

Stewart K. McCroskey Memorial Fund
Social Capital: Processes and Effects in Knox County, TN
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Overview

The McCroskey Memorial Fund will allow me to travel to various low-income apartment communities and conduct research interviews during the summer of 2014. I will travel to these sites to conduct interviews and focus groups with residents and management as well as field reconnaissance to document the built environment of these communities. I want to examine the ways in which residents utilize social capital available in these communities and how the built environment plays into the development of social relationships. Previous research is divided on whether social capital functions primarily as a mechanism to move people up the social ladder and into better residential and financial circumstances or as a source of stagnation; this research ultimately seeks to determine which of these is more prominent in low-income communities in Knoxville.

Problem

Social capital is defined as the use of social substitutes for resources that usually must be purchased. Social capital can be an impetus for upward residential or social mobility or a source of friction that can lead to stagnation. The concept of social capital as applied in a variety of disciplines has become an increasingly prevalent talking point in discussions about housing, neighborhoods, and socio-economic mobility. Social capital is often considered as a valuable resource with a potential to lift the urban poor out of poverty, putting them into more equitable housing situations. In low-income communities, however, social capital has the potential to suppress mobility as the quality of such social relationships is affected by fault lines of society such as racism, gender disparity, and the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth in the United States. Similarly, the limited self-efficacy of the chronically poor restricts the utility of social capital and the ability of low-income residents to exert control over their lives.

Research Objectives

This research seeks to use the framework of social capital to evaluate how low-income apartment residents use their social capital resources as a substitute for resources that would otherwise be purchased. I hope to assess the contribution of built environment, such as the presence of public spaces, porches, and sidewalks, on the development of social capital. By conducting a case study with three low-income developments in the Greater Knoxville metropolitan area, I will examine if social capital functions primarily as a mechanism for upward mobility or as a source of friction in these communities.

Research Locations

This case study will be conducted at three different low-income apartment communities in and around Knoxville. All three locations have a large African-American population and are located on the fringes of the city away from most public services and job opportunities. Each community is populated by residents whose rents are largely provided by government programs such as the Housing Choice Voucher Program and the Section 8 program funded by Housing and Urban Development and administered by the Tennessee Housing Development Agency. The projected

study areas were chosen because they are away from public transportation systems and other social resources, necessitating the development of social capital for residents to get by. My previous work as an apartment manager at these properties has allowed me to develop a rapport with many residents, alleviating the concerns of obtaining access and finding participants. These study areas are as follows:

Flenniken Square Apartments located at 500 Flennwood Way 37920 in Knoxville, TN

Kensington Forest Apartments located at 404 Tammy Dr. 37849 in Powell, TN

Belle Meade Apartments located at 7209 Old Clinton Pike 37921 in Knoxville, TN

Fieldwork Plans

Observation:

I will spend time at the communities observing interactions among residents as well as documenting the built environment and how the presence of sidewalks, porch spaces, and other public spaces may affect the development of social capital. This stage of the project will also provide insight into potential interview questions and allow for the identification of potential participants in the study. I will use random and snowball sampling to recruit research participants. I hope to recruit five respondents from each community for a total of fifteen semi-structured interviews. I will also recruit participants for three focus groups in each community; each group may have about 7-10 participants. Thus, I expect to engage with 45 participants through semi-structured interviews and focus groups in the three communities.

Interviews

I will involve participants in semi-structured interviews lasting 45 minutes to an hour. Potential lines of questions include: how do the residents use their neighbors to acquire resources/time that would otherwise be purchased? How do the residents make choices about their housing based on the prevalence of social capital in a community? How do the residents utilize their built environments to meet neighbors and establish/maintain social relationships? Finally, I will also assess their perception of the existing social capital in community strengthening and socio-economic mobility of the occupants. Once these questions are discussed, the content of the participants' responses will be utilized to further develop questions to clarify or expand upon other issues that might arise during the interviews. The confidentiality of participants will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms as established by IRB guidelines. I am currently working with my advisor Dr. Sharma to complete the IRB forms to enable fieldwork over the summer.

Focus Groups

In addition to one-on-one interviews, I will also conduct three focus groups along the themes outlined above. These focus groups will provide insights and additional perspectives that may not be revealed through personal interviews. As my research focuses on community engagement, bringing residents together to talk about issues of social capital will allow for further insight into the intricacies of my research questions.

Use of Funds

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|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Fuel | |
| Flenniken Square approximately \$1.60 x 5 | \$8.00 |
| Kensington Forest approximately \$2.16 x 5 | \$10.80 |
| Belle Meade approximately \$1.71 x 5 | \$8.55 |
| Participation Incentives | |
| Gift card for interview participants \$20.00 x 15 | \$300 |
| Focus Groups | |
| Refreshments for participants \$40.00 x 3 focus groups [10-15 members/group] | \$120 |
| Other materials (pens, paper, whiteboards, markers, etc.) | \$30 |
| Total | \$477.35 |

I request an amount of \$477.35 from the McCroskey Funds to enable the completion of my Masters thesis project.

Thanks for your consideration,
Davis Hodges