

Opportunity, Perception, and Privilege: Community Resources and Upward Mobility  
as Perceived by Spryfield Youth

By

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**Abstract**

This research aims to understand the relationship between youth access to community resources in Spryfield and Spryfield youth's perception of their chances of attaining upward socioeconomic mobility. The main research question I investigate is: how do Spryfield youth perceive the availability of community resources as contributors to their potential upward mobility? I also explore questions such as: what community resources are available to Spryfield youth? How do youth of different genders and ages perceive the availability of community resources in Spryfield? I use Pierre Bourdieu's forms of capital and neighbourhood effect theory to assess the Moving to Opportunity experiment as it relates to Spryfield youth. Primary data from a focus group formed through convenience sampling is compared to results from the Moving to Opportunity study. From the focus group, three themes are developed: 1) neighbourhood effects on Spryfield youth, 2) Spryfield lacks community resources that specifically focus on mental and physical health, and 3) the results coming out of Pathways to Education Spryfield challenge the MTO experiment. This thesis argues that disadvantages in attaining upward mobility are more effectively challenged when community resources for youth are implemented within their communities and when neighbourhood effects are addressed. The findings in this research suggest that community resource implementation within socioeconomically disadvantaged communities may prevent gendered differences in impact from occurring, as was the case in the Moving to Opportunity experiment.

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## Introduction

This research aims to understand the relationship between youth access to community resources in Spryfield and Spryfield youth's perceptions of their own chances of attaining upward socioeconomic mobility. The main research question that I am investigating is: how do Spryfield youth perceive the availability of community resources as contributors to their potential upward mobility? Simultaneously, I explore questions such as: what community resources are available to Spryfield youth? How do youth of different genders and ages perceive current community resources in Spryfield? As interest in neighbourhood effect theory grows, case studies in this area work toward expanding and solidifying the field's understanding of how certain neighbourhoods affect the youth that live there. As will be discussed, the Moving to Opportunity experiment remains a foundational part of the literature around neighbourhood effect theory, and as such, this research aims to assess Moving to Opportunity as it pertains to youth in Spryfield. Primary assumptions surrounding the Moving to Opportunity will be compared to the results of the present research.

There are five sections in this thesis. In the first and present chapter, I introduce my research and provide a guideline for the next sections. In the second section, I review the literature on socioeconomic status and neighbourhood effects to identify the gap that exists in the current scholarship. Finishing this section, I outline how the existing literature guides the present research in relation to the theoretical framework that is followed during analysis. In the third section, I discuss my methods and why I chose to employ the focus group method in consideration of both its positive aspects and negatives. I open the fourth section by investigating what it means for a neighbourhood to

be socioeconomically disadvantaged and provide background as to why the community of Spryfield fits this category. After this, I introduce my participants and discuss the results of the focus group before heading into the discussion. In the discussion, I outline three major themes that were produced by the focus group and explain how they fit into the foundational literature discussed in the second section both in support of existing findings, and in consideration of new findings.

Drawing on existing literature and the data collected through the focus group for this study, I argue that disadvantages in attaining upward mobility are more effectively challenged when community resources for youth are implemented within their communities and when neighbourhood effects are addressed. This is shown through the successful implementation of a community resource in Spryfield that fosters socioeconomic development in addition to providing support for youth as they face challenges obtaining economic, social, and cultural capital. Other findings in this study include the presence of neighbourhood effects in Spryfield, and the absence of community resources that encourage mental and physical health.

### **Literature review**

This section reviews the scholarship on socioeconomic status and neighbourhood effects and identifies the gap in this literature that the present research seeks to address. I discuss Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of economic, cultural, and social capital before applying them to literature surrounding privilege and class status. I review existing memoirs relating to capital to provide readers with a better understanding of how class, and where one grows up, have affected people historically. After reviewing the literature, I outline how the existing literature relating to capital guides the present research in

relation to neighbourhood effect theory and assessing the Moving to Opportunity experiment. Bourdieu's forms of capital and the theory of neighbourhood effects work together to create the framework that is used for analysis in this thesis.

The research surrounding the effectiveness of community resources in fostering socioeconomic mobility is an active field in sociology. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) states that for us to understand the social world, we must understand the three types of capital that create power and privilege: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital is money or investments but can also be institutionalized in the form of property rights. Cultural capital comprises the manners, understandings, or habits that represent wealth when transformed into economic capital and can be institutionalized in the form of education. Social capital (or, people's social networks) is the social connections that can give someone access to economic capital and is institutionalized in titles of nobility, such as Doctor, or Sir (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu (1986) maintains that economic capital is at the root of both cultural and social capital. Bourdieu's concepts of economic, cultural and social capital are important because they show how money, habits, and social networks contribute to how power is created, maintained, and reproduced. Bourdieu claims that the habits of those with high economic capital create a status-quo for how wealthy people are supposed to act and dress. Those with high economic capital are also considered to have wide social networks, which creates another standard that describes wealth. As people strive to be considered as upper class, these attributes are reproduced and come to represent someone of high socioeconomic status, and the opposite represents people of low socioeconomic status. Complications arise when those who traditionally do not have power find it in a

specific form of capital while lacking in others. As Bourdieu (1986) says, it is possible for someone to have high capital in one area, and low capital in another. These complications are shown through the narratives of Dalton Conley, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Matthew Desmond and show how those who attempt to transform certain types of capital into others, most often social and cultural capital into economic capital, struggle in doing so without societal privilege.

Dalton Conley, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Matthew Desmond show how attaining cultural or social capital does not guarantee the acquisition of economic capital, and how oftentimes, youth are forced to give up their old lives in order to meet the criteria of upper class-hood, should they grasp it. Conley (2000) writes his memoir, *Honky*, detailing his childhood growing up in the Projects as a White young boy. He recounts recognizing that there was a difference between he and his neighbours, who were mostly Black and Hispanic, as a young boy, but is unable to put this difference into words until his adulthood: he holds racial privilege. Throughout the book, Conley (2000) references specific instances where he can recognize his racial privilege, such as: his mother being able to pick whether he was in the “Black class” or the “Chinese class” (Conley, 2000, pg. 43), whereas other children were assigned immediately based on race. Conley also cites social capital that allowed relatively well-off parents in low-income areas to change their children’s addresses for school that allowed them to attend schools outside of the housing projects. Despite having low economic capital, Conley (2002)’s parents are able to use the societal privilege engrained in whiteness to secure a future for Conley that does not include remaining poor. Conley (2002) shows through his memoir that even though every kid in the Projects faces class-based disadvantage (a loss of



opportunity due to economic status), race allowed Conley (2002) to access social capital that Black and Hispanic youth could not. As such, race allows certain youth to move upward socioeconomically more easily, while racialized youth do not have this privilege.

Underlying Conley (2002)'s discussion is the notion that every child in the Projects is at an inherent disadvantage in society. Despite having race-based power, Conley (2002) still faces discrimination based on where he lives and saw how this discrimination presented itself through the conditions of the public-housing units, as well as the community schools. Children in the Projects are often deprived of class-based opportunity. Class-based opportunity is the idea that with high economic capital comes privilege. Youth from families that have high economic capital are more easily able to access cultural capital in the form of education, and social capital through the pre-existing relationships held by their parents.

This same disadvantage due to class-based opportunity is shown by Dunbar Ortiz (2010), who recounts, in *On Being Okie*, her experience growing up in rural Oklahoma and how being "Okie" came with stereotypes of low income, poor education, and little power. Dunbar-Ortiz marries a middle-class man, changes her accent to shield her rural Oklahoman roots, and desires to achieve education beyond what other members of her family had achieved. Like Conley (2002)'s Black and Hispanic peers, Dunbar-Ortiz faces a lack of societal privilege due to her Okie heritage. Even after acquiring economic capital through marriage, Dunbar-Ortiz remains disadvantaged due to where she comes from; her husband's family never sees her as equal, and she is unable to attain post-secondary education due to her husband telling her she must stay home. Though her societal place as a woman adds to the overall disadvantage she faces, like how race adds

to the disadvantage of Conley (2002)'s peers, the overall theme of Dunbar-Ortiz (2002) is that Okie's lack in class-based opportunity despite any acquisition of cultural and social capital simply because of where they come from.

In *Evicted*, Desmond (2016) describes his experience of growing up poor in a trailer park, much like Conley (2002) in the Projects, Desmond (2016) is assumed to be of low economic capital because of where he calls home. Desmond (2016) highlights the economic value of owning a home, describing it as the pillar of personhood, by following the stories of multiple families and their struggles in often choosing between clothes for their children, or a place to sleep. Without a home, or a permanent address, people are viewed as less human and are unable to access necessities, such as welfare cheques, which restricts them from stable livelihoods, let alone from accessing upward mobility.

By telling the stories of impoverished families in the United States, Desmond (2016) highlights how poverty stymies upward mobility, regardless of race and gender, and that poverty is often associated with certain areas of towns and cities and the people who live there. In comparison to Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), Desmond (2016) shows what happens when cultural capital can be attained through economic capital (which Dunbar-Ortiz could not do), but he also shows how this includes a loss of previously held social support. For Desmond (2016) to truly be of high socioeconomic status, it was assumed that he had to leave his identity as a poor youth behind. Like Conley (2002), Desmond (2016) finds power in his race-based privilege and wins a scholarship to attend university. By successfully turning his cultural capital (in the form of education) into economic capital, Desmond (2016)'s entire life changes as the people he used to call neighbours

begin to see him as an outsider due to his new connections to people with much higher socioeconomic status.

This change in social capital is not in Desmond (2016)'s control and is explained by Briggs (1998), showing that socioeconomic status has geographic considerations. Briggs (1998) investigates the effectiveness of a housing mobility program in Yonkers, New York that was implemented by the city. Briggs (1998) calls those who participated in the housing mobility program "movers" and found that they were isolated from social support in a different way than those who stayed in their communities, referred to as "stayers" (Briggs, 1998). He identifies two different forms of social capital, expanding on the thoughts of Bourdieu: 1) social leverage, referring to social capital that helps one get ahead through networks and resources, and 2) social support, referring to social capital that helps one get by, such as receiving financial assistance from a neighbour when rent is due and one cannot afford it (Briggs, 1998). According to Briggs (1998), social capital depends on social connectedness.

The stories told by Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010) and Desmond (2016) show that despite their differences, whether it be in terms of race or gender, there is an underlying part of their lives that is common: they all grew up in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Each of the authors are forced to either embrace who they grew up as, or to forget the cultural and social capital that they held while being in poor neighbourhoods and to adapt to the expectations of cultural and social capital associated with high economic capital. In all three cases, we see how the authors developed into positions where they were able to tell their stories for what they are and show how they did not develop despite where they came from, but largely because of where they came

from. Each author shows readers how acquiring one form of capital does not guarantee that another can be produced from it, and how where one comes from creates barriers in how others think of them and what they are capable of. Conley (2002) and Desmond (2016) possess a clear advantage over Dunbar-Ortiz (2010) in their memories, which is that they are both able to access education.

The relationship between education and upward mobility is explored in depth by Kennedy & Power (2010), who research the relationship between the forms of capital and education by interviewing eight adults in the Republic of Ireland. They find an underlying sense of individual accomplishment between each participant that both held high socioeconomic status and attended private school. In other words, most high-status participants believed that they succeeded without getting help from others. Despite this belief, Kennedy & Power (2010) determine that the relationships that private school youth make with prestigious alumni and teachers provides them with social capital that results in employment opportunities that public school youth are excluded from. Kennedy & Power (2010) conclude that attending private school in Ireland immediately puts certain youth in a more socially, and culturally, advantageous position than those who attended public school because they have higher amounts of each economic, cultural, and social capital and not just a concentration of one or two.

The literature discussed thus far creates a picture that socioeconomic mobility is in the hands of each individual and the families they grow up in. Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010) and Desmond (2016) all attempt, and in some cases succeed, to obtain economic capital by acquiring cultural and/or social capital, but they do not discuss the ways in which their communities could have made increased socioeconomic status more

attainable for them and their peers. Additionally, Kennedy & Power (2010) fail to account for mediating factors that could allow social capital to be attained in the absence of high economic capital, focusing only on differences between groups of youth in terms of upward mobility. A common feature of communities that is overlooked in each of the pieces that have been reviewed is community resources: programs or services that are available to community members for little to no cost.

The present research seeks to investigate this gap in the literature and whether socioeconomic mobility can be achieved by implementing community resources in communities with large populations of people who experience low economic capital, and whether community resources can mediate disadvantage caused by where youth live regardless of gender. Continuing, this section will discuss what community resources are and why they could be helpful, and close with a discussion on neighbourhood effect theory as it relates to capital and upward mobility both in the reviewed literature, the Moving to Opportunity experiment, and the present research.

**Community resources.** Community resources are low cost services or programs that are accessible to most of the people in the communities they operate in. In the present research, I investigate the effectiveness of community resources as a tool to help socioeconomically disadvantaged youth gain cultural and social capital in the absence of economic capital. As Kennedy & Power (2010) explain, youth whose parents cannot afford certain luxuries, such as private school, are automatically hindered in the cultural and social capital they can attain. Bourdieu (1992) explains how having wealthy parents exposes youth to habits and relationships that symbolize high forms of capital, showing how the level of capital parents hold can cause immediate advantage, or disadvantage, in

their children. It is the youth who grew up without wealth that the present research focuses on.

Community resources may be places for people to learn interview skills or do their homework, both of which instill capital in different forms: social capital comes from being able to speak and perform orally to influential actors in society, whether it be an elevator pitch to a hiring manager for a prestigious company, or introducing oneself to an employee of a university that can act as a reference for future applications. By preparing for interviews, individuals expect to and are ready to interact with people in these direct positions of power. Community resources may also take the form of affordable daycare, allowing parents to venture back into the labour market instead of staying home with children. Despite all of these possibilities, Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), Desmond (2016), and Kennedy & Power (2010) do not consider the possibility of community resources aiding socioeconomically disadvantaged youth.

The literature discussed so far shows that there is an overarching disadvantage in where socioeconomically disadvantaged youth grow up. Capital becomes concentrated in the hands of those who can reproduce it, as shown through the work of Bourdieu and Kennedy & Power (2010), and wealth is associated with the things these people do, and where they live. As a result, people with low capital come to represent the things they do and the areas in which they live as non-wealthy. Nicolas Buck (2001) explores the relationship between capital level and neighbourhoods in his piece *Identifying Neighbourhood Effects on Social Exclusion* and identifies the theory of neighbourhood effects. This theory, alongside Bourdieu's forms of capital, form the lens in which the effectiveness of available community resources is analyzed in this thesis.

**Neighbourhood effect theory.** Buck (2001) investigates the way that life chances are affected by the neighbourhood one grows up in, as we saw in the lives of Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), and Desmond (2016). He writes:

The critical question here is whether inequalities are essentially compositional, with individuals' well-being depending on their (or their family's) characteristics rather than their location, or whether a concentration of (some or all) disadvantaged groups in particular areas gives rise to externalities with an additional effect on opportunities, behaviour, and the well-being of (some or all of) the local population (Buck, 2001, p.2252).

Neighbourhood effect theory recognizes that the social constructs of race and gender have created advantage and disadvantage in society. However, the theory claims that regardless of differences in race and gender present in any neighbourhood, the level of socioeconomic status that is associated and present among residents of that neighbourhood will create neighbourhood effects regardless of whether the population is aware of their existence. Neighbourhood effect theory focuses on the life chances given to individuals based on where they come from and whether one's life chances would be better or worse if they lived in another neighbourhood.

Conley (2002) shows the association between high capital neighbourhoods and socioeconomic success by explaining how families with friends in wealthier neighbourhoods would change the addresses of their children's school files so they could attend schools in that area. It is assumed, then, that schools in wealthier neighbourhoods provide better life chances and opportunity than schools in poorer neighbourhoods.

Dunbar-Ortiz (2010) and Desmond (2016) outline the challenges they face in trying to gain capital while being associated with a low-income area, and the way their lives had to change structurally to represent high capital in socioeconomically prosperous areas. As such, a standard becomes associated with the lives of those who live in neighbourhoods

associated with high capital and socioeconomic status, and the reverse for those who live in neighbourhoods with low capital and socioeconomic status. This is identical to the creation, maintenance, and reproduction of high capital as described by Bourdieu (1986).

When trying to understand neighbourhood effects and how they influence an individual's chances of acquiring capital, Buck (2001) presents six different models that can fall under the theory of neighbourhood effects. These models are: the epidemic model, the collective socialism model, the competition model, the network model, the expectation model, and the insecurity model. While Buck (2001) highlights the importance of understanding these models individually, the most important part of them in the present research is knowing that they often work together and showcase how important it is to the theory of neighbourhood effects to understand that individuals experience these effects differently. As such, any solution that works to combat neighbourhood effects must be fluid enough to accommodate the many ways that lives are influenced by neighbourhood effects. Consider that Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), and Desmond (2016) all grew up in very similar circumstances, but take different routes to get out of socioeconomic disadvantage; Conley (2002) uses his parent's social capital, Dunbar-Ortiz (2010) removes Okie from her identity, and Desmond (2016) gains economic capital in the form of scholarships before being able to escape poverty. All three of these memoirs experience neighbourhood effects but challenge their impact in very different ways.

Buck (2001) then identifies three types of social influence: endogenous effects, contextual effects, and correlated effects. Buck (2001) argues that correlated effects cause members of the same group to behave similarly, supporting Bourdieu (1984)'s notion that



people with high economic, cultural, and social capital create a standard behaviour to represent wealth to those around them by all acting similarly. This also causes associations with types of people and the places in which they can be found as shown by Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), and Desmond (2016). Groups of wealthy, upper class individuals come to form the basis for socially desirable neighbourhoods, meanwhile groups of socioeconomically disadvantaged persons form the basis for socially undesirable neighbourhoods. The former peaks interest for those seeking influential opportunity, while the other pushes interest away.

Understanding how capital and neighbourhood effects together help to explain the shared experiences of Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), and Desmond (2016) allows us to see why their stories speak to not only their journeys, but also the lives of the youth that they grew up with. In each case, these memoirs include youth who are left behind to reproduce notions associated with low capital and socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), and Desmond (2016) show us that in their cases, moving to better neighbourhoods influenced the amount of economic, cultural, and social capital that they could obtain. The idea of neighbourhood-associated success is one that has been investigated through the Moving to Opportunity experiment, where youth like Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), and Desmond (2016) are investigated.

**Moving to opportunity.** The purpose of the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment is to investigate whether moving youth from high poverty neighbourhoods to low poverty neighbourhoods is effective in creating upward mobility, and in protecting against the social ills often identified in the poorest neighbourhoods (criminal activity,

drug use, or dropping out of school are some that are mentioned throughout experiment) (Leventhal, & Dupere, 2011). MTO researchers randomly selected winners from a list of families waiting for social assistance, giving them a housing voucher and enabling them to move out of the high poverty area, while those in the control group are those that remain on the list and face no intervention from the MTO researchers (Leventhal & Dupere, 2011).

There is a stark difference between the short-term effects of MTO and the long-term effects (Katz, Kling and Liebman 2001; Ludwig, et al. 2013). In the short-term, Katz, Kling, & Liebman (2001) found the following:

...Children who grow up in poor neighbourhoods fare substantially worse on a wide variety of outcomes than those who grow up with more affluent neighbours even in studies that include detailed controls for family income and background characteristics. Many analysts conclude from such findings that residential location greatly affects access to opportunity through peer influences on youth behaviour and through a variety of neighborhood characteristics correlated with neighbourhood wealth – such as school quality and safety from crime (Katz et al., 2001, pg. 608).

These early assumptions are central to MTO and the development of neighbourhood effect theory. This statement suggests that all children in poor neighbourhoods face disadvantage relative to those who grow up in wealthier neighbourhoods, meaning that there is something that stops them other than race and gender, as argued by neighbourhood effect theory. Katz et. al. (2001) say that the geographical location of neighbourhoods may create challenges, or benefits, in accumulating social capital through the presence of peer influences, adult guidance, or, the present focus of community resources.

Though neighbourhood effects are present regardless of race and gender, it has been found that there is a gendered difference in how well assimilation to low poverty

communities takes place. Short-term findings suggest that behavioral problems in boys increase when moving boys outside of a high poverty area to a low poverty area.

Suggestions for why this is the case rely on the assumption that since many boys in high poverty areas are raised by single mothers, the presence of male supporters through community resources is a key component in preventing problem behavior from accumulating. In low poverty areas, there is a decrease in the amount of available community resources because youth living in low poverty are assumed to need less support than those living in high poverty, which causes young boys to be negatively impacted by moving (Katz et al., 2001).

Neighbourhood effect theory critiques the short-term findings of the MTO experiment due to the finding that boys face increased behavioral problems after being removed from the social support of their high poverty neighbourhoods. Bourdieu (1986) and Briggs (1998) show how there is a difference between social leverage and social support, and the early findings of MTO suggest that social support is critical in the positive development of youth. In the absence of social support, youth resist assimilation into wealthier neighbourhoods and behaviors that were trying to be prevented become more prominent (Katz. et al., 2001).

Long-term outcomes of the MTO experiment are consistent with suggestions by Bourdieu (1986), Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), Desmond (2016) and Buck (2001): youth who live in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas have less opportunity to gain economic, cultural, and social capital. Despite this, youth who move from high poverty areas to low poverty areas not only lose social support as discussed in the short-term findings, but they also lose social capital. Discrimination, competition from more

wealthy peers, and less community resources for the poor are all adverse effects caused by the MTO experiment that harm the amount of social capital held by participants. In this respect, simply moving someone away from other impoverished people does not take away the fact that they were raised in poverty, the difference now is that they do not have the resources they used to cope with this before MTO intervention (Ludwig, Duncan, Gennetian, Katz, Kessler, Kling, & Sanbonmatsu, 2013).

Ludwig et al., write:

The MTO data make clear that neighbourhood environments have important impacts on the overall quality of life and well-being of low-income families despite the mixed pattern of impacts on traditional “objective” outcome measures, including null effects on earnings and education... decline in census tract poverty rates is associated with an increase in the standard wellbeing (SWB) that is about the same size as the difference in SWB between households whose annual incomes differ by \$13,000 – a very large amount given that the average control group family’s annual income in the long-term survey is just about \$20,000” (Ludwig et al., 2013).

What the authors conclude here is that a little bit of money can go a long way when it comes to increasing the SWB of community members. Every MTO experiment thus far has focused on removing youth from high poverty areas to low poverty areas, where the SWB may still be low, but survivable. MTO researchers point out that a difference between low poverty areas and middle-class areas may provide more insight into how large, or little, of a role neighbourhoods play in shaping the lives of those who live in them (Ludwig et al., 2013). The present research addresses this disconnect directly by investigating a socioeconomically disadvantaged community that experiences a variety of poverty levels, allowing for more clarity in how opportunity can be provided, or limited, within one’s own community without having to move. According to MTO, youth fare

best when they are removed from the social settings that exist within impoverished communities; the present research assesses and responds to this assumption.

In order to assess the MTO experiment, it must be understood that there are options other than moving away from poverty that can increase one's life chances, despite Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), and Desmond (2016) all leaving their disadvantaged communities and obtaining upward socioeconomic mobility. For example, Power et al. (2013) discuss the advantages and disadvantages associated with accessing education. They write that ideas surrounding access to education serve the interests of those who can indeed afford to choose educational facilities for their children. But much like those who live in high poverty areas throughout the United States, those living in high poverty areas in Ireland do not have the choice to 1) live where they want to with no restrictions, and 2) spend money on education that can otherwise be attained for free (Power et al., 2013). Much like Conley (2000), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), and Desmond (2016) portrayed, education is most often referred to as the way out of high poverty areas, but only for those who can access it. Power et al. (2013) understand this relationship as a byproduct of neoliberalism, a stance that Bourdieu (1984), (1986), and (1992), is likely to support as neoliberalism is a tool of capitalism.

Without access to post-secondary education, youth who stay in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities are unlikely to expand their social networks to influential actors that can help them attain jobs or opportunities that will increase their socioeconomic status. This social leverage (Briggs, 1998), may be in the form of a reference letter to a desired employer. Bourdieu (1986) maintains that capitalism is dependent on the reproduction of workers, meaning that companies are going to look for

people to work for them in specific institutions, such as universities. If families cannot afford to send their children to university, or youth do not have the grades to access scholarships and fear not being able to pay back student loans, those who come from families who have high economic capital will continue to dominant prestigious positions (Kennedy & Power, 2010).

With the advantages associated with accessing education comes discussion surrounding positive youth development. In Canada, all youth are given free primary schooling, but socioeconomic mobility is still limited in many communities. Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas & Lerner (2005) understand youth development as highly malleable. According to Lerner et al. (2005), positive youth development is found in different places, they write:

Positive youth development stresses the relative plasticity of human development and argues that this potential for systematic change in behaviour exists as a consequence of mutually influential relationships between the developing person and his or her biology, psychological characteristics, family, community, culture, physical and designed ecology, and historical niche... the plasticity indicates that the developmental system can be directed to the promotion of desired outcomes, and not only to the prevention of undesirable behaviours (Lerner et al., 2005, pg. 11-12).

In sum, Lerner et al. (2005) suggest that childhood development is not concrete, and the influences that shape a child can change drastically throughout development. Therefore, MTO and education, two very popular sources of upward mobility, are not to be confused for the only sources. By suggesting that one solution will create better conditions for every youth in an area, such as telling all youth that if they do better in school their problems will go away, one ignores the intersectional nature of positive youth development, where community plays a key role. The effects of ignoring community are

evident in the narratives of Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), Desmond (2016), and the short-term findings of the MTO experiment.

Reaffirming the role of community support in positive youth development, Lerner et al. (2005) write:

The key to ensuring the positive development of youth rests on developing research-based policies that strengthen in diverse communities the capacities of families to raise healthy, thriving children. As evidenced by the research reported in this special issue, such policies must take a strength-based approach to youth; they should be developmental in nature; and they should focus on (have as their target or unit of analysis) enhancing the fit between the capacities of young people and the assets for positive development that exist in their communities. In such a policy context, young people may thrive, and civil society may prosper (Lerner et al., 2005, p.15)

Lerner et al. (2005) highlight here directly what this research intends to investigate: the importance of community in helping youth develop positively toward upward mobility.

This research investigates community resources that could assist youth of varying identities establish upward mobility. Positive youth development suggests that MTO creates conditions where disadvantaged children will not move upward socioeconomically because they are removed from the resources that helped fill those gaps in their lives. This finding is supported by evidence that shows boys not having access to prior community resources leading to increased undesirable behavior from the MTO experiment.

Highlighting the importance of growing up in one's community, Briggs (1998) says that "high participation in organizations is considered a sign that communities possess social capital... individuals, though poor, are not socially isolated" (Briggs, 1998, p.201), suggesting that community resources that connect citizens with opportunities to gain cultural and social capital can alleviate disadvantages caused by lack of economic

capital. Crozier Kegler et al. (2005) support these findings and state that their theory is that if youth have support and opportunities from their family, neighbourhood, and communities, they can more easily address problem behaviors and transition more smoothly into adulthood. Crozier Kegler et al. (2005) write that research has shown that assets are more preventative when more than one is used at a time, including community resources. The initial research on the impact of community resources in the lives of youth experiencing negative neighbourhood effects, as shown, suggests that community resources can be successful in creating conditions where youth can gain capital and move upward socioeconomically.

Badger & Bui (2018) write that “some places lift children out of poverty. Others trap them there” (Badger & Bui, 2018, p.1). Their article outlines a program implemented by the Seattle Housing Authority, which echoes that of MTO, by offering housing vouchers that give extra rent money so people can move out of high poverty areas. Results from the program have shown that “where children live matters deeply in whether they prosper as adults” (Badger & Bui, 2018, p.1). Research has continuously shown that the variations of success in adulthood is driven by the neighbourhoods that people grew up in, without ignoring the effects of individual factors. Continuously, it has been shown how neighbourhood effect theory does not disregard the social effects of race and gender, rather, it suggests that marginalization experienced by differences in race and gender are elevated in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This affirms that the neighbourhood itself creates disadvantage that affects all people that live there, not just a few. The present research seeks to understand how people of varying identities can be affected by the same neighbourhood under the assumption that living there means they



have experienced low economic capital, and whether the presence of community resources can assist in increasing capital and socioeconomic status.

The reviewed literature justifies the importance of looking at how access to community resources influences upward mobility in disadvantaged youth for two primary reasons: 1) it has not been explored in-depth by influential literature in this field, and 2) socioeconomic disadvantage continues to exist even in the presence of MTO and other housing assistance programs. The memoirs of Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), and Desmond (2016) focus on the differences between their lives and those of their peers, and MTO fails to consider these factors upon execution and remains the primary study for understanding neighbourhood effects on youth to the present day. The role of community resources in positive youth development and upward socioeconomic mobility remains unclear and allows this study to contribute to a growing body of literature surrounding the importance of where youth grow up and what neighbourhoods do to the youth that live in them.

The current section presents a review of prominent literature and shows how the forms of capital and neighbourhood effects are connected. By looking at both memoirs from various authors, and the MTO experiment, it is shown that the understanding of the influence of community resources on youth remains vague. Positive youth development has been shown to be fluid, which indicates that what youth require to move upward socioeconomically will not be concrete. The role of community resources in aiding disadvantaged youth in neighbourhoods that face negative neighbourhood effects has not been investigated by any of the research presented thus far, leaving a gap in the research that this study addresses.

### **Research Methodology**

This study is based on data collected from focus group research. Six people who grew up in the socioeconomically disadvantaged area of Spryfield were recruited through convenience sampling. This section begins by considering the positive and negative aspects of the focus group method, as well as the convenience sampling method, and closes with a discussion on why the positives outweigh the negatives in this case. For this study, participants were recruited via social media and were asked to spend two hours discussing their perspectives on what it was like to grow up in a socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhood. At the beginning of the focus group, participants were asked to provide biographical information (age, gender, race, and time spent living in Spryfield). Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity, and the research described in this section has been approved by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board.

The focus group was based on discussion of the following five questions: 1) what community resources are available in Spryfield? This question was asked to get ideas flowing and to allow participants to start thinking about what their community offered, or did not offer, them as youth. 2) Did you find any of these community resources more helpful than others? Why? 3) What community resources do you wish would be, or believe should be, part of Spryfield? Why? 4) How, or why, did the presence, or lack of, community resources shape your perception of what you could achieve? Lastly, 5) Did the presence, or lack of, community resources, contribute to your ideas of achieving bigger networks or higher financial stability? As participants discussed among each other,

responses were recorded by the researcher in a private journal and became the primary data for this study.

The focus group method was chosen for data collection in this project for multiple reasons. Focus groups are described as “a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (Fern, 1996, cited in Sagoe, 2012, p.1). Because this research is heavily dependent on the individual experiences of Spryfield youth, the focus group method is ideal for collecting perspectives from these youth directly, as they have the most insight on how community resources impacted their adolescents. Kitzinger (1994) argues that when you are looking at something that influences a population rather than an individual, focus groups can allow for valuable insight into a group that shares something in common, such as growing up in Spryfield. In this case, the focus group method allows for me to account for individual experiences as they may relate to the experiences of the whole population as Kitzinger (1994) suggests. The final benefit that is discussed by Sagoe (2012) is that the interaction among participants can prompt thorough discussion that could reveal components of the research topic that the researcher had not thought about (Sagoe, 2012). In the present context, the possibility of unknown components is essential to developing neighbourhood effect theory further, adding to the value of using the focus group method.

Despite the benefits of focus group research, Boateng (2012) argues that focus groups have some critical disadvantages. Citing Krueger (1994), Boateng (2012) writes that focus groups take away control over the research from the researcher by forcing them to ask questions that are less centered, promoting a discussion that may not go to where

they intend. Boateng (2012) discusses the negative qualities of groupthink, suggesting that group members in focus groups may try to “minimize conflict and reach a consensus decision without critical evaluation of alternative perspectives” (Turner & Pratkanis, 1998, as cited in Boateng, 2012, p.55). In other words, groupthink creates the possibility for one perspective to overpower the others. This is dangerous because it could create data that reflects the perspective of one individual that others agreed with so that there would be no disagreement, this would result in an unrepresentative narrative of what participants have experienced.<sup>1</sup>

The participants in the focus group were recruited via convenience sampling. Following the works of Atkinson & Kintrea (2004), Kennedy & Power, 2010), and Power et al. (2013), convenience sampling was used because it ensures that the participants who took part in discussion had lived experience as disadvantaged youth. In order to take place in this study, participants must have been living, or had lived, in Spryfield for a minimum of ten years and be between the ages of 20-22. These conditions were put in place to ensure that the participants taking part would have been living in Spryfield during the same time that MTO participants would have been removed from their communities, and at similar ages to Conley (2002), Dunbar-Ortiz (2010), and Desmond (2016) when they started recognizing their advantages and disadvantages associated with who they were and where they were growing up. These conditions also ensured that youth would have been living in Spryfield during the period where their development

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<sup>1</sup> It does not appear that these negatives were present in the research collected by the focus group. However, without asking each participant individually, there is no concrete way of knowing that their responses were not influenced by groupthink.

would have been especially influenced by external factors, as described by Lerner et al. (2005).

Though the benefit of having chosen participants directly lies in the thick description of their individual experiences, and the shared experiences among them, the disadvantage to this method is that generalizability is no longer possible. It must be noted that this sample is not representative of the entire Spryfield population, particularly Black and Indigenous perspectives, as representation on this front was lost due to time conflicts with potential participants. As well, while this sample speaks to the lived experience of some youth who have experienced socioeconomic disadvantage due to growing up in a poor neighbourhood, this sample does not represent the standpoints of every youth who has ever grown up in a poor neighbourhood (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

The advantages that exist within the focus group and convenience sampling methods far outweigh the negative aspects because these methods allow this research to understand the community and participants that are the present focus. The results from the primary data, if read by the wider community of Spryfield, allow for others to consider whether they feel heard or represented by their community and the services that are offered there. These methods allow for a discussion to occur that has previously not happened in Spryfield and have created a thorough case study of what socioeconomically disadvantaged youth may experience as a result of growing up in these communities that could be compared to other studies in the future.

## Results and Discussion

This section begins by discussing what creates a socioeconomically disadvantaged community, and why the community of Spryfield fits that description. I show that the youth in Spryfield experience neighbourhood effects as a result of being from a socioeconomically disadvantaged area. I continue this discussion with a presentation of the results from the January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019 focus group that created the data for this study. From the data, I present three main themes: 1) neighbourhood effects on Spryfield youth, 2) Spryfield lacks community resources that specifically focus on mental and physical health, and 3) the results coming out of Pathways to Education Spryfield challenge the MTO experiment. I assess the MTO experiment and show how the successful implementation of the Pathways to Education Spryfield program, which fosters socioeconomic development as well as provides support for youth in obtaining economic, cultural, and social capital, has challenged the assumption of MTO that suggests that youth must be removed from disadvantaged areas in order to move upward socioeconomically. It is shown that barriers to upward mobility are more effectively challenged when community resources for youth are implemented within their communities and when neighborhood effects are addressed.

As explained by Haines, Beggs & Hurlbert (2011), socioeconomic disadvantage in neighbourhoods or communities looks like “poor access to quality schools, health services, transportation and communication resources, marriageable partners, conventional role models, jobs, and job networks” (Haines et al., 2011, p. 59). These factors contribute to limited attainable economic, cultural, and social capital among the residents in these communities and suggest that youth in these communities are at an

automatic disadvantage compared to youth who grow up in communities where these factors are not present. Youth who grow up in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities are therefore exposed to neighbourhood effects from the very beginning.

The present study analyzes the presence of neighbourhood effects in Spryfield youth. Spryfield is a town that experiences socioeconomic disadvantage in ways that have been discussed by Haines et al. (2011), for example: the only high school in the community has begun to fall apart to the point that the school has faced closures related to necessary repairs. Additionally, many people in Spryfield live without family doctors and/or medical plans and cannot afford medications when necessary. The public transit system is unreliable, there is an abundance of low-wage jobs and a large proportion of the community lives on social assistance. Because these factors are characteristics of the poorest neighbourhoods (Leventhal, & Dupere, 2011), people living outside of Spryfield often associate Spryfield with criminal activity due to associations between poverty and criminal behaviour (Leventhal, & Dupere, 2011). Spryfield's standing as a socioeconomically disadvantaged area is not a new label, as the community has faced disadvantage throughout its existence.

Spryfield was established in 1760 and annexed by the city of Halifax in 1969. With low income rental housing introduced in the 1970s in an area now known as Greystone, Spryfield itself has been shown to have less home owners, and more home renters, than the rest of Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) (Murphy, 2006). As discussed by Bourdieu (1986), home ownership is one of the clearest indicators of economic capital. The lack of home ownership in Spryfield is thus a direct reflection of the low economic capital of its residents. Low economic capital in Spryfield can also be

found in the stark difference between the amount of money residents in Spryfield residents make in comparison to the rest of HRM. Spryfield residents, on average, make 34% less than the average income across HRM. In the report *Halifax, a city of 'hotspots' of income inequality*, it is determined that low-income areas exist when the average household income is 20% less than the municipal average (*Halifax, a city of 'hotspots' of income inequality*, 2018). Spryfield is not only economically disadvantaged from Bourdieu's standpoint, but from the standpoint of the city as well.

In addition to lack of economic capital, Spryfield residents lack in cultural capital attained by education. Highschool graduation rates in Spryfield remain lower than average across HRM and the province, despite increasing dramatically. According to Ragnarsdotti et al. (2017), lack of educational success increases the likelihood of Spryfield youth partaking in undesirable, or criminal, behaviors. In support of Ragnarsdotti et al. (2017), it has been found that criminal behaviour in Spryfield is more prominent than wealthier areas throughout HRM (*Halifax, a city of 'hotspots' of income inequality*, 2018). Without high school educations, many Spryfield youth find themselves unable to access post-secondary education, immediately hindering the possibility of transubstantiating post-secondary education into economic capital.

The disadvantage for Spryfield youth does not end with economic and cultural capital. Spryfield youth are also disadvantaged in their acquisitions of social capital due to where they come from much like Dunbar-Ortiz (2010). Spryfield youth find themselves well acquainted with the managers of their part-time jobs, but are unable to create relationships with prominent figureheads, such as non-profit organizers or volunteer associations, that those with high economic capital would be able to interact



with on a more regular basis (Kennedy & Power, 2010). Spryfield youth find challenges in establishing these relationships also due to the absence of these associations in Spryfield until relatively recently, causing influential actors in society to be outside of the area that Spryfield youth spend most of their time (Briggs, 1998).

Spryfield as a community faces socioeconomic disadvantage as shown by the lack of economic, cultural, and social capital present in the area. As Murphy (2006) writes:

Spryfield residents are faring less well than their counterparts in the rest of HRM and the province. Less education, lower income, lower employment, and poor housing choices are characteristic of the area. Accompanying these features are higher instances of crime and poverty (Teplitsky, LeClair, & Willison, 2006, as cited in Murphy, 2006, pg. 12).

With one eighth of Spryfield's population being visible minorities (Murphy, 2006), there is a clear indication that racialized groups are not solely experiencing these undesirable social conditions but that white members of the community are experiencing poverty as well. Additionally, there remains no specific mention of a gendered difference. If the individual characteristics of the people within Spryfield are differentiating and they are all experiencing disadvantage, an unexplored explanation is the presence of neighbourhood effects.

This research aims to understand how neighbourhood effects in Spryfield are contributing to socioeconomic disadvantage in Spryfield youth. Because MTO research has been shown to have a gap in the literature surrounding what measures can be taken to challenge pre-determined potential upward mobility, this research specifically focuses on the availability of community resources in Spryfield. Specifically, this research looks at whether youth in Spryfield found these resources helpful in enabling them to acquire upward mobility. In order to understand how community resources contributed, or did not

contribute, to addressing neighbourhood effects in Spryfield youth, this research uses data from a focus group composed of six youth that compared their experiences growing up within the Spryfield community. These youth were asked to engage in conversation surrounding their feelings of socioeconomic status due to growing up in Spryfield and whether community resources helped them overcome the effects of their neighbourhood.

The focus group was held on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and includes six participants in total who are all from the socioeconomically disadvantaged community of Spryfield. The participants' have been assigned pseudonyms, and are identified as follows: Levi, a 21-year-old trans masculine gender non-binary person who has lived in Spryfield for 21 years; Paisley, a 21-year-old female who has lived in Spryfield for 18 years; Sofia, a 21-year-old female who has lived in Spryfield for 20 years; Asher, a 21-year-old male who has lived in Spryfield for 20 years; Carter, a 21-year-old male who has lived in Spryfield for 21 years; and, Naomi, a 22-year-old female who has lived in Spryfield for 22 years. The participants conversed among each other in response to five separate questions and were asked to compare their experiences growing up in Spryfield.

The focus group consisted of five separate questions, though discussion from each flowed into the others as a result of their similarities. The responses to each question are broken down below.

### **1) What community resources are available in Spryfield?**

Participants worked together to provide a lengthy list of community resources found in Spryfield, these were: the Captain William Spry Community Centre, Pathways to Education, Youth Leadership Program, the YWCA, the Boys and Girls Club, violin lessons, Spryfield Minor Softball, Chebucto Minor Hockey, the Spryfield Legion,

Taekwondo lessons, Kickboxing lessons, MMA lessons, the Community Health Centre, Sparks and Timberwolves, Family SOS, Habitat for Humanity, Church food banks, and multiple school-based programs contained within the community's three elementary schools, two of which extend to junior high, and the highschool, J.L. Ilsley. Evidently, there are a large amount of resources available to Spryfield youth, and youth, for the most part, are aware that they exist.

Asher said that he "is not much of a resource guy" indicating that he saw himself as not thoroughly involved in the community. Naomi echoed Asher's sentiments, adding that she "only went to Pathways because [her] parents made [her]". Paisley said that this question made her realize how little she did and was surprised to see how many things are available to youth in the community. However, Paisley added the value of school-based programming, saying that for her, walking into high school and having a breakfast club was very handy, as she did not always eat breakfast at home. Paisley's suggestion that she did not eat breakfast at home is especially interesting because the breakfast club at the high school would not exist for only one student. The mere existence of a food-based program implies that students in Spryfield are going to school in the morning without eating breakfast. This indicates that students either do not have time to eat, or, they do not have food at home to eat due to lack of economic capital.

**2) Did you find any of these community resources more helpful than others? Why?**

This question was answered with a unanimous "yes" by all participants. The community resource that they all felt was more helpful than others to them growing up was Pathways to Education Spryfield. Reasons for this were that Pathways recruits youth directly without them having to look for it, youth can ask Pathways staff anything and are

not heavily restricted in what the resource is used for, youth feel as though Pathways staff always have their back, and that if Pathways is unable to help them with something, staff knew who could and help youth find and access that resource. When looking back, Naomi said: “I’m not sure I totally took advantage of all Pathways had to offer.” This indicates that despite Pathways being an open resource for youth, at the time that Naomi was in the program it is possible that they had not advertised, or had available, resources that could help her.

Levi said that “good resources addressed me as a person and not a person from Spryfield” indicating that for them, meaningful and helpful resources are those that did not further perpetuate stereotypes about Spryfield youth. It also indicates that Spryfield youth have experienced the presence of resources and people who are meant to help but do so because they see Spryfield youth as a problem that needs solving, not because they believe in positive change. Levi continued with this and asked follow-up questions addressing the abundance of minimum wage jobs in Spryfield, such as: why do we look down upon minimum wage jobs anyway? Why do people see the presence of minimum wage jobs in Spryfield as an indicator of poverty? Though this was not answered by the participants, Bourdieu’s forms of capital would suggest that the presence of ample minimum wage jobs that are of low economic capital standing would mean that high wage jobs, which are of high economic capital standing, would be less available. This means that social capital in the form of prestigious job labels (for example, CEO), would be largely unavailable in Spryfield. Therefore, residents of Spryfield are thought to be of lesser status than people who live in areas where these types of jobs and labels are more prevalent.

The absence of higher-wage jobs in Spryfield, however, does not have to indicate low economic capital. Carter said that another extremely helpful resource for him was the presence of Youth Leadership Programs. At twelve years old, Carter was learning leadership skills and was exposed to mentors and other examples that helped him develop into the person he is today. Eventually, these connections turned into job opportunities. As such, the presence of community resources can challenge neighbourhood effects of Spryfield and jobs with more economic and social capital become available to Spryfield youth.

In terms of resources that were less useful than others, Sofia indicated that for her, sports were less helpful because they were limiting for people with disabilities, or for people with especially low income. Levi responded to this by saying that Spryfield Minor Softball sometimes let kids play for free because the coaches knew about their parents' situation, also adding that some kids could receive funding from the province. Sofia responded by saying that parents who pay, or fundraise, for their own kids or other kids, should be valued the same way as we do community resources, same with businesses who sponsor teams. Another resource that was considered less valuable than others was mentioned by Naomi, Carter, and Sofia, and that was the Captain William Spry Community Centre. Despite having an affordable public swim, the cost of programs deters them, and they believe others, from using the facilities. Regarding the gym, Carter said that the cost is too high for the availability of equipment, adding that it was of poor quality and made him, and others, not want to go to that gym. The barrier of low economic income continued to be the main issue surrounding assessment of each community resource mentioned by the youth in this study.

### **3) What community resources do you wish would be, or believe should be, part of Spryfield? Why?**

When asked this question, Naomi and Paisley began by saying that they believe programs such as Dress for Success would be positive additions to the Spryfield community. Naomi explained that Dress for Success collects business clothes for women and prepares them for interviews, shows them how to get jobs, and keep them. Sofia also noted that there was a lack of art programs in Spryfield, to her knowledge, the only real place to do art is during school. She mentioned that for her, there was an overemphasis on sport programming, and not enough on art. Youth also mentioned an absence of programming that prepared them for getting prestigious jobs and keeping them, which contributes to earlier discussion of the absence of high paying, high status jobs in Spryfield. Spryfield youth are largely taught that they must settle for certain sectors of work.

Reflecting on her personal experience, Sofia triggered discussion surrounding what youth felt missing in their lives while growing up in Spryfield. Carter said that for him, a gym was not part of his life until adulthood, and unless you played sports, fitness was not encouraged to you. Naomi echoed this sentiment suggesting that more health focused fitness would encourage body positivity in youth rather than making them feel like if they do not play sports there is no option for them. It was unanimous that combined with lack of programming and the cost of going to the gym, there was little in terms of fitness accessibility during Naomi and Carter's youth.

There also appeared to be a lack of mental health support during the youths of each participant. Sofia expressed that the current mental health centre approach appears

to focus on junior high and high school aged students, not younger people who may be confused about the feelings they are going through. Paisley announced that she did not know that there was a mental health centre, adding that it is not easily found and unless you really look, you will not stumble upon it. Sofia added that as a young girl, she struggled and looked very hard to find help, coming up empty. This feeling extended to Carter, who shared that in grade eleven, his life, and others, was shook with the death of a very close friend to suicide. Carter shared “we had counsellors for a week at school, and then it was like never again, like it never happened”. Sofia added that early intervention may be key to the type of mental health resource needed in Spryfield; someone in her family had always been told they had bad behaviour until one teacher suggested they have testing done. It was later revealed that her relative did indeed have more than bad behaviour, and the teacher changed their life by encouraging them to get help without any stigma attached.

On the same topic of mental health, it was revealed by Naomi and Sofia that the resources that exist in Spryfield currently, including Pathways, are not equipped to handle extensive circumstances, such as students with disabilities or those with serious mental illness because they are not trained in such areas. Sofia added that it would be good to have resources that specialize in this area because it would make both disability and mental health more talked about and contribute to the elimination of stigma. Carter noted that he has noticed that though Pathways staff and teachers try their best to help, they are sometimes hesitant because they do not want to feel like they are putting students down. Sofia added that teachers appear to be straining themselves trying to make up for a system that lacks.

However, all participants agreed that if these resources are to be implemented in Spryfield, it must be done with care and understanding that the right people must be here to do those jobs. Asher noted that in terms of mental health, counsellors must be the right type of people. They must radiate trust in an environment that has largely been subject to prejudice, because the wrong person could throw someone's progress off massively. Levi agreed with this passionately, adding that they wish Spryfield had more centers like Heartwood, a place that gave female identifying people somewhere to learn about the world and their identities. Levi said that "Spryfield needs places where people are seen where they want to be seen, not how others see them" but added that it can be hard to figure out what that is.

One must acknowledge that the absence of mental and physical health resources in Spryfield is especially indicative of associations between poor mental and physical health and people who live in poverty, or in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. These associations come to life in Spryfield because residents are unable to pay for amenities that would replace the need for community resources, such as gym memberships, personal fitness trainers, or private therapy in terms of mental health. The absence of high economic capital creates a barrier for Spryfield youth who actively seek help, like those in the present study, and cannot access it because their community cannot provide it for them.

**4) How, or why, did the presence, or lack of, community resources shape your perception of what you could achieve?**

Paisley opened this discussion stating, "I feel like we were below the rest of [Halifax Regional Municipality], our school received hand-me-down laptops from the



rich schools, it felt like we always had the rich school's scraps". Sofia agreed with this, adding that "the high school is literally falling apart". The physical state of the school remained the focus for quite some time, Paisley adding "richer areas have access to things we never did, like electric car chargers", Asher adding "when our school was falling down, Citadel got a new field." The government of Nova Scotia has promised funding for a new high school in Spryfield, but at the time of writing, no construction plan or timeline has been set in stone. The announcement of a new high school in Spryfield came after enormous petitions and activism in the Spryfield community, and many remain hopeful that the school will be replaced in a timely, efficient manner.

There was also a very clear awareness for the ways that Spryfield and its population are viewed by the wider community. Sofia said "when we tell people where we are from, they think we are poor, ghetto, or like our education is worse than theirs even though the curriculum is the same," Carter adding "I had a girl tell me once that if I wanted to date her I had to move out of Spryfield." Sofia ensured that it was made clear that there is a stigma surrounding all the people who live in Spryfield. Paisley felt especially effected by this stigma and admitted to previously telling people that she did not live in Spryfield, rather, Harrietsfield, just beyond the community. However, Paisley shared that she has stopped doing that and has found a new pride in being from Spryfield, Naomi interjected and said, "I tell people I'm from Spryfield to prove them wrong" and Paisley agreeing. Though neighbourhood effects do not create stereotypes, they can certainly bring them to life. Paisley's rejection of where she comes from shows that she, at one point, felt like she could not succeed or attain status without sacrificing the

neighbourhood she really came from. Feelings of needing to “prove people wrong” shows that there is a sense of overcoming barriers associated with coming from Spryfield.

Though not a community resource, a major factor contributing to feelings of low mobility was explained by Sofia, who said: “successful people I meet don’t stay in Spryfield. They move away and remove it from their identity. This leaves only the poor students, who end up thinking that J.L. (the high school) is the furthest I can get if I stay in Spryfield.” Carter echoed this from a male standpoint, saying that there are “not many great role models who stick around.” Asher agreeing, said, “we see adults grow and leave, so we associate growing up with leaving. But there is a new, more expensive housing area that appears to be turning the stigma around. However, the area as a whole is not very accommodating.” Perhaps most telling surrounding the desire to stay here is another quote from Asher: “Spryfield carries a heavy name. You’ve got too many reasons not to stay and none to stop you from leaving. But I think they’re changing that. People say they are scared to move or come to Spryfield, but nothing happens here. I don’t understand.” Sofia discussed the association between Spryfield and drug activity, Paisley adding that she believes that’s something exhibited more in older generations because she does not see it as much in her age group. There was agreement upon the group concerning the phasing out of drug activity, but also in the view that it was still relevant in terms of a stereotype. The absence of positive role models is a key threat to positive youth development and upward socioeconomic mobility. Without role models to show Spryfield youth what they are capable of, Spryfield youth begin to believe that they cannot both be from Spryfield and succeed.

Despite reasons to leave, each participant agreed that growing up in Spryfield was a positive experience for them, crediting the amount of social support that exists. Naomi praised the community, saying, “you can tell there is an amazing sense of community here.” Sofia adding, “[people] leave for better opportunity, or they stay for the community.” The reasons to stay in Spryfield began to show here, Carter and Sofia joining together to amplify the importance of one community resource, Pathways to Education Spryfield. Carter said, “when Pathways came in and told me I was worthy of tutoring, money, youth leadership activities, and mental health, that changed the lives of me and so many kids. It taught people that *they can do this*.” Even Naomi and Paisley, who expressed having negative perceptions of Pathways to Education Spryfield initially, began to change their minds. Naomi saying, “I have a very negative view of Pathways because I didn’t involve myself a ton. I was individually driven, I didn’t think I needed it. But now, I’m starting to see the benefits.” Paisley unconditionally agreed, adding “I knew I was in a better position than some, I almost felt guilty.” But it was a reflection from Sofia that spoke volumes about the importance of Pathways in the lives of Spryfield youth:

For me, having someone check in on my mental health was huge. You guys didn’t feel it necessary for your education, but I probably wouldn’t have gone to school without Pathways. Pathways has been the biggest resource.

Carter, Asher, and Levi all agreed. Carter saying, “I feel lucky that Pathways came here.”

Asher said that he felt the same, and that certain parts of the program were especially helpful, adding:

I don’t usually speak out and get excited about things, but Pathways was that. Anything you brought to them, they helped you. The money hold option (referring to the option to retain your scholarship earned from Pathways for several years) at Pathways was huge. Some didn’t have it all figured out, and they allowed you

time to do that without taking away what you've earned. Sometimes youth need encouragement to take time and figure things out.

It became abundantly clear that Pathways to Education Spryfield had provided these youth with a unique experience in terms of community resources.

**5) Did the presence, or lack of, community resources, contribute to your ideas of achieving bigger networks or higher financial stability?**

This question continued the conversation from the previous question. Paisley saying:

If Pathways wasn't a thing, or the O2 program (a school based-internship program), I would have felt like I couldn't have done it. I would have strayed. I don't think, beyond Pathways, there's any type of support for youth to really do it.

Naomi added that for her, the stigma did not really play a part in her confidence, that she knew she was capable of success. Sofia added that sometimes it was not only about what youth believed about themselves, but what others believed about them, and Pathways helped show the community that their youth were capable of being successful. Carter reflected on this, saying, "it felt like we had to work harder, like the richer kids got noticed easier," and mentioned the degrading nature of being from Spryfield. Carter shared a phrase that he had heard growing up, which was: "the best of J.L. is the worst of Citadel" referring to the fact that J.L., the community's only high school, had received hand-me-downs from the inner-city schools. Sofia added that it is not only in the school that they find this type of remark, but by adding the word "Spryfield" to the end of anything creates a negative connotation or makes it a joke. The presence of neighbourhood effects in Spryfield clearly extends beyond the geographic boundaries of

the community and follows youth wherever they go, so long as they indicate that they are from Spryfield.

The focus group ended with a reflection about what it meant to these youth to be from Spryfield. Stemming from the discussion above, Asher and Naomi joined together to say that it was refreshing to hear this type of feedback from their peers, to hear that other people were proud to be from Spryfield. Naomi suggested that “we over-compensate to prove we aren’t ‘hood rats’”, to which Asher responded “doesn’t that suck?! I’m proud to be from Spryfield, but people make me hide it unless I know I can’t lose something.” He clarified that loss included job opportunity, on top of Carter’s reflections previously about the loss of relationships. As such, being from Spryfield made both Asher and Carter lose out on gaining economic capital in the form of a job for Asher, and social capital in the form of relationships for Carter. Being from Spryfield immediately creates a disadvantage for youth who have to choose whether to be proud of where they are from or hide it.

**Discussion.** The results presented above reflected three main themes within this research: 1) Neighbourhood effects on Spryfield youth, 2) Spryfield lacks community resources that specifically focus on mental and physical health, and 3) the results coming out of Pathways to Education Spryfield challenge the MTO experiment.

**Neighbourhood effects on Spryfield youth.** As discussed previously, neighbourhood effects are understood as factors that effect members of a community regardless of individual factors such as gender. As such, neighbourhood effects elevate stigma and stereotypes, whether positive or negative, about particular neighbourhoods (Buck, 2001). In Spryfield, the youth in this study made it clear that the stigma and

stereotypes associated with the Spryfield community include poor, ghetto, and Spryfield as a dangerous area. The youth in this study said that describing oneself as successful and being from Spryfield were mutually exclusive to them as youth, noting that they “associated growth with leaving”. The social effects of being from Spryfield also included, in the lives of these youth, a loss of relationships and friendships, and potential loss of jobs had some of them exposed where they were from. Youth from Spryfield therefore face disadvantage in acquiring economic capital in the form of jobs, and social capital in the form of relationships. Being from Spryfield and knowing that this disadvantage is present make youth feel unmotivated, less important than others, and less capable than others.

As a result of limited social mobility, youth explained that some of their peers may feel like high school is as far as they will make it. This was associated with the absence of post-secondary educated role models. As such, many youth maintain high school level jobs after graduation (if they graduate) and reproduce cycles of poverty or strained income due to lack of educational attainment. This was associated with feelings expressed by the youth in this study of being perceived as less financially valuable than inner-city schoolkids, be it hand-me-down computers from other schools, or the absence of a structurally sound place to learn in the first place, that created these feelings. Despite varying economic standing between participants in this group, as portrayed by Paisley’s explanation of feeling guilty from participating in the Pathways to Education program because she knew she “was in a better position than some”, it was understood by them that people outside of Spryfield perceived them of being of low economic standing. As such, being from Spryfield also created the effect of being known as poor, whether the

youth within the community thought they were or not. This experience is very similar to that of Conley (2002), who wrote about not knowing he was different from the youth in his community until someone pointed it out to him, whether it be his skin colour or the amount of social capital he had available to him.

Levi explained that youth are extremely vulnerable to the influences that we give to them. The youth in this study reflected feelings of internalizing the idea that they were “poor”, “ghetto”, or from “a dangerous area”, apart from Naomi. Naomi insisted that the presence of disadvantage in her life did not contribute to her overall feelings of what she could be and what she could do. Notions of wanting to “prove people wrong” as per Carter were expressed simultaneous to feelings of being “below the rest of HRM” according to Paisley. The differences in experience and needs of the youth even within this small sample are as explained by Lerner et al. (2005) who suggest that at no point will every child feel the same way or need the same thing in their development, which adds to the complexity of why neighbourhood effects is so important in the field of sociology. This study showed, in support of Buck (2011), neighbourhood effects are present in the lives of all youth in Spryfield despite differences in gender, as all genders in this study (female, male, trans-masculine gender non-binary) experienced very similar experiences growing up in Spryfield. This is not to say that any of the participants in this study only experience neighbourhood effects as a disadvantage in their lives, rather that neighbourhood effects create a shared disadvantage between youth in Spryfield regardless of individual factors that can create additional disadvantage.

**Spryfield lacks community resources that specifically focus on mental and physical health.** Though initially not a focus of this research, the results of the focus

group revealed that community resources in Spryfield may be abundant, but that they lack in very specific areas. Participants revealed that collectively, they were aware of almost all the community resources that are available in Spryfield, but, that mental and physical health resources are missing. A pillar of the theory of positive youth development and neighbourhood effect theory is that not all youth need the same thing in order to thrive (Lerner et al., 2005; Buck, 2011). Expressed by the participants in this study is that Spryfield resources focus heavily on encouraging youth to finish high school and to continue to post-secondary education as education has largely been perceived to provide success both economically and socially, much like we saw with Desmond (2016). However, as shared by Sofia, her life was dramatically impacted by mental health and when she tried to find help early, her experience was even more negative, Sofia saying “I struggled and knew others who struggled and there is *nothing* for youth, and what is there is extremely hard to find. Carter added to this reality by recounting the death of his good friend by suicide, who was known by almost all the participants in this study. Carter said that there were counsellors present in the school for “about a week” and “then never again”. Due to the absence of resources, youth were forced to deal with this tragedy largely alone and the impact of it carries with them every day. It became clear that Spryfield lacks in mental health help for youth, especially help that reaches out and makes itself known to youth who may need it.

As will be discussed in the next theme, the youth in this study found community resources that made themselves known and available to youth the most effective in assisting youth with their respective problems and concerns. It may be worthwhile, then, for Spryfield to invest in this type of mental health care. However, it is essential that they



hear the voices of youth, especially those like Asher, who made the vital contribution that if these resources are to be implemented in the Spryfield community, they must be done with the right people. Spryfield youth are vulnerable enough without having untrained specialists trying to give them mental health care when they do not understand the situations they have gone through.

Mental health is not the only type of health that is not adequately addressed in Spryfield. Naomi emphasized that the absence of community resources that encourage physical health is likely to be linked to the fact that gym memberships are very expensive and, as Carter added, Spryfield does not really have a space for youth to be active for free. As such, body positivity is not really encouraged in Spryfield youth and adds to the presence of stereotypes associated with people who are understood to be socioeconomically disadvantaged: the stereotype of poor health. We see here that the disadvantages that come with having low economic capital intertwine with social capital and reinforce Bourdieu (1986)'s standpoint that economic capital is at the base of social capital. Spryfield youth, therefore, face a clear socioeconomic disadvantage in attaining health services.

There was also concern spread for community resources that promote physical health for those with disabilities. Naomi and Sofia both shared that people in their families experience disability and would have benefited from a more specified program beyond the community resources available to all in Spryfield. These experiences echo sentiments of Lerner et al. (2005) who emphasize that blanket strategies do not help all youth to develop positively, as well as Buck (2011) who emphasized that neighbourhood effect theory must take different perspectives in order to adequately understand the

unique experiences of different communities. Sofia recounted the experience of her family member who was constantly assumed to just be acting out, but once a teacher, with no judgement, suggested that they be tested, a diagnosis was made and the quality of life of Sofia's family member increased immensely because treatment became available. Naomi related to this, adding that her family member had to go through a system that was not built for them to thrive, and there was nothing there to help make up the difference.

There was also a significant awareness of the efforts people in the community were making to try and make up for a lack of resources. Each participant reflected on teachers who strained themselves trying to fill the gaps in the system, also empathizing with teachers who did not want to get involved for a fear of doing the wrong thing or appearing judgmental. There was also a sense of appreciation for the staff at Pathways to Education Spryfield, who may not have always had to help the youth with what they brought to them, but did anyway, and always gave their best. The youth in this study were not ungrateful for the help that they had received but insisted that better was necessary in terms of mental and physical health if these areas were to improve within Spryfield youth in the present day.

**The results coming out of Pathways to Education Spryfield challenge the MTO experiment.** To answer the main research question of this thesis, which is: how do Spryfield youth perceive the availability of community resources as contributors to their potential upward mobility? The majority of Spryfield youth in the present study saw currently available community resources in Spryfield as a major component to their feelings of possible upward mobility. Specifically, all participants except Naomi credited the Pathways to Education Spryfield program for largely teaching them about their worth,

capabilities, and potential when they believed otherwise due to associations based on growing up in Spryfield. Additionally, the positive impact of Pathways Spryfield was not gendered in my study, unlike the findings that came out of the MTO experiment. This indicates that the effectiveness of Pathways Spryfield, among those who participated in the focus group, does not differ based on gender identity. Pathways Spryfield, then, automatically impacts more youth in the possibility of attaining upward mobility than the MTO experiment.

The youth in this study all agreed that Pathways to Education Spryfield was the most accessible and useful resource when they were growing up, except for Naomi, who through this discussion came to see benefits she did not see while interacting with the program. To understand how Pathways to Education Spryfield challenges the foundations of MTO, it is essential to understand what the Pathways to Education program is. As such, this section will first outline the program and then show how it contributes to challenging MTO.

Pathways to Education is a national, non-government program that works within socioeconomically disadvantaged communities “where the average high school dropout rate is disproportionately higher than the respective provincial and national averages” and provides youth with the opportunity to earn a scholarship directly to post-secondary education (Pathways to Education Canada, 2017, p.9). Pathways to Education Canada recognizes the multiple factors that contribute to socioeconomic disadvantage, as outlined earlier by Haines et al. (2011), including limited economic capital, lacking academic support inside and outside of school, and limited social capital in the form of role models (Pathways to Education Canada, 2017). All three of these factors are experiences that

have been shared by participants in this study, most dominantly the absence of positive role models for youth in Spryfield. Independent research done by a third party for Pathways to Education Canada has found “a direct correlation between the increased number of students graduating and the introduction of the Pathways Program into the community” (Pathways to Education Canada, 2017, p.9). Interesting is that though the report done by Pathways to Education Canada focuses on educational success, there is a clear indication by the youth who took part in this research that the Pathways program provided more for them outside of education, including mental health support and advice beyond education.

Referred to in the Pathways to Education report as Halifax, the Pathways Spryfield location has seen massive quantitative success in terms of raising high school graduation rates in Spryfield. The pre-Pathways graduation rate in Spryfield was 54%, and as of the 2017 report, the graduation rate was 89% (Pathways to Education Canada, 2017). These rates are measures of the “on time” graduates of J.L. Ilsley, which is a time period of three years. This success has been the result of only nine years of presence in Spryfield, as the first Pathways Spryfield class began the program in 2010. Key to this, though, is that results from the Pathways Spryfield program would not have been available until 2014 as that is when the 2010 class graduated high school.

The Pathways program, as discussed by the youth in this research, provides much more than help in school. Asher, who described himself as particularly unenthusiastic when it came to resources, outlined the value in Pathways staff who were adaptable and understanding of the many issues that come about during the teenage years for youth, especially youth in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Carter, Levi, and Sofia all

outlined how important Pathways was in their lives, highlighting that they felt “lucky”, “worthy” and motivated as a result of taking part in the Pathways program. This is briefly discussed in the Pathways Canada report, where it says:

Relationship-building is an important aspect of a young person’s healthy development. At Pathways, youth are paired one-on-one with staff and volunteers, engage with their peers in group settings, and have opportunities to meet with community and corporate partners for career mentoring... [Students] described these programming supports as ways to relieve stress, increase self-esteem, and facilitate social contacts (Pathways to Education Canada, 2017, p. 23).

Though the main function of the Pathways to Education program is to provide youth with an opportunity to earn a scholarship, thus alleviating the threat of low economic capital in attaining post-secondary success, the functions of the program as outlined above indicate a very important focus on the opportunity to expand the social capital of Pathways youth, in this case, Pathways Spryfield youth. All results from the Pathways Canada report indicate that youth beyond those in this research are having extremely positive interactions resulting in increased social capital (Pathways to Education Canada, 2017). If we look at this through the lens of Bourdieu (1986), we can see the potential for the newfound social capital of Spryfield youth to transubstantiate to economic capital, thus providing an opportunity for Spryfield youth to fight against socioeconomic disadvantage. By directly investing in Spryfield youth, the Pathways program has contributed to increased possibility of socioeconomic mobility that was not possible before the program was initiated.

The Pathways Spryfield location also introduced Service Learning, defined as “an educational approach that combines learning objectives with community service” (Pathways to Education Canada, 2017, p.25) that allowed students to increase their engagement and interaction with the Spryfield community and its population. According

to Pathways Canada, “this process helped students self-advocate and encouraged them to take action to address social issues in their community” (Pathways to Education Canada, 2017, p.25). This means that the Pathways to Education program works to empower youth to not only better themselves, but to strive to create positive change and better conditions in the communities in which they live; for Spryfield, this means that everyone in the neighbourhood, whether they are in Pathways or not, could benefit from the progress toward challenging negative neighbourhood effects. The Pathways Spryfield program encourages youth to see the value in their neighbourhood and as such encourages those who find success to keep their association with Spryfield. This combats one of the major conflicts that youth in Spryfield face, as described by Asher as “associating growth with leaving.” This directly challenges neighbourhood effects and begins to change the feelings of youth from being “ashamed” of being from Spryfield and hiding it, to interacting with their community on a daily basis and beginning to feel a sense of pride from their community.

The success of the Pathways program in Spryfield poses a great challenge to the theory behind the MTO studies. MTO moves families from high poverty neighbourhoods to low poverty neighbourhoods to try and create socioeconomic upward mobility and to remove neighbourhood effects from directly impacting youth. What the current study has suggested is the opposite: that keeping youth in the socioeconomically disadvantaged communities that they grow up in and providing resources for them to better themselves in the community, creates more opportunity for upward mobility than removing them from the social support that they have. The fact of the matter is, is that community resources for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth are only going to exist where

socioeconomically disadvantaged youth live, so taking them out of these neighbourhoods creates adverse effects when they try to seek out help that does not exist in their new neighbourhoods.

The Pathways Spryfield program has bridged a large divide in the acquisition of each form of capital. Through providing economic capital in the form of bi-weekly supports, Pathways has enabled students to spend their spare time more freely and thus creating increased opportunity to attain social capital. Pathways Spryfield also creates opportunity for attaining social capital in Spryfield youth by bringing volunteers and corporate partners to the weekly programming. These relationships are a direct product of the Pathways Spryfield program and increase Spryfield youth's opportunity to attain social leverage, which as seen by Desmond (2016) can be transubstantiated into economic capital more easily than social support (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital also allows Spryfield youth to be more likely to access cultural capital. By accessing the Pathways scholarship by taking part in the program, Spryfield youth are more likely to continue to post-secondary education after graduating high school, automatically giving them more cultural capital than had they not graduated high school at all.

The response from youth in this study is that the implementation of impactful community resources, described as those that make themselves known to youth and accessible with little cost or conditions, can create opportunities for upward mobility that cannot happen in the absence of community resources due to socioeconomic disadvantage. Pathways creates unique benefits to youth because it creates opportunity for them to increase their socioeconomic status without having to pay any money to the program. It exists in their neighbourhood, invests directly in them, and shapes itself to

help each individual student as they need without a blanket solution to the neighbourhood effects that Spryfield youth face. The Pathways program has realized that positive youth development, and the challenging of neighbourhood effects, happens most effectively when individual problems are treated as such, unlike the MTO program.

**Conclusion.** This research aimed to understand the relationship between youth access to community resources in Spryfield and Spryfield youth's perceptions of their own chances of attaining upward socioeconomic mobility. The main research question that I have investigated is: how do Spryfield youth perceive the present availability of community resources as contributors to their potential upward mobility? Results from this research show that youth in Spryfield are aware of the neighbourhood effects that cause disadvantage for them socioeconomically, but that one community resource, Pathways to Education Spryfield, has helped alleviate some of the feelings associated with the presence of neighbourhood effects. The youth in this study have also indicated that mental and physical health remain areas of need in Spryfield and suggest that community resources in this area could create even more success in youth. The main finding of this research is that the foundation of the MTO experiment, that one must move to opportunity, is suggested to be inaccurate, as it has been shown that the negative effects of MTO (social isolation, lack of social support, and gendered success) are avoidable when opportunity and support are initiated in the socioeconomically disadvantaged communities themselves. It has therefore been shown that disadvantages in attaining upward mobility are more effectively challenged when community resources for youth are implemented within their communities and when neighborhood effects are addressed.



**Limitations and future research.** This research is limited in generalizability due to the small sample size of six Spryfield youth. The participants in this sample do not comprise the entire population of Spryfield, particularly racialized youth, and as such cannot speak on behalf of them. What we have though is a very in-depth picture of what socioeconomic disadvantage can look like for Spryfield youth and encouragement to continue this conversation among the Spryfield community. Future research may benefit from investigating the effects of Pathways Spryfield on youth longitudinally, and whether the youth who have taken part in Pathways have continued to see success socioeconomically. Additionally, since every youth in Spryfield cannot access the Pathways to Education program for various reasons, research on how these youth combat neighbourhood effects (if they do) would contribute greatly to this growing body of research.

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