Unheard and Unseen: 
A Narrative Study of African American Adolescents Experiencing Homelessness

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty
Of
Drexel University
by
Addie Lucille Ellis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
December 2012
This Ed.D. Dissertation Committee from The School of Education at Drexel University certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Unheard and Unseen:  
A Narrative Study of African American Adolescent Homelessness

Addie Lucille Ellis

Committee:

____________________________________
Dr. Kathy Geller

____________________________________
Dr. José Chávez

____________________________________
Dr. Deanna Hill

Date
Abstract

Unheard and Unseen:

A Narrative Study of African American Adolescents Experiencing Homelessness

Addie Lucille Ellis, Ed.D.

Drexel University, December 2012

Chairperson: Kathy D. Geller, Ph.D.

Nationally, the number of children and youth experiencing homelessness is increasing. The Sacramento, California region mirrors the challenges found nationally in urban areas with respect to youth homelessness. On the national, state, and local levels, African American youth are disproportionately represented in the homeless demographic. Frequently unheard and unseen in mainstream stories regarding homelessness, the needs of this population often go unmet. This includes the needs within the education system. The population of African American youth experiencing homelessness has some of the worst educational outcomes found in the United States.

The majoritarian narrative of the issue of dismal educational outcomes for this population is viewed from the perspective of “what is wrong with ‘those’ kids.” This work shifts the question from “what is wrong with ‘those’ kids” to “what is occurring within the system?”

This narrative study is from the perspective of four African American adolescents experiencing homelessness. Information is gathered from interview sessions, observations, and the analysis of documents to provide a counter-view to the majoritarian story told regarding race and homelessness. The themes that emerge from the stories of
the study participants are lack of consistent adult support, illegal activity as a necessary means of escape, education as a means to overcome adversity, and hope for the future. The stories of these youth provide insight into the lived experiences of African American youth experiencing homelessness in an effort to gain understanding of the support and opportunities that may assist these young people in achieving their goals. From these insights, recommendations for providing support to youth experiencing homelessness are made.
Livication

This work is livicated to my son, Naseer Najee Qadeer Thompson; twenty-two years ago I promised that I would work every day to make the world a better place for you to live. Prayerfully this work is another step in fulfilling that promise.

To all of the children and youth who are faced with housing insecurity, you inspire me with your strength.
Acknowledgments

Thank you to my family Ms. Margaret A. Ellis, Robert Jr., Shawn, Najee, Prentice, Robert III, Myles, Quentin, Caleb, and Willie. You each helped me in your own special way.

Mr. David Ricardo Inniss, thank you for never letting me quit. Whenever I am slacking off, slowing down, or just ready to give up I can clearly hear you say, “Addie, get in the drops and ride!”

I would like to acknowledge and thank my phenomenal dissertation chair, Dr. Kathy Geller, and my committee, Dr. José Chávez, and Dr. Deanna Hill. Your continued encouragement and input are priceless.

This work would not have been possible without the staff and children of Mustard Seed School. It is from them that I was first introduced to the issue of child homelessness. Ms. Casey, Ms. Becca, Ms. Liana, Ms. Angie, Ms. Regina, Mr. K., Ms. Madelyn, Ms. Sally, and all of the staff and volunteers, thank you for being there for our kids every day.

Thank you to the young people, staff, and volunteers who allowed me to hang out and learn. You more than schooled me. Special thank you to Mr. Chris Stambaugh for his tireless efforts to affect grassroots change, dude, you rock!
# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. iv  
LIST OF FIGURES ...................................................................................................................... xi 
1. INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM .................................................................................. 1 
   Problem Statement .......................................................................................................................... 5 
   Purpose and Significance of the Problem ....................................................................................... 5 
   Research Questions ....................................................................................................................... 6 
   Conceptual Framework .................................................................................................................. 7 
   Definition of Terms ...................................................................................................................... 11 
   Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations ............................................................................. 15 
   Summary ..................................................................................................................................... 16 
2. LITERATURE REVIEW ........................................................................................................... 17 
   Introduction ................................................................................................................................ 17 
   The Literature Review ................................................................................................................. 19 
   Summary ..................................................................................................................................... 37 
3. METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................................... 39 
   Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 39 
   Research Design and Rationale .................................................................................................... 39 
   Site and Population ....................................................................................................................... 40 
   Research Methods ....................................................................................................................... 41 
   Ethical Considerations .................................................................................................................. 45
4. FINDINGS, RESULTS, AND INTERPRETATIONS ............................................. 47
   Introduction ........................................................................................................ 47
   Findings ............................................................................................................. 52
   Results and Interpretations ............................................................................. 69
   Summary .......................................................................................................... 72

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ............................................. 74
   Introduction ........................................................................................................ 74
   Conclusions ....................................................................................................... 75
   Additional Conclusions .................................................................................... 81
   Recommendations ........................................................................................... 84
   Summary .......................................................................................................... 88

LIST OF REFERENCES ..................................................................................... 90

APPENDIX: APPROVAL OF PROTOCOL ....................................................... 95
List of Figures

1. Conceptual framework outlining the three research streams ..................................8
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem

I am an invisible man … I am a man of substance, flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me…When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me. (Ellison, 1952, p. 3)

On October 5, 2010, I began volunteering at an emergency school for children experiencing homelessness. Prior to October 5, 2010, my knowledge of homelessness was limited to images of adults on street corners holding “will work for food” signs. I did not see the faces, I did not hear the voices; I simply saw the signs and drove by. My eyes were opened to the reality of homelessness when a five-year-old at the emergency school recounted what she was most thankful for during a Thanksgiving project, “I’m thankful for a bed, and my own room, with pink walls. We don’t have it yet, but I know we will” (young student experiencing homelessness, personal communication, November 2010). The experiences with the children, staff, and volunteers at the emergency school for children experiencing homelessness provided the motivation for this research.

As a volunteer, my perceptions and stereotypes regarding poverty, economic hardship, and homelessness were challenged by stories from youth as young as three regarding shelter living, staying with friends and family, life in parks and campgrounds, and “welfare” motels. These stories became the unspoken theme of each day, as did “Couch Surfer,” “Throw-Away-Kid,” “Chronic Homelessness,” “Newly Homeless.” These terms that did not exist in my lexicon prior to volunteering at this school for children experiencing homelessness became material for regular conversations with family, friends, and colleagues.
Questions began to formulate in a constant internal dialog. “If, as a counselor and high school administrator for over 10 years I did not recognize the signs of youth homelessness, how are other educators interacting with this population?” “How do youth experiencing homelessness navigate their day-to-day life rituals of school, homework, and friends?” “Why are so many of the faces of the youth experiencing homelessness children of color?” This final question, the question of race, is one I initially tried to ignore. As an African American woman I am aware of the perception within the majoritarian narrative of being too focused on race. However, I could not deny or ignore the fact that the vast majority of children attending the school could pass as mine. The reality of the significant hardship individuals’ face when they are experiencing homelessness is not minimized by skin color. Poverty and homelessness has no respect for race. However, I could not push the question of race aside when, at times, all the classrooms at the school were filled with children of color.

There are approximately 1.5 million youth classified as homeless each year in the United States; a disproportionate number are African American youth living in California (Bassuk, Murphy, Coupe, Kenney, & Beach, 2011; Mawhinney-Rhoades & Stahler, 2006; U.S. Census Report, 2010). California ranks as one of the worst states, with the highest number of homeless youth between birth and 18 (Bassuk et al., 2011). The actual number of homeless youth in Sacramento, California is unknown; however, P. Julianelle (personal communication, November 15, 2012) the legal director for the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, stated in a presentation given to service providers for homeless youth, that the Sacramento region has almost double the number of calls Los Angeles, California has to the national runaway youth
hotline. Additionally, school districts in the region report an increasing number of youth classified as homeless. In all categories, national, state, and local, there are a disproportionate number of African Americans who are homeless. The disproportionality of African Americans experiencing homelessness and the lack of research addressing systemic problems from the perspective of the African American youth who are homeless forms the basis for this study.

Research from multiple sources indicates that youth who are homeless are more likely to have lower literacy and numeracy rates, and they tend to use and understand technology to a lesser degree (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Barton, 2004; Mawhinney-Rhoades & Stahler, 2006). Homelessness lends itself to transiency, poor nutrition, lack of adequate health care, and high stress environments. Each of these factors may contribute to gaps in learning that often lead to educational challenges (Kozol, 1991; Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006). According to the American Psychological Association (2011), to be unsheltered is to live in a constant state of stress. Focusing on academics is difficult when faced with “where will I sleep tonight?” or “will school breakfast and lunch be all I eat today?” (Youth advocate, personal communication, July 13, 2011).

In addition to the challenges with literacy, numeracy, and technology, youth who experience homelessness, even for a short period of time, are more likely to be suspended and expelled from school at higher rates, not complete high school, and tend to experience poverty into adulthood at a higher rate (Atkinson, 1983; Aviles de Bradley, 2011). Statistics on achievement for youth experiencing homelessness is not disaggregated by race; however, much like those who are homeless, African American
youth experience similar challenges with literacy and numeracy (Bassuk et al., 2011). African American youth score significantly lower than their White peers across all grade levels regardless of income (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010). In addition, African American youth have higher discipline and dropout rates (Darling-Hammond, 2010). From the negative statistics for African American youth and those experiencing homelessness separately, one can extrapolate that, when combined, African American youth who are experiencing homelessness experience negative educational outcomes.

High school graduation and college degree completion rates for African Americans are low (NCES, 2010). For youth living in poverty, 69% graduate from high school, 40% enroll in college, and only 12% actually complete their degree program (Engle & O’Brien, 2007; U.S. Census Report, 2010). The high school graduation and college completion statistics are dire for both those living in poverty and African Americans. These statistics are even worse for youth experiencing homelessness (Atkinson, 1983; Barton, 2004; Hagan & McCarthy, 2005). The failure to complete high school and college affects future earnings, as well as continuing income instability. College graduates earn nearly twice as much as high school graduates, and high school graduates earn nearly 30% more than those who do not complete high school (United States Department of Labor, 2012). In addition to the gap in wages and future earnings potential based on degree completion, 90% of the fastest growing jobs require post-secondary education or training (United States Department of Labor, 2012).

The actual academic achievement data for youth experiencing homelessness are not reported separately from those who are classified as low-income based on qualifying
for the free and reduced lunch programs; however, according to a personal communication with P. Julianelle (November 15, 2012) legal director from the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, there is an achievement gap between youth experiencing homelessness and their housed peers. Although the disaggregated academic achievement data for homeless youth is currently not available, there is currently a documented academic achievement gap for African American youth regardless of income as well as one for youth who qualify for free and reduced lunch (NCES, 2010). African American youth consistently score lower than their White peers on all achievement tests, graduate from high school at lesser rates, and attend college to a lesser degree (Darling-Hammond, 2010; NCES, 2010; Ravitch, 2010).

The intersection of race, homelessness, and the education system are useful to deepen and further the research dialog. The stories of these youth are central to this researcher’s desire to discover what contributes to academic achievement and opportunity from the perspective and through the voices of African American adolescent youth experiencing homelessness.

**Problem Statement**

The educational system does not currently support African American youth who are experiencing homelessness, as evidenced by the documented academic achievement gap for this population.

**Purpose and Significance of the Problem**

Viewing the lack of academic achievement from the perspective of how the individual is navigating the system is common in the majoritarian narrative and, in essence, casting blame on the individual for not meeting success measures over which
they have no control. Childhood homelessness, especially as it relates to academic achievement during the middle school years, grades six through eight, is a largely underexamined phenomenon. This research changes the view, seeking to focus on what is occurring within the system that may not allow this population to be successful. The purpose of this narrative study is to discover, through the stories told by African American adolescents who are experiencing homelessness, what support and opportunities may facilitate academic success.

As mentioned previously, African American youth are disproportionately represented in the homeless demographic (Bassuk et al., 2011). These youth are suspended and expelled at higher rates, disproportionately drop out of school, and are more likely to live in poverty as adults (Barton, 2004; Mawhinney-Rhoades & Stahler, 2006). Understanding the perspective of these young people may assist the educational system in developing new strategies contributing to successful academic outcomes for this population because it challenges the dominant narrative and the solutions that narrative provides.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the lived experiences expressed in the stories told by African American youth who are experiencing homelessness?
2. What stories do African American homeless adolescents tell about their interactions with school staff and teachers?
3. What support does the education system provide to encourage system navigation?
Conceptual Framework

Researcher’s Stances

This research is grounded in both ontological and axiological stances. My ontological stance is naturalistic, indicating I take a social constructivist perspective believing there are multiple realities (Creswell, 2008). The multiplicity of reality in this research is brought forth through the stories of the participants. My axiological stance is the medium in which I gather and filter data. The morals and values of the subjects shape their stories, and my values of equity, social justice, and advocacy shape my interpretation of their narratives.

My core belief that all youth deserve to access the opportunity education is said to provide shapes the paradigm used to contribute to scholarly dialog. As a critical race theorist and social constructivist who advocates for those who are marginalized in society, my ultimate desire is for this study to raise others’ awareness. It is my belief that exploring marginalized perspectives of reality through the voices of the participants will bring richness to the research dialog. The opportunity for the population of this study to have their experiences and perspectives heard by society at large is necessary for them to be fully understood (Riessman, 2008). Through hearing the perspectives of this population, the impact of homelessness on youth may be known. This research provides an opportunity for the voices of the unheard and the faces of the unseen African American homeless youth to challenge the broader conversation concerning how the educational system can support these vulnerable adolescents.
Conceptual Framework of Three Research Streams

In reviewing the research regarding adolescent and youth homelessness, African Americans are mentioned; however, the reference is commonly made in relation to the larger population of homelessness. There is a dearth of information in the research dialog regarding African Americans who experience homelessness in early adolescence. Acknowledging and analyzing the racialized experiences with homelessness offers a different understanding that may lead to new awareness. This study, as illustrated in Figure 1, is framed on the foundation of published research on Critical Race Theory (CRT), homelessness, and the structural inequalities that exist within the educational system.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework outlining the three research streams.

In the tradition of both CRT and narrative research, this study explores the counter stories of African American youth and their experiences in the education system.
In the majoritarian narrative, information is normed through the filter of White, middle-class to upper middle-class, heterosexual values. These stories, also called majoritarian stories, privilege those who come from that perspective (Merriweather Hunn, Guy, & Manglitz, 2006). Counterstorytelling is “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26), including non-heterosexuals, youth, people of color, and those classified as poor or low-income.

Exploring the stories of African American youth experiencing homelessness cannot be effectively completed without considering the implications of race. CRT provides a means to analytically consider how race impacts and perpetuates the systems supporting the extreme poverty most often associated with homelessness. Critical Race Theory is rooted in legal discourse (Booker, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In the legal system, CRT is about exposing racism, promoting racial justice, and mobilizing others into action (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) provide an early analysis of CRT within the education system. While there are a range of definitions of Critical Race Theory, for purposes of this study, the definition of CRT is taken from Delgado and Stefancic (2001).

Critical Race Theory “transform(s) the relationship among race, racism, and power” by seeking to understand and change how society organizes itself on “racial lines and hierarchies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, pp. 2-3). While there are several key aspects to CRT, counterstorytelling, telling stories that challenge the discourse of the majority by giving voice to the marginalized, and Whiteness as property, shaping and defining norms based on the privilege of Whiteness, are of particular focus for this research (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1999;
Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Counterstorytelling centers the discussion on the subject’s reality. The story of how these youth navigate homelessness and their definitions of achievement, success, and survival may greatly differ and directly challenge mainstream beliefs. Recognizing the stories of the participants may reflect the difference from the majoritarian story, but it does not negate the fact that there is a majoritarian story in which these youth live and operate.

The support given by those in the educational system for youth experiencing homelessness varies. The nature of homelessness facilitates transiency, which, in turn, may require these adolescents to switch schools where they may encounter barriers to access because of various residency and guardianship laws schools follow in enrolling students (Mawhinney-Rhoades & Stahler, 2006). Primarily, the research available analyzes the social and emotional challenges homeless youth may suffer, as well as the impact of education policy on school-aged homeless youth. Aviles de Bradley’s (2011) qualitative study provides the view of five homeless high school youth. Her findings identify four themes: (1) homelessness as a misnomer, (2) homelessness as a choice, (3) caring adults, and (4) student agency (Aviles de Bradley, 2011). The four themes provide foundational knowledge for this study.

Viewing homelessness through a policy lens is a method of understanding the phenomenon. The system of education is a complex, multifaceted organism. Each part of the system, including federal, state, local, and site policy is influenced by the historical construct in which they were developed. In addition, each level is comprised of individuals who have their belief systems and values that influence how policy is implemented. Beyond policy and individual implementation, the school system is
comprised of both cultural and historical lenses. Delpit (2006) analyzed the cultural and practical aspects of education and concluded that the practical nature of teaching cannot be separated from the mental models of the educators. Darling-Hammond (2011) discussed the inequities existing within the education system from both a macro policy and government level and a micro individual classroom level. Delpit and Darling-Hammond provide foundational literature to discuss the structural inequalities existing within the education system.

The confluence of CRT, homelessness, and structural inequalities within the education system are examined in depth in the literature review of this study. These three streams provide a foundation upon which to explore the stories of sixth- through eighth-grade African American homeless youth. Each research stream converges to provide a frame for the narrative.

**Definition of Terms**

**Academic achievement**

For the purpose of this study academic achievement is defined by course passage, consistent school attendance, and receiving three or fewer behavior referrals in a school year.

**Academic achievement gap**

For the purpose of this study academic achievement gap is derived from the majoritarian definition of achievement based on standardized test score passage rates.
Couch surfing

Moving between relatives’ or friends’ homes for temporary shelter (Jansson, 2008).

Counterstorytelling

“a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27)

Critical Race Theory

As defined by Delgado and Stefancic (2001), CRT is a means to “analyze and transform the relationship among race, racism, and power” (p. 2). In education, CRT is used to understand “issues of school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, controversies over curriculum and history, and IQ and achievement testing” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, pp. 2-3).

Homelessness

When an individual has a primary nighttime residence that is:

- “a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
- an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized;
- a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development); or
- youth and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement” (Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, 1987)

Housed

For the purpose of this study, housed youth are those who live in a stable residence.

Low-income

Living from the poverty line to 200% above the poverty line. The amount varies according to family size (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Permanence of racism

The belief that racism is endemic to the structure of the United States (Bell, 1992) including, “all political, economic, and social domains” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27).

Poverty

People are said to be “living in poverty” if they live below the official poverty guidelines as determined by the US Census. Poverty threshold varies according to family size (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Race

A social construct “contested and mediated by experiences of gender, ethnicity, national origin, and socioeconomic status” (Jewett, 2006, p. 144). Further, race is
a social construct that has been shaped over time and history by a series of
“social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender factors and then
crystallized into a series of structures that are now inappropriately taken as ‘real’”
(Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). This means that “context must be understood in
searching for deeper meanings that underlie contemporary social problems”

**Racialized**

Adding a race component to a situation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001)

**Resilience**

“positive adaptation in the face of adversity” (Buckner, Mezzacappa, &
Beardslee, 2003)

**Sheltered**

Those who reside in a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed
to provide temporary living accommodations

**Throw-away youth**

Youth denied housing by their families or prevented from returning home by a
parent or other household adult (U.S. Department of Education, 2004)

**Whiteness and property**

A concept within CRT that compares the quality of Whiteness to that of other
property rights (Harris, 1993)

**Whiteness as property**

For the purpose of this research, Whiteness as property is the belief that the
United States is founded upon property rights in which Whiteness shares
privileges of transferability and exclusion that others may not possess (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995)

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Several assumptions impact this narrative study of African American, early adolescent, homelessness, and academic achievement. The first assumption was that race was a factor in the academic achievement of the research subjects. As an African American woman, I am keenly aware of how race has impacted my own experiences within the educational system.

Another assumption was the belief that exploring methods to assist the population of youth, in particular African American youth experiencing homelessness, is valuable to academic discourse. Aligned with this assumption was a central belief that there is value in gathering the perspectives of this population directly. The view that there is value in the narratives of the marginalized is a principal assumption.

Although I am African American, I live in a middle-class environment where most of the people with which I come into contact have post-graduate education. The setting in which this study took place is different from the community in which I live and where I was raised. I made a secondary assumption that there were some shared cultural aspects with the study participants and that these similarities lent themselves to being accepted into the participants’ lives.

A significant limitation to this study was the transient nature of the population. The nature of homelessness is that of uncertainty and transiency. Ensuring contact is maintained drives this limitation. In order to mitigate this limitation, I needed to be flexible with scheduling meeting times and locations.
Another limitation of this study was the research design. This study was informed by the stories interpreted from a small sample size of four African American adolescent homeless youth. The size of the study may preclude general application; however, it can inform further study regarding the lived experiences of African American youth who are experiencing homelessness.

The concerns regarding transiency and maintaining contact throughout the study forms the basis for the key delimiter to this study, which was time. Flexible meeting guidelines were established in hopes of decreasing the potential of losing subjects before the study was completed. In addition to having flexible meeting guidelines, I needed to be open to meeting at different locations and times to support the needs of the participants.

Summary

The experiences of youth who are homeless may impact how they interact with the education system. Although the statistics introduced earlier in this chapter are dire, they do not represent the actual lived experiences of all African American youth who are homeless. This research explores the support, opportunities, and characteristics of homelessness through the stories of the study participants. The research streams forming a foundation for this study included Critical Race Theory, homelessness, and the structural inequalities within the education system. The narratives that emerged from the dialogue with these adolescents shaped the direction of this work.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Meeting the academic needs of homeless students in a mainstream academic setting can be challenging. The problem this study sought to explore is the educational system does not currently support African American youth who are experiencing homelessness based on the recognized academic achievement gap for this population.

Youth who are experiencing homelessness, even for a short period of time, are more likely than their peers who do not experience homeless to not complete high school and experience poverty into adulthood at a higher rate (Atkinson, 1983). Understanding the perspectives of these young people may assist the administrative staff and teaching faculty in developing new strategies to further assist this population and impact the educational system.

The needs of students who are experiencing homelessness appear to differ from their housed peers. Although students experiencing homelessness have recognized challenges, there are some who experience academic success in spite of systemic barriers. This narrative study explores the lived experiences of adolescents who are homeless. The narratives of these youth are situated within the conceptual framework of homelessness, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and the structural inequalities within the educational system.

The nature of homelessness is evidenced in housing instability and transiency. This transiency can lead to attendance issues, switching schools, and difficulty enrolling in a new school (Mawhinney-Rhoades & Stahler, 2006). Homeless adolescents may not be able to verify their residency, access previous school records, or verify guardianship,
and when faced with these situations these young people may opt out of the school system.

In addition, frequent school changes make it difficult for youth experiencing homelessness to build and maintain relationships with peers. Youth who are homeless report feeling lonely and not wanting to attend school “(be) cause (you) don’t know anyone” (Janine, personal communication, July 22, 2012). Youth experiencing homelessness also report having a difficult time making new friends because of the lack of material possessions (Kirkman, Keys, Bodzak, & Turner, 2010). Research suggests the social aspects of school play a significant role in the life of the child experiencing homelessness (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Mawhinney-Rhoades & Stahler, 2006).

The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, Pub. L. 100–77, 101 Stat. 525, 42 U.S.C. § 11431–35 (1987) combats some of the deleterious social and academic effects of homelessness. Along with providing the definition of homelessness, the act outlines services for those experiencing homelessness. The primary assertion of the reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act (2001) is that “each State educational agency shall ensure that each child of a homeless individual and each homeless youth has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as provided to other youth and youths” (42 U.S.C. 11431 Part C SEC 721).

Having a clear recognition of youth experiencing homelessness is a challenge. Although homelessness is clearly defined by McKinney-Vento policy, youth who meet the homeless criteria do not always consider themselves homeless, as they often have a place to stay and fail to report their legal homeless state (Aviles de Bradley, 2011). In addition, some do not report being homeless because of the nature and stigma attached to
homelessness. Lastly, there are a number of youth not attached to any educational system (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; First Focus, 2010; Moriarty, 2010). The failure of self-identification by youth experiencing homelessness makes providing support within the educational system difficult (Aviles de Bradley, 2011).

As the number of families experiencing homelessness increases, the number of youth engaged in the school system increases as well. Data from before the most recent recession offered reports of anywhere from 50,000 to 2.8 million homeless youth in the United States (Cooper, 2006). Depending on the source, this number can include youth living within a family system, as well as unaccompanied youth, those not attached to any adult caregiver (Bassuk et al., 2011; Fernandes, 2007). Nationally, the reported number of youth experiencing homelessness pre Kindergarten through grade 12 has increased from 679,724 in 2006-2007 to nearly a million in both the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years (Bowman, Dukes, & Moore, 2012; First Focus, 2010). In some instances, even with the knowledge of the students’ living arrangements, according to an attendance secretary at a Sacramento area school, schools do not know how to advocate for, or report, students who are experiencing homelessness.

The Literature Review

This literature on homelessness is reviewed historically as well as through a policy lens. Homelessness has a long history within the United States. At various times in this country’s history there have been large numbers of individuals who have experienced homelessness (Aviles de Bradley, 2008; Barak, 1991; Lang, 1989). Educational policy, as it relates to homelessness, provides insight into how being homeless affects young people within the educational system.
The amalgamation of homelessness and race is examined through the lens of Critical Race Theory. CRT has its roots in legal discourse with the end goals of exposing racism, promoting racial justice, and mobilizing others into action (Booker, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1999). Whiteness as property and counter-storytelling are of particular focus in this study as these concepts offer different views of how the construct of race plays out within the educational system.

The literature suggests negative outcomes within the educational system based on homelessness and race. In spite of the negative outcomes, there are young people who are successful despite systemic barriers. Reviewing the structural inequalities within the educational system provides a means for understanding how the system works for, and against, students who are homeless.

**Homelessness**

Vagrant, bag lady, waif, hobo – these pejorative terms have been used throughout history to describe those who are homeless (Barak, 1991). The terms for homelessness have shifted from the pejorative, oft-blame inducing names of the past to the current term of individuals experiencing homelessness, or, specifically, for this research, youth experiencing homelessness (Aviles de Bradley, 2011). Though homeless youth and youth experiencing homelessness are used interchangeably throughout this research, the latter term is the preferred as it removes the implication of the condition somehow being the child’s fault (Aviles de Bradley, 2011).

Families and youth are not the typical image of homelessness. The image of the middle-aged, alcoholic, White male, has long been the archetype for homelessness in the United States (Lang, 1989). Even though families and youth do not come to mind,
historically there have been waves of families and youth experiencing homelessness based on the nation’s economy.

One of the first recorded waves, in the 1880s, was attributed to the shift from an agrarian society to an industrial-based economy. The next was during the depression of the 1930s. The final noted wave was the shift from the industrial economy to the postindustrial service economy of the 1980s (Barak, 1991; Lang, 1989). Unlike other periods, the homelessness that began in the 1980s established the beginning of families facing homelessness nationwide (Quint, 1994).

During each of these periods, homelessness was attributed to individuals who were unable to transition to the new market base of the economy (Aviles de Bradley, 2008; Barak, 1991; Lang, 1989; Quint, 1994). The current upsurge of family and, in turn, youth homelessness is attributed to the latest economic downturn more than the inability of individuals unable to transition to the new economy (Bassuk et al., 2009; Sard, 2009). The national economic challenges increase the chances that families living at or near the poverty line will experience significant adverse effects including homelessness. These families are at greatest risk of becoming homeless because they tend to not have economic reserves (Miller, 2011).

Historically and currently, the characteristics of the homeless demographic are typically individuals “living on the margins of society (e.g., poor, mentally ill, minority status, women, and youth), and lacking the political power to significantly change the social structures that create and perpetuate homelessness” (Aviles de Bradley, 2008, p. 262). Individuals on the margins, specifically racial minorities, have disproportionately experienced homelessness (Quint, 1994). A subject from Quint’s (1994) study suggested
homelessness did not become an issue of national concern until White women, White youth, and White families began experiencing homelessness in greater numbers.

Regardless of the cause and characteristics of homelessness, youth living in a homeless situation seem to have shared educational experiences. Youth who are homeless are more likely to repeat a grade, have difficulty adjusting to the classroom structure, score lower on both math and language arts assessments, have a higher number of suspensions and expulsions, drop out of school at higher rates, and tend to experience poverty into adulthood at a higher rate (Atkinson, 1983; Biggar, 2001; Hartman, 2009). In addition, those who are homeless are more likely to be transient, suffer from poor nutrition, lack adequate health care, and live in high stress environments (Quint, 1994). Youth experiencing homelessness deal with the additional stressors brought on by the lack of the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and medical services (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Berck, 1992; Crooks, 1995; Quint, 1994).

Individuals living in extreme poverty, most often associated with homelessness, receive poor health services and, as a result, may suffer from health-related chronic illnesses (Crooks, 1995; Kozol, 1991). Transiency, poor nutrition, poor health care, and high stress can contribute to gaps in learning and challenges within the educational system for youth (Kozol, 1991; Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006). Research referencing the academic achievement gap between Black youth experiencing homelessness and their White peers experiencing homelessness is lacking; however, there is a noted achievement gap between Black and White youth living in poverty (NCES, 2010).
The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 stemmed from concerns brought about by the recession of the 1980s. At that time there was an increased number of homeless families and children. The McKinney-Vento legislation was the first that sought to address the disparities of homelessness. The educational portion of McKinney-Vento was reauthorized under both the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 and the current authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2012). Homelessness crosses into realms of affordable housing, education, and social justice.

The literature on homelessness and education demonstrates how the condition of homelessness may impact individuals differently depending on various factors including age and onset of homelessness. Perlman and Fantuzzo (2010) completed a quantitative study of an entire cohort of second grade students in a “large northeastern county” (p. 876). The 12,045 students within the cohort were measured on birth risks, poverty, maltreatment, homelessness, academic achievement, and attendance. Perlman and Fantuzzo (2010) defined homelessness as placement in a homeless shelter between birth and the end of second grade. Their findings confirmed a link between maltreatment, “a substantiated or indicated allegation” report to Child Protective Services or General Services Report, and homelessness (Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010, p. 877). Children who experienced homelessness during infancy had lower language, reading, and math outcomes than their peers (Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010). Although the study found evidence supporting the correlation of poor academic outcomes and homelessness, the influence of abuse may also be a salient risk factor to academic outcomes. This study focused on children who lived in a shelter serving families who were homeless.
Academic outcomes for children who are unsheltered or not involved in a shelter setting may be impacted differently.

Where Perlman and Fantuzzo (2010) analyzed correlations between homelessness and poor academic achievement, an earlier study by Rouse and Fantuzzo (2009) researched multiple risk factors in correlation with achievement for a second-grade cohort of 11,835 in which 25% of the cohort experienced homelessness. Perlman and Fantuzzo (2010) found a significant correlation between homelessness and poor reading, and, although these children scored slightly higher on the math assessments, there was a link between homelessness and reduced math achievement (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009). In addition to finding significant connections between poor academic achievement and homelessness, they also found an association between homelessness and behavioral outcomes. Children who were homeless were more likely to have poor social skills and high absenteeism (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009). Another significant relationship was found between school suspension and homelessness with the odds of school suspension increasing by 51% for children who experienced homelessness (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009). In this study, the relationship between negative outcomes was not linked to race; however, 67.2% of the children in the study were African American (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009).

Cognition seems to be affected by the lack of the basic needs of food and shelter (Fantuzzo, Perlman, & Dobbins, 2011). Fantuzzo et al. (2011) studied a cohort of 10,349 multi-racial, second-grade students in a large northeastern county. They found that 619 children in the cohort experienced physical abuse and 834 children experienced neglect. Slightly more than 40% of the children who experienced physical abuse also experienced
homelessness, and 45.3% of the neglected children experienced homelessness (Fantuzzo et al., 2011). The study found a positive correlation between neglect and poor academic performance.

An earlier study done on second-grade students in the same county by Rouse and Fantuzzo (2009) established a correlation between child maltreatment, homelessness, and poor academic performance. The relationship between negative outcomes and homelessness on young children who live in shelters provides an important perspective on homelessness.

In another study of children who experienced shelter living, Huntington, Buckner, and Bassuk (2008) investigated the experiences of 53 preschool and 69 school-aged children. Using a cluster analysis, subjects were placed in similar groups to maximize variability between groups and minimize variability within groups (Huntington et al., 2008). Two distinct categories of “high-functioning” and “low-functioning” preschool and school-aged children were found based on their Child Behavioral Checklist, Vineland Screener (an intelligence measure), and assessment scores (Huntington et al., 2008, p. 746). The distinct clusters in both the preschool and school-aged groups supported the notion that homeless children are not a monolithic group (Huntington et al., 2008).

Huntington et al. (2008) acknowledged their findings were limited by the small sample size, the time in which the data was collected, as well as the racial demographics not being reflective of national numbers; however, this study did demonstrate that there could be high-performing children and youth who experience homelessness.

A limitation I saw in Huntington et al.’s (2008) research they did not mention was the sample being taken solely from the shelter system. Homelessness, by definition,
includes children and youth who are doubled-up, living on the street, as well as those residing in shelters. The experiences of the children and youth who live in these other states of homelessness may differ.

Kidd (2007) surveyed 208 youth who lived on the streets of New York City and Toronto, Canada. One area of questioning was around social stigma in relation to homelessness. Although it was hypothesized that minorities would have a greater feeling of social stigma based on their homeless condition, the survey actually found that White youth reported higher perceived stigma due to homelessness (Kidd, 2007). The survey only measured stigma as it related to homelessness, not how race may impact the perception of being stigmatized. As Kidd (2007) concluded, minorities may have an added challenge to their homeless condition not measured by only looking at the perception of social stigma. As one subject in the study stated, “People aren’t afraid of me because I am homeless. People are afraid of me because I am Black” (Kidd, 2007, p. 296). The interaction of race and homelessness may change the experience that African American youth have while homeless.

Having quantitative data regarding homelessness provides information on the homeless experience; however, quantitative studies may not fully impart the lived experiences of the children and youth who are homeless. Aviles de Bradley (2011) conducted a qualitative study using the counternarratives of six unaccompanied African American high school youth classified as homeless in Chicago. The different perspective from this population demonstrates that the mainstream story regarding homelessness may not necessarily be the same as that of the youth experiencing homelessness.
A significant difference was found in the way the youth defined homelessness. In this study, homelessness was relational versus the actual loss of a structure (Aviles de Bradley, 2011). Although the relationships seemed to have an emotional impact, the youth reported not having a choice as to whether they left or remained in their home (Aviles de Bradley, 2011). The thought that youth who leave home do so out of necessity is a different aspect of homelessness. The mainstream story is generally that youth leave home because they do not want to abide by family rules or structure; however, the relationships with adults, though inconsistent, were something the youth in this study desired. A final finding in the study was that the youth actively sought support to assist their success and connection to school (Aviles de Bradley, 2011).

Hickler and Auerswald (2009) conducted a mixed-methods, cultural, epidemiological comparison of African American and White youth experiencing homelessness in San Francisco. The study surveyed 205 youth, 145 White and 60 African American. The sample consisted of both young men and young women recruited from agencies and the street. An ethnographic interview was conducted with 54 of the youth primarily African American and White and two categorized as Latino. The study found significant differences in how African American and White youth self-identify as homeless, as well as in programs serving homeless individuals. In both instances, White youth were more likely to self-identify as homeless and access programs. The racialized differences found in this study, between African American and White youth, supports additional research on how different subsets (e.g., sexual orientation or gender identification) within each of these populations experience and navigate their homeless state.
Tierney and Hallett (2012) conducted an 18-month study of a Los Angeles school district. Within this study, 120 youth and 45 adults including policymakers, school officials, clergy, service providers, and similar individuals who work with youth experiencing homelessness were interviewed. The study provided considerable detail on youth in different categories of homelessness according to the McKinney-Vento definition (e.g., doubled-up, unaccompanied youth, youth residing with their families in shelters, and the like). A finding in the study was the lack of access to services due to the failure of students and their families to disclose the homeless state. Additionally, they found that a lack of resources within the school system impacted how McKinney-Vento policy was implemented.

**Summary.** The condition of homelessness within the United States is a charged, emotional issue that often carries a societal stigma (Kidd, 2007; Tierney & Hallett, 2012). The traditional view in the dominant narrative of homelessness was the single White man who struggled with substance abuse. Then the perception of homelessness broadened to include women and men who were mentally ill or were struggling with substance abuse. Recent U.S. Census data demonstrates that families are increasingly among the ranks of the homeless. Their presence has increased significantly since the original signing of the McKinney-Vento Act in 1987 (U.S. Census Report, 2010). As the number of families experiencing homelessness increases, the number of homeless youth within the educational system has also increased (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009).

Poverty and homelessness are inextricably linked, with those who are classified homeless also falling into the category of extreme poverty (U.S. Census Report, 2010). Youth living in poverty are twice as likely to be Black or Hispanic (Bowman et al.,
2012). The challenges raised by the extreme poverty of homelessness disproportionately effects youth from African American backgrounds. African American adolescents make up 47% of the homeless youth population, yet are just 14% of the total population (Bassuk et al., 2011). To understand the reality of this statistic, what does one need to understand about the interplay of race and homelessness?

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory attempts to shift the discussion away from a deficit model, where some youth and families are seen essentially as empty vessels in need of being filled with the knowledge of the dominant culture, to an inclusive model that values multiple perspectives (Yosso, 2005).

Given the insidious and often subtle way in which race and racism operate, it is imperative that educational researchers explore the role of race when examining the educational experiences of African-American students. (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 26)

The lens of CRT provides a different method for viewing the historical relationship between race and privilege in the United States (Bell, 1992; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Yosso, 2006).

Originally grounded in legal discourse on racial justice and uncovering all forms of racism, and its intersections with gender, ethnicity, national origin, and socioeconomic status, CRT calls to question the cultural lens through which individuals are viewed (Ladson-Billing, 1999). Harris (1993) provided an in-depth analysis of how Whiteness became a property right within the United States through the historical connection of laws of exclusion based on skin color. At an unconscious level, the historical connection of laws of exclusion based on skin color carries forward into modern day as the
expectation of certain rights, such as the right to decide normative values and culture, are based on White culture and values (Harris, 1993).

The school system is not exempt from issues of race that exist within the United States at large. In a historical overview of CRT and its application to educational research, Ladson-Billings (1999) describes five central themes of CRT, which include Whiteness as property, the critique of liberalism, counterstorytelling, interest convergence, and the permanence of racism. Two themes, Whiteness as property and counterstorytelling, are of specific focus in this research. These themes lay a foundation for understanding how African American youth (as well as other minorities) may have to face unique challenges within the educational system. There is significant research regarding the experiences of African American youth within the education system applying the CRT approach. Understanding the literature on the dynamic of race and education assists in framing the complexity of the intersection of race, homelessness, and academic achievement.

To understand the experiences of homeless youth, it is my belief one must understand the racialized experiences these young people may encounter. To restate the quote on youth homelessness and social stigma, “People aren’t afraid of me because I am homeless. People are afraid of me because I am Black” (Kidd, 2007, p. 296). CRT accepts the perception of fear of Blackness expressed by the young person in this quote.

DeCuir and Dixson (2004) provide an analysis of CRT and racism in education drawing upon the experience of two students, Malcolm and Barbara, attending Wells Academy, an elite, predominantly White school. The story Malcolm and Barbara share regarding their experiences at Wells Academy differs from the perceptions of the larger
school environment. In an effort to elucidate Whiteness as property, Barbara tells the story of a female African American student who wanted to wear an African head-wrap for graduation. The young woman was unable to wear the original head-wrap because it was colorful, and for the graduation ceremony, girls were expected to wear all white. The dress code did not provide the opportunity for one to express oneself outside the school cultural norm. The dress code was based on mainstream values developed when the school did not have students from diverse backgrounds and did not include the African American perspective (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). In essence, Whiteness as property accepts that the values of those who are White are to be valued (consciously or unconsciously) over the values of those who are not.

CRT questions the normative value placed on the culture of the dominant group, which is most often middle class to upper middle class and White (Yosso, 2005). The extreme poverty of homelessness and race may be inextricably linked as those who are classified as homeless disproportionately falling into the category of African American (U.S. Census Report, 2010).

The property value of Whiteness is seen in discussions on student achievement. Taylor (2006) utilized CRT to analyze the academic achievement gap of African Americans and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy. Although the NCLB policy attempts to mitigate challenges within the school system, Taylor (2006) suggested the policy does not address the challenges African Americans and other people of color, specifically those who live in poverty, may experience.

The educational experiences of the student are often not limited to the individual student’s experience. Economic challenges, unemployment, lack of home ownership,
and the exposure to subpar educational systems across generations perpetuates the achievement gap before some children enter school, during kindergarten through grade 12, and into undergraduate studies (Taylor, 2006). The discussion of academic achievement of African American youth is often centered on a deficit model, a model in which African American youth are viewed as missing key information and knowledge that is culturally normed to White, middle-class values (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Yosso, 2005).

Yosso (2005) provided another dimension of CRT through an analysis of culturally specific knowledge. By including multiple cultural frames, Yosso (2005) suggested African Americans and other students of color would likely be seen to have strengths unacknowledged within an education system normed to White values. Because of how students of color are currently measured, both expectations and interactions with staff and teaching faculty be may influenced.

In the school setting, the expectation of high achievement for African American students is, at times, lacking. Dixson and Rosseau (2005) provided an overview of CRT within education beginning with Ladson-Billings and Tate’s 1995 analysis of CRT in educational research. They noted that (2005) in many schools, African American youth are not exposed to the same quality of teachers or coursework. Darling-Hammond (2010) found that in many cases, African American youth are subjected to higher class sizes and lower-end courses.

The findings regarding school connectedness as it relates to achievement for African American students is mixed (Booker, 2006). Although African American students may report feeling connected to school, they may not have the same expectations
of positive outcomes from the school experience (Booker, 2006). Gutman and Midgely’s (2000) longitudinal study of 62 African American families living in poverty explored academic achievement and the transition to middle school. Although their study specifically reviewed factors that contributed to resilience, an ancillary finding that reflected Booker’s (2006) analysis of school experience was the relationship between the decrease of students’ grades during the middle school years and the lowered sense of belonging in the school setting.

**Summary.** Research supports negative outcomes on the academic achievement of African American adolescents experiencing homelessness. The impact of homelessness and CRT often leads to the expectation that the educational experience for African American homeless adolescents will be challenging. Although the expected outcomes are often bleak, there are some African American youth who experience homelessness and are successful in spite of institutional barriers.

How African American youth interpret their school experience is the crux of counterstorytelling. Counterstorytelling acknowledges the stories of these youth may differ vastly from those who do not share their race or class. A portion of the story of African American adolescent homelessness may rest within the stories shared by the participants in this study who live at the intersection of homelessness and CRT.

**Structural Inequalities**

A third component that may influence the stories of African American youth who are homeless is that of structural inequalities within the educational system. Structural inequalities were alluded to throughout the CRT research as well as within the literature on homelessness. For the purpose of this research, structural inequalities are defined as
the constructs within various systems including education, law enforcement, and economic opportunities that, though subtle, influence how opportunities are meted out to different individuals. The complexity of structural inequality is linked within systems thinking, as well as policy development, and reflects institutional bias. Systems thinking is “the invisible fabrics of interrelated actions, which often take years to fully play out their effects on each other” (Senge, 2006, p. 7). Applying systems thinking, each part of the organization can influence the outcomes of the other, including the development and implementation of policy. Specifically looking at the education, the individual is simultaneously influenced by, and influences, the system of education.

Senge et al. (2000) provided a fieldbook for educators working within the education system. They noted that the lack of change from an industrialized model of education is viewed as a challenge for growth and innovation in the present and the future (Senge et al., 2000). Under the industrial-age approach to education, students are seen as lacking in an area that only the school can fix (Senge et al., 2000). The deficit approach lends to a belief that there are two types of students, “smart kids and dumb kids” (Senge et al., 2000, p. 42). Mental models and the theories, beliefs, and values, that people hold about the way the world works shape the way the individuals within the education system see students, and, in turn, how the students view themselves (Senge et al., 2000). Mental models provide the foundation for how structural inequalities continue to exist in the the education system.

The views people hold can contribute to the inequalities in education. Delpit (2006) analyzed the impact of power, race, culture, expectations, and experience on educational experiences of African American and other minority children. In a
discussion of education and power, Delpit made five assertions, two of which I highlight to demonstrate how inequalities exist on both a systemic and individual level. The first assertion is “issues of power are enacted in classrooms” (Delpit, 2006, p. 24). The power interactions are not limited to the teacher and student relationship. Power exchanges are also demonstrated in what is viewed as important knowledge to learn from both within the school and from those outside the school system (Delpit, 2006). What information the school chooses to teach leads to the second assertion, “the rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power” (Delpit, 2006, p. 25). The rules that guide educational and other mainstream systems are based on the values of middle-class and upper middle-class culture (Delpit, 2006). This assertion maintains that for students to be successful in the education system, they must understand how to operate according to the values of the White middle class. Students who do not know the value of the culture of power, also known as “cultural capital” (Delpit, 2006, p. 28), have a difficult time navigating the various educational environments.

Although the educators in the system may be well meaning, without acknowledging and preparing students to understand how to work the power dynamic in the existing paradigm, students from economically disadvantaged environments and those who do not have cultural capital as valued by the dominant culture are not as likely to be successful in that educational setting. Delpit (2006) used examples of clashes between school and home culture to demonstrate the challenges students may have in the education system. When students have significant cultural differences between their culture and that of the school, teachers “can easily misread students’ aptitudes, intent, or
abilities as a result of the difference in styles of language use and interactional patterns” (p. 167). In addition, teachers “may utilize styles of instruction and/or discipline that are at odds with community norms” (Delpit, 2006, p. 167). In essence, students are disadvantaged because they do not share the cultural norms of the school environment.

Darling-Hammond (2010) also provided an analysis of the inequalities that exist in the U. S. education system. She noted that the de facto segregation of schools based on location impacts the types of courses taught. Schools in low-income, high minority areas are more likely to have underprepared teachers and administrations, fewer options for advanced placement courses, and receive less money for per pupil spending (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Darling-Hammond (2010) noted that, in addition to the disparities within the K-12 school system, children from urban areas often do not have the “social and emotional skills and language experiences needed to be initially successful in school” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 33).

Inequalities seen in the school system are reflected in policy development and implementation. Kozol (2005) examined the educational systems of schools in urban areas versus their suburban counterparts. Looking solely at funding, Kozol (2005) illustrated a large funding gap between schools that were predominately Black and Hispanic and schools that were predominately White. Schools that were predominately White in middle- to upper-income neighborhoods received more money per student than schools that were predominately Black and Hispanic and low-income.

In addition to funding, Kozol (2005) also examined the effects of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 on academic outcomes for low-income Black and Hispanic
students. Although the policy was stated to be developed to serve students from low-income, high minority areas, these students were not demonstrating the expected results, and schools were indicating an increased number of students within this demographic as disappearing from the education system (Kozol, 2005).

**Summary.** The systemic challenges African American and other minority students face are beyond the scope of classroom curriculum. The students do not have control over the disparities within the K-12 school system, as well as those that may be experienced pre-K. These inequalities may shape the stories African American students tell about their educational experiences. Structural inequalities go beyond the pervue of the individual student, as the inequalities are based on the educational system.

**Summary**

Homelessness, race, and the structural inequalities within the education system may influence the lived experiences of African American youth who are experiencing homelessness. The research regarding the barriers existing between youth who are experiencing homelessness and academic achievement supports a conclusion found in the majoritarian narrative that youth experiencing homelessness are not performing academically due to their condition of homelessness and the constraints that come with that condition. CRT provides a theoretical lens through which an understanding of the lived experiences of African American youth experiencing homelessness can be expanded to incorporate an understanding of the systemic challenges of structural inequality within the education system and the constraints that exist within the educational system. As African American youth who are experiencing homelessness
share their stories, insight can be gained into how the factors of homelessness, CRT, and the structural inequalities in the school system shape the narrative.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Qualitative research is used to explain the human experience. It is used in understanding a certain phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). The purpose of this study was to discover, through the stories told by African American adolescents who are experiencing homelessness, what support and opportunities may facilitate their academic success. Although specific data for adolescents experiencing homelessness is unavailable, there is a recognized academic achievement gap for homeless, African American youth who have difficulty matriculating through the education system. The qualitative research approach provides the best option for examining this problem.

Research Design and Rationale

Narrative research design allows subjects to tell their stories in their own voices and words about their personal school experiences (Creswell, 2008). Narrative research design allows for focusing on the story of as few as one individual (Creswell, 2007). Riessman (2008) described seven potential purposes for selecting the narrative method:

- remembering the past
- making an argument
- persuading an audience
- engaging the audience
- entertaining a group
- misleading an audience
- mobilize others into action for change. (pp. 8-9)

By assisting subjects in remembering the past, this study, in keeping with the purpose of narrative methods and Critical Race Theory, sought to mobilize others into action for change.
The opportunity to have first-hand accounts from individuals who have an intimate experience with homelessness was instrumental to this study. The use of narrative research design provides an avenue to focus on the smaller, often overlooked, perspective of homeless, African American young people. Providing a vehicle to hear the lived experiences of those affected by homelessness contributes to the richness of the research dialog.

As discussed earlier, the purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of homelessness and academic achievement through the perspective of the subjects. A narrative approach provides the means through which to collect and analyze the stories of the participants. Narrative studies are also in keeping with CRT. The voices of African American youth experiencing homelessness are often left out of the research dialog. The stories of the subjects provide a counterstory to what is told in the majoritarian narrative.

**Site and Population**

**Population Description**

Four African American adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17 who are significantly credit deficient and were, at the time of the study, experiencing homelessness within Sacramento County were the identified population for this study. The population was limited to adolescents who experienced at least 30 consecutive days of homelessness at any time while in grades six through eight. These homeless youth were often hidden and disenfranchised from the conversation of academic achievement. The subjects for this study were selected because of their experience with homelessness. Prior to selecting the subjects for this study, an informational meeting was conducted with the subject and his or her parent(s)/guardian(s). The process of selecting the final
participants involved both convenience sampling and the richness of their stories. Due to the high transiency of this population, it was necessary to select participants who had both a desire and the availability to meet multiple times.

**Site Description**

Flexibility and establishing relationships with organizations that serve the homeless population was important throughout the research process. A local community center serves youth experiencing homelessness. In addition, the center has an emergency shelter, educational services, and offers a day center to homeless youth in Sacramento County.

**Site Access**

A community center serving youth experiencing homelessness was used as the starting point to contact study participants. This organization had relationships with the youth, families, and other support systems. Because of these relationships, the organization staff members were able to assist in the participant identification process. Access was made to this organization through the researcher’s volunteer status.

**Research Methods**

The narrative was based on interviews with four individuals, two male and two female, ages 14-17. Each individual brought a unique view of the story of African American adolescent homelessness. The stories were gathered during multiple interviews and observations conducted over a three-week timeframe. Each participant was given the opportunity to provide feedback on the analysis of the transcripts as well as input on his/her pseudonym. Having the opportunity to provide feedback was instrumental in maintaining the integrity of each individual story. Small details, such as
the selection of his/her individual pseudonym, were important in empowering the participants as well as maintaining the partnership in developing and constructing the narratives. The collection of stories was a foundational piece in completing this study. However, the stories alone do not give the full picture. In addition to interviews, observations and artifact examination were tools used to complete the narrative landscape.

**Instrument description.** Multiple, in-depth, one-on-one, highly unstructured interviews were conducted with each participant. These unstructured interviews were used to gather information to guide further conversations. In addition to interviews, observations of the subjects were also conducted. Two separate sessions were scheduled to observe how the study participants interacted within their environment. The observations provided additional details to enrich the narrative.

The final instrument used to gather data was artifact examination. Artifacts include school records, participant writings, and reviews of *Street Breeze*, a newspaper written, edited, and published by youth experiencing homelessness. School records regarding the participants’ educational experiences were reviewed for continuity of the story as well as to fill in gaps left from the interviews and observations. Journals and other participant writings were also gathered as artifact samples.

**Data collection.** Interviews were recorded with audio technology. The subjects were informed at the beginning of the interview session that the sessions were recorded. The subject could request that information be removed from the record or for the recording to be terminated at any time during the interview.
Observation data were gathered during 30-minute to one-hour sessions in the environment chosen by the subject. Observation data were gathered in and around a local community center that serves children and youth experiencing homelessness. Parent(s)/guardian(s) and subjects were informed that observations would be made. Personal data as well as anecdotal data were used from the observations. The observations were used as a confirming mechanism.

Artifacts were gathered from the subject, parent(s)/guardian(s), schools, and social service organizations. The subjects of this narrative were instrumental in selecting artifacts they felt provided more information regarding their homeless experience.

**Data analysis procedures.** In narrative research, the data were analyzed “for the story they have to tell, a chronology of unfolding events, and turning points or epiphanies” (Creswell, 2007, p. 155). Narrative coding was employed as an initial method to construct the themes. Narrative coding was used for greater understanding of the participants through their stories (Saldaña, 2009). Within the framework of the stories, the data were also analyzed through open coding. Merriam (2009) described open coding as the researcher being open to the possibilities within the data. After the initial coding, the codes within the data were analyzed using secondary coding methods including axial coding and theoretical coding. All themes were next placed in the Dedoose© data analysis software. Through the Dedoose© data analysis system, themes were cross-referenced and graphed for frequency. As a final means of analysis, data were analyzed through a CRT lens. In CRT “narratives provide a language to bridge the gaps in imagination and conception that give rise to the different [those who do not fit into the majoritarian story]. They reduce alienation for members of excluded groups, while
offering opportunities for members of the majority group to meet them halfway” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 44). Triangulation was used in coding and analyzing the data as well as for creating themes to increase the validity of the study.

All data were analyzed to learn more about the story of homelessness. Audio recordings were transcribed and reviewed for the richness of the story. Data were analyzed, reviewed, and coded for themes. Observation and artifact data were also coded with special attention given to the themes that connected all the data.

Validation

As noted in Chapter 1, I am grounded in a strong ontological and axiological philosophy. To maintain the integrity of the research, validation checkpoints were maintained throughout the study. An initial checkpoint was self-reflection and journaling. The constant reflection allowed for analysis of my values as they related to the research. This assisted in accurately depicting the meaning of the material.

In addition to self-reflection, preserving communication with the subjects allowed for a check to ensure the stories were accurately depicted. The communication with the subject was enhanced through the building of trust. Trust was established through prolonged contact, as well as through the genuine desire to “get the story right.”

Additional validation measures employed for this study were the use of rich, thick descriptions throughout the work, as well as verifying information with the study participants. By using the language of the participants, the partnership with the study participants was strengthened. In addition, I was more equipped to determine whether the data could be generalized to the larger population of young people experiencing homelessness.
Ethical Considerations

This narrative research study required considerable contact with the study participants and service providers. Collecting the stories from these parties required expedited IRB approval from Drexel University and signed consents from parents, guardians and the student him or herself (see Appendix).

To protect the subjects and their families, pseudonyms were used throughout the study. All recordings, notes, transcriptions, journals, or other personal identifiers were maintained in separate drawers of a locked file cabinet. No personal data regarding the subjects was disclosed to the community center funders, volunteers, or employees. Due to the researcher’s status as a mandated reporter within the state of California, she is required by law to disclose information to the proper authorities if one of the subjects reports self-injurious behavior in the form of suicide, physical harm to others, or child abuse. All study participants were informed of the researcher’s mandated reporter status prior to the beginning of each interview and observation setting.

In completing this study, the researcher paid special attention to the fact that she was working with a group designated as a special class by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Parent(s)/guardian(s) signed consent was received, as well as ascent by the study participants, prior to the initial interview session (see Appendix). The overarching concern was of the welfare of the young people who participated in this study; throughout the process their well-being was maintained. This research presented the opportunity for the young people in this study to tell their stories; and, because of this, confidentiality was maintained. All consent forms were maintained in a locked file throughout the study and were destroyed upon completion of this and related research. In addition to securing
consent forms, pseudonyms were used in place of actual names and school sites.

Special consideration was paid to ethical considerations as individuals who experience homelessness are often victimized.
Chapter 4: Findings, Results, and Interpretations

Introduction

The purpose of this narrative study was to discover, through the stories told by African American adolescents who were experiencing homelessness, the support and opportunities the youth deemed necessary to facilitate their success in school. The study was shaped by their perspectives regarding their a) lived experiences, b) interactions with school staff, and c) the factors that facilitated school success. The concept of success was individually defined by each participant. The research findings emerged from the stories of four African American adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17 over 12 interview sessions. The findings drew on researcher observations, and appeared through written artifacts including articles published in Street Breeze, a newspaper written, edited, and published by youth experiencing homelessness.

Story

Critical Race Theory, a foundation for this study, introduced the concept of counterstorytelling. Counterstorytelling is the process by which the majoritarian story can be evaluated and critiqued through the story of the minority (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). The counterstory is viewed as the true experience of the storyteller. Prior to hearing the counterstory as shared by the study participants, I first needed to understand the story as it was told in the dominant narrative.

The story, as shared in this section, was gathered primarily from service providers, volunteers, law enforcement, and educators who have worked with adolescents experiencing homelessness. Informal conversations with these individuals provided the
basis for constructing the story overview. The story tends to vacillate between potential, blame, and hopelessness.

Potential was the description primarily provided by service providers and volunteers that work closely with these youth. In several cases, the service providers have experienced challenges with homelessness in their own formative years. There is an acknowledgment that the youth who are homeless, especially African American youth, face significant barriers. Service providers and volunteers stressed the opportunity for positive outcomes based on personal examples of success stories. Primarily, these service providers viewed themselves as being instrumental in providing advocacy and support to these young people. The relationship between the service providers and the youth experiencing homelessness is different based on the individual provider. In some instances the service provider provides a stabilizing adult support system. In other instances, the service provider acts as savior for the youth, a role seen in the majoritarian narrative. Service providers are a small subset of the individuals who have contact with African American adolescents who are homeless.

The other view of the story was a multifaceted expression of blame and hopelessness most often shared by educators and law enforcement, although service providers and volunteers also made some similar assertions. In this view, one facet of the blame is directed toward the parent. This blame is in reference to the parents needing to, as a Sacramento area teacher stated, “get their stuff together.” Parents are described as drug addicts, prostitutes, and criminals who do not understand the importance of education, parenting, or their child’s best interests. The adolescent is viewed as having
minimal opportunity to transcend his/her circumstance because of environment and lack of opportunity to change.

In conversation with educators and law enforcement personnel, these young people were frequently depicted as angry, unmotivated, addicted, gang members. The expressed story details a no-win situation where the conclusion was bleak at best, disheartening at worst. In most instances, the story expressed was overwhelmingly one of hopelessness. The obstacles present in the young person’s life are viewed as insurmountable. High transiency, emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, and lack of resources were given as reasons why the young person who was homeless was unable to achieve academic success and why they could not transcend their current circumstances.

Previous researchers have suggested that while children who experience homelessness may struggle with learning disabilities, learning disabilities may actually be caused by the impact of educational transiency (Buckner et al., 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2011; Fantuzzo et al., 2011; Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010). The stories educators constructed are supported by research; however, these stories do not fully depict the lived experiences of the African American youth experiencing homelessness. The narratives, as told by these young people, provided a different prism in which to situate the predicament of being an African American adolescent who is also homeless.

**Participants**

Each participant shared his/her story during a series of scheduled interviews. The interviews were conversational in tone allowing for give-and-take between researcher and participant. The participant profiles shape the counterstory of African American adolescent homelessness.
**Participant 1 – Akeelah.** Akeelah was a 16-year-old, self-identified, bisexual female residing in a shelter. The shelter had guardianship rights. Akeelah had lived on her own for varying lengths of time since she was 13.

Well, it’s kinda like my mom’s husband, he…like, I’m not his kid of course. So, he obviously thinks differently because he doesn’t have kids himself. Like I don’t know what happened; but, he pretty much put her on drugs. So, she believes everything he says of course because he’s the one that has the drugs for her. So, if he says ‘oh, she gotta leave,’ I gotta leave. If he says I can’t be at a certain place on the outside then I go back to my mom’s.

Akeelah was not in foster care at the time of the study, and she proudly stated “I’ve never been in the system…I’m resourceful.” Chronologically, Akeelah was a senior; however, she stated she had not consistently attended school since the eighth grade.

I’m not the kind of person that I be sad at school or anything; but, it did affect me because I was moving to house to house so I couldn’t stay at one school. Like I went to three high schools in three years. I’m a senior right now and I’ve never stayed at a high school for two years, so…

Upon a review of her cumulative folder, it was clear Akeelah did have high school credits toward graduation; however, she was significantly credit deficient. Although this was the case, her belief was, “[I’m] going to graduate on time with my class.”

**Participant 2 – Jerome.** Jerome was a 14-year-old male residing in a shelter. His mother resided at a different shelter. He could not stay with his mother because “they don’t let boys stay there…I’m too old.” Jerome had been homeless for six months. This was his first experience with homelessness.

My mom and my auntie had got into an argument and my mom just decided to leave. And my auntie let me stay for a couple, well my mom, my mom didn’t want me to stay but my auntie said it was alright. She said I could stay as long as she was there; but my mom said no. So I went with my mom, then I went with my dad for about a week or two or three weeks, but then my dad sent me back
with my mom. Then my mom got this house and then the lady started yelling at me because she thought I left the stove on; but, I didn’t. She left the stove on and then she started yelling at me and then my mom started yelling at her and so my mom started packing our stuff [be]cause she didn’t want to be around stuff like that, and so my mom packed our stuff and she brought me here.

Jerome was enrolled in a school that provided education to special-needs students with the primary disability of Emotional Disturbance (ED). Several students who attended the school were expelled from their original school of record or they were on probation. Jerome was expelled in the eighth grade because “they had a zero tolerance fight policy so they kicked me out.”

Participant 3 – Neecey. Neecey was a 17-year-old female foster youth. She ran away from her last placement and was residing at a shelter. The shelter had guardianship rights at the time of the study. Neecey had an 11-month-old son. Chronologically, Neecey was a senior in high school; however, she was significantly credit deficient. Neecey estimated her first experience with homelessness was at age six.

We would go somewhere out of state and then like our first spot that we would live would be inside of the shelter when we moved out of state or whatever; but, just until we got on our feet and find somewhere we could go [be]cause my mom, she doesn’t like staying near family: so, we were always like moving. So when they moved closer to us we’d end up moving further away from them.

Participant 4 – Alton. Alton was a 16-year-old, self-identified gay male. He was couch surfing. He had been homeless sporadically since the age of 10.

My uncle died and my family kinda took it hard and then my mom turned to drugs, and I was, I’m the oldest out of all of my brothers and sisters so my mom was doing pretty good at first and then the drugs kinda got to her. We lived in a hotel for a little bit then um, it was kinda hard when she stopped working because then money wasn’t coming. We lived on the street for about like two months and as me, as the oldest, always looked at is as I can’t help my brothers and sisters if I don’t put myself first so I moved away with my dad for a little bit and um my mom and them were homeless for a little while. But then my other brother and
sisters moved with my grandmother. And my mom was just… I didn’t see her for about a year and it was kinda hard; but, I got through it.

Alton was a sophomore. “[I’ve] been to four schools in the last three years, I don’t know how many credits I have.”

Findings

Four prominent themes – lack of consistent adult support, illegal activity as a necessity, the impact of education, and hope for the future – emerged from the data analysis process. The themes were discussed with each participant prior to finalization. The themes give insight into the counterstories told by study participants.

Finding #1 – Relationships with adults

The presence of consistent adult support influence is common in the majoritarian story of childhood. The participants in this study were able to articulate how this deficiency impacted their lives. Although the majoritarian story of homelessness recognizes the absences of parents, it does not often examine the lack of support from adults in the community who fail to provide support and care. The lack of support was not limited simply to actual physical absence; the participants also discussed how the lack of boundaries increased the feeling of emotional absence. Even though participants focused on the lack of support from family members, the study participants also shared stories about how law enforcement and social services inconsistently supported them in times of need.

One aspect of adult support that was consistently reported by participants was the absence of a parent due to incarceration. When asked about important relationships and what being an African American male means to him, Jerome shared the following:
Like I see, like my dad, I haven’t grown up around my dad. My dad has been in prison so like my dad he really hasn’t talked to me about things like being a young man and how to stay away from violence and stuff. I learned that kind of stuff from my mom, and so my mom is like my mom and my dad.

The story of incarceration is prevalent in the mainstream narrative of homelessness. Two missing aspects in this dialog are a) the feelings of the children regarding the absence of the parent due to imprisonment and b) the disproportionate number of African Americans impacted by the criminal justice system. Throughout the conversations, the participants expressed feelings of loss regarding their relationship with the incarcerated parent. The participants evidenced these feelings of loss in describing how they would treat their own children. The relationship with the incarcerated parent shaped their view of parental expectations.

Like he (father) left, he left when I was 3. He went to the penitentiary for twelve years he came out and then I got to know him for like, like three months and then he just stopped calling, stopped coming around. And then he went back to jail again, and I don’t know where he is now. (Neecey)

Neecey expressed feelings of frustration, anger, and hurt when she discussed her father as a parent.

He just (pause) how do I, how do I say it, like (pause) you (pause) like, it’s like he knew that what he was doing was wrong; but, he just, he decided to do it anyway. He was only thinking about himself. He wasn’t thinking about the child that he was bringing into this world. So, it’s like, I don’t like him very much at all. (Neecey)

Neecey was emphatic regarding her dislike of her father and expressed a lack of understanding on how he could leave his child. Whereas Neecey expressed dislike, Jerome shared a different outlook. Although he earlier stated he did not really know what it meant to be a “young man,” Jerome expressed a desire to have several children as a means of doing things differently than his father.
Like I want, like 10 (children), like watching my kids grow up in like a house. I don’t want my kids to be like me. Like really, really, like when somebody say something to them I want them to be able to walk away. How my mom, not saying my mom didn’t raise me good; but, my mom like she didn’t do the best job. I want to keep my kids around sports and school.

The inconsistency of adult family members is not limited to incarceration. Drug use also has a role in parental absence. Prenatal use of drugs established the relationship in Neecey’s family.

When I was first born she didn’t want me. She never took care of me. My grandma raised me. She taught me everything. And it’s like, I don’t respect my mom because when she was pregnant with me, her and my dad were both on drugs, and [they say] I was a planned child. And my grandma told her, ‘you shouldn’t have the baby if you’re going to do drugs.’ She did drugs throughout my entire, throughout her entire pregnancy, so it’s like, you knew I was going to come out with problems, so, it’s like, you wanted me to be this way. So, I just don’t respect her for that.

Because of her mother’s drug use, Neecey formed a strong relationship with her grandparents. She considered that relationship to be her primary adult support system.

My grandma and my grandpa had like that special, special bond. Like especially my grandma. We do, she’s my best friend. Like we do everything, like we go to movies together, we go eat sushi, we do everything. Like people make fun of me [be]cause on Facebook all I’m talking about I hung out with my grandma today. But like, they don’t understand that my grandma’s not your typical grandma, she’s really cool…I mean I couldn’t walk, like, I would walk with my arms straight out like an airplane, and I couldn’t hold a fork. I couldn’t, I couldn’t write my name; but, then like my grandma like took her time, like her real time, and taught me…She helped me through everything.

The impact of violence and death also played a role in the inconsistency of adult support. Violence and death often intensified fear of loss of other adult caregivers.

Like when people be like, “who’s your parents?” I always say my grandma and my grandpa because they raised me, they taught me everything. Like my grandma taught me everything and then my grandpa (long pause). I used to call my grandpa dad (long pause) and then, my grandpa killed himself. He overdosed. So, I kinda like, it’s the hardest thing because I watched him overdose. I was fifteen, so two years ago, and it’s like I was, I stayed up and he was alive and then
I went to bed for ten minutes because I was so tired and I woke up and he was gone. So it was like that made a huge impact because he was the one that kept me together, like he had the answer for everything, and then it’s like the only person that I have now is my grandma. And my grandma has heart disease and she’s had triple bypass. So, it’s like if my grandma leaves then I’ll have no one (long pause, voice quiets) no one. So (voice trailing off) it’s kinda hard. (Neecey)

Death due to violence and drugs was not an uncommon occurrence. All the participants mentioned the death of at least one friend or family member caused by violence or drugs.

Alton shared how the loss of a sibling altered his relationship with his mother and changed his family dynamic.

My mom, when she was pregnant with my brother, she got jumped, and by a lot of people. And they killed my little brother. And that kinda killed me because I was, that, my little brother was keeping my family together. Like, that was our hope. I don’t know why. That was just something that was saying ‘mommies getting better’…like she, there was no more drugs and she was getting herself together. She was actually in rehab. She was, she was, she had started working again, and then that happened, and she took it hard again.

Loss due to incarceration, death, and drug usage is a large aspect in the lived experiences of African American youth experiencing homelessness. Aviles de Bradley (2011) found the relationship with adults for African American homeless youth plays a significant role in how the youth navigate and define homelessness. Even in cases in which drug abuse was the cause for failure to provide support and care, participants preferred the relationship with his/her parent or other family member over that of being in foster care. The researcher asked Neecey why she ran away from foster care when life at home was unstable.

In foster care your screams are silent. It’s like no one listens to your problems. People, no one is working for us…When you’re in foster care they make you think (change to a high pitch mocking voice) ‘oh, you owe me, I brung you to my home, you owe me.’ Things were way better (with mom). She doesn’t just (voice trails off) shut us off or whatever. We’re there. She sees us, she hears us, she understands us…My mom’s she’s a (long pause). Hmmm, I don’t wanna say drug
addict, [be]cause she’s not a drug addict, but (long pause) she does drugs (quietly) or whatever.

Although Neecey talked about her grandparents consistently throughout the interviews as being her parents, she saw her mother as being a better option than being in foster care.

Alton was able to sum up the commitment to family.

My mom got pregnant again and I knew she couldn’t do it by herself, so I came back and helped her out, a lot. And I didn’t know what to do, so I quit school. And I really just knew that if no one else was going to help her, and my family just kinda gave up on her because they’ve been helping her a lot and she didn’t want to help herself, so I felt like she didn’t have anybody. (Alton)

Incarceration, death, violence, and drugs influenced how the participants related to adult caregivers. Even with adults being inconsistent, each participant reported wanting a connection with adults on a meaningful level. They articulated knowing the difference between positive relationships versus someone “trying to buy my relationship” (Jerome). Contrary to the story regarding these youth, participants articulated the importance of having caring adults who established boundaries as a means of demonstrating caring relationships.

Like he, me and him we talked; but, we didn’t talk like father and son. We talked like, ‘hey good morning dad’ ‘hey you want to go here…’ My dad would always give me money; buy me shoes, clothes, anything I wanted. But, he wasn’t trying to get my relationship. He was trying to buy my relationship.

Jerome contrasted the relationship with his father with his and his uncle’s, who had consistently been a part of his life.

My favorite person is probably my uncle. My uncle has always been there; although he went to college for six years I think it’s been. He’s been in college; but he comes to Sac…But he always been my role model. My uncle gave me a hat about four years ago. I always never messed it up. Like when somebody touched it I was like, ‘don’t touch that, that’s from my uncle.’ Like me and him, we always connected…So I guess me and him, he was like my dad. He was like, he bought me clothes, and he bought me shoes, and like I would go to school and then he would come home from school and like my shoes were messed up and he
was like, ‘Jerome, you messed up the shoes. What’s going on?’ Yeah, that’s why like with shoes I try to keep them all clean and like all my clothes, like, if I get a stain, I’m like ‘I have to take this shirt off.’ Like, I don’t like, I don’t like to look dirty. Like he taught me how to keep my hygiene up and to keep my clothes and my shoes clean.

Jerome explained the difference between his father, who simply purchased items for him, and his uncle who took the time to show him how to take care of what was purchased.

As he expounded on the discussion, he shared that with his uncle he felt his uncle cared enough to set rules while his father simply gave stuff to get him out of the way. Neecey shared a different version of the importance of rules and boundaries in a parental relationship.

When we lived in LA my mom was more strict. When we moved out here she was just, ‘yeah you can go do whatever,’ Like I would get home late, my mom wouldn’t say anything or if I would, if she would tell me to be home by nine and I came home at like eleven, she wouldn’t get mad. And she’ll let me stay out however late, like I’d go wherever I want. So it was like she gave me no boundaries. So, it’s like she kinda made it ok to do the things that I was doing.

Moving from Los Angeles to Sacramento was where Neecey felt she lost her support system. Jerome described a planned move he thought would develop his support system:

I’m actually moving in with my aunt, my aunt and cousins…It’s going to be the best move for me. She’s more grounded, like she has more strictness than my mom.

Because of the importance placed on family, it often impacts the participant’s school life.

I used to get in trouble sometime on purpose just to get closer to my mom because like I didn’t like being around a lot of people, like my mom was like the only person I liked being around. Like everybody else I used to always fight away or I used to never talk to. I used to be that kind of kid where I’m either quiet around you or I’m not going to like you and give you a lot of attitude. (Alton)
The lack of consistent adult support transcends the familial relationship. Participants also expressed a lack of support from adults and structures within the community.

I’ve called the police on my mom a couple of time, and they were like, ‘we’re going to arrest you if you call back too many times, we’re going to make you pay for each call you make’ Like they should listen to the kids and really listen to. Don’t be like, ‘you just don’t want to go home.’ Listen because you don’t know what might be happening because the next day you might go back and the kid is dead. Don’t say, ‘I don’t believe that could happen’ (be)cause you don’t know what’s going on when they close the door. (Akeelah)

The thread that ties the stories together was the sense of uncertainty the participants described. Each participant learned adults are not to be trusted. The lack of trust impacts how the participants engage with others. From the perspective of the participants, the behaviors that may be described as rude or off-putting by the majoritarian story are actually coping mechanisms developed to compensate for the level of uncertainty in which these youth live.

Finding #2 – Illegal activity as a means of escape and survival

Participants repeatedly discussed three types of illegal activity: prostitution, violence, and drug use. Contrary to the story of not understanding the dictates of society, participants viewed participation in illegal activities as a survival mechanism. Although they said there were limits to the behaviors in which they would engage, participants stated they understood why sometimes illegal activity was necessary. Survival sex, exchanging sex for drugs, money, shelter, or protection (Hickler & Auerswald, 2009), was an unfortunate part of the counterstory. Each participant shared they had both male and female acquaintances engaging in sex acts as a means of survival. Alton’s was particularly enlightening:
I was sitting there and my friend, I kept asking her what she did because I always see her with money and she’s in the same situation as I am. So, I asked her one day, I was just curious. I was like, ‘what do you do?’ She was like, ‘my brother’s friend, he has me work for him’ and I was like, ‘what do you mean work for him?’ And she was like ‘I go and just hang out with older guys for a while and then they pay me for it and I give it to the guy and he give me what I need.’ And I was like, I asked her like ‘what do you do with these guys, like, you just sit there?’ She was like, ‘sometimes we sit there and talk, sometimes I have to give them sexual attention.’ And I’m like ‘well my mom always told me that that road is wrong to go down. Like, my mom’s not perfect; but, that’s just, that’s just the wrong road for me.’ And she was like, ‘what if like, what if you just need the money, would you work for it?’ And I was like, ‘that’s just not me, I’m not that type of person. I’d rather sit there and struggle for a bit and then get hard work.’

(Alton)

Alton described sex acts as being one means of making money. He went on to share the entire story.

There was a time that I went and her brother was like, “if you don’t want to do that [sex], just come with me and I’ll figure out a different way.” And we all go into his car and he went, and he was like deep in Elk Grove and he told me to sit in the car; but he left the keys in the car. And he was like, “when I come out and I run, I need you to just take off in the car.” And I’m like, “well, what are you talking about?” And I’m sitting here confused, and I’m sitting here like, well, this doesn’t sound right. I know I’m smart, and I can just add things up. And I know this is bad, so I decide to get out of the car and walk away…I knew either way it was a bad, I was going to get in trouble for it because he was going to get mad at me if I just left him there, and I was like, if I stay there and I get caught up in it I’m just going to get ten times more trouble, so I still chose to leave…I took a different road…A few weeks later I got jumped for it.

Participants viewed those who were “out there” (individuals who suffer from extreme poverty and homelessness) as needing help more than judgment.

Like, I don’t look at people one way anymore. Like, I think before I judge somebody because there’s a reason why everybody acts the way they act. Just simple stuff, little stuff that may have happened to them to make them act like that. (Akeelah)

When this researcher asked Akeelah if she ever did anything she regretted, the response was “people do what they gotta do.” The majoritarian story stresses
responsibility and punishment for those who engage in illegal activity. As a twist to the majoritarian story, the participants expressed judgment and blame toward people who have means, but do not do anything to help those less fortunate. There was a ready acceptance of criminal activity as a reality; however, there was a common belief that first, people’s behaviors are dictated by situations that occur in life, and second, the community has a degree of responsibility to help.

Well I know if I see a little kid who’s no more than thirteen on that corner, I know that he’s at-risk. When I see little girls looking no more than what, barely out of elementary, like in middle school, and they’re walking up and down this street it’s like, you know, it’s like I feel like people should, you know, go out and talk to them. Like this is not for you, you’re too young for this you know, let me get you out of this environment, let me help your family, whatever. I mean you cannot save everyone; but, just like, saving someone, just one person. I mean even making a little bit of impact. (Neecey)

Often, in thinking about illegal activity, the majoritarian story limits the story to crimes committed against another person. The participants shared how the use of drugs and alcohol impact their personal lives. The use of drugs and alcohol varies across participants. Each participant demonstrated the ability to articulate why she or he opted to use, or not use different drugs. Those who chose to not engage in the use of drugs did so because of the effect drugs had on those around them. “I learned from other people’s mistakes not to do anything like that; so, I learned not to. I see how it messed up their lives and I don’t want it to mess up mine” (Jerome). Learning not to use drugs and alcohol due to the deleterious impact they had on those around them was the primary reason given as to why an individual chose not to use drugs. The overwhelming reason given by the youth for using drugs and/or alcohol was for escape.

I did used to smoke a lot and drink and party a lot just to, just to get the worry, the stress off my mind [be]cause I’m just like I just hate being so miserable. Like
everyone thinks I’m a happy person and I would tell them I wish they’d see behind my smile sometimes. Because I hang out with my friends and you guys see me smile all the time, I’m ha ha joke, but if you guys see what I go ‘home’ to its differently, like, I’m not, I’m not the same person. I’m not the calm one who knows all the answers and so I used to drink it or smoke it away like let it just go. (Alton)

To further the point of drug use, Akeelah explained the difference between prescription drugs and street drugs. Although Akeelah acknowledged the Adderall was prescribed to help her focus and remember in school, the Adderall did not meet Akeelah’s primary need, which was to forget what was occurring in her life.

I’m supposed to take Adderall; but I don’t like to take it because of how it makes me feel…like Adderall, like, I don’t even do things. I’m always angry and aggravated. And like the street drugs like make me happy, like it makes me not, I only take the street drugs though to like, to get my mind off of everything that’s happened; to escape the world. That’s the only reason why I do it…and with the Adderall I’m very much like to myself, I don’t talk much, I don’t really laugh. I just sit there and stare at the wall.

All study participants had contact with crime. Although participants stated they would “never” do some types of crime, they all expressed understanding why others chose to commit criminal acts. The participants differentiated crimes committed against others and illegal activities that just affected an individual such as drug and alcohol use. Regardless of the types of crime committed, participants viewed illegal activity, especially drug and alcohol use, as a means to dull the sharp edge of their reality.

**Finding #3 – The importance of education**

The importance of education was expressed throughout the interviews. Education was viewed as necessary and of key importance to changing economic options by these participants. Although the participants stated education was important, according to the majoritarian story, the behavior they demonstrated did not match their words. Within their experiences with the education system, participants discussed “ghetto schools,”
educators who did not understand as well as educators who were supportive, a lack of resources and the structures that assist them in being successful in school. The participants are keenly aware of schools that are, according to Neecey, “ghetto and not so ghetto.” “Ghetto” schools were more likely to not hold participants accountable for behavior or academic achievement. Negative behavior was often ignored.

I never went to class or nothing, and if I did, I was always high. I smoked like every day. Woke up smoke, go to lunch smoke, go home smoke. Like I used [drugs] to push everything away…a couple of times they [teachers] would ask “are you high” and I’d say “no,” then they’d say “ok.” Then they’d go back to what they were doing. (Jerome)

Ignoring negative behaviors was not limited to drug use. Absenteeism was also ignored.

The school I was going to, it was right across the street from the college. So, I used to ditch school and go there and hang out with my friends and eat lunch there. I’d go back to like one or two classes and ditch. I’d come back like nothing was wrong. (Akeelah)

When asked why no one at the school did anything about her “ditching” class, Akeelah’s response was “[it] is not really a good school. Like, it’s kind of a bad school. I guess they just figured I was another one of those kids that do it so, like, [they] don’t care.”

When this researcher reviewed Akeelah’s cumulative folder, the document confirmed that during the school year in question, Akeelah missed 92 full days of school. The researcher did not count missed class periods. There were several returned letters in the folder, but no additional attempts to make contact with a parent or guardian.

The disconnection from school was not limited to drug use and “ditching.” Participants expressed concern with sharing their stories with school officials. All the participants in this study stated they did not share their living situations with school officials out of fear of being reported. Alton shared that he did not want to create
problems for his family, “I would give like warning signs and like they would, some of the teachers would catch on but I would ease back because I didn’t want to get my mom in trouble because I have two younger sisters.” Concern was expressed over actions that would be taken if teachers became aware of one’s homeless situation:

There’s no use telling them [teachers] because they end up getting CPS involved and starting the whole thing like you’re getting abused at home; but, like, yeah. Like if you tell the teacher they’ll go right to CPS without asking you questions. (Akeelah)

When asked to share more about why she felt teachers called CPS, Akeelah saw reporting as the “easy way” in which teachers could say they did something without having to become directly involved. The feeling of being unable to share information was not limited to teachers. The participants also stated they did not disclose their living situation to administrators and counselors.

I just don’t go to, we don’t like have counselors…Counselors these days, they’re not like real counselors. They’re like if you need your job, if you need like your worker’s permit or if you need something like changing your schedule or something like that. That’s when you go to your counselor. Counselors are not what you see on TV like when you go have a counseling session with our counselor. (Neecey)

Even in situations where there was extended time, self-disclosure of homelessness did not occur.

I used to always be in the principal’s office. Me and the principal actually made friends because I used to be in her office like all the time. Well, yeah, she knew some of it; but she didn’t know all of it. Like she knew I was having a hard time; but, she didn’t know that we were homeless. (Alton)

As a former high school counselor and principal it was challenging for me to hear the perspective of the participants. The majoritarian story as shared by educators includes “we’re here to help,” “I know the student is homeless,” “the student is not
prepared for our school, it’s best if the student goes somewhere else.” Regardless of the reasons within the majoritarian story, the participants viewed many school officials as lacking understanding, apathy, care, and concern. Neecey explained why she was disconnected in class.

It’s funny because if you don’t have an IEP or a 504 plan or if you don’t have anything insinuating that you need help then you don’t get help, I mean you can ask for help; but, that doesn’t mean you’re going to get help [be]cause there’s like 10 other kids asking for help so it’s like winning the lottery like you know it might be your day that your teacher actually helps you; but if not you know that she’s helping this person and you can hope that this person is on the same question that you’re on [be]cause like then you can just go over there and listen.

Continuing the story, Neecey shared her experiences at a “ghetto” school with large class sizes and discipline problems.

Teachers are teachers like um like I went from an ok school well, not ok to a like non-ghetto to ghetto [school] and then um, it’s just like, I don’t know. I see the difference with the teachers; but, they’re still like in the same boat like. I don’t know, that’s like one of the reasons I decided to do independent studies because like when kids are in trouble like teachers take forever, and forever, and forever and a day, just like to take this one student. Like Kevin could go out. It’s like wasting all the time there and they wanna blame us. Like the rest of the kids like (changing voice) ‘if y’all don’t act up as much we could get through a lesson and y’all won’t have all this homework and all this other stuff. I’m not here to babysit’ like (voice trailing off).

Educators who had the most impact on participants were those who were creative with their teaching style and who took time. These educators made lasting impressions on the participants.

I never really got close to the teachers. Like, you know how some people have, “oh my favorite teacher” well, I got one favorite teacher; but she’s not a teacher anymore, she retired. It was one of my teachers I had last year. Like when she taught us, it was through videos, yeah, she had stuff that we’ll look up, so it was like that and we had a lot of hands-on stuff. (Akeelah)
Engaged teachers were also able to change negative behaviors. Jerome shared his experiences when he changed schools.

After I got kicked out of [previous school], I don’t know, like I changed. I started going to school like every day and I was more interested and stuff. Like my teacher made it fun and like she helped me with whatever I needed help with.

All the participants shared a desire to have relationships with teachers; however, they also voiced a general concern regarding those in authority partly because, as Alton noted, “I don’t know what they’re (authority figures) about.” Although participants expressed concern for building relationships with educators, they acknowledged educators should understand the different needs of students who are homeless in order to help facilitate educational success. The challenge for the participants was how to disclose being homeless without everyone knowing. All participants expressed shame at being homeless and not wanting others to know. Each participant struggled with the concept of being “outed” as homeless. Participants were concerned with being revealed; however, they understood it could be useful for assignments.

I think they [teachers] should be [aware] because if a child is having issues at home it’s really hard to separate your emotions from home and school and if your emotions at home are basically in like survival mode then school’s not really going to matter to you…If they’re assigning you hecka homework, it’s like a lot of people, they don’t have computers at home or they have computers and no internet and lot of people don’t have cars and you have a project and whatever ‘I need you to go here to get your supply stuff’ and whatever you know. I don’t know if it should be less or more like not even more because if it’s more they’re not even going to do it, like an understanding amount. (Neecey)

Additionally, Neecey shared the importance of teachers understanding the difficulty in acquiring materials for assignments. “How am I supposed to do this (school assignment)? Like I live way over here and the $.99 store is freaking far. I probably
don’t have money for it anyways.” On the same topic of receiving materials for assignments, Akeelah shared:

If I can’t get the stuff [supplies for class], I just give up and don’t do it and take the F [be] cause I don’t want to ask for help from anyone because the teachers be like there’s nothing we can do so you just have to figure it out yourself or go to the principal.

In spite of all the negative experiences with school, the participants overwhelmingly expressed a desire to return to school and receive a diploma versus a general education diploma (GED). Achieving a high school diploma was viewed as a way out of homelessness and a means of accessing the future.

I want to graduate and I feel like if I get my diploma then that will be an honor kinda because a lot of people, they just give up. And I’ve wanted to give up a lot of times; but, I just want to do it instead of givin’ up. (Akeelah)

Interaction with the education system was viewed as a necessity; however, attendance, resources, and connection were, at times, a challenge. Two of the four participants qualified for special education services; however, all the participants could have benefitted from modifications. The crux of this theme was, although the participants had high absenteeism, they all had the desire to complete high school and receive their diploma. In addition, whenever the participants had an engaged teacher who was creative with curriculum delivery, they were more likely to attend at least that class.

Neecey shared that at the “non-ghetto” school she attended, she had access to a sign language course. This course led to her desire to become a sign language interpreter and social worker. The subsequent schools she attended did not have rich course offerings. At one of the schools she attended, Spanish was the only language offered, and enrollment was limited. By limiting enrollment to the class, access to higher education is
affected, as having a language other than English is a four-year college eligibility requirement.

When asked, all the participants stated they wanted to attend college; however, they all stated they did not feel prepared to attend. Neecey had the highest concern about college attendance and questioned this researcher on several occasions regarding “what it takes to be a social worker.” She expressed concern regarding “never really being taught.” Whether the “never really being taught” occurred because of gaps in her school attendance or other factors is unknown. From the perspective of the participants, the impact of high class size, minimal resources, and few options at their schools has a long-term effect on options.

Finding #4 – Hope for the future

Throughout the interviews, when the discussions focused on the past or their current life situations, participants were engaged in the conversation. They were insightful and open to sharing their stories. During the last interview session, when directly asked about their perceptions of the future, all four participants initially struggled. Alton, who confidently provided elaborate details on most answers, was for the first time uncertain.

I write like stories, and I write poetry…I don’t share because I don’t want people to think I’m weird. I mean, I am weird; but, I just don’t want people, I don’t know what people are going to think. I don’t want them to think I’m dumb and stuff like that.

When the researcher asked Alton if she could include one of his poems in this study, he declined. Although his poetry was wonderfully written, he stated he was not ready to share.
The uncertainty was not limited to Alton. Each participant was tentative when sharing their hopes for the future. In a follow-up meeting to review transcripts and verify the story, Jerome and I discussed why talking about the future was challenging. Although the recording was not running at the beginning of conversation, his words were captured through field notes.

I don’t talk about the future [be]cause I don’t know what’s going to happen. I know what I want; but, like, if I like tell someone, they might say it’s stupid…They may take it [my future plans] away…I really like sports. My coach is always telling me that if I really like sports stick to it, you grab it and hold on to it because you might actually go somewhere playing sports. Like you’ll get scholarships and they’ll pay for your whole college, like that really shocked me. I was like “they’ll pay for my whole college!” I learned this when I was ten and I’ve been playing football and basketball…I need to keep my grades up so I can keep on playing. (Jerome)

Hope is directly tied to the participants’ definitions of success as well as what they viewed as their strengths. Akeelah, sharing her dreams, said “I want to open my own bakery. Yeah, [be]cause I think I can bake really good. [Be]cause when I was in school I’d sell stuff, like cookies and stuff.” When asked the steps to opening a bakery, she stated, “um, go to school for it. Like, get all of the classes and then um get my license in it I guess. And then, I don’t know, get a place to open up, yeah.” In a follow-up discussion, Akeelah shared she started researching taking courses at the local community college. “I’m sure a lot people say ‘look where she’s at right now, look at what happened at her other high school; but, I know who I am and I know what I’m going to do.”

The participants described hope as being the feeling that makes the current situation endurable. It was shared in a poignant statement by Neecey:
I don’t know. I just know that’s [homeless] something I don’t want to be. Yeah, but, I mean, like, if you fall you fall. All you can do is get up. The one thing you can, the one thing you can’t do, is not try at all. I don’t think being homeless has a color, or going through troubles has a color, it’s who you are. It’s not what race you are. It doesn’t have nothing to do with your ethnicity, it’s like the type of person you are, so being Black, White, Mexican, German, it doesn’t matter. It’s like what you put yourself through, it’s what you do, you know, to fail in life. Not even fail; but, you, like, you know, to trip. I think it’s all up to you, me, I mean, it makes you stronger.

The previous themes discussed in this study were concrete concepts the participants discussed using examples from their past, as well as their present, experiences. The concept of hope was the only abstract theme. The participants in this study engaged in the conversation of success and hope; however, the conversation caused some initial discomfort. Although it took time to elicit responses, once the participants began speaking of the future, there was a noticeable excitement. At the end of the last session with Neecey, this researcher thanked her for sharing her dreams. Neecey’s response was, “yeah, I never have time to dream.” That comment, “I never have time to dream,” is a reminder that the majoritarian story of young people having idle time to waste as they choose is not the reality for this population. The participants have hopes and dreams; however, they need time and assistance to uncover and accomplish them. As a closing thought, Neecey tied hope to her concept of success.

Success means what you want it to mean. Success for me can be different from anyone else. So for me, success means for me like be happy, have the things that I need, not want, make sure that my son is growing up in a healthy, strong environment, and, yeah, being back with my family as in one, not as in here there and over here, as one.

Results and Interpretations

The story told from the perspectives of the participants is one of responsibility and commitment. The commitment to family often outweighs other, seemingly more
stable options. For instance, although the foster care system can provide an alternative to being homeless, the stability of foster care was not as important to these youth as the relationship with the primary caregiver. African American youth who are homeless are more likely to maintain relationships with family members (Hickler & Auerswald, 2009). These youth define their homeless status not in terms of housing but in terms of the relationships they have with family members. The youth in Aviles de Bradley (2011) study also defined their homeless state according to their relationships. Hickler and Auerswald (2009) found that African American youth differ from White youth in how they define and navigate homelessness. The participants in this study articulated being housing insecure; however, they did not view themselves as homeless according to the majoritarian definitions of homelessness.

On a near daily basis, the participants in this study had contact with “the system.” The system is all of the social safety net organizations, including school, law enforcement, foster care, and social services that are supposed to be of benefit but, often, in the participants’ perspectives, do more harm than good. An aspect of the lived experiences as expressed in the stories was lack of control of how one is defined. Said best by Akeelah, “We are used to people talking at us, not with us.” This experience is supported by CRT critique of liberalism. The premise of the critique of liberalism finds that the dominant culture dictates how one is defined (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). An example directly related to this study is labeling. At the onset of this study I determined that the right phraseology was to state “an individual experiencing homelessness” versus “a homeless individual.” My assumption was the former was somehow less of a stigma than the latter. This was a mistake. The participants in this
study, as well as other African American youth who attended the community center, noticeably bristled whenever the term homeless was used as a descriptor. The participants in this study define homeless people as dirty, unkempt, “crazy,” and desirous of homelessness. Neecey shared that she was not homeless; she was simply, “going through some stuff right now.” When the language was shifted from “homeless” to “going through some stuff” or “unstable housing,” the response was noticeably different from research participants and others at the center. In the critique of liberalism, those in power make decisions based on what is deemed best from a paternalistic perspective that does not take into account the individual being helped may know what is best in his/her life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Overwhelmingly all four participants in the study remarked at different points in the interviews that their reasoning for not sharing their housing instability with educators was the fear of the teacher calling child protective services (CPS). Although the dominant culture views CPS as being for the benefit of the child, the adolescents in this study did not view CPS as a supportive organization. People who could involve them in that system were viewed with distrust. As Alton said:

One of the teachers had called CPS on my mom so that really had me like pull back because I don’t want my little sisters to be in foster care. They’re too young. One is about to be four. And the other one is about to be two.

Akeelah voiced a similar concern saying: “Yeah, and there’s no use telling them [teachers] because they end up getting CPS involved…like you’re getting abused at home; …if you tell the teacher they’ll go right to CPS without asking you questions.”

Understanding the cultural perspective of African American youth may offer the opportunity to provide a different type of supportive service. Understanding the cultural
perspective of housing unstable African American youth provides the opportunity to understand the differences in behaviors and reactions. Delpit (2006) discussed the importance of recognizing, and accepting as truth, the cultural differences of marginalized youth. Understanding the difference in community resources for youth who are homeless, and, although not discussed in this study, children living in poverty, is the beginning of making paradigm shifts regarding homelessness and poverty.

A lack of community resources is common in low-income neighborhoods (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Hickler & Auerswald, 2009; Kozol, 1991). Each participant mentioned their lack of food as being a daily concern. As Akeelah simply shared, “There are days that I just don’t eat.” In addition, participants mentioned the inability to purchase school supplies because as Neecy noted, “the $.99 store is hecka far.” Disparities in expectations, resources (human and material), and opportunity play a significant role in how youth living in poverty engage with the educational system (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kozol, 2005). Although the school system cannot address all community needs, this is an area of opportunity discussed further in Chapter 5’s recommendations.

Summary

Analyzing the data provided by the participants through a CRT lens presupposes that the perceptions expressed by the participants are true. The narratives as shared by the participants were their realities. The stories were counter in that they were not what commonly may be expressed regarding adolescents who are homeless.

Through acceptance of the lived experience of the adolescents, four themes emerged. The themes: a) lack of consistent adult support, b) illegal activity as a necessary means of escape, c) education as a means to overcome adversity, and d) hope
for the future provided the foundation to the stories of Akeelah, Alton, Jerome, and Neecey. In addition, these themes are the framework within which the research questions are addressed in the final chapter.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this narrative study was to discover, through the stories told by African American adolescents who were experiencing homelessness, the support and opportunities they deemed necessary to facilitate their success in school. An additional goal of this study was to gather and share the perspectives of African American adolescent youth experiencing homelessness regarding their a) lived experiences, b) interactions with school staff, and c) understanding of what factors facilitated school success. Where to situate the problem was a challenge throughout this research study. The story shared by teachers, administrators, and support service personnel describe the overwhelming negative outcomes African American adolescents who are homeless face situating the problem with them and their families, essentially blaming the victim. However, the Critical Race Theory lens through which this study is filtered and the counterstories told by the adolescents, suggest we may need to situate the problem within the system as it is the place where control rests.

This study’s problem statement indicated the educational system does not currently support African American youth who are experiencing homelessness based on the documented academic achievement gap for this population. The study was guided by three research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences expressed in the stories told by African American youth who are experiencing homelessness?
2. What stories do African American homeless adolescents tell about their interactions with school staff and teachers?

3. What support does the education system provide to encourage system navigation?

These questions are considered at length in presenting the conclusions that emerged from the findings.

**Conclusions**

African American adolescents who are experiencing homelessness have hopes, dreams, wishes, and desires. However, for many of these young people, life circumstances cause their outlook on their future to shift, dim, and fade. To be an African American adolescent experiencing homelessness is to live a very secretive life. In school, they often do not share information regarding being homeless with school staff, teachers, or peers.

For African American adolescents, homelessness holds a prodigious shame. These adolescents go unheard and unseen in settings where they might receive assistance because these settings do not recognize what is of importance to these youth. To begin to understand the phenomenon of homelessness and what these adolescents experience the conclusions for this study were vetted by the research study participants. When I reviewed the findings, conclusions, and recommendations with the study participants they each remarked they did not really believe I was going to verify information with them. They also expressed surprise that their language was maintained in the study. Neecey commented, “it [feels] good to actually have someone care about what [I] say.”
comment remained with me throughout the writing of Chapter 5. The conversations with the study participants and the research questions guide the formation of conclusions.

**What are the lived experiences expressed in the stories told by African American youth who are experiencing homelessness?**

The lived experiences of the participants in this study are defined by three parameters: a) a lack of resources within the community, b) the criminalization of poverty, and c) a distrust of “the system.”

**A lack of resources within the community.** The community in which the young people in this study lived was marked by a plethora of liquor stores, payday loans store fronts, pawnshops, graffiti, and high crime. On an observation day, I walked the community in which the youth lived. In a 10-mile radius, there was not a major grocery outlet; however, there were 12 liquor stores, eight payday loan stores, an assortment of abandoned buildings, and several fast food restaurants. Healthy food options were limited as well as community support systems, especially when compared to the number of negative options. As Neecey shared, “I go to the center but right now it’s only open Tuesday and Thursday.” There is a library within a half a block from the center as well as a health clinic. When I mentioned the library to the participants, only one, Alton, was aware of the hours of operation. He stated he used the library often, as “I like to read about my history.” All the participants were aware of the health center. Each participant mentioned the nurse at the community center and the staff as sources of information and assistance.

**The criminalization of poverty.** All the participants have close friends and family members who have been, or were at the time of the study, participants in the
criminal justice system. Alton mentioned being stopped for “hanging out at the park. Like, I didn’t have anywhere to go and, like, I wasn’t doing anything to anybody. I don’t know why they (police) had to mess with me.” The opportunity to be stopped for truancy or loitering increases for housing unstable youth because these young people spend more time exposed.

The impact of the legal system is implicitly and explicitly felt. During an observation, I watched one of the youth in the community being stopped by a police officer. After the incident, I engaged the officer in conversation. The officer stated the young person failed the “attitude check.” When asked to explain an “attitude check” the officer described it as demonstrating the “proper respect to an authority figure.” The officer further explained how some of the kids were “really good kids but a lot of them were looking for trouble.” When I inquired as to how he could tell the difference, he used my approach to him as an example. “You see how you came up to me? You were smiling, you introduced yourself, you said, ‘excuse me sir.’ These kids can learn a lot from you.”

Upon reflection of this conversation I juxtaposed my experiences growing up with those of the study participants. My personal experiences with police officers, especially during my formative years, were positive. The experiences with police officers the participants describe were negative.

The “attitude check” rule disadvantages African American youth who are homeless. First, these youth are more likely to be targeted by police officers because they are simply more visible. Youth who are housed have somewhere to go. Often youth who are experiencing homelessness do not have anywhere to be during the day, and, for
those who are living on the streets, they are also more likely to be exposed at night making them a target for curfew laws. Secondly, negative interactions with law enforcement do not engender a relationship of mutual trust and respect. In many instances, these youth see law enforcement as people to distrust. Previous experiences may lead to behaviors that do not adequately satisfy the various law enforcement officers in which they come into contact.

Whiteness as property addresses the unwritten, and written, laws impacting African American youth who are homeless. When directly asked if they felt race impacted how they were treated in society, all participants stated they felt their economic status was of greater concern than race. Although the youth in this study did not see race as being the reasoning behind negative interactions with law enforcement, economic status impacts the ability to have power and control. The ability of those in power to unilaterally determine rules is a part of Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993). If officers are basing stop procedures on rules normed to the dominant culture, then youth who do not share the experiences of those in the dominant culture are not as likely to perform appropriately. These laws disadvantage those who do not have the power to influence policy, and often, when mistreated by those in authority, these youth do not have voice to hold those in authority accountable.

**Distrust of the system.** Throughout all of the interviews, “the system” was referred to often. The system refers to anyone or organization in authority that takes away power to make decisions for oneself. The system includes the school system, foster services system, CPS, criminal justice system, all organizations in which individuals are said to have the youths’ best interests in mind; however, consulting with the youth rarely
The majoritarian story does not acknowledge the possibility that these youth have an understanding of what is beneficial in their lives. Similar to experiences with law enforcement, when the previous interactions with the system are deemed as negative, they do not have the confidence that future interactions will be positive. Many of the adolescents who are living in a state of homelessness have unique experiences that remove the veil of innocence. The relationship between the system and the youth may shift when decisions are made in partnership with the youth and in acknowledgement of those unique experiences.

**What stories do African American homeless adolescents tell about their interactions with school staff and teachers?**

Three of the four participants are currently enrolled in independent studies courses to complete their education. The remaining participant is enrolled in a county school that serves students labeled ED. These settings allow for closer connection with individual teachers and administrators because of the nature of the programs. A benefit of the independent studies program is that the youth are able to build a relationship with their teacher because of the one-on-one nature of independent studies.

The programs offered in many school programs do not offer the same flexibility for teachers to develop one-on-one relationships with students. Overworked, under prepared, and under resourced educators are the stories the participants tell about the teachers in these school programs. Participants share a narrative of educators who lack cultural competence and awareness of students as individuals. “Teachers don’t really think we’re going to do anything. All they think is we’re going to be out here having babies” (Neecey).
Within some high school programs, the responsibility to make connections falls on teachers who in some instances have over 180 contacts within a school day, a conservative estimate. With budget cuts, if there is a school counselor, the caseload is well over 700 students per counselor. These ratios discourage individual relationships. Educators are often well meaning; however, the broad brush strokes of low expectations negatively influence participation, engagement, and preparation for the future.

**What support does the education system provide to encourage system navigation?**

The number of young people experiencing homelessness currently enrolled in the education system is a nebulous number. The challenge of identification is exacerbated by the propensity for African American youth experiencing homelessness not to self-identify (Hickler & Auerswald, 2009). Participants mentioned having academic success when teachers took an interest in assisting them. This was born out when Jerome noted, “After I got kicked out of, I don’t know, like I changed. I started going to school… and I was more interested and stuff. Like my teacher made it fun and like she helped me with whatever I needed help with.” Participants in the study each mentioned desiring help; however, they also shared a desire not to disclose their homeless status. The young people do not disclose their situation due to the absence of trust; yet, trust is difficult to establish when the youth do not disclose. This paradox challenges educators to creatively find methods to identify homeless populations within the school.

The participants responded to teachers who took an interest in making the courses interesting and in addressing the needs of the student as individual. The individual approach can have success; however, the model is not viable as a long-term fix, as success is dependent upon finding the right teacher fit for each student. Providing
resources for students in need has limited success; and system-wide shifts to education delivery have the ability to serve vulnerable populations. Relationships are instrumental in success.

Technical changes involving increasing teacher awareness and providing support with materials and supplies have short-term impact on success, as these support measures situate the solution on the ability of individual educators to be rescuers of African American students experiencing homelessness. Although individual educator engagement and having access to school supplies support navigating the system, the onus is placed back on the child to access the supplies and the goodwill of the educators to provide the support. The supports needed go beyond simple quick fixes that require implementation on a site-to-site basis. Adaptive changes that shift system-wide education delivery is necessary for African American adolescents experiencing homelessness.

**Additional Conclusions**

**Relationships with adults**

Adult support influences how a young person engages with others. Because African American youth who are experiencing homelessness are often transient, developing lasting relationships, even with peers, is challenging. The McKinney-Vento Act supports young people maintaining consistent enrollment; however, without funding for transportation services, and the inconsistent application of the law from site to site, continuous enrollment can be a challenge. Additionally, young people without consistent adult support are less likely to receive the lessons of goal setting, independent living skills, and trust that the majoritarian story takes for granted. The inability to depend on
the basic support systems including family, school, and law enforcement changes how these youth interact and perceive the world.

**Illegal Activity as a Necessity**

In most cases throughout this study, youth engaged in illegal activity not for enjoyment but out of what they deemed necessity. Exploitation of these youth, either by other or self, was a reality. Sexual exploitation, drug usage, and gang membership was often done as a means of survival. Illegal activity further disenfranchises these youth from mainstream society. In addition, African American youth experiencing homelessness are at increased risk for exposure to violence, public health risk, and the criminal justice system.

Not all African American youth experiencing homelessness use drugs and alcohol. Those who do use these substances often do so as a means to escape the uncertainty and instability of life, thus increasing the chances of addiction and the continued cycle of drug use and poverty. Currently the majoritarian story states all illegal activities must be punished; however, the support systems to interrupt illegal behavior are lacking. The current methods are to deal with the negative behavior without analyzing the root causes.

**The Impact of Education**

The participants of this study understand the importance of education; however, accessing educational options can be challenging. The current school system does not fully meet the needs of this unique population. In this study, three of the four participants mentioned accelerating their high school completion through independent studies programs. Although they can complete their high school diploma through this option, the
preparation for post-secondary training is unknown. Providing independent studies programs, correspondence courses, and specialized programs meet the goal of high school graduation; however, how these young people are being prepared for post-secondary options should be included. When young people have minimal access to rigorous curricula, they are less likely to be prepared for economic independence.

The programs in which the students are enrolled focus on the basics; hence, the students are not exposed to enrichment courses found in middle- to upper middle-class, well-resourced schools. Educational options are more likely to focus on vocational programs. Although vocational programs provide an option for the future, these programs do not expose these young people to the rich array of post-secondary options found in higher resourced schools. Limited access to varied curricula taught by less qualified and less experienced teachers with fewer learning resources is common in schools in the high poverty schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The reality of the 21st-century economy is jobs with life sustaining wages will be in more highly skilled positions. If these young people are not engaged in education programs preparing them to train for these more highly skilled positions, they will be left behind perhaps to repeat the cycle of homelessness as adults.

**Hope for the Future**

Throughout the process of learning about the population of African American adolescents experiencing homelessness, hope was the underlining theme to all conversations. Alton defined hope as “not having to live like this for the rest of my life...having a house one day...being different from my family.” Every young person is asked “what do you want to be when you grow up?” Most can answer that question, even
if sometimes adults believe the answer to be unrealistic. Young people who can
answer the question have a vision, a hope, for their future. At some point, for African
American students who experience homelessness, the vision for the future begins to dim,
the dream fades, and the hope is lost. Each participant in this study was at a different
stage in losing sight of their dreams, as indicated by their difficulty in answering the
question regarding their future.

The bleak statistics given in the introduction are indicative of the cycle in which
cchildren who are experiencing homelessness often find themselves. The participants in
this study have extremely limited resources. Their experiences and outlook of the world
are vastly different than the stereotypical school-aged child. Their experiences are
different from those of the stereotypical adolescent, and their experiences are different
from those of each other. One thing they have in common is they are still children.
Underneath the bravado, the hurt, the anger, and the frustration, they are adolescents who
have a vision for their life. The education system, in partnership with others, can go far
in helping these youth develop and accomplish their vision.

**Recommendations**

The growing number of young people affected by homelessness requires schools
and social services systems to develop a different understanding of the lives of these
young people in order to change business as usual. Schools cannot provide all services.
To meet the unique needs of African American youth who are homeless, the following
recommendations are suggested.
School and Community Partnerships

Money matters in education; however, “Money alone isn't the cure for America's ailing school system” (Obama, 2010). Although California passed legislation that ensures funding for school systems, the funding alone will not solve the challenges African American youth experiencing homelessness face in the education system. Culturally competent support coordinated by the school system provides opportunities to serve these youth. Recognizing that African American youth may in many instances not disclose being housing insecurity, there is opportunity to coordinate efforts with community organizations to strengthen the continuum of care in identification and service delivery. Because some youth who are experiencing homelessness are not utilizing services from shelters or foster care, the development of partnerships should review partnering not only with shelters, law enforcement, and foster services but with service providers outside of majoritarian structures, such as churches, community centers, health clinics, and food banks. Partnerships between schools, business, non-profits, and families are needed to provide support and opportunities to promote long-term success. Additionally, treatment programs and other social service organizations geared toward youth should be housed on or near the school campus. As Neecey mentioned, there are a lack of counselors in the school system; by coordinating efforts, that void can be met.

Partnerships are needed; however, placing organizations together without training does a disservice to the organizations and the youth. Training and staff development is needed for service providers and organizations working with African American youth experiencing homelessness. The importance of developing culturally cognizant and
competent organizations and service providers strengthens service delivery and increases the likelihood that the services provided meet the needs of the target population.

**Internships, Apprenticeships, and Mentoring**

The need for additional training is necessary to meet the requirements for high skilled jobs. Although additional training is needed, that training does not necessarily have to occur in the established school environment. Internships give youth the exposure to different career opportunities as well as providing needed employment experience. Additionally, apprenticeship programs may prepare these youth for higher skill-higher wage employment while earning an income. Prior to placement in internship or apprenticeship programs, these youth should receive the training in employability skills to ensure their success.

Adult relationships were mentioned throughout this study. Mentoring has the ability to develop long-term, supportive, adult relationships. In this age of technology, mentoring does not necessarily equate to physically connecting with a youth. Mentoring can be done with text messages, emails, and social media tools used as a means to supplement in-person connection.

**Policy Changes**

Partnerships provide a starting place for developing a continuum of care for African American adolescents experiencing homelessness; however, partnerships do not address policy barriers impacting this population. Although youth engaged with the foster system are eligible to receive support in some instances through age 24, youth such as Akeelah are not foster youth, yet share many of the same life challenges. Specifically, educational policies are needed to address graduation requirements, college support
services, and financial aid. Each participant was concerned regarding the number of graduation credits needed. The needs of African American youth experiencing homelessness are often the same as foster youth. If these youth are provided the same options as foster youth, the potential to receive support after high school increases.

Individualized education plans (IEP) for youth who are experiencing homelessness would be of benefit to these students. The IEP would follow the youth through each school placement and ensure the school understood the educational goals, objectives, and challenges. The IEP should be kept electronically as well as in paper form, and it would need to be properly secured to ensure confidentiality. There is a concern with the young person being “outed” as being homeless, especially if the homeless condition changes; however, oft times the needs of youth experiencing homelessness do not change when the homeless condition ends. The IEP concept is strengthened if the continuum of care is developed.

Additional Research

An area of opportunity is additional research on the intersections between homelessness, sexual orientation, and public health. Alton, in particular, voiced concerns regarding his safety especially as he ages. He mentioned several friends who engage in sexual relationships in order to have basic needs met. He stated he had not engaged in this practice at the time of the study, but he was propositioned often. In Alton’s estimation, school is important; however, he stated he was more concerned about his physical and emotional health as a young, gay, African American male who was also homeless.
The four youth in this study, although there were commonalities, had different experiences and adaptive coping mechanisms to navigate their housing instability. As an African American, gay, male, Alton felt he was more vulnerable within the community. He also shared he did not feel like he was accepted by the African American community, and in many instances, his family, because of his sexual orientation. Whereas Alton described feeling limited by his sexual orientation, Akeelah as a bi-sexual female, did not. As a heterosexual male with family support, Jerome had a slightly different experience. Similarly, although she was not accessing services, Neecey had the opportunity to take advantage of programs the other youth did not have available because they were not in “the system.” Examining the nuances within the African American homeless population is an area of opportunity for the next study.

Another area for additional research is in the area of policy. Although the McKinney-Vento policy is a starting place for providing safety nets for youth experiencing homelessness, it is an unfunded mandate. Research regarding how McKinney-Vento is implemented throughout the Sacramento region is needed.

Summary

The bleak statistics given in the introduction are indicative of the cycle in which children who are homeless often find themselves. The participants in this study did not have access to the nook in the kitchen to do homework; nor, did they have easy access to a computer and internet. Sometimes, simply accessing paper and pencil can be a challenge. Their experiences and outlook of the world were vastly different than those of the stereotypical youth. Their experiences were different from those of the stereotypical
adolescent, and, their experiences were different from those of each other. One thing they had in common was they were still adolescents.

The majoritarian story encourages their youth to dream. Goals are discussed and plans are made. At times, it seems cruel to encourage African American youth experiencing homelessness to dream; however, without the ability to dream of a way out, there cannot be a goal and a plan to find a way out. One cannot imagine the possibilities of what can be if one is only focused on what is. The story, as it was told by the study participants, was their individual realities. These youth had a vision for their life. “The system,” working in partnership, can go far in helping these youth develop and accomplish their vision for their lives.
List of References


Jewett, S. (2006). If you don't identify with your ancestry, you're like a race without a land: Constructing race at a small urban middle school. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 37*(2), 144-161.


Appendix: Approval of Protocol

DREXEL UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

Office of Regulatory Research Compliance
APPROVAL OF PROTOCOL

July 18, 2012

Kathy Geller, Ph.D.
Goodwin College
Mailstop: Drexel University

Dear Dr. Geller,

On July 18, 2012 the IRB reviewed the following protocol:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Review:</th>
<th>Initial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>Unheard and Unseen: A Narrative Study of African American Adolescent Homelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator:</td>
<td>Kathy Geller, Ph.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB ID:</td>
<td>1207001401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
<td>Internal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant Title:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant ID:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IND, IDE or IDE:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents Reviewed:</td>
<td>Application Form, Data Collection tools, Flyer, Assent and Permission Forms, Proposal, and Permission Letter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to 45 CFR 46.110, this study is Approved Expedited Categories 6 and 7. This study will enroll 10 subjects recruited from Wind Youth Services Community Center Sacramento, CA.

Risks to Children: 45 CFR 46.404 – Minimal Risk

The IRB approved the protocol from July 18, 2012 to July 17, 2013 inclusive. Before July 17, 2013 or within 30 days of study close, whichever is earlier, you are to submit a completed Continuing Review Progress Report and required attachments to request continuing approval or closure.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of July 17, 2013 approval of this protocol expires on that date.

1601 Cherry Street, 3 Parkway Building, Suite 1644 • Philadelphia, PA 19102 • Phone 215-255-7857 • Fax 215-255-7874
www.research.drexel.edu • www.drexelmox.edu

In the tradition of Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania and Hahnemann Medical College

Philadelphia Baptist Education Corporation does Drexel University College of Medicine as a separate not-for-profit subsidiary of Drexel University.
Drexel University is not involved in patient care.
Attached are stamped approved consent documents. Use copies of these documents to document consent.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Danyelle S. Gibson
DREXEL UNIVERSITY
ASSENT FORM FOR CHILDREN/MINORS IN A RESEARCH STUDY

This study is about African American youth and their experiences on being homeless. The study is a narrative; this means that I am gathering information from you to share your story, thoughts, and experiences. This study is being completed because I believe it is important for people, especially educators and policy makers, to hear your story.

Participants will participate in at least three (3) conversations ranging from thirty minutes to one hour. All conversations will be recorded. During our conversations, you will be asked to answer some questions. These questions will include, but are not limited to: your experiences with being homeless, your experiences in school, and your definitions of success. These conversations are designed to receive your story. Each conversation is scheduled for approximately 45 minutes; however, you will have the opportunity to expand on topics, talk about related ideas, or you may also choose not to answer certain questions.

I will also observe you at Wind Youth Services community center. You do not have to do anything special during observations. This is a time for me to see you on a normal day.

In addition to our conversations and observations for our last meeting I will ask you to bring something that tells about you. This can be pictures, journals, poems, school projects, or anything else you would like to share. These items, or artifacts, help to provide more information about you.

All personal identifying information will be kept confidential. The only time your personal identifying information will be shared with someone else is if: you are hurting yourself, you are going to hurt someone else, or if someone has hurt you. In each of these situations I must report to a responsible adult, but not the person who has hurt you.

All information gathered, referred to as data, will be kept in a secure location at Drexel University Center for Graduate Studies in Sacramento, CA. What you say may be included in my writing; however, you will be identified by a different name, also called a pseudonym. Only I will have access to personal identifying information.

This study will be used for the completion of my doctoral degree.
DREXEL UNIVERSITY
ASSENT FORM FOR CHILDREN/MINORS IN A RESEARCH STUDY

This study is about African American youth and their experiences on being homeless. The study is a narrative; this means that I am gathering information from you to share your story, thoughts, and experiences. This study is being completed because I believe it is important for people, especially educators and policy makers, to hear your story.

Participants will participate in at least three (3) conversations ranging from thirty minutes to one hour. All conversations will be recorded. During our conversations, you will be asked to answer some questions. These questions will include, but are not limited to: your experiences with being homeless, your experiences in school, and your definitions of success. These conversations are designed to receive your story. Each conversation is scheduled for approximately 45 minutes; however, you will have the opportunity to expand on topics, talk about related ideas, or you may also choose not to answer certain questions.

I will also observe you at Wind Youth Services community center. You do not have to do anything special during observations. This is a time for me to see you on a normal day.

In addition to our conversations and observations for our last meeting I will ask you to bring something that tells about you. This can be pictures, journals, poems, school projects, or anything else you would like to share. These items, or artifacts, help to provide more information about you.

All personal identifying information will be kept confidential. The only time your personal identifying information will be shared with someone else is if: you are hurting yourself, you are going to hurt someone else, or if someone has hurt you. In each of these situations I must report to a responsible adult, but not the person who has hurt you.

All information gathered, referred to as data, will be kept in a secure location at Drexel University Center for Graduate Studies in Sacramento, CA. What you say may be included in my writing; however, you will be identified by a different name, also called a pseudonym. Only I will have access to personal identifying information.

This study will be used for the completion of my doctoral degree.

APPROVED
Office of Regulatory Research Compliance
Protocol # 12376001-01
Approval Date: 07/18/12
Expiration Date: 07/17/13

Version 1
Drexel University
Recruiting Volunteers for a Research Study

Unheard and Unseen: A narrative study of African American adolescent homelessness

A study of African American adolescents experiencing homelessness in Sacramento, CA

Research Objectives
The purpose of this study is to find out what support and opportunities may help African American adolescents who are homeless during middle school, specifically sixth through eighth grade.

In participating in the study:

- You will participate in conversation on three occasions and be asked to discuss experiences associated with homelessness as well as your school experiences.
- Each conversation will last approximately 45 minutes; but, no longer than 1 hour.
- Sensitive questions regarding homelessness, race, and school experiences will be asked during the interviews.
- All conversations will be recorded and put into written form. You will have the opportunity to review the reported findings.
- Your identity will be confidential.

Information for Research Subjects Eligibility
Individuals selected for this study must be:

- African American
- between the ages of twelve (12) to seventeen (17)
- experiencing homelessness

Location of the research and person to contact for further information
If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact

Addie Ellis
916-743-2593
ac556@drexel.edu
Community Room-Wind Youth Services Center Wednesdays 10am - 1pm

This research is conducted by a researcher who is a member of Drexel University

APPROVED
Office of Regulatory Research Compliance
Protocol # 1201701.001
Approval Date: 07/18/12
Expiration Date: 07/17/13
DREXEL UNIVERSITY
PERMISSION TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY

1. PARENT/GUARDIAN NAME: ____________________________

CHILD'S NAME: ____________________________________

2. TITLE OF RESEARCH: Unheard And Unseen: A Narrative Study Of African American Adolescent Homelessness

3. PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR'S NAME: Dr. Kathy Geller
   CO-INVESTIGATOR'S NAME: Ms. Addie Ellis

4. RESEARCH ENTITY: This research study is being done by Drexel University.

5. PERMISSION FOR THE RESEARCH STUDY: This is a long and an important document. If you sign it, you will be authorizing Drexel University and its researchers to perform research studies on your child. You should take your time and carefully read it. You can also take a copy of this permission form to discuss it with your family member, physician, attorney or anyone else you would like before you sign it. Do not sign it unless you are comfortable with your child participating in this study.

6. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH: Your child is being asked to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to find out what support and opportunities may help African American adolescents who are homeless during middle school, specifically sixth through eighth grade.

   This research study is being done as part of a doctoral degree program at the Drexel University.

   Your child has been asked to take part in this study because of the reply to the invitation flyer. In addition, your child meets the demographic requirements. There will be other individuals taking part in this study.

   Individuals selected for this study must be:
   - African American
   - between the ages of twelve (12) to seventeen (17)
   - experiencing homelessness

   Your child may leave the study at any time without any consequences.
7. **PROCEDURES AND DURATION:** You understand that your child will be do the following as part of this research study:

- Your child will participate in conversation on three (3) occasions and asked to discuss experiences associated with homelessness as well as school experiences.
- Each conversation and observation will last approximately 45 minutes; but, no longer than 1 hour.
- Sensitive questions regarding homelessness, race, and school experiences will be asked during the conversations.
- All conversations will be recorded. Each recording will be put into written form. After all conversations have been completed and put into written form, your child will have the opportunity to review the reported findings.
- Your child will be observed for no more than one hour during their time at the community center.
- At the final meeting, your child will be asked to share and talk about pictures, journals, schools projects, or other items of their choosing with the co-investigator.
- Co-investigator will take notes of conversations and observations.

Notes, audio recordings and written documents/transcriptions will be securely stored in a locked cabinet at Drexel University Center for Graduate Studies in Sacramento, CA, and accessible only to the investigators.

8. **RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:** Risks are minimal and may involve issues such as questions that your child may find embarrassing or personal in nature. Your child will be able to discontinue the conversations at any time. What your child chooses to share with the researcher is entirely your child’s choice. Because your child will speak with the researcher more than once, there will be a loss of anonymity with the researcher only. The researcher will keep your child’s identity safe and not share her notes, recordings, or any other research data with any other person.

9. **UNFORESEEN RISKS:** Participation in this study may involve unforeseen risks. If unforeseen risks occur, they will be reported to the Office of Regulatory Research Compliance.

10. **BENEFITS:** There may be no direct benefits to your child from participating in this study. However, this study may provide contribute to helping research in the field of homelessness and adolescents.

11. **ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES:** This is not a treatment study. The alternative is not to participate in this study.
12. **REASONS FOR REMOVAL FROM STUDY**: Your child may be required to stop the study before the end for any of the following reasons:

   a) If all or part of the study is discontinued for any reason by the sponsor, investigator, university authorities, or government agencies; or
   b) other reasons, including new information available to the investigator or harmful unforeseen reactions experienced by the subject or other subjects in this study.
   c) Finally, your child may be removed from the study if your child fails to adhere to requirements for participation established by the researcher.

   Your child’s participation may also end for any of the following reasons:

   a) Your child fails to meet the homeless definition at the beginning of your participation
   b) Your child intentionally provides false or inaccurate information
   c) Your child’s safety or the researcher’s is put in jeopardy

13. **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may refuse to be in the study or your child may stop at any time without the loss of the care benefits to which your child is entitled. However, your child will be expected to follow the instructions provided by the research staff, in order to ensure your child’s safety. Your child may leave the study at any time without any consequences.

14. **RESPONSIBILITY FOR COST**: There is no cost to you for participating in this study.

15. **CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY**: Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with your child will remain confidential. Your child’s name will not be associated with the research findings in any way and only the researcher will know your child’s identity. The researcher will store all data in password protected electronic files accessible to only the researcher and all written documents will be kept in a secure location at Drexel University Center for Graduate Studies Sacramento, CA. In any publication or presentation of research results, your child’s identity will be kept confidential.

   There is a possibility that records which identify your child may be inspected by authorized individuals such as representatives of the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP), or the Drexel University institutional review board (IRB). Your permission to such inspections and to the copying of excerpts of your child’s records, is required by any of these representatives.

   You will receive a copy of this form after it is signed to keep for your records, the researchers will keep the signed form that you return in a locked secured location until your child turns 25, and will then destroy the document.
All survey data and audio recordings will be kept in an electronic format on a password-protected laptop and will be destroyed 7 years after the closure of the study."

The researcher is a mandated reporter. Confidentiality may be broken if she becomes aware of the presence of harm to self, harm to others, or physical abuse.

16. **NEW INFORMATION**: If new information becomes known that will affect your child or might change your decision to let your child be in this study, you and your child will be informed by the investigator.

17. **QUESTIONS**: If you have any questions about this study or your child’s participation in this study, contact:

   **Dr. Kathy Geller at 916-213-2790**

If you have questions about your child’s rights as a research subject, you may contact:

Drexel University
Office of Regulatory Research Compliance
1601 Cherry Street, 3 Parkway Bldg.
Mail Stop 10-444
Philadelphia, PA 19102
215-255-7857.

Do not sign this permission form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers to all of your questions.

If you agree to your child’s participation in this study, you will receive a signed and dated copy of this permission form for your records.

18. **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**: If you wish further information regarding your child’s rights as a research subject or if your child has problems with a research-related injury, for medical problems please contact the Institution's Office of Regulatory Research Compliance by telephoning 215-255-7857.
19. PERMISSION

- I have been informed of the reasons for this study.
- I have had the study explained to me.
- I have had all of my questions answered to my satisfaction.
- I have carefully read this permission form, have initialed each page, and have received a signed copy.
- I freely give permission for my child to participate in this research study.

Parent of Subject or Legally Authorized Representative

Date

Investigator or Individual Obtaining this Consent

Date

List of Individuals Authorized to Obtain Permission

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Day Phone #</th>
<th>24 Hr Phone #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Addie Ellis</td>
<td>Co-investigator</td>
<td>916-743-2593</td>
<td>916-743-2593</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPROVED
Office of Regulatory Research Compliance
Protocol # 18/001-001
Approval Date: 07/18/12
Expiration Date: 07/17/13

Version 1
Interview Protocol

Meeting 1

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Addie Ellis

Interviewee:

This is our first interview to gather your story about being an adolescent who is homeless. This also serves the purpose to strengthen my understanding of homelessness. I will be asking questions regarding your perspectives on homelessness, academic achievement, as well as your connection to school. This interview will be more of a conversation than a back and forth questions and answers. Feel free to expand on the answer to any question, ask me clarifying questions, or, if you feel uncomfortable, not to answer a question.

Questions

1. How long have you been homeless? Describe your “homeless” situation (where are you living, with whom, how long?)
2. How do you think being homeless has affected you? When you became homeless what changed in your life?
3. Are you in school? If not in school when did you stop going? What impact, if any, has homelessness had on your studies?
4. What grade are you currently enrolled?
5. What do you experience when you go to traditional public school? Who in the school is aware of your living situation?
Interview Protocol

Meeting 2

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Addie Ellis

Interviewee:

It is good to see you again, thanks for coming. How are you?

Questions:

1. How do you define success?
2. How will you know when you have reached success?
3. Do you think being homeless will affect your success?
4. Do you think being African American will affect your success?
5. What do you think will help you succeed in school and beyond?

As always I thank you for your time. I am going to write up everything we have discussed at our meetings. We'll schedule our third meeting. At this meeting bring your journal, pictures, and anything else you would like to share.

Thank you so much.
6. How do teachers, administrators and staff at your school respond to your homelessness?
7. What kind of special support is provided to you?
8. Tell me about your relationship with teachers and other staff at school?
9. Who is your favorite/least favorite person? Why?
10. What do you think will help you stay in school?

Thank you so much for allowing me to interview you and sharing your story. I will stop the recording at this time. All information will remain confidential with the exception of the information we discussed previously. You have provided me with valuable information. Let's schedule a time for a follow-up interview so I can share what I have written and to get additional information. Thank you again for your time.
Interview Protocol

(Meeting 3)

Time of interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer: Addie Ellis
Interviewee:

It is good to see you again, thanks for coming. How are you?

Questions:
1. How do you feel about participating in this study?
2. Tell me about the items you brought with you.

As always I thank you for your time. I am going to write up everything we have discussed at our meetings. I will contact you so I can go over everything with you because I want to make sure I am telling things correctly.

Thank you so much.