

Social Capital and Homeless Youth: Influence of Residential Instability on College Access

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Abstract

This article examines the experiences homeless youth face and the influence of social networks on their education. Using a social capital framework, we analyze the experiences that are different for poor youth in general and those homeless. Data used include interviews with 123 homeless youth and more than 40 policymakers, school counselors, and after-school program coordinators. Youth identified three aspects of their lives that influence network development associated with college access: mobility and stability, meeting basic needs, and anonymity and shame. The temporary nature of their residential stability requires a systemic response by educational institutions.

For at least a half century, federal, state, and local governments have struggled with how to provide adequate schooling for low-income urban youth. Although systemic and sustained solutions are elusive, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers increasingly have a better understanding of the challenges and problems that exist when children grow up in poverty. However, poverty is not a singular term that evenly explains the conditions of everyone who experiences it. To be sure, schools where students do not have books or the student/counselor ratio is 800:1 have problems that need to be addressed regardless of the type of students who attend. At the same time, a low-income high school student who is undocumented or gay faces different issues than his or her counterpart who is a legal citizen or straight. A “one size fits all” approach to resolving the problems of low-income youth is inadequate if the assumption is that the socio-cultural contexts in which individuals live in part reflect how they will define their situations.

In this article, we consider the challenges homeless youth face. Homeless youth encounter unique conditions that frame their educational experiences in a manner different from those who are low-income but have a home. We work from a social capital perspective that stresses the import of networks in which individuals and groups are embedded to frame homeless youths’ experiences. Data is derived from an 18-month project with homeless youth. Based on interview data, we argue that homeless teenagers face at least three significant obstacles that frame their experiences in a manner different from other students.

We begin with an overview of homeless youth and what is known about their educational levels and experiences. In the next section we outline the methodology and consider homelessness within a framework of network building and social capital. The data that we then provide center on three themes: (a) mobility and stability; (b)

meeting daily needs; and (c) anonymity and shame. The text concludes with a discussion of facilitating agency for homeless youth.

Framing Homelessness

Although homelessness influences nations across the world, discussing related issues generally becomes difficult since cultural and political contexts differ. Here we draw upon how youth in the United States experience residential instability. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines how the American policymakers think about and respond to homelessness in many ways. Although several thoughtful works (e.g., Rossi 1991; Kusmer 2002) have offered analyses of homelessness in American history that highlights divergent definitions and strategies, currently the manner in which federal, state, and local governments approach homelessness is more similar than different, and that similarity is based on federal legislation. A homeless person, according to McKinney-Vento, lacks a fixed, regular place to stay, does not have adequate night-time residence, resides in a welfare hotel, transitional living program, or place not ordinarily used as regular sleeping accommodations or shared residence with other persons due to the loss of one's housing or economic hardship (42 U.S.C. §§11434 et seq.)

The federal definition of homelessness is inclusive, allowing protection to street youth, people in shelters, families in hotels, couch surfers, and families doubled-up. The two most obvious categories are youth that live on the street and in shelters. *Street youth* under the age of 18 are generally living with family members in a car, abandoned building, or campsite. *Shelter youth* may or may not be with their families when they seek refuge in a shelter. Emergency shelters allow youth or families to stay for a night, but their space is not secure from day to day. Transitional shelters, which require enrollment in school or a job training program, will provide shelter until permanent housing is secured. Families living in a *hotel* generally have a space approximately 12 by 15 feet with one bunk bed. The family shares a public bathroom with 20 or 30 other rooms. *Couch surfers* sleep on a different friend's or extended family member's couch or floor from night to night. The most controversial inclusion of the federal definition is families living *doubled-up* (Hallett 2012). The two or more families live in a dwelling designed for one family. In many cases each family unit, consisting of three or more individuals, uses one room in an apartment and shares the kitchen and bathroom spaces. As will be discussed later, youth generally have a residential history that includes transitioning between multiple types of homelessness.

Although definitions are surely useful, one conundrum we consider is how the educational system might best respond to such a broad definition. The problems that exist when living on the street, for example, differ from those faced when living in a shelter. The overall challenge of homelessness, obviously, is that an individual lacks a stable residence, but insofar as individuals are homeless in different ways, systems need to be able to respond in different ways. More often than not, social welfare systems are not up to the challenge.

Again, because of the lack of a stable residence, counting homeless individuals has been difficult. The current estimate is that 3.5 million people in the United States experience homelessness each year, and half are families seeking shelter (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2006). Homeless youth face many barriers that impede their ability to transition successfully to adulthood. Youth on the street are significantly more likely to experience pregnancy than those residing in a stable home (Greene and Ringwalt 1998). Substance abuse and unprotected sexual activity are much greater for those who are homeless than those who are not (Halcon and Lifson 2004). Depression is also a significant problem; three quarters of homeless youth have had suicidal ideation (Thompson, Zittel-Palamara, and Maccio 2004). Literacy rates are lower; suspension or expulsion from school is higher (Thompson et al. 2004). Homeless youth are significantly more likely to score below grade level, repeat grades, have poor attendance, and experience discontinued services as compared to their housed peers (Rafferty and Shinn 1991).

A conclusion one may derive from these data is that homelessness is an issue of social justice. Although that is surely key, in a global economy in which the economic well-being of the country is largely dependent on the skills and educational levels of its citizens, when individuals are homeless, they are unlikely to be contributing not only to their own economic well-being, but to the country's. Our point here is not an exegesis on why homelessness in general exists or what causes homeless adults to be homeless. Rather, our purpose is more focused — what are the educational challenges that homeless youth face and how might they be overcome? We have outlined the large framework in which they exist. What we intend to do is to provide context to this framework in order to better understand the multiple problems that homeless adolescents encounter. Insofar as homeless youth face multiple issues, if social structures such as schools are unable to deal with these problems, then we are condemning a segment of society to unproductive lives. Prior to examining the interviews we have done, we turn to a discussion of the specific context and methodology we employed in collecting the data and the theoretical framework from which we work.

Context and Research Design

Los Angeles County has a homeless problem that is larger than most states in America (Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness 2005). On any given night 88,000 people are homeless in the county, and there are more than 250,000 that experience homelessness over the course of a year (Tepper 2004). Approximately 26,000 youth are homeless in Los Angeles (Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness 2005). About a half million people are in acute poverty and on the brink of homelessness (Flaming and Tepper 2004).

Although document analysis and participant observation were utilized to buttress the findings, the primary method of data collection was interviews. We spoke with two constituencies: (1) 43 adults involved in educational efforts aimed at improving the lives of homeless youth, and (2) 123 homeless youth between the ages of 14 and 19. The

adults included shelter staff, social workers, parents or guardians, school district staff, community activists, employers, and state and local policymakers. We interviewed them in a variety of settings — shelters, after school programs, soup kitchens, and schools. Interviews, lasting approximately one hour, were recorded and transcribed.

The research questions revolved around issues of personal experiences and how homeless youth construct and make sense of their daily lives. The main questions of the study were: (a) How do homeless youth conceptualize themselves as adults?; (b) How do they spend their time?; (c) How do they negotiate educational and social barriers?; (d) How do homeless adolescents create support systems?; and (e) What are the different factors they prioritize as crucial to their development? The goal was to provide an account of what it means to be a homeless adolescent in Los Angeles, based on the experiences of homeless youth, in order to recommend policies that will lead to the improvement of their lives.

Finding homeless youth to interview was difficult. Schools require parental consent, and service providers frequently either did not understand or did not want their youth to participate. Formal settings at preset times for interviews was virtually impossible. Over time, however, we were able to interview individuals and develop relationships with staff in multiple organizations. Nevertheless, the difficulty involved in reaching this population underscores yet again the challenges associated with providing services to a population that is frequently invisible and underserved. Virtually no one at a school knew who was homeless, and services beyond bus passes were pretty much absent. Thus, even before we began the interviews, the lack of a network was becoming evident. Prior to presenting the data, we turn to a discussion of social capital and network development.

Social Capital and Poor Communities

Social capital is a framework that enables or disables individuals and groups to accomplish particular goals through network development. As Warren, Thompson, and Saegert succinctly point out, “Social capital refers to the set of resources that inhere in relationships of trust and cooperation between people” (2001, 1). The underlying assumption is that networks and group affiliations are likely to have positive benefits that result in the acquisition of social capital. The use of the word capital is purposeful. Just as economic capital enables an individual entrée into certain arenas, and human capital pertains to the skills an individual has which provide for employment, social capital also facilitates movement, albeit with a different form of capital. Social capital pertains to interpersonal networks that provide individuals with cultural resources that they are able to exploit in other areas of social life. Individuals rich in social capital have the ability to increase their economic capital. A person with little or no social capital is likely to have a harder time acquiring economic and human capital. Choices are constrained and frequently favor those who already possess social or economic capital (Gale 2005; Gale and Densmore 2003).

Examples of social capital are resources developed within a network of relationships of mutual acquaintances. An elite private high school is an example of an organization that has multiple opportunities for individuals to acquire social capital. Students participate with one another in an array of college preparation activities. Visits with one's peers to cultural entities such as museums or the theater will be commonplace. Opportunities to visit historical and cultural landmarks and to travel abroad are frequently part of the norm rather than once-in-a-lifetime events. Parents of the students most likely have attended college, and discussions about which college to attend upon graduation will occur. One's siblings will attend college. The school will sponsor field trips to visit colleges and universities, and the teachers will be versed on what students need to know in college and how best to prepare them. Summer employment will be education-focused and geared toward learning opportunities. All of these examples lend themselves to social capital development. What participants in such a school see as the norm and implicit will be absent or an exception in a low-income school.

In a low-income school, for example, the opposite sort of scenario may be in place. If college preparation begins at all, it will occur in the senior year when a single college counselor will try to help 800 students choose and apply to college. Students will not know anyone in their neighborhoods or families who has attended college. Summer employment will be some form of physical labor such as in a grocery store to earn money to help out the family. Visits to museums and other cultural locales will be seen as time-wasting luxuries. Classes will not cover college material, and discussions about what college is about or what professors expect from students will be absent.

Obviously, social and economic capital are interrelated. The development of one type of capital is likely to facilitate the acquisition of the other. The social capital that a student acquires in high school may not make the individual economically wealthier, but the networks that have been created will enable the student to attend a prestigious postsecondary institution, which, in turn, will facilitate additional network enhancement and the eventual acquisition of well-paying employment. Attending a private high school typically requires economic capital. Economic capital provides access to a variety of goods, services, and related physical and symbolic commodities. There is, of course, not always a direct relationship. A professor's children may be rich in social capital, but not economic capital. A baseball player may be economically wealthy but have very little social capital. Alejandro Portes is worth quoting here:

Whereas economic capital is in people's bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships. To possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it's those others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage (1998, 7).

Social capital should not be seen as a singular act; simply attending a museum will be beneficial to an individual, but for the accumulation of social capital to occur, the individual has to be involved with other individuals over time such that a network develops and is maintained. Consequently, in poor schools where an event occurs that

is an exception to the norm, the event itself may be of worth, but it is not an example of social capital development.

Membership in a group creates social obligations that provide benefits to the individual such as a credential or contacts that can be utilized in the future (Tierney 2006). Consider, for example, membership in a country club. An economic cost is involved with regard to fees and yearly dues. Members commonly point out that the cost is worth it because the individual gains entrée to a pleasant place to socialize, to have dinner, and to play golf. From the perspective advanced here, however, the more important aspects of such a membership are the interactions that take place among members. A member has certain obligations such as a dress code and norms of behavior, but in turn the individual will be in an exclusive network that increases his or her social capital.

Networks also are frequently multiple and overlapping. Individuals who are in a country club may have attended similar universities, participated in the same fraternity or sorority, or frequented the same restaurants and cultural events. Overlapping networks strengthen and extend the social capital of the individual. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu looked at such network development and concluded that social capital is a primary explanation of how inequality flourishes. Memberships, argued Bourdieu, are exclusionary and provide not only avenues for wealth creation but barriers to equality (1986). Such memberships create group solidarity, which, in turn, facilitates social reproduction. Those who are in such networks acquire greater resources, and those who do not must do without. Bourdieu was particularly good at pointing out the dynamic nature of social capital. Rather than a static notion that does not change over time, Bourdieu considered how networks develop such that the social relations of power and inequality get reproduced. Students in wealthy schools, for example, are able to take advanced placement (AP) exams with one another, which facilitate their entrance to and graduation from elite institutions. When criticism is lodged that low-income students do not have access to AP classes, the system responds by creating such classes; in turn, AP is downgraded in import, and other activities take on importance.

Such an analysis is particularly useful with regard to homeless youth. Our concern, however, is that Bourdieu and others deny agency to individuals and groups. Society exists from this perspective as a set of unequal relationships that are reproduced continually. Individuals are little more than pawns in ever-shifting currents. We take issue with such an assertion and shall suggest that those who are most disempowered, such as homeless youth, have the potential for agency, but the conditions for empowerment need to be aided by social organizations such as schools. Accordingly, we employ social capital as an analytic tool that has the ability to help combat poverty. Social capital itself, obviously, does not alleviate poverty, but it is able to leverage investment in human and cultural capital.

Current configurations about homelessness in general employ one of two assumptions with regard to social capital. Either those who do not have social capital lack the moral or intellectual resolve to do what needs to be done to acquire capital, or the structure

of societal power has made it impossible for those homeless to build networks. Although both assumptions differ in beliefs about the individual, the result is the same — the individual will not acquire social capital.

However, those who are poor have many networks in their lives — families, social and fraternal organizations, and churches, to name but a few. African Americans in a rural community, for example, frequently share a history, tradition, and identity (Warren, Thomason, and Saegert 2001). The type of network in which one resides obviously provides different sources of support. The challenge is to enable those who are poor to have access to network development that facilitates a path out of poverty. Rather than an individual approach that suggests an individual needs to pull him- or herself “up from the bootstraps” and if the individual does not then he or she is to blame, the framework we advance here argues that individuals have the potential to exist in networks that enable the acquisition of social capital. In poor communities, however, those networks need to be consciously created and fostered. If they are not part of the norms of an organization’s culture, such networks will not organically occur as they would in wealthy organizations such as private elite boarding schools. Accordingly, efforts need to be placed on how to build and strengthen networks and create social bonds so that poor people develop the capacity to address their social conditions.

Social organizations such as schools have a crucial role to play in the facilitation of networks and the acquisition of social capital so that collective, instead of individual, action is possible. Rather than the motto being “Yes, I can” the perspective advanced here sees the motto as being “Yes, we can.” In order to understand how homeless youth see themselves so that such networks might be developed, we point out the challenges that exist using data collected over the last 18 months and then consider the implications for network development.

Social Capital and Homeless Youth

As a subcategory of poverty, homeless youth face many of the same barriers to network development as their peers from low-income families. Many homeless youth either have documentation issues or a close relative is undocumented. Carlos, a 19-year-old Mexican youth, recently graduated from high school and completed a nine-month dental hygienist credentialing program but works in a clothing factory for below minimum wage as a result of his documentation status. “I don’t know what to do,” he shares, “I went to school, and I’m working and, I mean, I am doing good things, but I got no home.” Some youth are involved in illegal activities, including gang involvement and graffiti crews. Pedro is a 16-year-old Hispanic male who joined a tagging crew in middle school. “I am getting attached to spray cans more and more,” he explains, “I just get out of it that people know me in the streets.” Youth frequently live in neighborhoods that are plagued by violence. “When we lived in the hotel downtown, I used to be outside all the time. The first week here I got hit in the head with a baseball bat and that changed things,” confides a 16-year-old biracial male who lives in South Central. Fearful of additional violence, he spends the majority of his time inside. And few of the youth can identify close relatives that are high school

graduates or college educated. These experiences are shared by their peers in low-income communities. However, these youth and their families endure additional experiences that result from their residential instability.

Although a few youth do not know a life outside of being homeless, for the majority of youth, the separation between being homeless and poor is one crisis. Rosa moved into a shelter with her mother and siblings after the murder of her father. Pedro lived in an apartment with his mother and siblings for two years surviving on his mother's minimum wage job and food stamps. "A new manager came out of nowhere, and he wanted 20 dollars more for the rent. My mom decided that we didn't have no more money, and she didn't know where else to go to." They moved to an emergency shelter in Skid Row. DaShawn has few memories of his mother who left when he was a toddler. Six years ago his father lost his job and moved with his son to the Skid Row hotel where they now live. Trevon lived in a deteriorating low-income housing unit for several years. His family moved into a hotel a few months ago when an inspector determined the apartment was unsafe for human inhabitation, and a social worker terminated their Section 8 check.

For other youth the crisis results in a separation from their families. Danny ran away from an abusive stepfather and sought refuge at his older sister's home. "I live with her for a while, then we got some problem[s], you know. My sister used to yell at me a lot. I ended up running away from home again." He lived on the streets until an outreach worker gave him directions to an emergency youth shelter. Mikhail's mother was killed by her boyfriend when he was in middle school. He had never known his father and was bounced between friends and extended family. Each time he had any semblance of stability, he would be kicked out for not following a rule or if the household was unable to financially support him. He now lives in a youth shelter and plans to write a book about his life titled *A Lost Boy*. As these youth demonstrate, many homeless families lived on the brink of residential instability when a financial or relational crisis occurred. Whether as part of a family unit or independent, the experiences of being homeless influence how youth understand their ability to participate in the educational process.

Mobility and Stability

Samuel is a 15-year-old who has a difficult time remembering all the places he has lived. For the past two months he has been sleeping on a couch in a two-bedroom apartment that serves as home to 11 people. Over the past year he has lived in three different group homes, a car, a Skid Row hotel room, and two foster homes. Jennifer is a 16-year-old who rotates between sleeping on the floor in her friend's room or on the couch of her father's former girlfriend. LaTisha lived her entire life transitioning with her mother between sleeping on the floor of a relative and staying in an emergency shelter where she slept on a cot outside. That all changed on her 17th birthday. "I wasn't planning on running away," she explains. "I just got tired of living like that. I didn't like living like I'm an animal, like I'm locked away or that I have to be up under somebody else's command." She now lives in a youth shelter and has infrequent contact with her mother.

Homeless youth share a history of mobility. Most of the youth have a difficult time identifying all of the places they have lived. In the most extreme cases, youth like Eddie and Ashley have to find a different place to sleep each night. Eddie, a 17-year-old with a magnetic personality, has been separated from both of his parents since he was 10. He started out moving between several foster homes and then was placed in a group home. Over an eight-month span he can recall being in several different group homes — “four or five, something like that.” Two years ago, he ran away from the final group home because of a conflict with staff. “I pretty much slept under the bleachers at the park behind the baseball diamond. It was like a little hole, and it was cold at night,” he shares. “I didn’t feel safe. But then at the same time I didn’t know where to go.” One day when he was out looking for food, he ran into a friend he had met at one of the shelters. The young man had moved back with his parents and offered to let Eddie live in their shed.

I made it into my room, and I was going to school in the morning, and after school I used to go to the U-Haul parking lot and people would go and pick you up if they needed help moving.

Eddie’s semi-stable environment dissolved when his friend’s parents determined it was too risky to have an unaccompanied minor living in the backyard. Eddie makes friends easily and was able to find people to let him crash on their couches for a couple of nights. After his friends ran out, he moved back to the street. A few months ago, he was taken in by another friend who offered a room as long as he was going to school.

Ashley, a well-manicured 16-year-old African American female, has a similar story of mobility. For the past five years she has been on a steady transition between three different aunts, a grandmother, a friend in Los Angeles, her father’s ex-girlfriend in Florida, another ex-girlfriend in New York, and her father in San Diego. When asked to give a summary of where she had lived in the past two years, she laughed, “I don’t really remember.” She starts by trying to remember where she has stayed in the past two months. In the past week she has rotated between her grandmother’s crowded two-bedroom apartment and sleeping on the floor at a friend’s house.

Youth who are in semi-stable living arrangements, for example, a hotel or doubled-up, share the fear that they may lose their home at any time. Juan is a shy 14-year-old who is going through an awkward growth spurt and recently became interested in girls. He shares a Skid Row hotel room with his mother and three siblings. His mother was told that the hotel was being sold to a developer that plans to turn the building into expensive lofts. Juan, and the other 300 residents of the hotel, will have to move. “I don’t know when. It could be any day now.” Living doubled-up comes with its own challenges. Asia lives in a two-bedroom apartment in South Central with her mother and two other households. The family, who lived in Skid Row hotels and shelters for seven years, has been in the apartment for eight months. “We got the eviction papers the week before Thanksgiving.” One of the households has decided they no longer want to live with the collection of families, which has left her family without the income needed to pay rent. “I don’t know where we are gonna go. I don’t want to end up back on Skid Row.”

Each of these adolescents highlights not merely the challenge of everyday living, but also the difficulty of being involved in any networks at all, much less ones that facilitate learning when social structures are absent. Their family situations are fluid, and the bonds across the family are at times weak. The portrait of these youth parallels the rest of the students in the study. They have typical adolescent concerns about friendships, sexuality, daily life, and the like, but any sense of normality is punctuated by the knowledge that they were or are homeless and could or will be again — not at some remote point in the future, but that evening. The result is that the ability or desire to create relationships that lead to the establishment of networks that create social capital is virtually absent. In turn, as we discuss in the following section, a focus on education or future plans is usually a mystery that is not given much thought.

Frequent movement limits the involvement in networks within the school and community. The majority of youth could not identify one teacher to whom they spoke outside of class. A few of the highly mobile youth, for example, Ashley, had a difficult time identifying all of their current teachers by name. The youth that were able to forge a relationship within the school were unable to maintain the connection when moving to a new school. LaTisha developed a close relationship with one of her high school teachers. When LaTisha moved into the youth shelter, she transferred to a new school. She has not seen her former teacher since and does not have a relationship with any of her current teachers. Ashley's teachers are frustrated that she is late or absent frequently. She does not speak to anyone at school about what is going on because she does not think they would be able to help, and she fears the emotional stress of breaking those bonds when she moves again. The only conversations she has with teachers are lectures about the importance of coming to school on time. Asia met a woman several years ago through a mentoring program. A close relationship developed between Asia and her mentor. "She helped me get registered in school and would help me with my homework. We talked about how I would go to college some day." However, the relationship dissolved when Asia moved to South Central. "It was too far for her to drive."

Meeting Basic Needs

Meeting basic needs, including food, shelter and safety, are daily concerns. Eddie spent the majority of his time on the street focused on surviving through the day.

Finding a place to sleep at night, and if it's safe was hard. And then eating. Those were the two major things I worried about. I would go to my friend's house, and he would bring me a sandwich or something, but I would have to wait all day.

Esther, a young woman who lives in a church storage room, does not have access to a shower or bathroom. "You might think it's dumb, but I just like to be clean. Most days I don't even shower." The family fills up a bowl of water at an outdoor faucet so they will have water to drink and use to brush their teeth. A second bowl serves as a toilet. Esther refuses to go to school on days she cannot find a way to clean up. Pedro, the

young man in a tagging crew, is angry that his sister was exposed to drugs and prostitution on a daily basis while they lived in Skid Row. “My baby sister, she sees drug addicts shooting their self up, smoking weed, selling dope every day.” The irony is that he sold crystal methadone and cocaine on Skid Row to help his mom buy food and supplies. “Everybody does it down here. I never knew nothing about drugs before I came down to Skid Row.” Asia misses school frequently because she is babysitting either her younger siblings or the two babies of the other family that lives in the apartment while the mothers travel to different social service agencies to get food and supplies. “I want to go to school, but someone has to take care of the babies.” Asia’s older brother frequently misses school because he is afraid that his mother and younger siblings will be harmed when he is away. “My little sister, she was 12, would get bothered by guys who kept trying to get her to get into the car when she would be walking to school. Like she was a prostitute. That’s messed up.”

School becomes irrelevant to youth preoccupied with meeting basic needs. Pedro finds school “boring” and a “waste of time.” He feels that his time would be better used if he could find a job that would help his family out. Esther agrees that school is boring. She frequently gets in trouble for talking in school.

I’m not going nowhere. I’m not doing anything good. I don’t have good grades at all. I talk too much. I talk. Why? To keep my mind off everything, problems. I want to be happy, I want to be going out places, doing other different stuff. When you go to school you have to be quiet, and it makes you think, and then it makes me sad, and all of that. I just want to be talkative.

She knows that doing well in school will help her in the future, but she is preoccupied by getting through the day. “I’ve tried many times to get into it, but there’s many distractions. I try my best but I can’t, I guess.”

Meeting basic needs takes time and energy away from their schooling. Eddie speaks about how the constant stress of surviving the day created emotional stress. “You want to do something, but you can’t. Not because you don’t have the ability, it’s just you don’t have the way to do it. Like not going to school for me just made me mad every day.” LaTisha sums the emotional stress of meeting basic needs:

It gives you more barriers, because instead of worrying about school, you worrying about your life, you worrying about what you gonna do the next morning, when you go home how you gonna live, how you gonna sleep, how you gonna eat, how you gonna survive.

Anonymity and Shame

The living situations lead to an overall sense of shame. Pedro was embarrassed to tell people he was living in a shelter. “You’re sleeping outside like filth, living in cots.” Although he went to a predominately low-income school, he had social problems

when his peers found out he was living in a shelter. “I got picked on a little bit, but when I did I had to show myself to them, you know?” Within a semester of losing his home, Pedro was transferred to a school for children with behavioral disorders because of his frequent truancy and fights. LaTisha is frustrated that her grades dropped from As and Bs to Ds when she moved into a shelter that requires families to sleep on cots in a fenced yard. Initially, she struggled to find a space and supplies to complete her homework, but became frustrated when she realized that her papers were habitually wet from dew and rain. “You get embarrassed; you don’t want to say, ‘I live in the shelter and that’s why my papers are wet,’ you know?” LaTisha did not tell her teachers or peers why she was having a difficult time completing her homework. “You don’t want everybody to know what’s going on; you don’t want everybody to treat you like you’re less than because you don’t have the same as everyone else.” Juan, the freshman in high school who recently discovered females, whispers during the interview because he does not want a girl he likes to hear what he is saying, “I really like her, but I don’t want her to think that I am like poor, cause she might not go out with me.” Unbeknownst to Juan, she lives in a similar situation but does not want him to know either. Esther will not invite people over and does not tell her friends that she lives in a storage room.

I’m not saying it’s bad, but I would want a home, where I could take a shower and, you know, brush my teeth in a real sink. Actually flush the toilet, you know. I would want at least an apartment, I’m not asking for a big mansion, at least a small apartment.

She confided in her boyfriend a month ago. She did not tell him everything, but explained that her family was short on money, and they needed to find a place to live. “He ignores me when he’s with his friends, but wants me to be with him, but alone, only just me and him. The first time we went out, he denied me with one of my friends, and got me mad.” She continues to date him, but vowed to never open up to anyone else about her life.

Shame and fear keep the youth from opening up to school staff about their residential instability. However, the school staff does not look for the youth either, and there is an anonymity that blankets the homeless experience. Angel recently started at a new high school and admits that he does not have any friends. He lives doubled-up with two other households in a small apartment. The only quiet space he can find to complete his homework is a small closet in the hallway. “I am having a hard time in math and history; I don’t think I can pass.” He struggles every day to get to school, find a space to do his homework, and eat at least two meals a day. However, no one at the school knows about his living situation. Danny has never spoken to his high school teachers and is failing several of his classes. A counselor found out he was homeless when he had to sign up for summer school and did not have a parent or legal guardian to sign the form. “She tell me that she hope[s] that I be successful some day, but she didn’t give me any advice.” He has not spoken to her since — even though he is having a difficult time getting his

homework done and frequently misses first period. Ashley, the young woman who surfs, misses school at least twice a week when she is unable to find a ride from her temporary location or if she does not have a clean uniform. No one calls to see where she is when she is absent. Although against district policy and federal law, once each semester the attendance clerk at her school mails home a letter to everyone who has been truant. If the letter comes back “return to sender,” as it does for Ashley, her enrollment is dropped. The school staff no longer is responsible for her attendance, and she is told that she needs a parent or guardian to prove residency before she can continue attending school. She leaves frustrated and is not sure if she will return to school.

On the Need for Systemic Networks

Most teenagers have not mapped out their long-range plans, and they usually do not have a clear trajectory about where their lives will take them. However, by the time individuals reach high school, they have some sense of their aptitude for learning, how much they enjoy it, what sort of educational goals they want, and how to achieve them. Low-income youth may have a less well-developed sense of what an educational future is, but as they progress through high school, they develop ideas about various alternatives. Some students know that they want to go to college but are unclear what “going to college” means. Others want to learn a vocation or skill when they graduate from high school so they might find gainful employment, and others simply want to survive high school and graduate and will then figure out what to do.

For homeless youth, however, educational futures are again in large part determined and framed by their immediate situation in manners much more direct than their peers. We certainly are not suggesting that none of the youth are doing well in school or that no one is aware of their struggles. We found a few teachers and a handful of after-school programs that offer educational guidance and support. There are vigilant teachers out there who try to help students and intentionally reach out. These teachers can have an impact on how some youth perceive education. However, the high mobility of homeless youth makes it difficult to have a sustained relationship with these teachers. The sense of shame that many feel limits the number of youth who will reach out, and their invisibility makes it difficult for teachers to find the students. By the time a relationship develops, the young person may be forced to move and attend a different school. After a while, the young person refuses to build relationships because he or she finds it too difficult to continuously enter and exit relationships. Someone beyond the school needs to facilitate the transition from school to school and someone at the school site to help youth transition in and out of the school sites.

Two points stand out from the data presented here. First, the *temporary* nature of the living situations in which these adolescents find themselves cannot be emphasized enough. Homelessness defines their lives. Even for those who are able to succeed, they still do so in relation to their lack of social stability. This instability makes the creation or maintenance of networks of their own difficult. As we noted previously, people living in poverty may not be involved in networks rich in social capital that generate

economic or human capital, but they usually are in multiple networks — religious, social, fraternal, and familial. However, the homeless youth we interviewed have few such networks. The children's families are on their own, and frequently, the children themselves are on their own.

Previous studies of poverty have tracked youth over time. Jay MacLeod (1987, 1995) studied two groups of adolescent boys living in a low-income housing project. He returned eight years later to conduct follow-up interviews. He found that youth primarily lived in the same housing project. The few that no longer lived in the complex were easily found through continued relationships. We had a difficult time finding many of the youth eight weeks after the first interview.

The temporary nature of their living situation also impacts their identities and their educational aspirations. Again, their young lives are most often defined in relation to their social situation. An educational future is either seen as irrelevant to their immediate situation or as a way to escape it. Those in social institutions such as schools seem largely unaware of homeless youth, and the result is that identity formation occurs in part by the social context of being homeless.

Second, being homeless is also a *stigma*. Students do not want individuals to know that they are homeless and do not want teachers to treat them in any way different from other students. Those without social capital are frequently without networks that enable its acquisition, and homeless youth exemplify such a point. Broadly stated, two forms of networks might exist in a setting — those networks that are for multiple individuals and constituencies and those that are based on one or another characteristic. The aforementioned membership in a country club, for example, has wealth as one characteristic. A century ago such memberships largely excluded people of color. In turn, people of color created their own sorts of organizations, some of which were based on wealth. Similarly, when university fraternities excluded African Americans, the response by African Americans was to create African American fraternities. The same sorts of responses can be seen by women, gays, and lesbians, and any number of other groups that have sought the creation of networks that might rival those organizations from which they were excluded.

Homeless youth, however, do not want others to know of their situation. If anything, the students in this study largely want to remain invisible, even if that invisibility further marginalizes them. No homeless clubs existed in the schools we visited, and the vast majority of teachers, counselors, and administrators are unaware who is homeless and who is not. Shelters where young people may visit are largely void of educational services and struggle simply to provide lodging and food. The result is that these youth end up in a self-perpetuating cycle from which they all too frequently do not escape.

Although no shortage of educational solutions exist for those who are trapped in under-performing schools, for homeless youth the largest and most immediate solution to their problem has little to do with education. To solve the challenges that the individuals

portrayed here will require providing them with stable living environments. The temporary nature of their living situations and the related stigma associated with being homeless demands solutions that are largely out of the hands of school personnel.

These students miss classes or on occasion years of schooling because they are constantly on the move. The importance of school falls by the wayside as they search for housing or personal stability that has been brought on by being homeless. The ability to form friendships, peer groups, or relationships with adults is made that much more difficult. A “chicken and egg situation” exists whereby the lack of social structures, the inability for self-definition other than in relation to being homeless, and the lack of clear educational avenues for forecasting a way out of one’s situation can be overcome in part by gaining a permanent living situation; however, a permanent home is unlikely to exist without social structures that facilitate the acquisition of capital that enable the individual ability to gain housing and think of themselves in ways other than homeless.

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