a breadwinner goes to prison, the situation can quickly become severe for the rest of the family. Anna recounted her experience of becoming homeless:

"I was living with my parents. When I got pregnant my boyfriend did move in with me. Not the same dad as [my daughter]. Then, he went to prison, so basically from the time [my son] was...really by the time I had [my son], [his dad] was already locked up. He got out for a little while, then got locked up again, got out for a little while. My parents actually went to prison, my dad went when [my son] was like 6 months and my mom like a year later or 6 months later. They got indicted by the FBI for selling narcotics and my dad...he's doing 13 years. My mom did 5, she just got out. So, I was on my own from that time, about 17. I was 18 by the time my mom went, so I was just kinda...out there."

Another woman, Elizabeth, a 27 year-old Native-American mother, spoke of her situation growing up in a sketchy situation and the cyclical nature of the environment. Raised by a single-mother, Elizabeth's father was not involved, except in the payment of child support. That stopped when her father became disabled and was unable to work any longer. Her mother had attempted to raise her; however, the bulk of the child support money received went to her mother's drug addiction, and it soon became obvious to all parties involved that this was not an ideal scenario. Elizabeth was put into foster



care and floated around for most of her life. She is now struggling as a single mother herself, trying to raise a child whose father is in prison for selling narcotics. Unlike the mothers mentioned in Coleman's research who would buy an extra textbook to help their children study, giving their children extreme advantages in the realm of social capital, situations like these lead to extreme deficits in social capital, as we see multiple generations affected. What is important to note is that the legal situations discussed in this section are not the wrongdoing of those experiencing homelessness, but rather the actions of others, showing the power of social capital in a negative way. Additionally, women often seek out help from men who are traditionally granted more power in society. While this dynamic seems to be in the best interest of the women with less capital, as they envision it producing a partnership with the potential to increase opportunities and stabilize life, negative sources of social capital are just as capable of having undesired effects on a situation as positive sources are at causing the desired effects.

### **Attitudes about the future**

There are many different approaches to try to alleviate homelessness, most of which focus on providing shelter. Some aim to do more, by providing employment services, such as resume building and teaching interviewing techniques. While each person's situation calls for a different approach to eliminating homelessness in their life, those approaches which take into consideration the role of social capital have the potential to be the most successful and efficient.

All the women interviewed commented on their feelings about the programs that they have been a part of, and several themes, both positive and negative, appeared. Specifically, the positives included

an increased feeling of optimism regarding their situations, as well as the ability to pass on short-term opportunities in favor of options which would lead them to long-term success. The negative themes include an inability to cultivate one's family in community living, difficulty increasing social capital, and stigma related to their experiences with homelessness.

### **Increased optimism**

It was surprising to note the optimism of those in the study experiencing homelessness. When asked how optimistic they are about the future, participants consistently stated that they were very optimistic about the future. For some, this optimism was brought on by past experience, such as Mary, who had been recently laid off: "Oh, I'm very optimistic because I'm employable." For others, it was the knowledge that this was one of the first times they have experienced some sort of stability in their life. "I'm feeling excited about the future," Anna said about her situation, "I feel really good. I feel like, everything's good right now." Marie, a 30 year-old Hispanic mother of three, mentioned a reliable source of food, shelter, and safety was enough to elicit optimism. Additionally, this optimism spilled over into the second generation for some, such as Mary, who spoke of her daughter's plans for the future:

"She wants to be a cosmetologist. She wants to go learn that, make money, then go back to school and learn something else. So she's looking at extended schooling. I've always just nailed home education. You cannot do anything without an education, unless you want to be something shady. And that won't last long...this is not going to stop us from taking her to the next level. It's just a little speed bump. It's huge for me a big ol' pothole in my life, but for her, it's just a little speed bump, because you know we're going to get [there],

we're going to keep going with school for her, because she wants to."

Many had similar goals for the future including higher education plans, such as Elizabeth, who is currently enrolled in college classes, and quality employment, including clerical and call center employment or jobs such as an x-ray technician or a dental hygienist.

### **Long-term planning**

One reason for the widespread optimism by those interviewed is the ability to pass on short-term solutions, in favor of those which will set them up for long-term success. While some chose to accept part-time employment for the immediate benefit, others expressed frustration with trying to find employment while being employed. For this reason, some choose to pass on part-time employment altogether, opting instead to find a full-time job that could sufficiently support the lifestyles that they envisioned, in particular, independent housing. As Mary put it:

"I'm using this program to set me up for success. Because like I said, can't live off of a part-time job. I can tell you, if I were out of this program, I would've taken a part-time job, because you know, I've got to have money. So this program has allowed me to take a step back and say, 'is this really right for me?' and it wasn't. But if I wasn't in the program, I would've had to take it. And I think a lot of people are forced into, you know, their category of life by circumstances like that."

This is an insightful observation pertaining to the role of social capital in these situations. Additional capital allows one to pass on the opportunities which provide no long-term stability, and instead hold out for those that set one up for long-term success.

Additionally, several cited the ability to set and work toward goals

as a reason for optimism. Anna was especially pleased to be setting goals for her life: "Sitting down and setting 30 day goals and 60 day goals. I think it shows you the steps that you need to take to get there. Actually every week we do action steps to get you closer to your goals. I like it. It helps you stay on task. Honestly, before I came here I never set any goals for myself. It's cool. I like being able to do that. It's nice."

For many who find themselves in situations where food and shelter are uncertain, life becomes a day-to-day struggle; the focus of life shifts its focus to survival, rather than success. While this is a reasonable and common reaction, it is also a contributing factor to the cyclical nature of poverty and homelessness. In situations where additional social capital is accessible, those experiencing homelessness are able to engage in thought and planning for the future and, as we have seen, become much more optimistic about the future they now envision.

## CHALLENGES

### **Lack of family life**

Still, while those interviewed expressed many reasons for optimism, they also expressed frustration with various elements of their life. As addressed earlier, the role of family and the potential effects on one's life, whether positive or negative, are substantial. However, in programs which incorporate various forms of community living, including shelters and other alternative housing programs, it can be very difficult to cultivate social capital in the family. Given the consequences of having low levels of social capital, this has the potential to pose a serious problem in eliminating continued homelessness and poverty. While conditions in various programs are no doubt more favorable than living on the streets, they still limit

the development of social capital within the family. Raising a child in this environment can be especially challenging. Mary described the difficulty of cultivating a family life and building a relationship with her sixteen-year-old daughter as she transitions into being a young woman:

"All families sleep in the same room, so there is no privacy. It's very tough; very tough. I don't think community wise, people realize how important that time is in the evening, that reconnecting at the end of the day. Being with your kid and seeing what you can do to make it better. Well, we have "group" and we have to go to groups, and it just cuts into family time. It just makes it harder to connect. Ya know and kids need your attention, especially in this environment."

Similarly, Callie expressed their thoughts on the difficulty of raising a child in this environment:

"Yeah, it's um definitely how you parent is called into focus here: your values, how you treat your child, how you think your child should be raised, people are always scrutinizing you constantly. You're more restrained here, so maybe you don't parent the way that you want to."

Marie described the environment as "fish-bowl parenting," alluding to the way in which she felt like her every move was being monitored by those around her, also mentioning that she felt "judged" in the way she raised her children. The overall lack of privacy in this environment proved to be frustrating for most of the women interviewed.

### **Inability to accrue more capital**

Along with an inability to grow and strengthen family ties, it may become difficult to build capital outside the program. Several of the women compared their experience at the program to being institutionalized. Because of the rigid structure of some of the programs,

participants find it difficult to make connections outside the program. Mary found the schedule to be especially frustrating:

"You're locked into this program in that you have to stay here for the first 30 days and pretty much the whole time. You can't stay here a day and then go stay with a friend, you have to stay here the whole time. So, um it locks you into definitely a different type of structure to your day. Say you have to be in the church by 10 o'clock. You have to eat dinner at 6. It's like being institutionalized, only you get the freedom to walk outside. That's exactly how it is."

When asked about her social life, Callie mentioned the difficulty of making friends given the environment and her lack of transportation. This is also true for the children in these programs. As Mary put it:

"Yeah, they don't like for kids to be gone either. They kind of like to force kids into the program. I kind of think a kid should have more outs, but, you know grandma, grandpa, an uncle's house, they ought to be allowed if they want to go, they should be allowed to go. There's a thirty day window where you can't go anywhere. The first thirty days here are the hardest. I think it'd be better for the kids if they could go somewhere else. You know, but the things is 'Oh well, this is for the kids, so the kids need to be here.' It's kind of a catch-22, because it's like if it's harming them mentally, why can't they just go somewhere else for the day? Why can't they get the comfort of a family member, go to grandma's house, instead of being in this generic room that's made to look like it's your bedroom, but it's not. And the rooms would be like this, (motions around the office), but they'd push the table to the side and put a couple cots out. You know, we have a place to sleep, but it's not homey. This is a great program, but it's not home."

This difficulty in being able to create networks affects the performance of students who find themselves alone where most students have the support of friends or tutors. Mary, when asked if her daughter was able to make friends at school or get help with homework, answered, "Well she's not going to seek out help from the community or from friends when she can't bring them home, they can't hang out at home." This is perhaps one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome in building social capital. While employment opportunities are limited and program structures limit the ability to build outside relationships, there is perhaps nothing more damaging to the creation of social capital than stigma.

### **Stigma**

While the obstacles discussed thus far limit the ability to build more social capital, social stigma is perhaps the only one which works directly counter to this process. We have seen social capital defined in terms of the ability to facilitate relationships and bring about certain actions (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Putnam 1995). Social stigmas, on the other hand, prohibit these relationships and decrease one's ability to accomplish certain goals. The theme of stigma was very prevalent in the interviews as participants shared both personal experiences and those of their family. The difficulty was not limited to finding jobs and housing, but also carried over into personal situations which make building more social capital difficult.

Mary recounted her story of struggling to get housing and employment after becoming homeless:

"Once you become homeless you cannot get a home. It's like you're black marked in society, because they're not going to give you the opportunity. It's like, you can find a job if you have one, but if

you're unemployed: forget it. It's that mentality. I'll give you a job because I see you're employable.' But you don't have a job, so obviously you're unemployable. So how do you get out of homelessness when society keeps you there? They don't allow you to. There's no leeway. Things are so expensive now too. What do you do? Yeah, it's like circular logic. "I'll give you a job if you can show me you're employable. I'll give you a home if you show me the home you've been living in." I don't know, maybe I'm skewed, but that's how I see it."

Others, such as Callie, reinforced this opinion in their interviews, expressing the difficulty of finding housing without a current address or a rental history, or in using programs such as Section 8 housing, which many landlords refuse to accept largely due to the stigma attached to those receiving the benefit. The same held true for jobs. When employers found out about homeless situations, they questioned the interviewee's ability to be a good employee, citing distracting life circumstances and lack of transportation, as justification for their concerns. Even with experience, many of those experiencing homelessness are passed over for less qualified candidates with more stable situations.

Furthermore, there is a stigma produced by those working or volunteering with those experiencing homelessness. Several participants mentioned feeling judged by others and spoke of how people assumed their situation was a result of their own poor choices, without considering the role of family structure or other contributing factors. Upon taking her daughter to church one day, Callie, who utilized the church's overnight shelter, was approached by a woman who wanted to introduce her son to "one of the homeless people who sleeps here at night." Similarly, others in the program expressed that those

working with these groups are often outright about their feelings of superiority, viewing their time in the shelter as a "service" or an "obligation" to the "less fortunate."

For some, viewing the effects on their children is difficult and emotional. Speaking of her daughter, Mary said, "She's only a sophomore. And the biggest setback of this program is the churches like to have teenagers help. We've had experiences where her peers are seeing her in this program. Humiliation is huge. It makes me feel bad." At this point, Mary began to cry, then continued, "Ya know, she's in high school. And umm... (wipes tears)... ya know she acts like she doesn't care, but I know better." While this may on the surface seem simply like an emotional reaction by a parent, it is in reality a very telling indication of future difficulty in developing social capital. As evidenced above and by empirical research such as that demonstrated in Coleman's work, social capital in the family as well as the development of capital among peers, particularly pertaining to education, can have strong implications of the outcome of the students in terms of educational attainment. Difficulty to cultivate what most would consider "normal" relationships during high school and teenage years can lead to inadequate network connections down the road, which often lead to job acquisitions and other benefits of social capital.

### **DISCUSSION**

This study has several limitations that should be considered when discussing the findings. The sample was small, but does include the entire population at the program which granted me access to do interviews. It is, therefore, representative of experiences in this program, but cannot fully be generalized to the experiences of all homeless mothers.

There were problems reaching the initial target population, which resulted in narrowing the study in scope to homeless families, specifically to mothers. No other shelter allowed access to interview their homeless clients. Nevertheless, a broader sample, one which incorporates multiple programs, would improve the generalizability and credibility of the study.

Interviews were conducted in the housing program, and while confidentiality was ensured, some participants seemed hesitant to discuss negative thoughts about the program. Additionally, one must consider the dynamics of a researcher coming in and conducting what some referred to as a "science experiment." This presents questions about how to best conduct similar research, minimizing the perceived gap between the researcher and the homeless. If future studies are to overcome the issues addressed above, they will require greater time, resources, and cooperation from local shelters.

This study set out to answer two primary questions: Does the

homeless population lack significant social capital? If so, did social networks exist at one point and deteriorate over time, or are the networks insufficient or lacking in some way that allows homelessness to occur? In addressing the first question, it can be said that the participants of this study all had significant deficiencies in social capital. The homeless interviewed had little to no connection with family. Those with family stated that they were in similar situations, if not worse. In terms of the second question, most had little social capital to begin with. The small social networks that had been built over time were unstable and many times, contributed to the problem, for instance in the case where the boyfriend became abusive.

Of great importance is the impact that these deficiencies have on the children of homeless mothers. As the literature suggested, the impacts on children can lead to significant problems down the road. In contrast, children with high levels of social capital typically attain higher levels of

education and upward social mobility. Most of the mothers interviewed are examples of this, given that they came from childhoods with little social capital. In order to disrupt the potential cycle of homelessness for these families, special attention must be given to developing social capital both within families and with outside social networks. The creation of these networks and accumulation of social capital are key elements for preventing homelessness in the future. Further research would be well served by developing improved methods of measuring social capital, such as indices which examine factors such as network size, contact with social connections, and proximity of network connections. Given the prominent role of social capital and the deficiency exhibited by those interviewed, further pursuit in this area could yield substantial results and begin to shift the way we address homelessness.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Guide

Name of Interviewee:

Meeting place for interview:

Date:

#### Demographic Information

Sex    Male\_\_\_                      Age\_\_\_  
       Female\_\_\_

Employment status:        \_\_\_Employed full-time  
                                     \_\_\_Employed part-time  
                                     \_\_\_Unemployed

#### Education

\_\_\_HS diploma/less                      \_\_\_4 year college degree  
\_\_\_Some college                            \_\_\_Technical/vocational training

#### Marital status

\_\_\_Married                                      \_\_\_Single, never-married  
\_\_\_Divorced/Widowed                      \_\_\_Cohabitation  
\_\_\_Other

#### 1. INTRODUCTION/PURPOSE/CONSENT

2. BASIC DEMOGRAPHIC: Sex/Race. Let's start off with your name and age. What's the highest level of education you've received?

3. FAMILY: Have you ever been or are you currently married? Do you have any children?

4. EMPLOYMENT HISTORY: What is your most recent job? What were you doing before that? How long have you lived in Liberal?

5. CURRENT SITUATION: How did you come to be affiliated with \_\_\_\_? Approximately when was that? In what ways are they assisting you? How helpful do you find these services?

6. SOCIAL RESOURCES: Have you received assistance from any other sources? (Family/ Community/ State?) Did you receive any support from family? Friends? If so, what kind of support did you receive? How helpful?

7. CONCLUSION: How optimistic are you about your future? What other comments would you like to share?

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**APPENDIX B****Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b># of Children</b>
Mary	45	White	1
Anna	22	White	2 (and one stepchild)
Callie	23	African-American	1
Marie	30	Hispanic	3
Elizabeth	27	Native-American	1