

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND HOMELESSNESS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

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## Dedication

This is dedicated to my wonderful family. Particularly to my husband Carlos, whose love and support give me strength, and to my father Joe who has been a source of guidance and wisdom throughout my life.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many friends, relatives, and supporters who have made this happen. Special thanks to the distinguished faculty members who served on my committee: Dr. Dale and Dr. Guagnano; you were of invaluable help. Finally, the shelter staff who made it possible for me to conduct this research, and the individuals who chose to participate in my research. I could not have done this without you.

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## Abstract

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND HOMELESSNESS

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Using survey data collected in 2011 from two singles' homeless shelters in Fairfax County, Virginia, this study discusses the relationship between levels of educational attainment and homelessness among current homeless shelter residents. The research concludes with a discussion of the results and presents implications for the field of homelessness. This thesis is slated to be a reference and resource for a research on homelessness prevention strategies.

## Chapter 1. Introduction

Meet John Smith: He is a 35 year-old single male who, like many Americans, is struggling to make ends meet. He works as a day laborer and has no steady paycheck. His stability depends on factors beyond his control, including demand, the weather, and competition from fellow day laborers who may be stronger or more skilled than he is. He used to live in a room-to-rent but after getting behind on his rent for two months he was asked to leave and is now staying in a homeless shelter. He knows that day labor is not a reliable source of income, and worries about being homeless in his old age.

During the days he does not secure day labor he heads to his local Social Services Department and searches for stable jobs in their career center. John is a people person and would like to work in an office setting as an assistant. He imagines that it would be a pleasant job to have as he no longer has the same strength and stamina that day labor requires, and it would be a job he could continue doing into his old age. However, all of the job postings he searches through require a high school diploma. John dropped out of school at the age of 17, a decision he deeply regrets. He has attempted to take the General Educational Development Test (GED) twice in the past, but failed the mathematics portion on both occasions. He has participated in various training programs at the career center, and has obtained a certificate in computer basics and Microsoft Office. John

knows he has many of the necessary skills to work in an office setting, but without a high school diploma he knows his chances of being selected as a serious candidate are slim.

While John Smith is a fictitious character, his story is common among the homeless population, where possessing a high school diploma can make a difference by allowing homeless individuals access to jobs and programs they would otherwise be ineligible for. This is why many shelter systems, such as the one in Fairfax County, place a high level of importance on education and encourage residents to work towards a GED certificate, while providing them other educational programs in order to build the homeless' skill sets and make them more competitive in the workplace.

The poverty of homeless individuals is often seen as a consequence of personal weaknesses rather than the result of larger socioeconomic forces. Individualism, work and the work ethic are idealized in American culture, where since colonial times, those physically capable of work have been expected to provide for their own support and that of their families. In our capitalist economy, paid employment is the main source of support for most families. The modern poor, however, face a variety of structural barriers to gaining paid employment and improving their financial circumstances (Goetz 1994).

Lack of formal education is a barrier for homeless individuals because it is difficult to secure a decent-paying job in today's challenging economic environment without at least a high school diploma. Lack of a steady and decent income leads to difficulty maintaining housing and life stability. In fact, the median income for persons ages 18 through 67 who had not completed high school was roughly \$23,000 in 2008. By comparison, the median income for the same age group who completed their education

with at least a high school credential, including a General Education Development (GED) certificate, was approximately \$42,000. Among adults in the labor force, a higher percentage of dropouts are unemployed compared with adults who earned high school credentials (Chapman 2010). However, educational attainment is generally not considered a serious variable in the study of homelessness.

### Purpose of the Study

Using data collected during a survey of two Fairfax County singles' homeless shelters conducted in 2011, I seek to answer the following research question: Is there a relationship between educational attainment and homelessness? By surveying the homeless in a shelter environment I would be able to find out whether there were high numbers of high school dropouts within their population.

The purpose of this study is to provide evidence supporting the theory that there is a relationship between homelessness and educational attainment. It is important to note that the intention is not to establish that lack of educational attainment *causes* homelessness, but that lack of educational attainment increases one's likelihood of becoming homeless. I begin this research by providing a brief discussion of contemporary homelessness, followed by a literature review of relevant research supporting the study. I will then discuss methods of data collection and analysis. I will conclude with a discussion of my results, limitations and implications.

## Definition of Terms

The first important term to define is *homelessness*, as it has traditionally been a difficult term to define based on political and social climates. The Stewart-McKinney Act of 1987 – the first major legislative response to homelessness in the United States – defined a homeless individual as someone who “lacks a fixed permanent nighttime residence, or whose nighttime residence is a temporary shelter, welfare hotel, or any public or private place not designed as sleeping accommodations for human beings” (Arnold 2004).

The department of Housing and Urban Development defined a homeless individual “anyone who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence; and has a primary residence that is a) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations; b) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or c) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings” (Department of Housing and Urban Development 1999).

Both the Stewart-McKinney Act and the Department of Housing and Urban Development definitions establish a concrete, measurable and exclusive set of variables that determine whether someone is homeless. Other definitions are more flexible and inclusive. For example, the United Nations, Department of Economics and Social Affairs defines homeless households as “those households without a shelter that would fall into the scope of living quarters. They carry their few possessions with them, sleeping in

streets, in doorways or on piers, or in another space, on a more or less random basis” (2004).

Similarly, the Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses (CES) introduced the following definition at the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Conference of European Statisticians:

In its Recommendations for the Censuses of Population and Housing, the CES identifies homeless people under two broad groups: (a) Primary homelessness (or rooflessness). This category includes persons living in the streets without a shelter that would fall within the scope of living quarters; (b) Secondary homelessness. This category may include persons with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodations (including dwellings, shelters and institutions for the homeless or other living quarters). This category includes persons living in private dwellings but reporting ‘no usual address’ on their census form.

Ferris J. Ritchey defines homelessness as “a condition associated with increased daily hassle, decreased social support, decreased health status, and increased adverse life events, all which ultimately are related to amplified depressive symptoms” (Wasserman and Blair 2010), and Christopher Jencks argues that someone is homeless when they don’t have a place of their own because money is an obstacle (1994). The previous three definitions provide a holistic and immeasurable approach to homelessness, understanding its various social causes and consequences.

Because the definition of homelessness is not static, it can change depending on political climate and economic interest. For the purposes of this research I will use Peter H. Rossi's and James D. Wright's definition of homelessness, which defines a person as "literally homeless" if they are residents of shelters for homeless persons, or have no access to a conventional housing unit (1989). I decided to use this definition because it is simple, inclusive, and because I will be conducting my research strictly in a shelter setting.

Another important term I will be using is "single homeless individual" which refers to homeless individuals residing in singles' homeless shelters meant for unattached adults - as opposed to an individual residing alongside his or her family in a family shelter. While single homeless individuals may have families, and often enter the shelter with their spouse or significant other, singles' shelters residents sleep in dormitories divided by gender.

Finally, I define educational attainment to mean highest level of education achieved, and use high school graduation or General Educational Development (GED) certificate acquisition as a standard measure of education. This seems to be an inclusive educational standard most often used by researchers in the field.

#### Homelessness in Fairfax County, Virginia

According to the Fairfax County Office to Prevent and End Homelessness (OPEH), on January 27, 2010 there were 1,544 people who were literally homeless in the Fairfax-Falls Church Community. 652 of them were single individuals residing in



homeless shelters, seasonal hypothermia prevention shelters, or unsheltered and living in places not meant for human habitation (e.g. the woods, vehicles or abandoned properties). The rest of the individuals counted belonged to homeless families (Fairfax Office to Prevent and End Homelessness and Fairfax County Department of Systems Management for Human Services 2010). For the purposes of this research I will only be focusing on the 42% of literally homeless single homeless adults.

I selected Fairfax County as my research site due to the readily available data sets, and highly documented strategies, to address homelessness dating back to the early 1990's, when the Fairfax-Falls Church community established a Continuum of Care as a community process for seeking federal funds from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. This collaborative approach brought millions of dollars to the community for services and programs to manage the growing homeless issue, but few dollars or incentives to develop long-term solutions to end homelessness. In 2004 a Community Planning Collaborative on Homelessness was established to study in depth the current status of homelessness in the community, to review plans from other communities around the country, and to consult with experts in the field to learn about best practices and successful model programs (Planning Committee to End Homelessness of the Community Council on Homelessness 2006).

In 2006 the county implemented a tracking system introduced by the Department of Housing and Urban Development in order to accurately estimate numbers of homeless individuals in any given location, and to document the effectiveness of the suggested strategies. The first Point-in-Time Count was conducted in 2006 and is calculated once a

year in wintertime when homeless individuals are more likely to seek shelter or services due to the cold temperatures. This survey covers individuals who are literally homeless in the community, and includes those who are in shelters, in transitional housing, or unsheltered living on the street (Fairfax County Office to Prevent and End Homelessness 2011). In 2007 the county reviewed the recommendations of the planning committee and created the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness based on the recommendations of the plan to end homelessness developed by the National Alliance to End Homelessness in 2000 (2000).

The plan's goal is that no later than December 31, 2018, every person who is homeless or at risk of being homeless in the Fairfax-Falls Church Community will be able to access appropriate affordable housing and the services needed to keep them in their homes (Implementation Committee to Prevent and End Homelessness in the Fairfax-Falls Church Community 2008). Using data collected by the Point-in-Time Count, the county can assess the progress and challenges within homeless services.

#### Educational Attainment in Fairfax County, Virginia

The United States Census Bureau found that in 2010, 16% of the population of Fairfax County between the ages of 18 and 24 did not have a high school diploma; along with 8.5% of the population over the age of 25. 13% of the population of Fairfax County (age 25 and older) that did not hold a high school diploma lived at or under the poverty line, as opposed to only 6.8% of the population that held a high school diploma. The median income rate for the population of Fairfax County (25 and older) without a high

school diploma was of about \$22,000 per year, as opposed to about \$30,000 for an individual with a high school diploma. This data set can be found in Appendix A. (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). What these statistics tell us is that individuals residing in Fairfax County who do not hold a high school diploma have higher rates of poverty than their counterparts. My assumption for this research is that a number of individuals who fall into these categories are facing homelessness today at a higher rate than others.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

It is not within the scope of this research to conduct a detailed review of contemporary homelessness, but outlined below are some summaries of the results of studies that provide some insight into contemporary research in the field of homelessness. I will begin this literature review by discussing a brief review of contemporary homelessness, followed by an analysis of the literature on educational attainment and its relationship to homelessness. I will conclude this section with a discussion of the theoretical framework behind this research, and its relationship to homelessness.

### Contemporary Homelessness

Homelessness, a dilemma with deep historical roots, is especially problematic in the postindustrial United States. The homeless are often perceived as insane, lazy, addicted individuals, and therefore responsible for their own misfortune. They have traditionally been isolated from the mainstream of American society, sequestered in ghettos, skid rows, and poor neighborhoods, as well as institutionalized in alms houses and debtors prisons (Goetz 1996).

Homelessness has traditionally been portrayed an individual issue, mainly affecting low-skilled laborers or those in the manufacturing industry who are affected the most during times of economic hardship (Wasserman et. al 2010). It had been assumed

that these types of workers chose their lifestyles voluntarily and enjoyed a life free of responsibility or social obligations. However, contemporary researchers find that homelessness is strongly related to political and economic conditions (Wasserman et. al 2010) and that personal agency plays a smaller role than once thought.

Contemporary studies of homelessness in the United States have found that contemporary homelessness has five distinctive characteristics that set it apart from homelessness in previous time periods:

1. Growth in homelessness during economic recovery, showing there is no correlation between homelessness and unemployment;
2. Decline of social networks and loss of community, where researchers claim that individuals who fall into hard times have fewer social connections to turn to;
3. A larger population of mentally ill individuals who lack appropriate psychiatric or psychological care;
4. A larger population of women and children are now homeless, but families have not displaced the single adult male as the most common demographic type
5. An increase in rural homelessness (Blau1992).

Additionally, recent studies on modern trends find that homelessness is not purely an economic disadvantage, but also a stigmatized social identity that is given meaning according to its conceptual distance from the norm. Homeless individuals are seen as somehow different from the non-homeless population, and the social separation that results is both physical and conceptual. The former consists of political, economic, and cultural practices that systematically disadvantage and disenfranchise certain groups

(Wasserman et. al 2010). Researchers argue that the stigma associated with homelessness results from the common American belief that poor people are somehow responsible for their own poverty. However, homeless population growth patterns challenge this notion because it requires believers to argue that for some reason, a sizeable group of citizens suddenly became irresponsible at the very same time (Blau 1992) – directly challenging previous schools of thought.

Currently we are moving farther away from traditional victim-blaming, and seeing homelessness as a symptom of an unhealthy society that secludes certain populations through economic marginalization, resulting in a culturally stigmatized and politically disenfranchised population (Arnold 2004). Contemporary studies on homelessness demonstrate that there are multiple causes of homelessness, which are both systemic and complex.

#### Educational Attainment in the Homeless Population

Because the causes of homelessness are not concrete or certain, it is impossible to determine that a single factor will result in an individual becoming homeless at some point. However, there are factors that can play a role in increasing one's chances of becoming homeless. The following studies illustrate various research studies on educational attainment and homelessness.

The first, a study by Burt and Cohen which sought to present descriptive data for homeless single women and women with children, and contrast it to parallel data for single homeless men through surveys conducted in soup kitchens of various unnamed US

cities. It explored many demographic characteristics such as race, age and education, as well as joblessness and mental/medical health history. The study concluded that homeless individuals have considerably less education than the average American adult and, with the exception of single homeless women, have less even than the average American below the poverty line (1989).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

	<i>Single Women (N=242)</i>	<i>Women with Children (N=268)</i>	<i>Single Men (N=1042)</i>
<b>Race</b>			
Non-white	59%	83%	52%
<b>Age</b>			
18-30	39	61	25
31-50	41	37	54
51-64	19	2	18
65+	1	0	3
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>
<b>Marital Status</b>			
Currently Married	9	18	7
Divorced/Separated	36	27	31
Widowed	5	5	5
Never Married	50	50	57
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>
<b>Education Completed</b>			
Grades 0-7	4	9	10
8-11	33	48	40
High School Graduate	42	32	31
Some Post High School	16	8	14
College Graduate	4	1	5
Some Post-College	0	2	1
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>

Note:

a. "N" refers to unweighted sample size. All percentages are based on weighted data. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Burt and Cohen, 1989

A second study, conducted by Dworksy and Piliavin sought to understand homeless recidivism by studying patterns in Alameda County, California. The authors argued that it remains uncertain whether the attributes of homeless persons are precursors, consequences, or simply correlates of initially becoming homeless. The study concluded that,

The institutional resource variables that had a significant effect included informal support from family and friends, employment, housing assistance, and participation in some government cash assistance programs. Among the individual deficit variables that were not found to have a significant effect were physical or mental health problems, substance abuse problems, and educational attainment (Dworksy and Piliavin 2000).

Finally, two studies, the first conducted by Joel Blau to discredit commonly held misconceptions about the homeless population; and the second, conducted by Kathryn Goetz and Cynthia Schmiede, found that most homeless individuals lack a high school education (1992).

### Social Capital and Homelessness

Pierre Bourdieu defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu 1985). Bahr and Caplow argued that whatever the reason behind an individual’s homelessness, the end result was disaffiliation from society. The authors identified three paths leading to



social disaffiliation: (a) external changes leaving individuals with few social supports, (b) individual estrangement from society, and (c) lifetime isolation (Bahr 1974). To possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is those others, not himself, who are the actual source of his advantage (Portes 1998). However, history suggests that homelessness increases during periods of social disorganization, such as wars, depressions, and periods of technological change (Malloy, Christ and Hohloch 1990). These are all times in which social connections become limited.

#### Theoretical Foundations of Social Capital

Alejandro Portes argues that Bourdieu's treatment of the concept of social capital is instrumental, focusing on the benefits accruing to individuals by virtue of participation in groups and on the deliberate construction of sociability for the purpose of creating this resource (1998). Furthermore, Portes states that Bourdieu's definition makes clear that social capital is decomposable into two elements: first, the social relationship itself that allows individuals to claim access to resources possessed by their associates and second, the amount and quality of those resources (1998). Portes argues that,

Bourdieu's emphasis is on the fungibility of different forms of capital and on the ultimate reduction of all forms to economic capital, defined as accumulated human labor. Hence, through social capital, actors can gain direct access to economic resources...; they can increase their cultural capital through contacts with experts or individuals of refinement...; or alternatively, they can affiliate with institutions that confer valued credentials... (1980).

Glen Loury critiqued various neoclassical theories of racial income inequality, and while he did not go on to develop the concept of social capital in any detail, he argued that orthodox economic theories were too individualistic, focusing exclusively on individual human capital and on the creation of a level playing field. Furthermore, Loury argued that minorities were constantly harmed socially and economically due to differential access to opportunities through social connections (1977).

Finding a way out of homelessness is virtually impossible for those without much social capital. For those already having limited education, skills, connections and experience, employment opportunities that pay a living wage are very limited (National Coalition for the Homeless 2009), and efforts to exit homelessness can be significantly hindered.

### Chapter 3. Methodology

The United States Census Bureau data demonstrating that in 2010, 16% of the population of Fairfax County between the ages of 18 and 24 did not have a high school diploma; along with 8.5% of the population over the age of 25. Thirteen percent of the population of Fairfax County (age 25 and older) that did not hold a high school diploma lived at or under the poverty line, as opposed to only 6.8% of the population that held a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

Additionally, the 2010 Point-in-Time Count<sup>1</sup> demonstrated that 28% of homeless individuals in Fairfax County are between the ages of 18 to 34. When compared to the U.S. Census data discussed previously, about 29% of the population of Fairfax County between the ages of 18 and 34 does not have a high school diploma (see Appendix A). We could assume that a large number of individuals who are currently homeless and between the ages of 18 and 34 do not have a high school diploma.

The Point-in-Time Count includes a variety of different categories, but excludes educational attainment:

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<sup>1</sup> The Point-in-Time Count is a tracking system developed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development in order to accurately estimate numbers of homeless individuals in any given location.

Table 2. Characteristics of Single Individuals

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Serious mental illness, substance abuse or both	391	60%
Chronic health problems	83	13%
Physical disability	54	8%
Victims of domestic abuse	45	7%
Language minority	147	23%
Homeless from an institution	132	20%
Formerly in foster care	16	2%
Veteran of U.S. military service	62	10%
Chronic homeless	242	37%
Unsheltered	140	21%
Gender: Male	484	74%
Gender: Female	168	26%
Employed	150	23%
No income or unknown	362	56%
Income from \$1 to \$500 per month	114	17%
Income from \$501 to \$1,000 per month	131	17%
Income over \$1,000 per month	45	7%
Race/ethnicity: Hispanic ( <i>any race</i> )	110	17%
White ( <i>only, non Hispanic</i> )	256	39%

Black ( <i>only, non-Hispanic</i> )	199	31%
Asian/Oher/Bi- or Multiracial/unknown	87	13%
Ages: Age 18-34	182	28%
Age 35-54	366	56%
Age 55 and over	104	16%

Total number of single individuals: 652

*Source: 2010 Point-in-Time Count of People Who Are Homeless in the Fairfax-Falls Church Community*

### Sample

The data used for this paper’s research was collected through a survey conducted in two singles’ homeless shelters located in Fairfax, Virginia. Out of all the cities and counties in Virginia, I chose this particular geographic location due to the readily available data sets and highly documented strategies to address homelessness discussed in the introduction. The sample population for this research included 100 individuals who had been self-identified as homeless by becoming residents of the selected shelters. Due to the shelters’ strict privacy policies, no recruitment tools could be used beforehand, and the residents had to be explicitly informed that the survey was voluntary and was in no way supported by the shelter. It had to be clear that non-participation would have no effect on their shelter stay.

## Survey Instruments

I designed a questionnaire to gather nominal information on educational attainment levels from the research subjects. An original copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix B. The questionnaire items assessed the highest grade that respondents completed, the name of the last school in which they were enrolled, the highest grade that they had completed, and if they had obtained a GED certificate. The surveys were designed to be accessible to all reading levels, taking into consideration any literacy concerns on behalf of participants. The questionnaires were distributed along with an informed consent form, which was read out loud to all participants to ensure their understanding and consent. Both the survey and the consent form were issued in both English and Spanish, as requested by shelter management due to the number of Spanish-only speakers in the shelter. The content of the items was relevant to educational attainment and appropriate for all participants. Respondents were asked the following four questions:

1. Did you graduate from High School?
2. What is the name of the last school you were ever a student in?
3. What is the highest grade you completed?
4. Do you have a GED?

## Data Collection

The data used in this study was collected in two singles' homeless shelters in Fairfax, Virginia in October of 2011. The shelters were chosen by the researcher because

they were the two main singles' shelters in the community. For the purposes of my research, I contacted via e-mail the directors of the two different shelters I wanted to research. After obtaining written permission from the two directors, I submitted my research proposal to the George Mason University Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). Once I was granted permission by the HSRB, I e-mailed the directors a copy of the permission letter and scheduled the surveys. A copy of the permission letter from HSRB can be found in Appendix C. In order to protect the privacy of the residents who were surveyed, I have not attached the permission letters from the respective directors to this research paper since they would disclose the name and location of the shelters that were surveyed, and this would violate the confidentiality agreement that I made with the participants.

I conducted the survey in the two shelters, "Shelter A" and "Shelter B," each housing 50 individuals in their main shelter program at a time. For the purposes of this research, only individuals who were identified as shelter residents were surveyed. I conducted the first survey on October 20, 2011 and the second survey on October 27, 2011. The dates were not chosen arbitrarily, but based on the bi-weekly shelter meetings held so that residents could address any residency issues with staff, and to receive information about new programs or shelter policies. Attending these meetings would provide a platform in which I could introduce the research project, read the informed consent form out loud, and be available to answer any questions. I placed copies of the survey and informed consent forms in resident mailboxes in order to ensure that only shelter residents would participate, and to provide an opportunity for those residents who

were not at the shelter during the meeting to participate. I left an envelope at the front desk of the shelter so that residents could turn their surveys in after completing them where I could collect them. I returned two days later (on October 22 and 29 respectively) to pick up the remaining survey results. The intended sample size was 100 homeless individuals, however only 93 subjects chose to participate in the survey.

Data from a total of three items from the original questionnaire were included in the analysis for the present study:

- Did you graduate from High School?
- What is the highest grade you completed?
- Do you have a GED?

### Limitations

The first limitation to my survey was that it excluded individuals who were homeless, but were not residents of the shelter. Both shelters that I surveyed provide food, showers and toiletries to individuals who are not residents, and non-permanent shelter for certain people who call ahead on a daily basis in “Overflow” programs. By excluding this population, I lowered the number of research subjects that would have provided responses to the survey. However, these individuals are not required to attend the shelter meetings, and have no mailbox where they could receive a copy of the survey. Individuals that use these services are often transient and may only stay in the shelter a couple of nights. I purposively chose to exclude this population from the survey to attempt to control the number of subjects from whom I would expect a response.



The second limitation is that I was unable to obtain all 100 responses I had expected and I found this problematic because I was already working with a small sample. Due to shelter turnover and residents' decision to complete the survey, there were seven people who did not turn in responses. Since I was already working with a smaller sample, it would have been beneficial to have obtained the full 100 response but a 93% return rate is still quite reasonable.

## Chapter 4. Analysis and Discussion

For the purposes of this research I divided the data into three categories:

- 1) Category 1 – Educational Attainment: whether the respondent had graduated from high school or obtained a GED certificate;
  - 2) Category 2 – Average age at drop-out: what the highest grade of completion was.
- Category 1 determines what the respondent's education attainment level is, and category 2 determines what the average drop-out grade is for the individuals who did not graduate high school.

### Results

#### *Category 1: Educational Attainment*

Upon completion of the survey, I recorded the results into the software program MiniTab in order to analyze my data. Because I am using a small categorical data set, I used a Chi-squared test to determine whether there was a relationship between the two variables: educational attainment and homelessness. The results were statistically significant at the  $p \leq .05$  level.

My null and alternative hypotheses were:

- $H_0$ : There is no relationship between educational attainment and homelessness.
- $H_1$ : Educational attainment is associated with homelessness.

The results of the survey are as follows:

Table 3. Survey Results (Educational Attainment)

	High School Diploma/GED/other	No High School Diploma/No GED	Totals
Shelter A	18	26	44
Shelter B	15	34	49

I used MiniTab to calculate the degrees of freedom and P-value:

Table 4. Chi-squared Test

	High School Diploma/GED	No High School Diploma/No GED	Totals
Shelter A	18 15.61 0.365	26 28 0.201	44
Shelter B	15 17.39 0.328	34 31.61 0.180	49

Chi-Sq = 1.074, DF = 1, P-Value = 0.300

*Category 2: Average grade at dropout*

In order to analyze this data I created a spreadsheet and calculated the mean of the data collected. The results of are as follows:

Table 5. Survey Results (Average grade at drop-out)

	Average grade at drop-out
Shelter A	11 <sup>th</sup>
Shelter B	11 <sup>th</sup>

Data Analysis

*Category 1*

Because the significance test failed to meet the  $p \leq .05$  criterion, the survey failed to reject the null hypothesis: “ $H_0$ : There is no relationship between educational attainment and homelessness.” However, what was significant was that percentage-wise, 50% of the residents of Shelter A, and 60% of the residents of Shelter B, did not have a high school diploma. While the data did not demonstrate a statistically significant relationship, the numbers of homeless individuals in the shelter is still very high and speaks to challenges posed by lack of educational attainment among the homeless in Fairfax County.

Category 2

The data demonstrated that the average grade at dropout of both shelters was 11<sup>th</sup> grade:

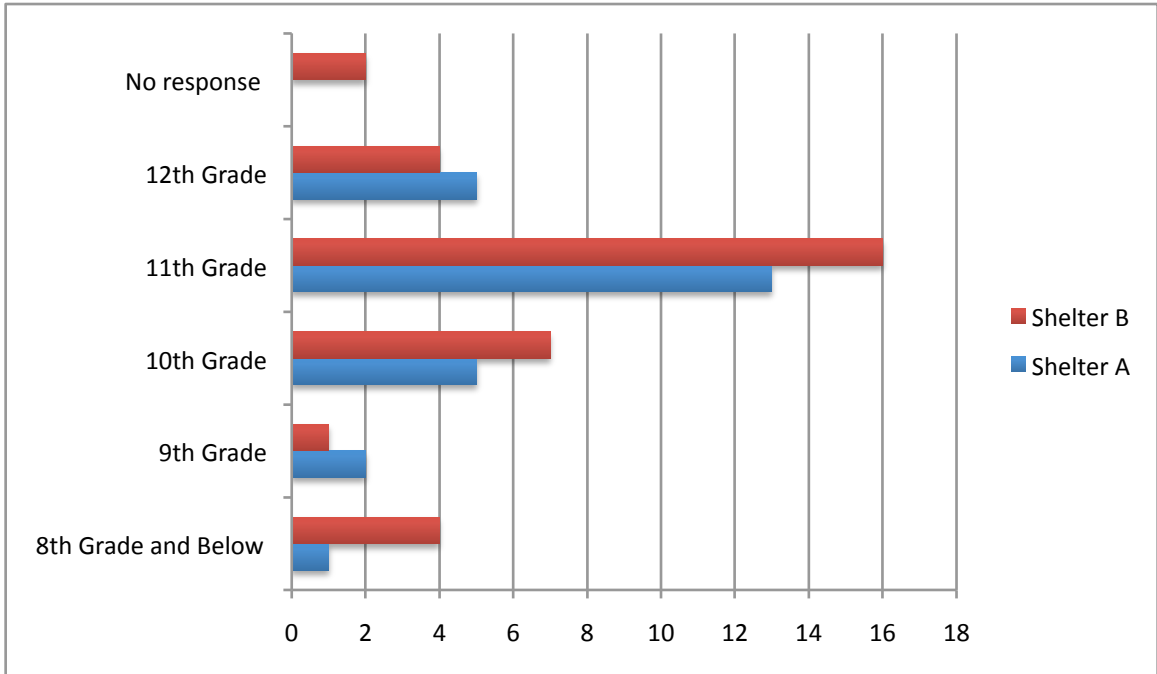


Figure 1. Data results (Category 2)

These results were significant because they showed a range in responses to the question of average grade at drop-out. While the average grade was 11<sup>th</sup>, there were a number of individuals with educational attainment lower than that. Five people listed educational attainment at 8<sup>th</sup> grade or below. This raises serious concerns about their literacy levels and their ability to participate in a competitive job market. Not having

reached or completed high school poses a serious economic and social disadvantage for these individuals.

## Discussion

Homelessness has been studied extensively within the social sciences in hopes of understanding its causes and the experiences of those who are homeless. Examining the contributing factors that increase one's likelihood of falling into homelessness is important to develop preventative tools and to help those in our community who are already homeless.

This research shows that there is an important link between educational attainment and homelessness in light of the high percentage of high school dropouts in the shelter system. While educational attainment is certainly not a cause of homelessness, this data shows that individuals with lower levels of educational attainment find themselves in homelessness at a higher percentage than those with high school diplomas or above.

## Chapter 5. Conclusions

Lack of formal education is a barrier for homeless individuals because it places them at an economic disadvantage. This research did not set out to establish that lack of educational attainment causes homelessness, but that it plays a role in a person's likelihood of becoming homeless under the right circumstances. Educational attainment can provide a security net and without it, people facing homelessness may find their options limited.

Because education is a type of social capital, people with advanced degrees or higher levels of educational attainment are at an advantage. They have skill sets that set them apart from others, and if they fall in hard times, they have more resources available to get back on their feet. These resources include individuals who can provide them with leads, recommendations, or perhaps even a job, influencing their financial attainment and stability.

Getting out of homelessness is difficult for anyone in that situation. However, we are currently facing a struggling economy and high unemployment where it is difficult for the average individual to secure a decent source of income. The job market is tougher and more demanding, knowing that there is a large pool of highly qualified applicants collectively struggling to find work. Individuals with lower levels of educational attainment cannot easily compete with others who possess skill sets and educational

degrees that they do not. Without the necessary tools, it is tougher for them to compete against younger and more qualified individuals.

This research sought to demonstrate that there is a link between educational attainment and homelessness, considering educational attainment an important source of social capital. The surveys completed demonstrated a high percentage of individuals in homelessness with low levels of educational attainment. While a significant relationship could not be established based on the data collected, the percentages obtained demonstrated an important measure.

As Fairfax County addresses the needs of its homeless population, it is important that policy makers keep in mind the limitations of these individuals and that they provide the most holistic approach possible when providing solutions and resources. After all, homelessness cannot be solved simply by providing people with a roof over their heads. It can only be solved when a society acknowledges the disadvantages their most vulnerable members face, and provide holistic services targeting all aspects of their homelessness.



## Appendix A

Subject	Fairfax County, Virginia					
	Total		Male		Female	
	Estimate	Margin of Error	Estimate	Margin of Error	Estimate	Margin of Error
Population 18 to 24 years	82,974	+/-238	43,074	+/-135	39,900	+/-157
Less than high school graduate	16.5%	+/-2.6	18.8%	+/-3.6	14.0%	+/-3.3
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	26.3%	+/-3.5	27.3%	+/-4.3	25.3%	+/-4.9
Some college or associate's degree	38.7%	+/-3.7	39.2%	+/-4.8	38.0%	+/-5.6
Bachelor's degree or higher	18.6%	+/-2.6	14.7%	+/-4.0	22.7%	+/-3.2
Population 25 years and over	740,461	+/-353	358,649	+/-289	381,812	+/-318
Less than 9th grade	4.6%	+/-0.6	4.5%	+/-0.8	4.6%	+/-0.6
9th to 12th grade, no diploma	3.9%	+/-0.4	4.2%	+/-0.6	3.6%	+/-0.5
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	14.7%	+/-0.8	14.1%	+/-0.9	15.3%	+/-1.1
Some college, no degree	15.4%	+/-0.8	14.1%	+/-1.1	16.6%	+/-1.0
Associate's degree	5.3%	+/-0.5	4.1%	+/-0.6	6.5%	+/-0.7
Bachelor's degree	29.3%	+/-1.0	28.0%	+/-1.2	30.6%	+/-1.3
Graduate or professional degree	26.8%	+/-1.0	31.1%	+/-1.2	22.8%	+/-1.2
Percent high school graduate or higher	91.6%	+/-0.6	91.3%	+/-0.9	91.8%	+/-0.6
Percent bachelor's degree or higher	56.1%	+/-1.1	59.1%	+/-1.3	53.4%	+/-1.3
Population 25 to 34 years	159,902	+/-392	79,606	+/-259	80,296	+/-268
High school graduate or higher	91.8%	+/-1.4	90.0%	+/-2.1	93.7%	+/-1.8
Bachelor's degree or higher	51.8%	+/-2.4	46.8%	+/-3.2	56.8%	+/-2.9

Fairfax County, Virginia

Subject	Total		Male		Female	
	Estimate	Margin of Error	Estimate	Margin of Error	Estimate	Margin of Error
Population 35 to 44 years	165,241	+/-474	81,063	+/-264	84,178	+/-280
High school graduate or higher	91.6%	+/-1.3	90.7%	+/-1.7	92.4%	+/-1.6
Bachelor's degree or higher	61.1%	+/-2.3	61.1%	+/-2.6	61.1%	+/-3.2
Population 45 to 64 years	307,723	+/-343	149,361	+/-276	158,362	+/-222
High school graduate or higher	92.5%	+/-0.9	92.4%	+/-1.2	92.7%	+/-1.0
Bachelor's degree or higher	59.5%	+/-1.5	63.6%	+/-2.0	55.5%	+/-1.9
Population 65 years and over	107,595	+/-241	48,619	+/-181	58,976	+/-189
High school graduate or higher	88.5%	+/-1.4	91.6%	+/-2.1	86.1%	+/-2.1
Bachelor's degree or higher	45.5%	+/-2.0	61.8%	+/-3.0	32.0%	+/-2.7
<p>POVERTY RATE FOR THE POPULATION 25 YEARS AND OVER FOR WHOM POVERTY STATUS IS DETERMINED BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT LEVEL</p>						
Less than high school graduate	13.0%	+/-3.6	11.4%	+/-3.9	14.6%	+/-4.5
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	6.8%	+/-1.7	6.4%	+/-2.2	7.0%	+/-2.4
Some college or associate's degree	5.2%	+/-0.9	4.1%	+/-1.2	6.0%	+/-1.3
Bachelor's degree or higher	2.4%	+/-0.5	1.6%	+/-0.5	3.2%	+/-0.7
<p>MEDIAN EARNINGS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS (IN 2010 INFLATION-ADJUSTED DOLLARS)</p>						
Population 25 years and over with earnings	56,939	+/-1,781	70,363	+/-1,618	47,053	+/-2,119
Less than high school graduate	22,032	+/-1,521	25,562	+/-3,120	19,498	+/-1,738
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	30,345	+/-1,347	34,167	+/-4,421	25,810	+/-2,444
Some college or associate's degree	41,028	+/-1,390	46,579	+/-2,238	35,250	+/-2,630
Bachelor's degree	70,473	+/-2,144	85,184	+/-4,873	56,637	+/-2,969

Fairfax County, Virginia

Subject	Total		Male		Female	
	Estimate	Margin of Error	Estimate	Margin of Error	Estimate	Margin of Error
Graduate or professional degree	100,555	+/-1,095	117,103	+/-6,027	78,890	+/-4,257

PERCENT IMPUTED

Educational attainment	4.4%	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
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*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey*

## Appendix B

Survey Instructions: Please answer the following questions. Please be informed that this survey is optional (so you can choose to not complete it), and that not completing it will have no effect on your shelter stay.

1. Did you graduate from High School? (Circle one)

YES

NO

2. What is the name of the last school you were ever a student in? (Please write)

Name of school: \_\_\_\_\_

Year: \_\_\_\_\_ (for example: 1985)

3. What is the highest graded you completed? (Please circle)

1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> 9<sup>th</sup> 10<sup>th</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> 12<sup>th</sup>

4. Do you have a GED\*? (Please circle)

YES

NO

\*The GED is a high school equivalency exam administered to people who did not graduate from high school but who want a certificate indicating that they have met most of the academic requirements of a high school education.

## Appendix C



Office of Research Subject Protections

Research 1 Building  
4400 University Drive, MS 4C6, Fairfax, Virginia 22030  
Phone: 703-993-4121; Fax: 703-993-9590

TO: John Dale, Sociology & Anthropology  
FROM: Keith R. Bushey *KRB*  
Chief of Staff, Office of Research

PROTOCOL NO.: 7726

PROPOSAL NO.: N/A

TITLE: Educational Attainment and Homelessness

DATE: October 14, 2011

Cc: Flavia Giovanna Sanchez-Guerra

Under George Mason University (GMU) procedures, this project was determined to be exempt by the Office of Research Subject Protections since it falls under DHHS Exempt Category 2, research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior.

You may proceed with data collection. **Please note that all modifications in your protocol must be submitted to the Office of Research Subject Protections for review and approval prior to implementation.** Any unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others, including problems regarding data confidentiality must be reported to the GMU Office of Research Subject Protections.

GMU is bound by the ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects in research contained in The Belmont Report. Even though your data collection procedures are exempt from review by the GMU HSRB, GMU expects you to conduct your research according to the professional standards in your discipline and the ethical guidelines mandated by federal regulations.

Thank you for cooperating with the University by submitting this protocol for review. Please call me at 703/993-3088 if you have any questions.

## Appendix D

Expected counts are printed below observed counts

Chi-Square Test: High School Diploma/GED, No High School Diploma/No GED

Chi-Square contributions are printed below expected counts

	No High School		
	High School Diploma/GED	Diploma/No GED	Total
1	18	26	44
	15.61	28.39	
	0.365	0.201	
2	15	34	49
	17.39	31.61	
	0.328	0.180	
Total	33	60	93

Chi-Sq = 1.074, DF = 1, P-Value = 0.300

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## Curriculum Vitae

Flavia Sánchez-Guerra was born in Mexico City, Mexico. She received a Bachelor of Science in Sociology from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, in 2007. She worked for homeless services in Fairfax County, Virginia, from 2008 to 2011, and she currently continues pursuing her work in social justice through another Virginia-based organization.