Hiding in Plain Sight: Omaha’s 160-Year Assault on the Urban Poor, Minorities and the Disadvantaged: A Critical Dialogue Paper

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Hiding in Plain Sight: Omaha’s 160-Year Assault on the Urban Poor, Minorities and the Disadvantaged

A CRITICAL DIALOGUE PAPER

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In this the 50th year since President Lyndon Johnson and the U.S. Congress declared a national domestic war to address the massive crisis of poverty in the United States, it seems a fitting time to take a “completely fresh look” at the multiplicity of factors underlying this devastating and extremely-complex problem. Based on a combination of unique historical and community-cultural characteristics and the very poor poverty-related outcomes described in this paper, the City of Omaha [Nebraska] provides a case study to better understand the roots and nature of poverty.

Based largely on Patrick McNamara’s invaluable, but since neglected, 2007 comparative case study of Omaha’s community culture, this paper shows that certain components of and patterns within it, have been identified that are clearly tied to some of the worst urban-minority poverty and related socio-economic problems in the United States. These preliminary findings are especially ironic, as Omaha as an entity and a great many of its citizens, see and tout themselves and their home-place as a virtually-utopian representation of “the good life” and among the absolutely best places to live, raise families and conduct business anywhere in the country and the entire world.

Our examination and analyses of McNamara’s primarily qualitative, theory-building study, along with additional research findings, form the foundation for this paper, which we hope will be a “bridge” to the future development of a more-quantitative, applied research and poverty-policy development agenda. By focusing on the identified components of Omaha’s community culture which are linked to poverty and other local problems, this new information should be of enormous benefit to individuals and institutions that are addressing the many concrete issues and ongoing, poverty-related crises in Omaha and Nebraska.

COMMUNITY CULTURE AND CULTURAL NARRATIVES

“Community culture” is generally defined as the concepts, memes, beliefs, values, customs, practices, language, behaviors and institutions that help define a particular population. To summarize and comprehend this defining information, certain stories are created that come to represent a group or population’s self- and shared identities and values. These tales are commonly referred to as “community-culture” narratives within academic disciplines such as sociology, cultural anthropology, social-psychology, history, political-economics, etc. [Howard, 1991].

A more-specific and academic definition of “community-culture” (and the corresponding cultural narrative) employed in this paper, is the one used by McNamara, which includes three major definitional factors: 1) community power, 2) social capital and 3) political history.

1See “Collaborative Success and Community Culture: Cross-Sectoral Partnerships Addressing Homelessness in Omaha and Portland (McNamara, 2007).”
Taken together, these factors are used to create various typologies or archetypes that are found in
different cities and locations, which may then be used to more-accurately and meaningfully
understand and evaluate local community cultures, narratives and their impacts.

A. COMMUNITY POWER IN OMAHA

*Community Power* has generally been defined as the intentional use of various resources
to exert a group’s collective will over others (Wrong, 1995; Domhoff, 2002). McNamara
modifies this definition somewhat in his work, in emphasizing that power is also, “...a group’s
ability to use resources to achieve desired ends.” The following factors are of primary
importance in classifying Omaha as a “private-sector” community culture (McNamara, 2007).

1. Elite/Private-Sector Leadership and Centrally-Controlled Decision-Making

Since the city’s inception in 1854, a clear pattern of highly-centralized and concentrated
control and decision-making, wielded by a relatively-small group of elite and powerful leaders
(usually private-sector businessmen), has existed and persisted. In three major eras, under
widely-different economic and social conditions, this defining factor of strong top-down, almost
exclusively private-sector leadership, has been shown to be the driving and controlling force in
Omaha’s development and performance.

2. Overriding Values of Economic Reductionism and Profit-Motives in Omaha Culture

While it might not be surprising that economic and financial gain are the dominant values
in a private-sector community culture (McNamara, 2007), the extent to which they override and
undermine efforts to address serious social problems like poverty in Omaha, is not widely
recognized or understood. These findings are consistent with elite control and economic
“growth machine” theories (Molotch, 1976; Logan and Molotch, 1987), which reveal that
economic self-interest and maximization of financial gain for the elite, is the primary motivation
behind private sector, government and non-profit collaborations to develop land and construct
buildings and infrastructure.  

While some argue this development benefits the entire community by creating
employment (Peterson, 1981), critics point out that such a single-minded focus on the generation
of enormous profits for the economic elite and other beneficiaries, comes at the expense of the
working poor, racial and ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups (Waste, 1993; Box,
1998) and results in weaker growing income and wealth inequality within a community
(Krugman, 2014).

---

2 The three (3) eras of elite, private-sector control in Omaha are: 1) Initial Omaha “Boosterism,” rampant elite
land-use speculation and development, Trans-Continental Railroad/Union Pacific Outside-Investor Control (1854-
1897), 2) Political-Boss Tom Dennison’s Elite Power and Control for the Private Sector (1898-1931) and 3) Elite
Private-Sector and Corporate Control from Ak-Sar-Ben to Heritage Services (1932-Present). See (Larsen and
Cotrell, 1982, 1997; McNamara, 2007).

3 An extremely-long list of such “growth-machine” projects in Omaha over the decades, includes the three most
recent ones: 1) the $291 million CenturyLink/Qwest Convention Center (2003), 2) the $92 million Holland Center
for the Performing Arts (2009) and 3) the $132 million TD Ameritrade Baseball Park (built to retain the NCAA
College World Series in Omaha until at least 2035 if constructed).
3. Omaha’s and Nebraska’s Comparatively Weak and Ineffective Governments

Other effects of long-term, over-reliance on a small group of private-sector leaders for all important community decision-making, control of social-power networks and the distribution of jobs, incomes and other economic benefits, is that local and state governments and nonprofit organizations will likely be relatively weak and ineffective in addressing social problems and other matters (Lynd & Lynd, 1927; Hunter, 1953; Stone, 2005).

4. The Role of the “Free” Press in Public Policy and Social Control

A final factor of community power noted in this paper (and examined in more detail by McNamara), is the role of the local press serving as a tool of the elite to maintain power and control in Omaha. Even prior to the City’s founding in 1854, the business elite have continuously used the local newspapers in a “booster” capacity to advertise and promote Omaha as an “ideal garden” for investment and opportunity (Larsen & Cotrell, 1997). Since its inception in 1889, the Omaha World-Herald (the city’s only paper since 1937) has vigorously and continuously pushed the views of the controlling business leaders and their agenda, virtually becoming the embodiment of the Omaha elite and their values system (Darstrom, 1988).

B. SOCIAL CAPITAL IN OMAHA

Social capital was first popularly defined and expanded upon by Robert Putnam in his works investigating the nature and status of civic engagement (1993, 1995 and 2000). Other social scientists also contributed to and expanded the modern concept, noting that the function of social capital (like that of physical infrastructure/factories and financial and human capital in the production of goods and services) is to facilitate the productive achievement of particular societal goals, outcomes and ends (Coleman, 1990; Edwards and Foley, 1999).

A similar working definition used by McNamara in his study is that, “Social capital consists of networks of trust and the norms that exist in a community to be productively used by individuals and organizations [...] to get things done that cannot otherwise be done.”

1. High Levels of Social Bonding and Low Levels of Social Bridging Capital

The networks of trust or connectedness that exist within some groups, such as those of community leadership for example, exhibit extremely high levels of “social bonding” capital (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003) and trust between the individuals that have been admitted and accepted into the group. If a person or organization has these types of personal “connections,” access to sufficient resources and opportunities [in Omaha] will very likely be made available by those in power (Banfield & Wilson, 1963).

4 These early Omaha papers are The Arrow (June, 1854), the Nebraskan (1856), the Nebraskan and Times (1859), the Nebraska Republican (1863), the Omaha Herald (1865), the Omaha Bee (1872), the Evening World (1885).

5 The paper was founded in its present form through the merger of the Omaha Herald (1865) and the Omaha World (1885).
The equally or perhaps even more-negative downside of these very high-bonding networks of trust, is that those not within or connected to certain groups, feel the extremely low levels of “social bridging” social capital (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003). The resulting inability of many or most individuals and organizations to have meaningful connections with “more-elite” individuals and groups, creates the very-real and oppressive sense and atmosphere, that Omaha is highly “fractional” and “fragmented” (McNamara 2003).

2. Social Norms and Unspoken Rules in Omaha

The “norms” and “unspoken rules” in Omaha manifest as “conservative” pressures to live traditional lifestyles that include long-term hetero-sexual marriage, child-rearing, church attendance, community volunteerism and/or donating to charities and causes, along with the display of other expected values, attitudes, behaviors, duties and obligations. The over-riding theme is that to rise to a level of affluence and influence in Omaha, persons need to conform to, live within and abide by these normative systems and constraints (McNamara, 2007).

3. Philanthropy and Social Networks as Mechanisms of Elite Control

Through the decades, private-sector leaders and their followers, employees and collaborating individuals and institutions have employed a variety of mechanisms to gain and maintain power and control of others in Omaha (Larsen & Cotrell, 1997). Eikenberry (2007) notes that even philanthropy, through control of its boards and social networks, the determination of the type and nature of funded projects, the levels of funding and in other ways, can be a mechanism of elite community power and social control.

4. Structural Racism, Sexism and Other Forms of Exclusion in Omaha

Other forms of social control by the elite are related to the access that is allowed or not allowed to people of color, women, nonprofit and social service leaders, government officials and other “outsiders” (McNamara, 2007). While some in Omaha insist that these forms of discrimination and exclusion do not even exist anymore in this city, the data collected from key informants provides strong evidence that this is certainly not the case.

C. POLITICAL HISTORY IN OMAHA

Political history is the third aspect of community culture to be considered, which McNamara further refines among three sub-indicators: 1) citizen participation, 2) control of public process and policy and 3) leadership. He also notes that understanding the political history of a locale is especially important in accurately classifying the type of community-culture under study.

1. Citizen Participation

McNamara (2007) notes that high levels of citizen participation and meaningful first-hand involvement in the democratic decision-making process, as occurs in Portland [Oregon], is

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6McNamara specifically cites land-use planning, development and valuation decisions, as examples of how control of these by the private-sector elites, defines and impacts public/private “collaborations” in Omaha.
a defining characteristic of public-sector community cultures, as opposed to private-sector cultures where major decisions are controlled and made by a small, elite as in Omaha.

For citizens to acquire greater and more-significant democratic participation, many factors such as: 1) politicians and public administrators creating more avenues for real involvement, 2) higher expectations by citizens that participation is a fundamental right and 3) holding both public and private-sector leaders of the local power-structure accountable for bad decisions and poor social and economic outcomes are necessary.

2. Private-Sector Control of Public Process and Policy in Omaha

Growth machine theory holds that elite groups control local government decisions to maximize economic benefits to themselves, their members and/or employees and followers (Molotch, 1976; Logan & Molotch, 1987). Political decisions, for example those related to proposed public/private construction projects, endorsed by the elite/corporate leaders who stand to gain the most monetarily from them, are regularly supported and approved by politicians (whose political campaigns have been supported by the private developers) and are then implemented by public administrators.

Although the local booster-narrative is that this is a good model of public-private-nonprofit inter-sectoral partnership and collaboration, this largely-concealed process often ends up being little more than, “…an insulated, elitist activity in which residents, neighborhood groups, grass-roots community organizations and individual citizens are not viewed as essential or explicit to these initiatives” (Turner, 2002).

3. Political Leadership

The elite leadership of Omaha has primarily been private-sector “heavy weights,” who have obtained and retained tight control for all but of few of the sixteen (16) decades the city has existed (McNamara, 2007). One of McNamara’s important conclusions, is that a challenge in improving community cultures and collaborations, is the false notion that one sector can completely dominate all others. To have a healthy, prosperous, fully-functioning and well-integrated community “….one sector alone cannot sustain a community.”

III. OMAHA’S COMMUNITY-CULTURE NARRATIVE VS. OMAHA’S REALITY

This chapter presents a further examination of Omaha’s community-culture and narrative, presenting additional more-quantitative (objective) data as it relates to both. As shown in the preceding chapter, Omaha’s community-culture narrative, historically paints a portrait of Omaha as unquestionably among the best places in the U.S. and world, to live, raise families and conduct business.

A. THE “VIRTUALLY-UTOPIAN” NARRATIVE OF OMAHA

Omaha is home to five Fortune 500 companies: Berkshire Hathaway, ConAgra Foods, Union Pacific, Peter Kiewit Sons' and Mutual of Omaha. As noted in the Omaha World Herald:

“Using the federal government’s broadest definition of what constitutes a metropolitan area, a World Herald analysis shows that Omaha is home to more Fortune 500...
companies per capita than any major metro area in the nation.” (Cordes, February 3, 2013).

Similarly, Omaha’s Chamber of Commerce and the Omaha World Herald consistently present Omaha’s other positive, high national rankings on a variety of community factors, which tend to support the utopian claims of the city’s incomparable virtues. Some of these “best” national rankings are presented in the left-hand column of Table 1 below.

To provide a more-balanced and accurate view of other wide-ranging, actual conditions in Omaha, however, the left-hand column presents a side-by-side comparison of some of Omaha’s “worst” national conditions’ rankings. This pertinent and often dismissed information demonstrates why large segments of the population refer to the city as The Two Omaha’s.”

Table 1
Best and Worst Conditions Rankings and Indicators for Greater Omaha [Nebraska]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OMAHA’S BEST CONDITIONS RANKINGS &amp; INDICATORS (Source)</th>
<th>OMAHA’S WORST CONDITIONS RANKINGS &amp; INDICATORS (Source)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#3 Best Cities to Start a Business (Nerdwallet.com)</td>
<td>#3 Highest U.S. Black Poverty Rate (100 Largest U.S. Metropolitan Areas) (U.S. Census Bureau)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#1 New and Expanding Facilities (MSA’s 200,000 – 1 Million) (Site Selection Magazine)</td>
<td>#1 Highest U.S. Black-Children Poverty Rate (100 Largest U.S. Metropolitan Areas) (U.S. Census Bureau)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#1 Top 10 Best Cities to Raise a Family (Movoto Blog)</td>
<td>#2 Highest U.S. Rate of Placing Children in Foster Care7 (U.S. Department Health and Human Services)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 Number of Economic Development Projects (MSA’s 200,000 – 1 Million) (Site Selection Magazine)</td>
<td>#1 Highest U.S. Black Homicide Victimization Rate (Violence Prevention Center)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 America’s 10 Best Cities for Professional Women (Motovo Blog)</td>
<td>#2 Highest Percentage of Hourly Workers Earning at or Below Minimum Wage8 (U.S. Department of Labor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 Top 50 Military-Friendly Cities (G.I. Jobs)</td>
<td>#2 Lowest U.S. Eligibility Level for Childcare Assistance for Low-Income Working Families9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 This ranking is for the state of Nebraska with the vast majority of placements occurring in families in Omaha.  
8 The ranking is within the mid-western geographic region.  
9 Based on the percentage of the official U.S. Poverty Level set by the state of Nebraska (and translated into dollars).
(Nebraska Appleseed Center)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#1</th>
<th>Least Financial Stress on Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Credibility.org)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>Widest U.S. Economic Disparity Between</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black and White Residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Omaha World-Herald)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>Best City for Cheapskates</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Kiplinger, 2013)</td>
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<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>Highest U.S. Black Arrest Rates for</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marijuana Possession</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(American Civil Liberties Union, 2013)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. THE REALITY OF OMAHA’S EXCLUDED AND DAMAGED COMMUNITIES

With all the massive resources available in Omaha, among many highly-vested philanthropic foundations, a high proportion of wealthy professionals and businessmen and an elite private-sector leadership that never fails at any initiative or project they undertake (McNamara, 2007), policy-makers must ask, “Why then, does Omaha continue to produce and struggle with such extreme poverty after 50 years of “effort?” And perhaps more importantly, if the private-sector leadership takes credit for all the positive economic outcomes that have been produced, must they not also have to take responsibility for all the extremely-poor social outcomes that Omaha has also produced?

Why do Omaha and Nebraska have minority-child poverty rates at 18% (the highest in the entire U.S.) and 34% of single-parent families with related children that are below poverty at a rate; 16,597 adults and children receiving welfare (TANF); 82,000 children receiving food stamps and 223,269 children enrolled in Medicaid and CHIP (Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity, 2014)? Unfortunately, these data highlight the great and growing economic disparity between the worlds of Omaha’s Fortune 500 companies, passive investors, related businesses and industries, their employees and beneficiaries and that of the working-poor, minority and disadvantaged citizens and their families in Omaha and Nebraska, living near or suffering in poverty every day.

1. The History and Current Context of Anti-Poverty Measures in the U.S. and Omaha

While such simplistic beliefs and myths that the poor and minorities lack motivation, adequate morals and/or are in poverty solely due to their own poor choices and behaviors, have been debunked by the social sciences and human-service professionals, the objective realities of poverty here are that: 1) nearly one in five or 20% of Omaha’s children live in poverty for at least part of each year, 2) 30,000 Nebraskans are at risk of homelessness and 3) that at one local Omaha elementary school, 80% of the students live at or below the poverty line. Families in poverty have doubled since 2000 in this area.

In Nebraska, Republican Governor Dave Heineman has denied federally-funded Medicaid expansion three times, which was made available to the states at no initial cost, as a result of the congressionally-approved Affordable Care Act.; denied access to critically-
necessary driver licenses for authorized young people under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA); was even against taxpayer-funded pre-natal care for undocumented immigrants and is also against granting in-state tuition to children of undocumented immigrants.

To further explore community-cultural and narrative themes, the following section of this summary provides additional information on some of the recently adopted policies and implementations of poverty-related remediation measures and actions, in Omaha and Nebraska, which have been anything but helpful or remedial.

2. Catastrophic State Government Failures Responsible for Worsening Poverty

Many catastrophic failures by Nebraska’s state government have received considerable national attention in the New York Times and other media since 2008. This was the year that NE Legislative Bill 157 (which was originally intended for infants, but the law did not specify the age of youths), allowed parents/guardians to drop off any children they could not adequately care for at hospitals and other public facilities, which children would then become legal wards of the state and therefore eligible for previously-denied assistance, with no questions asked.

What nationally came to be known as Nebraska’s “Safe Haven Crisis,” was the first major indicator and widely-visible sign, of the extent to which public mental-health, human social, correctional and other critical services for the working poor and their children in the state, were often non-existent or completely inaccessible to those who need them most. In 2008, 6,600 children were in the custody of the State of Nebraska, making it the second highest ratio of children in state care in the U.S.\(^\text{10}\)

To reduce the number of state wards, the Governor and NHHS “muscled-through” and implemented (over the vociferous but unsuccessful objections of service providers and child advocates), an inadequately-researched and poorly understood program of “privatization” of the child welfare system. This action practically and essentially shifted the burden and responsibility of caring and providing critically needed services for children, from the state to five private contractors in 2009, without budgeting adequate transitional, oversight or compensatory resources.

While the wildly-optimistic and naïve goals of the Governor and the state were to enhance efficiency and accountability while controlling the costs of the failing system, this effort was another spectacular failure to address poverty and related problems.\(^\text{11}\) A partial list of some of the worst failures and performance by Nebraska’s state government in addressing poverty-related problems includes:

- Nebraska’s “Safe Haven” Crisis

\(^\text{10}\) Also at that time, there were only six practicing child psychiatrists in the entire state, and the mental and behavioral health services for children and adolescents were scarce, unaffordable, and difficult to access, according to reports prepared by Voices for Children, Nebraska Appleseed and (later) the Nebraska Legislature.

\(^\text{11}\) As reported by the Omaha World-Herald, information gathered in the investigations above, into the disastrous, privatization initiative driven by the Republican administration, revealed that privatization has resulted in an additional $75 million in direct expenditures for the state, not a cost savings as promised. The studies also found that another $75 million or more in other indirect costs, due to the loss of valued and experienced state staff, other system-wide impacts and needed remediation efforts for affected families, will be forthcoming in the next several years. Today, only one of the original five service providers is still in business in/with Nebraska.
• “Privatization” of Health and Human Services/Child Welfare Programs
• Federal Non-Compliance and Closing of the Beatrice, Nebraska State Developmental Center (Mental Disability and Health Facility) \(^\text{12}\)
• “Access Nebraska” (Mandatory Online System to Access SNAP/Other Benefits) \(^\text{13}\)
• Nebraska Department of Corrections (Early Release of Nikko Jenkins and Other Serious and Violent Prisoners) \(^\text{14}\)

But just as the stark incompetency and weakness of the public sector has dramatically emerged, a recent “cross-sectoral” program failure to close Omaha’s long-standing educational gaps (Building Bright Futures), \(^\text{15}\) may be the first crack in the “myth of invincibility” of the wealthy-elite domination and control of the social, economic and political culture of Omaha.

In his interviews with key community informants knowledgeable of its history and inner-workings, there was consistent agreement that if any local project or initiative was to be successful, all that was needed was the participation and support of members of this elite group. If these business leaders were behind a proposal, history had shown it would unquestionably be “successful,” if they were not, it would “fail.”

While the overall analysis of public-policy was correct (that poor educational performance and poverty are strongly linked) and the right approach, both the implementation efforts and the amount of resources necessary to reduce or end poverty were completely insufficient and must be dramatically larger in size and scope. Some very basic ameliorations must include more-comparable wages and incomes throughout the city (Nebraska’s minimum wage, received by a majority of Omaha’s working poor families, is a paltry $7.25 per hour); universal healthcare, affordable and available transportation and housing, and an educational

\(^{12}\) This facility had a decades-long history of problems and was found out of compliance by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (see “An Indictment of Indifference,” The Center for Disability Rights, Law and Advocacy, 2007) costing the state approximately $30 million dollars in lost Federal revenue and fines.

\(^{13}\) This mandatory online system to receive welfare benefits implemented in 2011, has received constant and severe criticism since its implementation. It is now the subject of a law suit filed by advocates for persons seeking SNAP benefits due to unlawful extensive processing delays for the Federal Food-Stamp Benefit.

\(^{14}\) In June 2014, an Omaha World-Herald investigation showed that the Nebraska Department of Corrections had improperly calculated the sentences of and/or mistakenly released approximately 873 serious and violent offenders early, sometimes by as much as 35 years. One case is especially significant involving a now-convicted murderer named Nikko Jenkins. Jenkins was incarcerated as a youth and had a long history of serious mental-health problems as a juvenile prior to his conviction. Despite this fact he was subjected to long periods of solitary confinement and his pleas for treatment were ignored by Corrections, who believed he was “faking” them. Prior to his release Jenkins begged for treatment and not to be released, warning officials that he was hearing voices and that he would kill people if he was let out. Again his pleas were ignored and he killed four persons within weeks of his being freed from custody.

\(^{15}\) Building Bright Futures (BBF) was organized in 2006 by Omaha leaders and philanthropists to address education gaps and issues impacting poor children and their families. The goals included that within five years, every poor child in Douglas and Sarpy County would have health care, tutors and mentors, and the opportunity to go to college. The organization spent about $7 million dollars a year donated by Omaha philanthropists. One of the most intriguing goals of BBF was that public policy regarding poverty would be highlighted and the initiative would insure that every poor child was as well-equipped as possible to face the challenges pursuing their education despite being poor.
system with highly-skilled and culturally-competent personnel who are trained to work with families who are experiencing inter-generational poverty.

IV. STUDY FINDINGS AND ANALYSES, SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The long-standing control of Omaha’s economic, social and political spheres by generations of small, powerful, elite-circles of wealthy businessmen has produced great economic benefits for the city, sometimes astounding personal wealth for themselves and for many of their employees and others having connections to them (McNamara, 2007).

However, the complete domination of Omaha by a private-sector community culture and narrative, has according to “growth theory” (Molotch, 1976; Logan and Molotch 1987) and the data compiled for this paper, likewise helped create and extend extreme conditions of poverty and other social problems for many other of its citizens, particularly those who have no access to the exclusive social and economic networks that enforce and perpetuate this culture.¹⁶

A. OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE, MODERNIZATION & IMPROVEMENT

The ultimate intent of this paper is not merely to criticize, but to present findings and information about the culture and conditions of Omaha, to see if we can discern or point out facts, patterns, perceptions, clues or new understandings, that might be useful in bringing needed change, modernization or improvements, for the betterment of all people in Omaha, or in any other locales where they are needed.

The following sub-sections contain what we believe are the most-important findings gleaned through our efforts, including recommendations on how they might best be applied by interested parties, to achieve the aforementioned goals.

1. Communities, Cultures and Narratives Are Not Static

Despite the fact that Omaha’s community culture has maintained its primary private-sector classification and other characteristics, almost continuously for 160 years since it was founded, recent research suggests that no communities or their cultures are static or unchanging (Sinclair, 2002). Anthony Giddens (1984) points out just the opposite in fact, arguing that communities are continually changing, transitioning and restructuring, even if this process is not immediately apparent.

2. The Role of Youth and Generational Change in Social, Political and Economic Progress

¹⁶ Historians Larsen and Cotrell and others describe the destruction of the black middle-class as primarily accruing to four (4) economic and social policies pursued by Omaha’s leadership in the early and middle part of the 20th Century: 1) the closure and re-organization of the meat-packing and railroad industries in Omaha that had a devastating impact on black and minority employment, 2) comprehensive racial discrimination against blacks which did not allow them to live or obtain housing outside a small area (ghetto) in north Omaha (where a majority of black citizens still reside), 3) discrimination in hiring blacks to work on the construction of the Interstate Highway System and other construction projects in the 1950's and later and 4) the successful efforts of Omaha’s leaders to largely exclude the federal government and its anti-poverty programs from having a strong leadership presence in Omaha (to ensure the elite’s continuing complete dominance in policy and power) during the early 1960s and 1970s, that provided a wide array of services and benefits (including the development of a professional class) to blacks in cities across the U.S.
McNamara’s (2007) interviews with key informants in Omaha, demonstrate a clear pattern of concern among various segments of the population, about what the next generation of leaders will “bring to the table” as the previous generation retires. Some felt that the training of replacements in the elite, private sector leadership has been well underway for years, to insure a seamless transition with little change. Others felt quite differently and expressed hope, that the more-evolved value-systems and extensive knowledge of successful strategies to address social problems, could be the keys to “finally tearing down the Berlin Wall” of the imposing and harmful, cultural resistance to needed change.

Both Omaha and Nebraska have decades-old, serious problems of massive numbers of highly-educated and motivated youths migrating to other states (commonly referred to as the “brain drain”). These figures alone should give the private-sector and elite leadership sufficient evidence to investigate, that perhaps some improvements and upgrades in Omaha’s community-culture and a more-realistic narrative might be in order, to help stem the continuing flows of talented citizens to destinations with alternative cultures.

Our new era of rapidly-evolving capacities for interactions, social organizing and communication through social media and other forms, should enliven the imaginations of the designers of and participants in, the next versions of social structures, processes and practices in all disciplines, that are have already been here in other cities/states for a decade or more and are rapidly approaching in the “laggers” throughout the U.S.

3. A Call for a More “Public Regarding” Community Culture

Dye and Zeigler (1993) are cited by McNamara in his study of Omaha’s community culture, as calling for the private-sector elite to become more “public regarding.” This notion may become more acceptable to the elites for a variety of reasons in the near future, perhaps partially-based on their recent experiences of failure, in attempting to address some of Omaha’s most-egregious social problems. This means a much greater sharing of power and decision-making with all citizens and public and nonprofit-sector institutions.

On some levels, there must be a realization among the leadership that higher levels of publicly-controlled revenue are absolutely necessary, to improve state and local government functioning and to effectively address our growing lists of worsening social and environmental crises. There must also be a growing realization among the elite leaders, that the wildly-growing levels of wealth and income-inequality we have seen in society for over 30 years, are simply not sustainable and could jeopardize the entire economic system upon which the lives of everyone (including their own) are based.

4. Strengthening Governmental & Nonprofit Sectors and Increasing Citizen Participation

In public-sector community cultures such as Portland, a stronger, more-effective and productive government sector exists, which plays key roles in addressing social problems like poverty, in ways that are not possible for private-sector entities (McNamara, 2007). Local and state governments are especially well-positioned and have legally-authorized powers in creating

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17 According to just-released U.S. Census Bureau data, Nebraska posted huge net losses of college graduates in the past two years. In 2011 and 2012 alone, an astounding 3,680 and 4,117 more college graduates left the state than entered it.
avenues and venues for meaningful citizen participation in the democratic decision-making process.

Perhaps most important of all, governments and public administrators could be the key and legitimate actors, to initiate improved collaborative cross-sectoral projects. Such more-inclusive collaborations have proven to be the most-effective organizational structures to address social ills like poverty, in all arenas of personal, familial and community betterment.

5. Community Culture, Poverty/Social Problems Research and Policy Development

Finally, our greatest hope and highest recommendation is that the information and findings in this report (and any subsequent research it may help generate) be reviewed, discussed and employed by wide-ranging and inclusive individuals, groups and institutions in Omaha, Nebraska and interested communities anywhere. More specifically, it should be used to make needed improvements in cultural performance, poverty abatement and related-social problem outcomes. As we have stressed throughout, this paper should be only viewed and employed as a starting point for additional investigation and research, better policy development and more-forceful and effective community organization and action.

Progress in these areas will require that those involved in these efforts, transcend and help transform those aspects of the local community culture and narrative that are actually creating poverty and other social dysfunctions, or at best, are providing unnecessary resistance to what clearly and finally needs to be done, to diminish the expanding poverty in Omaha and throughout the U.S.
I. INTRODUCTION

In this the 50th year since President Lyndon Johnson and the U.S. Congress declared a national domestic war to address the massive crisis of poverty in the United States, it seems a fitting time to take a “completely fresh look” at the multiplicity of factors underlying this devastating and extremely-complex problem. Our initial suspicions were that the City of Omaha and Nebraska, based on a combination of unique historical and cultural characteristics and very poor poverty-related outcomes, might have something important to teach us to better understand the roots and nature of poverty, as well as for the development of new anti-poverty approaches, tools and structural reforms.

Even under the best of circumstances, where a majority of leaders and citizens in the private, public and nonprofit sectors have a good grasp of the causes and complex nature of poverty, and knowledge of the best practices to address it, actually doing so effectively is still a tremendous challenge. When such comprehension is completely missing or blurred however (for example, based on false or incomplete understandings of community-culture and cultural narratives), tragic failures in policy prescriptions and achieving desired outcomes are wholly predictable and inevitable.

A. A CASE STUDY OF COMMUNITY CULTURE AND POVERTY

Beginning with the city’s founding in 1854 and continuing for 160 years, the leaders, citizens and institutions of Omaha [Nebraska] have contributed in countless ways to the development of the current community-culture and the dominant narrative that helps explain, shape, sustain and drive it. Although Omaha’s culture has evolved through strikingly different eras and conditions over the last century and a half-plus, certain components and patterns have
emerged and been identified, that form the basis for the “preliminary” case study presented in this paper.

It is our hope and primary intention, that these largely qualitative (subjective) and theoretical findings, will be useful in further quantitative (objective) and applied (“real world”) investigation, documentation, analyses and comprehension of the entire spectrum of community-culture factors and their collective impacts and outcomes. The evidence collected in previous research, clearly shows that these local-cultural factors are tied in Omaha, to some of the worst urban-minority poverty and related socio-economic problems in the United States. This is especially ironic and perhaps somewhat unexpected, as Omaha as an entity and a great many of its citizens, see and tout themselves and their home-places (in a very incomplete and often misleading community narrative) as virtually-utopian representations of “the good life” and among the absolutely best places to live, raise families and conduct business anywhere in the country and the entire world.

While important and useful in understanding the reality of poor social conditions, the vast accumulations of quantitative data and statistical analyses generated in the U.S. during the past 50 years, about poverty and its effects, have actually provided little more than copious amounts of “grist for the mill” of ideologically-driven debate and political conflict. Typically, the masses of methodically-collected information on the subject has had very little impact in producing meaningful and lasting improvements in the levels of poverty during the last five decades, largely due to the irrationally competing and antagonistic, “values-driven” interpretations of the very same data.
In our view, better understandings of the “true nature” of community cultures and cultural narratives (whether distorted, accurate or somewhere in between), has been a crucially-important and largely-omitted key, to our finally addressing societal poverty comprehensively and effectively. Such additional comprehension and knowledge can only be arrived at and attained, however, through holistic investigations of the inter-related historical, social, economic, political, psychological and other multi-disciplinary factors that create, comprise and perpetuate community cultures and narratives.

B. PURPOSES OF THE STUDY AND OVERVIEW

This paper presents the findings of our first exploratory effort to re-examine the broad community-cultural context in which poverty conditions for so many in Omaha and Nebraska, have been constructed and maintained. Important findings from previous research conducted at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and by others in various disciplines, provide a sturdy platform on which we hope to continue to build, in combination with current poverty conditions findings and analyses compiled by our research team.

The primary purposes of the study are three-fold. First, it examines previous key qualitative and theoretical research findings that identify relevant, underlying community-culture factors and narratives. It then combines these findings with additional quantitative and applied poverty-related information, which continues to show Omaha’s “extremely poor” outcomes in national urban-area comparisons, after 50 years of amelioration efforts.

Finally, this study provides specific recommendations and research questions to address critical aspects of the community culture and narrative, especially as they have negatively impacted poverty and related social problems. We hope that these recommendations and
research questions, based on and derived from the findings of this report, will be useful in guiding future basic and applied research in these and other areas of investigation, as well as informing cross-sectoral\textsuperscript{18} efforts to develop, resource and implement new and improved anti-poverty policies, programming initiatives, legislation, and structural reforms.

C. ORGANIZATION OF THE PAPER

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Chapter II examines the nature and importance of the “community culture” context, cultural archetypes and alternatives, significant historical patterns in Omaha and how they have been shown to impact the effectiveness of collaborative efforts to address poverty and related social problems. Chapter III first examines and contrasts the information and indicators found in Omaha’s dominant community-culture and narrative (promoted and enforced by key actors within the local power structure), with some of the city’s unique and “extremely poor” poverty-related outcome indicators, that are totally excluded or minimized in the narrative in a variety of ways.

To conclude the paper, we then present poverty and community-culture related recommendations and research questions, intended to improve social-problem-amelioration performance and outcomes in Omaha. Our larger hopes are that these findings and examples will also provide ideas and insights, to update and create a more-accurate and effective community culture and narrative in Omaha, and wherever else they are needed. These improvements are critically necessary to insure that all leaders, citizens and organizations, may more-productively and finally, address severe poverty and the related social problems that are currently being faced by a large and rapidly-growing proportion of the population.

\textsuperscript{18} Between and/or involving private, public and nonprofit sectors.
II. COMMUNITY CULTURE, NARRATIVES & IMPACTS ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS

“Community culture” is generally defined and understood as the concepts, memes, beliefs, values, customs, practices, language, behaviors and institutions that help define a particular population. For a variety of reasons and through multiple media over time, certain stories are created and emerge that come to represent a group’s or population’s self- and shared identities and values. These tales are commonly referred to as “community-culture” narratives within academic disciplines such as sociology, cultural anthropology, social-psychology, history, political-economics, etc. [Howard, 1991].

A more-specific and academic definition of “community-culture” and cultural narrative employed in this study, is the one used by Patrick McNamara in his comparative study, “Collaborative Success and Community Culture: Cross-Sectoral Partnerships Addressing Homelessness in Omaha and Portland (2007).” (Due to space limitations here, readers of our paper may want to view this study in its entirety at http://pqdtopen.proquest.com/pubnum/3287859.html?FMT=AI, for more in-depth and additional information on a variety of findings and operational definitions we reference.

In this model, additional definitional factors such as 1) community power, 2) social capital and 3) political history are also considered, to create various typologies or archetypes that are found in different cities and locations, which may then be used to more-accurately and meaningfully understand and evaluate local community cultures and narratives. The more-detailed understandings and insights gained in this manner, especially related to the importance of local contexts, are also critically necessary to assess community-culture impacts on other
social phenomena, such as organized and collaborative efforts to address social problems like poverty.¹⁹

McNamara’s key findings and relevant, additional historical and current-conditions information we have compiled, regarding the nature of community power, social capital and political participation in Omaha are presented in the remainder of this chapter. The factors presented are of critical importance in categorizing Omaha’s community culture and evaluating its impacts on the ability of the system to address poverty and other social problems. In addition, more qualitative information and evidence, provided in the comments and answers to structured questions obtained in interviews with key-informants, that also typify and summarize the most common and representative findings for each factor, are provided in italics.

A. COMMUNITY POWER IN OMAHA

Community Power has generally been defined as the intentional use of various resources to exert a group’s collective will over others (Wrong, 1995: Domhoff, 2002). McNamara modifies this definition somewhat in his work, in emphasizing that power is, “...a group’s ability to use resources to achieve desired ends.” He also notes, most importantly in the study of community culture, that the concept of power may be further refined as “power-over” as a form of coercion or control (Follett, 1925) or as “power-with” which is more collaborative in nature and practice (Fox and Urwich, 1993).

¹⁹ In this research, McNamara employed extensive interviews with numerous well-placed, experienced and knowledgeable key informants, focus groups and a research methodology called “member checking” (Schwandt 2001, p. 155; Creswell, 2003, p.196) to corroborate and increase the validity of the findings.
1. Elite/Private-Sector Leadership and Centrally-Controlled Decision-Making in Omaha

Since the city’s inception in 1854, a clear pattern of highly-centralized and concentrated control and decision-making, wielded by a relatively-small group of elite and powerful leaders (usually private-sector businessmen), has existed and persisted. In three major eras,\(^\text{20}\) under widely-different economic and social conditions, this defining factor of strong top-down, almost exclusively private-sector leadership, has been shown to be the driving and controlling force in Omaha’s development and performance. This factor is of primary importance in classifying Omaha as a private-sector community culture (McNamara, 2007).

- “If you look at every major [cross-sectoral] collaborative effort in the past, there has always been some business leader at the forefront. We are fortunate to have six or seven business leaders who do that [now in this era].”

- “The first level of leadership is the four guys who run Omaha – Gottschalk, Scott, Yanney and Stinson.”

- “The common denominator in all successful collaboration is the business community. Because there is philanthropic engagement, the business community has legitimacy in this city.”

- “It’s the five or ten white males who all sit on boards, run the corporations and are very community minded.” “Personally, I’d rather work with five or six guys rather than a broader group. It’s easier to ask them, ‘Will this happen?’ and they say ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’”

- “On the surface it’s changed, but I’m not really sure it’s changed in its core. There are still the major players around who run this city.”

- “There was a former city councilman, John Miller, who was working on some economic development issue at the Chamber. I met with him about some of the work we were doing and he says, ‘Have you met with Walter Scott? You can’t do something like this in this town without meeting with Walter Scott.’”

\(^{20}\) The three (3) eras of elite, private-sector control in Omaha are: 1) Initial Omaha “Boosterism,” rampant elite land-use speculation and development, Trans-Continental Railroad/Union Pacific Outside-Investor Control (1854-1897), 2) Political-Boss Tom Dennison’s Elite Power and Control for the Private Sector (1898-1931) and 3) Elite Private-Sector and Corporate Control from Ak-Sar-Ben to Heritage Services (1932-Present). See (Larsen and Cotrell, 1982, 1997; McNamara, 2007).
• “The Heritage Services\textsuperscript{21} group – when they decide something is going to get done, it will.”

2. **Overriding Values of Economic Reductionism and Profit-Motives in Omaha Culture**

While it might not be surprising that economic and financial gain are the dominant values in a private sector community culture, the extent to which they override and undermine efforts to address serious social problems like poverty in Omaha, is clear (McNamara, 2007). One insight provided by a key informant intimately associated with the small, elite group controlling social-problem-policy and -projects, summarized this weakness, which is identified by many other sources in the study:

• “The capital and the will have not been developed to address serious social problems like poverty and affordable housing. You need to find an economics [based] model to solve this problem, big investors [in philanthropy] and find a way for them to make money on it.”

These same profit-making motives and values drive the major, elite donors’ and decision-makers’ (who are largely concentrated in construction, architecture, design and finance corporations) and shape the focus of charitable giving in Omaha (McNamara, 2007). Namely, they expect a return on their investment (for which they have already or likely will receive tax deductions), though this return is not exclusively a financial one, at least not in every instance.

However, the cumulative results are collaborations with the primary intent to construct many buildings (some say way too many) and other infrastructure for the community, nonprofits and government institutions. While tens or hundreds of millions of dollars might be spent on such a single physical-infrastructure project in a given year, clearly and demonstrably-insufficient

\textsuperscript{21} The most recent incarnation of the continuous elite/private-sector leadership and control in Omaha for 160 years, from before the city’s formal/legal founding in 1856 through today.
support is provided by the business elites for staffing, overhead, capacity-building, programming 
and provision of direct services (Larsen and Cotrell, 1997; McNamara, 2007). Other comments 
reflecting these findings are as follows:

• “Power in Omaha is almost-completely economically driven. Power is money, power is 
somehow overwhelmingly concentrated in the private-sector here.”

• “In Omaha, the private sector tackles much more tangible issues and projects and drags 
the government and nonprofit sectors along – in other words we build something – but do 
not grapple with poverty or homelessness. We’re thinking cosmetically about physical 
development and wealth creation for some, but not thinking systematically about all the 
negative impacts it has on an equal number or more people, who are completely left out 
of that single-minded and very limited, narrow focus.”

• “Money is power. I think that the Nebraska culture and narrative goes back to the belief 
that Nebraska was a pioneer community and that everyone here is from that stock, which 
just isn’t true. People use that to say we have some sort of superior work ethic to justify 
that all they think or care about is making more and more money.”

These findings are consistent with elite control and economic “growth machine” theories 
(Molotch, 1976; Logan and Molotch, 1987), which reveal that economic self-interest and 
maximization of financial gain for the elite, is the primary motivation behind private sector, 
government and non-profit collaboration to develop land and construct buildings and 
infrastructure. Other researchers have provided additional evidence to support growth-machine 
theory, showing that public administrators and urban planners become tools of the elite, pushing 
government subsidies of projects through economic tax breaks, such as Tax Increment Financing 
(TIF) or other development mechanisms (Judd & Mendelson, 1973; Judd, 1988).

Examples of such growth-machine projects undertaken through private-public 
collaborations, may focus on the development of local amenities (Whitt, 1987), such as new 
convention centers, art and concert halls and sports facilities, to mention a few which are all very
prominent in the Omaha landscape. While some argue this development benefits the entire community by creating employment (Peterson, 1981), critics point out that such a single-minded focus on the generation of enormous profits for the economic elite, comes at the expense of the poor (Waste, 1993; Box, 1998) and results in weaker governments and growing income and wealth inequality within a community (Krugman, 2014).

3. Omaha’s and Nebraska’s Comparatively Weak and Ineffective Governments

Other effects of long-term, over-reliance on a small group of private-sector leaders for all important community decision-making, policy development (including tax policy), infrastructure and budgetary decisions, control of social-power networks (such as favored nonprofit agencies and boards) and the distribution of jobs, incomes and other economic benefits, is that local and state governments and nonprofit organizations will likely be relatively weak and ineffective in addressing social problems and other matters (Lynd & Lynd, 1927; Hunter, 1953; Stone, 2005).

The observations of the key informants that follow are illustrative that this weakness is the case, as identified through other research and historical data on Omaha’s city and Nebraska’s state governments (Daly-Bednarek, 1992; Larsen & Cotrell, 1997; Omaha Community Foundation, 1999):

- “I think the culture of Omaha is that the private sector has a pretty tight grip on the public sector. And they’ve used that to control the agenda.”

- “You see, the leaders decide what issues to take on. There is an illness in our community. It unintentionally stifles the more democratic institutions, the very ones that might balance the corporate leaders.”

Recent “growth-machine” projects in Omaha include the $291 million CenturyLink/Qwest Convention Center (2003), the $92 million Holland Center for the Performing Arts (2009) and the $132 million TD Ameritrade Baseball Park (built to retain the NCAA College World Series in Omaha until at least 2035 if constructed).
• “Generally, over the years, the major community decisions have been made by people in
the corporate sector, the Captains of Industry. It’s the game of 6 or 10 or whatever.”

• “Omaha has a history of being an aberration. Partly because we’ve had so many
entrepreneurs who have made big money here, they’ve taken over things that government
usually does.”

• “There’s a perception that the city is controlled by a few people and input from the
nonprofit and human services community is not valued. There are a few private-sector
community leaders who drive the decisions in our city.”

• “I believe that communities have this ‘muscle-memory.’ If you do it over and over again,
then it becomes automatic. And Omaha’s muscle-memory is that we are addicted to and
dependent on a group of private-sector people who ‘know better,’ addicted to a centrally-
controlled system. The results are not necessarily all negative, but it does negatively
affect the strength of our other public institutions.”

4. The Role of the “Free” Press in Public Policy and Social Control

A final factor of community power noted in this paper (and examined in more detail by
McNamara, 2007), is the role of the press serving as a tool of the elite to maintain power and
control in Omaha. Even prior to the City’s founding in 1854, the business elite have continuously
used the local newspapers\textsuperscript{23} in a “booster” capacity to advertise and promote Omaha as an “ideal
garden” for investment and opportunity (Larsen & Cotrell, 1997). Since its inception in 1889,\textsuperscript{24}
the Omaha World-Herald (the city’s only paper since 1937) has vigorously and continuously
pushed the views of the controlling business leaders and their agenda, virtually becoming the
embodiment of the Omaha elite (Darlstrom, 1988).

\textsuperscript{23} These early Omaha papers are The Arrow (June, 1854), the Nebraskan (1856), the Nebraskan and Times (1859),
the Nebraska Republican (1863), the Omaha Herald (1865), the Omaha Bee (1872), the Evening World (1885).
\textsuperscript{24} The paper was founded in its present form through the merger of the Omaha Herald (1865) and the Omaha
World (1885).
The paper was first taken into direct control and ownership by the major Omaha business interests in 1962, when it was purchased by Peter Kiewit to keep it in local hands and “save it” from outside investors. Interestingly, the paper was purchased in 2012 by Warren Buffet, the second-richest man in the U.S. and Berkshire-Hathaway (the multi-national conglomerate holding company headquartered in Omaha) to “keep it a simple hometown newspaper.” The following observations by key informants reflect only a small fraction of the influence the paper still has on Omaha and Nebraska values, opinions and politics (McNamara, 2007):

- “Remember that most of the money here is what I call ‘civic republican’ money……Just look at the conservative, pro-business Omaha World-Herald editorial policy.”

- “Today the influence of the Omaha World-Herald is very great. It has a strong voice in supporting the existing power structure and its business agenda of the elite in Omaha…..”

- “When Hal Daub lied about the cost of helicopters and the Omaha World-Herald brought in a lie-detector, that action was all John Gottschalk. That demonstrates how strong the leadership of the privately-controlled press is here.”

B. SOCIAL CAPITAL IN OMAHA

Social capital was first popularly defined and expanded upon by Robert Putnam in his works investigating the nature and status of civic engagement (1993, 1995 and 2000). Other social scientists also contributed to and expanded the modern concept, noting that the function of social capital (like that of physical infrastructure/factories and financial and human capital in the production of goods and services) is to facilitate the productive achievement of particular societal goals, outcomes and ends (Coleman, 1990; Edwards and Foley, 1999). A similar working definition used by McNamara in his study is that, “Social capital consists of networks of

25 Founded by his father of the same name in 1884, Peter Keiwit headed the Keiwit Construction firm headquartered in Omaha (incorporated in 1964) from 1924 until his death in 1979.

26 Former Omaha Mayor
trust and the norms that exist in a community to be productively used by individuals and organizations [...to get things done that cannot otherwise be done].”

I. High Levels of Social Bonding and Low Levels of Social Bridging Capital

The networks of trust or connectedness that exist within some groups, such as those of community leadership for example, exhibit extremely high levels of “social bonding” capital (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003) and trust between the individuals that have been admitted and accepted into the group. If a person or organization has these types of personal “connections,” access to sufficient resources and opportunities in Omaha will very likely be made available by those in power (Banfield & Wilson, 1963).

- “Relationships between the leadership are tight. We’re still a small enough community that corporate Omaha knows political Omaha very well. They are just a phone call away.”

- “We are a large small town. The power structure here knows each other and basically supports each other. We can call the Mayor or Governor and actually get a call back.”

- “All these individuals have been here a long time. From the late ‘70s to the 90s, we were the same players.”

The equally- or perhaps even more-negative downside of these very high-bonding networks of trust, is that those not within or connected to certain groups, feel the extremely low levels of “social bridging” social capital (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003). The resulting inability of many or most individuals and organizations to have meaningful connections with “more-elite” individuals and groups, creates the very-real and oppressive sense and atmosphere, that Omaha is highly “fractional” and “fragmented” (McNamara 2003).

- “Omaha is not as homogeneous as one might think. It is so factionalized here.”
• “If you graduated from Creighton or the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), you have a pair of wings around you that will help you get connected. That makes it more difficult for outsiders, unless you’re bringing a lot of money to invest in the community.”

• “There are sanctioned pathways here in Omaha. This is a faith-based town, highly affiliated. It has Roman Catholic roots and a strong base of Evangelicals.”

• “If you’re a white male and want to get involved – then it’s easier. Immigration has been a big part of our city’s history. While it is easy to get involved, it is not for outsiders.”

2. Social Norms and Unspoken Rules in Omaha

The “norms” and “unspoken rules” in Omaha manifest as “conservative” pressures to live traditional lifestyles that include long-term hetero-sexual marriage, child-rearing, church attendance, community volunteerism and/or donating to charities and causes, along with the display of other expected values, attitudes, behaviors, duties and obligations. The over-riding theme is that to rise to a level of affluence and influence in Omaha, persons need to conform to, live within and abide by these normative systems and constraints (McNamara, 2007).

• “To earn your stripes you need to have a traditional lifestyle, either a husband with long-standing connections to the community, a debutant at Ak-Sar-Ben27 or independent wealth.”

• “I learned that Omaha has a very conservative culture and is resistant to change. They love to talk in progressive terms, but in reality they don’t like change.”

• “This is still very much a man’s town as far as women working goes. The glass ceiling is welded in place. I don’t think the big boys have got that yet. There’s still a huge elephant in the dining room.”

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27 The 119-year old Knights of Ak-sar-ben organization was founded in 1895 by the Omaha Business Men’s Association prior to and in anticipation of the work to be done to host the 1898 Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha. The Executive Committee comprised of members of Omaha’s elite business community soon emerged as a driving force in Omaha’s leadership.
3. Philanthropy and Social Networks as Mechanisms of Elite Control

As we began writing this sub-section of the “social capital” findings, we noted that the first two factors discussed here (social bonding and bridging; and norms and unspoken rules) are highly inter-twined with and inseparable from the “community power and control” factors discussed in the first section of this chapter. At this point, upon reviewing all the community-culture findings, it became clear to us, that each of the 11 sub-factors identified and discussed in this chapter, in the three areas of A) Community Power, B) Social Capital and C) Political History, have very strong of elements and play an active role and in maintaining economic, political and social control by the elite.

Through the decades, private-sector leaders and their followers, employees and collaborating individuals and institutions have employed a variety of mechanisms to gain and maintain power and control of others in Omaha (Larsen & Cotrell, 1997). Eikenberry (2007) notes that even philanthropy, through control of its boards and social networks, the determination of the type and nature of funded projects, the levels of funding and in other ways, can be a mechanism of elite community power and social control. The following comments by key informants illustrate this point:

- “Gottschalk said to me one day, ‘Heritage Services is the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval for all fundraising projects.’ There are six or seven members of that board who decide what projects go. They control not just personal resources, but influence over others. There are some people who just won’t give unless asked by those guys.”

- “Decisions come from one of these individual leaders, taking their turns. One person makes a gift or calls in a favor from a politician. Decisions start with one individual then he calls in the chits for others.”

- “The Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben have diminished over the years, but still civic involvement is prized and required. People who want to rise to the top of the pyramid have to serve and give resources back to the community.”

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28Gottschalk was the former editor and publisher of the Omaha World-Herald.
“Corporate and small-business leaders and even their employees are pressured to be civically engaged. If you are a titan or a regular citizen, there are strong expectations that you will give back.”

4. Structural Racism, Sexism and Other Forms of Exclusion in Omaha

Other forms of social control by the elite are related to the access that is allowed to people of color, women, nonprofit and social service leaders, government officials and other “outsiders” (McNamara, 2007). While some in Omaha insist that these forms of discrimination and exclusion do not even exist anymore in this city, this following comments by key informants provides strong evidence that this is certainly not the case:

- "There are folks who would like to see it change because there’s this notion that good ‘ol boys make this happen in Omaha. But there’s no good ‘ol girls here. Most don’t see us as race and gender diverse."
- "The leadership clique here has been and still is ALL white male."
- "The common perception is that you can’t be a leader in your own right if you’re black."
- "Nonprofit leaders and managers are not held in high regard by private business. There’s a bias that doesn’t recognize incredible, outstanding nonprofit-sector leaders and people."
- "I would say that the nonprofit sector is not viewed by the business community as elevated to a level that is valuable to the community."
- "The disadvantaged, working-poor and their advocates get left out of most and the most-important collaborations. The greatest amount of local collaboration always takes place between and among the rich and powerful."
- "After LB 416 passed by such a large margin, I knew why as a gay man I hadn’t been able to access so much of and wasn’t accepted by this community."
- "It is far easier for the traditional elites to build buildings than it is to talk to gays or about gay efforts to attain fair treatment and equality."
• “Latinos are stuck at the middle manager level. Omaha is letting them know they’re ‘not quite ready yet.’ They keep us where we have a place at the table, but it’s not a visible position and it’s always at ‘their table,’ not at everyone’s table. It’s because many Latinos don’t vote, so there’s no return for their money.”

• “I don’t ever get to be in the same room as the corporate leadership. The corporations are just not there. The true community-based organizations get tired of ‘the white man’—that’s what we call them—throwing money at them and telling them what to do.”

• “It’s easy for some people to get involved if they have money or a high-profile job with a corporation or university. It’s harder for the up and coming young person. There are invisible enclosures which are mostly relational and if you are a little more liberal, it may seem like you are always on the outside.”

C. POLITICAL HISTORY IN OMAHA

Political history is the third aspect of community culture to be considered, which McNamara further refines among three sub-indicators: 1) citizen participation, 2) control of public process and policy and 3) leadership. He also notes that understanding the political history of a locale is especially important in accurately classifying the type of community-culture under study. With this historical context in hand, the roles and relative strengths of the public sector, government and nonprofit officials and administrators can more-completely be evaluated and compared to the private sector, their representatives and other key actors.

1. Citizen Participation

McNamara (2007) notes that high levels of citizen participation and meaningful first-hand involvement in the democratic decision-making process, as occurs in Portland [Oregon], is a defining characteristic of public-sector community cultures, as opposed to private-sector

29McNamara specifically cites land-use planning, development and valuation decisions, as examples of how control of these by the private-sector elites, defines and impacts public/private “collaborations” in Omaha.
cultures where major decisions are controlled and made by a small, elite as in Omaha. For citizens to acquire greater and more-significant democratic participation, many factors such as: 1) politicians and public administrators creating more avenues for real involvement, 2) higher expectations by citizens that participation is a fundamental right and 3) holding both the public and private leaders of the local power-structure accountable for bad decisions and poor social and economic outcomes are necessary.

While currently the evidence is clear that meaningful access to and citizen participation in the highest levels of decision-making in Omaha is impossible at this time, actions and changes are possible that would certainly improve the situation. Most importantly, despite the fact that Omaha has had tightly-controlled leadership by small, elite groups of very powerful and wealthy men for 160 years since its inception, the reality is that all communities are in “states of continual transition” (Sinclair, 2002).

In our era of perpetual local and national crises, there are constantly arising new windows of opportunity (Lober, 1997; Takahashi & Smutny, 2002) for change, inter-sectoral collaboration and improvement, if we only have the awareness, skills and knowledge to be able to see and take advantage of them. This is particularly true in times of growing turmoil and chaos, as we see now in Omaha and Nebraska, with rapidly spreading poverty (especially child poverty) into non-traditionally poor areas and the white suburbs (Drozd, 2014), a severe lack of adequate mental and physical healthcare, social services and other support (Voices for Children & Nebraska Appleseed, 2013) continually high levels of violence and disproportionate minority confinement and the seriously-dysfunctional and ineffective Nebraska Departments of Health and Human Services and the Nebraska Department of Corrections (Omaha World Herald, 2014), to mention just a few.
The following comments by key informants provide additional data substantiating these conditions and the opportunities they present for change in elements of the community-culture that created them in the first place:

- “There are a lot of organizations that citizens can be involved in. But at the higher level, it is not possible. There are minor and major boards, and then there are the elite boards. There’s a high level of control at the elite level.”

- “Getting elected to office has particular barriers. The City Council and State Legislature don’t really pay anything, so you need substantial resources of your own to live, and that’s a strong deterrent for most common people to get involved and run.”

- “To work well together you need to have a relationship based on mutual respect that is equal or close to equal. That is definitely NOT the case in Omaha….because the relationship is way out of balance here, because the corporations and wealthy so dominate.”

- “I sometimes perceive that there is a small group of community leaders that think they know what is best for the community and they operate as they want, with no participation by or input from Omaha’s citizens.”

- “Race is a very difficult subject in Omaha that affects group relations, power and decision-making, in ways that are difficult to discern from the outside…..but that are obvious patterns of exclusion from the outside.”

- “We are remarkably segregated in all ways in Omaha. Visitors from other cities see and comment on this and I know it hurts Omaha’s reputation. Don’t our leaders see or care that this is a major problem?”

- “There is a deep culture of poverty in Omaha that no one wants to admit even exists, let alone working on seriously to solve.”

2. Private-Sector Control of Public Process and Policy in Omaha

Growth machine theory holds that elite groups control local government decisions to maximize economic benefits to themselves, their members and/or employees and followers (Molotch, 1976; Logan & Molotch, 1987). Political decisions, for example those related to proposed public/private construction projects, endorsed by the elite/corporate leaders who stand
to gain the most monetarily from them, are regularly supported and approved by politicians (whose political campaigns have been supported by the private developers) and are then implemented by public administrators. Although the local booster-narrative is that this is a model of public-private-nonprofit inter-sectoral partnership and collaboration, this largely-concealed process often ends up being little more than, “…an insulated, elitist activity in which residents, neighborhood groups, grass-roots community organizations and individual citizens are not viewed as essential or explicit to these initiatives” (Turner, 2002).

Omaha takes on capital projects [physical construction/infrastructure/buildings] because they are often easier to accomplish than finding solutions to complex social issues and fit well in a city where architects, engineers and construction companies have been part of the corporate elite for generations (McNamara, 2004).

- “There’s a good working partnership between the City and corporate leaders. If you want something built, which is what we do most and best, those are the builders.”

- “In this community, a successful effort, whether it’s physical construction or social betterment, has to be initiated in the private sector. While the City of Omaha used to have more impact I think, nothing seems to happen now without corporate leadership.”

- “People grasp on some level what I believe fundamentally….government here is a fairly small piece of the equation. Amazingly, local government in Omaha is not the forum for getting public choices made.”

- “I see the culture of City government as reactionary. The vision is that the corporate community is driving everything. No longer is the City involved with every big initiative at the start like it should be.”
3. Political Leadership

As has been clearly demonstrated throughout this paper, the elite leadership of Omaha has primarily been private-sector “heavy weights,” who have obtained and retained tight control for all but of few of the sixteen (16) decades the city has existed, and even in those 35 years, they were very close to the city’s political “Boss” Tom Dennison (see Section A, page 11). As times and conditions have changed however, even these business leaders have changed in type, from early land speculators and developers, entrepreneurs, small and large businessmen and early industrial magnates, to an era of business control and political domination by corporate leaders (McNamara, 2007).

One of McNamara’s important conclusions in his research, is that a challenge in improving community cultures and inter-sectoral collaborations, is the false notion that one sector can completely dominate all others. To have a healthy, prosperous, fully-functioning and well-integrated community “….one sector alone cannot sustain a community.” The final comments in this chapter add to and amplify these sentiments:

- “The collaborative efforts may seem good on the surface, but in actuality they are not effective. People soothe their souls by saying we work together, but the reality is that they don’t accomplish that much.”

- “They mindset is completely different. There are completely different bottom lines for business, government and nonprofits.”

- “The linkages between the different sectors are just not there. We could close half the nonprofits in Omaha and not miss them, the vast majority are left out of meaningful participation.”
“The public sector brings a little less enthusiastic response to the nonprofit sector than does the private sector. In some ways, they are competing for the same dollars and to be seen as successful.”

“When resources are limited, the partnerships are more important. Like right now there’s a feeling in the City government that we can’t do anymore because there’s no money. Ten or fifteen years ago, there were more resources in City government and they were better partners.”

“There’s so much money in this community that’s going to turn over in a short amount of time, it is almost beyond belief. But still there’s a sense of ‘We can’t because there’s no money.’ The City should be a real and initiating player on many projects – they shouldn’t always be looking to private corporations and foundations for direction.”

“I think the sectors don’t work as well together because there’s suspicion – what do you want from this? Am I going to lose? Are they just asking for money?”

“Building trust is the most difficult thing in collaboration. But it is also the most important thing. In the past, the community culture was about looking at the whole, sadly that is no longer the case.”
III. OMAHA’S COMMUNITY-CULTURE NARRATIVE VS. OMAHA’S REALITY

Thus far, this paper has mainly explored the definitional nature of community cultures and narratives, based on the literature and some of the key findings of a thorough and important comparative study of two cities’ cultures (Omaha, NE and Portland, OR), one “private sector” and one “public sector” (McNamara, 2007). While these findings were generally based on more-qualitative (subjective) information and intended primarily for use in theory exploration and development, we now turn our attention to further examination of Omaha’s community-culture and narrative, presenting additional more-quantitative (objective) data as it relates to both.

A. THE “VIRTUALLY-UTOPIAN” NARRATIVE OF OMAHA

As mentioned in the introduction, Omaha’s community-culture narrative has (since the city’s founding) and does, paint a portrait of Omaha that it is unquestionably among the best places in the U.S. and indeed the world, to live, raise families and conduct business. In this section, we present information about Omaha and its national rankings on a variety of community factors, many of which would support these claims for a large segment of the city’s population, for whom these data are accurate representations of many aspects of their lives. Table 1 presents a side by side comparison of some of Omaha’s best and worst conditions’ rankings and pertinent information that demonstrates why many refer to the city as “The Two Omaha’s.”
Table 1
Best and Worst Conditions Rankings and Indicators for Greater Omaha [Nebraska]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OMAHA’S BEST CONDITIONS RANKINGS &amp; INDICATORS (Source)</th>
<th>OMAHA’S BEST CONDITIONS RANKINGS &amp; INDICATORS (Source)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#3 Best Cities to Start a Business (Nerdwallet.com)</td>
<td>#3 Highest U.S. Black Poverty Rate (100 Largest U.S. Metropolitan Areas) (U.S. Census Bureau)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#1 New and Expanding Facilities (MSA’s 200,000 – 1 Million) (Site Selection Magazine)</td>
<td>#1 Highest U.S. Black-Children Poverty Rate (100 Largest U.S. Metropolitan Areas) (U.S. Census Bureau)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#1 Top 10 Best Cities to Raise a Family (Movoto Blog)</td>
<td>#2 Highest U.S. Rate of Placing Children in Foster Care (U.S. Department Health and Human Services)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 Number of Economic Development Projects (MSA’s 200,000 – 1 Million) (Site Selection Magazine)</td>
<td>#1 Highest U.S. Black Homicide Victimization Rate (Violence Prevention Center)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 America’s 10 Best Cities for Professional Women (Movoto Blog)</td>
<td>#2 Highest Percentage of Hourly Workers Earning at or Below Minimum Wage (U.S. Department of Labor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 Top 50 Military-Friendly Cities</td>
<td>#2 Lowest U.S. Eligibility Level for Childcare Assistance for Low-Income Working Families (Based on the percentage of the official U.S. Poverty Level set by the state of Nebraska (and translated into dollars).)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

30 This ranking is for the state of Nebraska with the vast majority of placements occurring in families in Omaha.
31 The ranking is within the mid-western geographic region.
32 Based on the percentage of the official U.S. Poverty Level set by the state of Nebraska (and translated into dollars).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(G.I. Jobs)</th>
<th>(Nebraska Appleseed Center)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Least Financial Stress on Households (Credibility.org)</td>
<td>#2 Widest Economic Disparity Between Black and White Residents (Omaha World-Herald)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#1 Best City for Cheapskates (Kiplinger, 2013)</td>
<td>#1 Highest U.S. Black Arrest Rates for Marijuana Possession (American Civil Liberties Union, 2013)</td>
</tr>
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While the disparate pictures of the best and worst rankings of conditions in Omaha presented in Table 1 are by no means comprehensive, they do offer a glimpse of the dominant, local community-culture narrative that is most-widely used to portray what life and conditions are like in the city. The best conditions rankings in the left-hand column (five out of seven being business or economic-conditions related) were all obtained from the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce website and such items are also regular front-page news in the Omaha World-Herald newspaper. Both of these institutions having been the very embodiments and tools of the Omaha business elite for decades (see Chapter II, Section A, 4, page 12).

The social problems and poor conditions, listed in the worst rankings in the right-hand column, are also covered in the World-Herald, but typically are downplayed through a variety of techniques, especially when compared to how the always-positive, economic-success stories and rankings are presented. The problematic issues and related dysfunctions in human-service provision and program performance in state government (especially in the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services and Nebraska Department of Corrections over the past ten years), are typically portrayed in news stories and on the editorial page, as areas where Omaha and/or the state are now “making great progress” or are “finally on the right track.”
This “great progress” in addressing poverty and related-problems, according to the World-Herald, has supposedly and continuously been made during the course of the past 50 years, and yet inexplicably, we find that conditions for the poor and disadvantaged in Omaha are as bad as they ever were, and in some cases even worse. The decades-old campaign by the newspaper, to subtly minimize and marginalize the growing crises in the minority and poor communities, was perhaps unwittingly exposed in a recent human-interest column in the World-Herald, written by one of the its premiere, self-proclaimed Omaha boosters and enthusiasts.\textsuperscript{33}

In an interview with Robert Frick, the director of the rankings project for Kiplinger’s business and financial magazine (which had rated Omaha “America’s Top Value City” several years earlier), the interviewee condescendingly described north Omaha (home to a majority of black citizens and other residents of the city) as “\textit{Omaha’s Achilles’ heel}.” Citing the area’s high crime and unemployment rates, Frick detachedly observed, “If Omaha could just fix north Omaha, if you guys could solve that [little] problem, Omaha could almost be \textit{mythical}.”

We suppose that attaining “mythical” status is not beyond the insatiable aspirations of the elite, business leaders of Omaha, as it would greatly transcend what we have described as their “virtually-utopian” community-culture narrative, which they themselves created and continually perpetuate. What is not mentioned in Omaha’s narrative, however is that previous generations of Omaha’s leadership, through their social, economic and business policies and practices, played a determining role in the nearly-complete annihilation of what was, at one time, a thriving and growing black middle-class community (Larsen & Cottrell, 1997; et al).\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{33} See Omaha World-Herald, January 21, 2014; Michael Kelly column, page 2B.

\textsuperscript{34} Historians Larsen and Cotrell and others describe the destruction of the black middle-class as primarily accruing to four (4) economic and social policies pursued by Omaha’s leadership in the early and middle part of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.
B. THE REALITY OF OMAHA’S EXCLUDED AND DAMAGED COMMUNITIES

The horrendous impacts of poverty affect all of us in Omaha. Some here, unfortunately, are seemingly content to believe that people in poverty are older men, who are addicted to drugs or alcohol (or both), have a mental illness and/or are almost certainly poor due to their lack of personal ambition, character flaws and the avoidable bad choices they made during their lifetimes.

While these simplistic beliefs and myths have largely been debunked by the social sciences and human-service professionals, some of the realities of poverty here are: that one in five or 20% of Omaha’s children live in poverty every day; 30,000 Nebraskans are at risk of homelessness; and at one local Omaha elementary school, 80% of the students live at or below the poverty line. Families in poverty have doubled since 2000 in this area. To explore these themes and the facts about poverty in more detail, we first will look more closely at the history and implementation of poverty remediation measures in the U.S. and other occurrences, and also at actions and policies in Omaha and Nebraska that have been anything but, helpful or remedial.

1. The History and Current Context of Anti-Poverty Measures in the U.S. and Omaha

To gain needed perspective and greater contextual understanding of some of the real roots of poverty, we must revisit some not-too-distant United States’ history. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the U.S. government initiated the Social Security Act (SSA) nearly 80 years ago to keep vast numbers of widows, turbines off the rights of black citizens to vote, and improve the lives of Black folk generally. For example: 1) the closure and re-organization of the meat-packing and railroad industries in Omaha that had a devastating impact on black and minority employment, 2) comprehensive racial discrimination against blacks which did not allow them to live or obtain housing outside a small area (ghetto) in north Omaha (where a majority of black citizens still reside), 3) discrimination in hiring blacks to work on the construction of the Interstate Highway System and other construction projects in the 1950’s and later and 4) the successful efforts of Omaha’s leaders to largely exclude the federal government and its anti-poverty programs from having a strong leadership presence in Omaha (to ensure the elite’s continuing complete dominance in policy and power) during the early 1960s and 1970s, that provided a wide array of services and benefits (including the development of a professional class) to blacks in cities across the U.S.
children and older adults (whose care and support was far beyond the financial means and organizational capacity of churches and charities) out of poverty; in 2014, similar or worse poverty and living conditions still exist in the U.S.

Furthermore, each state under the SSA was to furnish financial assistance to needy and dependent children. The Great Depression of the 1930’s led Americans toward the reality-based understanding that absolutely no individual or family was immune to or protected from financial ruin. There was a feeling in the country during that horrible crisis, that everyone was experiencing the same traumatic issues and no individual’s personal choices were to blame (the still popular among some groups, blaming the victim mentality and politics). FDR and his allies were hopeful that the SSA would assist women, children, the aged and disabled from hitting rock bottom and being anymore damaged than they already were. Why then, hasn’t this greatly popular and needed social-insurance program been more successful in reducing and even eliminating, all poverty and related-problems for more poor families and children?

In Nebraska, Republican Governor Dave Heineman has denied federally-funded Medicaid expansion three times, which was made available to the states at no initial cost, as a result of the congressionally-approved Affordable Care Act,; denied access to critically-necessary driver licenses for authorized young people under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA); was even against taxpayer-funded pre-natal care for undocumented immigrants and is also against granting in-state tuition to children of undocumented immigrants. The economic growth of rural areas in Nebraska can largely be attributed to immigrants, both documented and undocumented, having saved many of these small Nebraska towns through their hard work and productivity, from being blown away like bird’s nests in a Nebraska dust storm.
Therein lies the issue, if it were only funding that was needed to bring people out of poverty, perhaps the issue and crisis would have been solved long ago. Barusch (2011) stated that to a large extent, poverty is the direct result of governmental policies. She states that tax breaks for the wealthy decrease revenue for programs that low-income seniors, families and children rely upon to survive, and even then, very poorly or just barely. Upon closer examination of Governor Heineman’s ideologically- and politically-driven policies, one could also add a clearly-targeted aim at immigrant and undocumented populations.

The goal of any sound, social policy, is to ensure that it is universal and comprehensive versus residual and fragmented. The complex web of poverty and careful examination of which actions really do have meaningful impacts, must also include a universal and comprehensive understanding the many traumas of being poor in this country. There is an example that is referred to quite often regarding access to resources; where one lives affects where one goes to school, which then impacts what type of employment you’ll have, which then leads back to where one can live, based on the salary you receive, etc. In the recent past, there has been much attention given to military personnel regarding Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). If you have experienced any severe trauma or a life threatening event, it is quite possible and even likely, that you may develop symptoms of PTSD. All persons under these conditions and the stresses can result, may feel like their life or the lives of others are in great danger or that they have no control at all over what is happening.

Just listen to the life stories of homeless women, men and children. An Omaha elementary school principal says that he knows that many of his children are living in homeless shelters and he is aware of the great difficulties they face each day when they leave school. He
says that he surrounds these children with people who care about them. Several local non-profit organizations in Omaha initiated a backpack program for children in an after school program years ago. The director stated that the children would comment that they didn’t have enough to eat at home over the weekends, or that the food was for their younger siblings. Why is it necessary that we have programs such as these, which are usually under-funded and temporary, in the richest country in the world? Why do we need to have them in Omaha, which is the home of more Fortune 500 companies per capita than any other city in the U.S.? Why do we need them in this city which also boasts more millionaires and billionaires per capita, than any other city in the U.S.?

Jonathon Kozol wrote numerous books regarding education and children, including *Savage Inequalities* and *Saving Grace*. He stated that our goal should be to make our U.S. public schools so wonderful that our children hate to leave school each day. Instead, we find that we have many public school systems that actually destroy young minds and motivation, students that don’t graduate and often become easy targets for a dysfunctional and ineffective corrections system. A new report released by the federal Department of Education points out one of the systemic barriers that disproportionately impacts children and youth of color are harsh school discipline policies, often referred to as the ‘school to prison pipeline.’ Voices for Children-Nebraska released data referring to this pipeline by analyzing out-of-school suspensions for Nebraska students (2011-2012); the findings of greatly-disproportionate treatment of minorities, as shown in the tables below, are sobering and disturbing, especially with regard to African American youth.
Many Nebraska schools are accomplishing just the opposite of what Kozol proposes. Unfortunately, and with some certainty these data are not new to African American families, whose students have been dismissed summarily for many years. These findings then beg the discussion leading to intergenerational poverty. Inter-generational poverty is the result of multiple-generations of individuals and families who are impoverished.

“A cycle of poverty that starts with one adult or family continues through successive generations and only gets worse, especially as we can now clearly see, that workers’ real wages have not increased since the 1970s” (Global Research, January 2011). How does a country as rich in resources and both economic and human capital as the United States, have many large
and growing populations who experience inter-generational poverty? In a press release dated September 18, 2013, the Securities and Exchange Commission voted to propose a new rule that would require public companies to disclose the ratio of the compensation of their chief executive officer to the median wage of its employees. The average CEO-to-worker pay ratio in 2012 was an incredible 350 to 1. This point of information is staggering, and it clearly points to one of the main underlying reasons why so many in the U.S. suffer inter-generational poverty.

National headlines on a daily basis show how disproportionate the numbers are for people of color in U.S. corrections systems. Drucker (2013) presents the issue of mass incarceration akin to an epidemic disease. His analysis utilizes tools of epidemiology which sheds new light on examining this life-threatening issue to many individuals, communities and families.

His research contends that there is a direct connection between mass incarceration and later public health problems, which are further linked to inherent inequalities and impacts on children. Thus, Drucker creates as the foundation of this work, an analysis of individual and environmental characteristics and the intersection of both, in order to make sense of a large-scale problem and a necessary predecessor to its prevention.

He concludes that: “Epidemic mass incarceration has become one of the most powerful determinants of systematic and inter-generational inequality in our society” (p. 162). The ensuing goal, then being a prevention model aimed at reducing mass incarcerations, eventually leading to the elimination of unnecessary inequalities that disproportionately impact children and people of color.

Cullen, Wright and Chamlin (1999) have similar insights to those of Drucker and suggest the following:
“These narratives, moreover, would seek to connect biography and social structure, and how individuals, caught in a web of neglect and disadvantage, are placed at risk for a life in crime. Finally, the punch line of the story would be that by creating a more supportive society and by giving concrete support to individuals, much crime [and mass incarceration] would be prevented” (pp. 197-198).

The 2013 U.S. Census estimates that Nebraska’s population is 1.8 million. The Omaha Douglas County population is estimated at 537,256 or nearly 30% of the total population of the state. Omaha is home to five Fortune 500 companies: Berkshire Hathaway, ConAgra Foods, Union Pacific, Peter Kiewit Sons' and Mutual of Omaha. Henry Cordes, a staff writer for the Omaha World Herald wrote:

“Using the federal government’s broadest definition of what constitutes a metropolitan area, a World Herald analysis shows that Omaha is home to more Fortune 500 companies per capita than any major metro area in the nation. Using a narrower definition of a metro area, Omaha ranks no worse than third. It trails only Bridgeport-Stamford-Norwalk Conn., the affluent burbs in the shadow of New York City, and San Jose Calif., the heart of Silicon Valley.” (Omaha World Herald, February 3, 2013).

For people outside of this metropolitan area, Omaha may appear to be a utopia in the middle of the country with resources readily available to counter attack any socio-economic condition that is present in the area. According to research conducted by McNamara (2007), Omaha’s economic and political will, led by a few good businessmen, have used their cumulative economic assets and interests to “set the stage” for this city. In his interview with several educational, community and business leaders, there was consistent agreement that if anything was to be successful, one just needed to offer ‘a name.’ If these business leaders were behind the proposal, then it would certainly be ‘successful’, if not, it would ‘fail.’

However, several recent attempts to reduce or eliminate poverty, championed by the high-profile, elite leaders in this community over the past several years, have met with little success or failed outright. Perhaps in these failures we may be seeing the first cracks in the myth
of invincibility, that has supported the social, economic and political control of Omaha by its private-sector, corporate elites. As we saw in the findings presented in Chapter II, it is far easier to engage in land- and economic development and construct buildings and physical infrastructure, than it is to successfully address and cope with the complexity and difficulties inherent in social problems such as poverty.

One must ask the question, with all these massive resources, people who care about the struggles of the disadvantaged and smart advocates, why does Nebraska struggle with child poverty rates at 18% (the highest in the entire U.S.) and single-parent families with related children that are below poverty at a rate of 34%; adults and children receiving welfare (TANF) number 16,597; children receiving food stamps 82,000 and 223,269 children enrolled in Medicaid and CHIP (Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity, 2014)? Unfortunately, these data highlight the discrepancies between the perceptual universe of Omaha’s Fortune 500 companies and the world of Nebraskans and Omaha residents who struggle in poverty every day.

Building Bright Futures (BBF) was organized in 2006 by Omaha leaders and philanthropists to address issues impacting poor children and their families. The goals included that within five years, every poor child in Douglas and Sarpy County would have health care, tutors and mentors, and the opportunity to go to college. The organization spent about $7 million dollars a year donated by Omaha philanthropists. One of the most intriguing goals of BBF was that public policy regarding poverty would be highlighted and the discussion would lead to every poor child being as well equipped as possible to face the challenges of being poor.

This was a huge miscalculation on the part of Omaha’s elite and philanthropists, as the human-services professionals who work in the field and the social scientist who study it well know, poverty is a very, very difficult monster to kill. The analysis regarding public-policy
issues related to poverty was the right approach; the implementation efforts and what it takes to reduce or end poverty is something quite different. These ameliorations would include more-comparable wages and incomes throughout the city (Nebraska’s minimum wage, received by a majority of Omaha’s working poor families, is a paltry $7.25 per hour); universal healthcare, affordable and available transportation and housing, and an educational system with highly-skilled personnel who are trained to work with families who are experiencing inter-generational poverty.

2. Catastrophic State Government Failures Responsible for Worsening Poverty

As with the first clear signs of failures by Omaha’s elite, private-sector leadership, to successfully address poverty and the related-problem of poor educational outcomes, the first of many ensuing catastrophic failures by state government, also took place at about the same time. Legislative Bill 157 was introduced in the Nebraska Unicameral in the 2008 Legislative Session, and was passed on Final Reading, February 7, 2008 by the vote of 41-1-7.

The full text of LB 157 reads: “No person shall be prosecuted for any crime based solely upon the act of leaving a child in the custody of an employee on duty at a hospital licensed by the State of Nebraska. The hospital shall promptly contact appropriate authorities to take custody of the child.” LB 157 did not specify an age limit for which a person could drop off a child at a hospital and not be prosecuted. The bill was intended to protect newborns from being abandoned or killed by distraught parents, and Nebraska was the last of the fifty states to enact legislation known as “Safe Haven” laws.

Between September and November 21, 2008, when the governor signed the revision of the law, LB1 of the Special Session of the Legislature, 35 children were dropped off at Nebraska
hospitals, the majority being between 10-17 years of age. No infants were left. The hasty revision of the law amended the original bill to state that parents of infants under 30 days of age were protected from prosecution. In the weeks prior to November 21st, children and adolescents were abandoned by their parents and caretakers in hospital emergency rooms, sometimes telling the children, but often not. Adolescents were flown or driven to Nebraska from Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Indiana, and Iowa, in addition to the many local families who could not provide for the physical and mostly mental health needs of their children.

One Omaha father dropped off nine children, ages 1-17, stating that he was overwhelmed since the death of his wife following the birth of the youngest child. A divorced mother of three left her 11 year old son with bi-polar disorder at a rural hospital after a weekend of violent episodes, and discharge from the three-day-only stay allowed, by state law, at a mental health inpatient facility. The child “promised to be good” as she tearfully left, feeling that she had no other hope, after the state government’s mental-and-behavioral health system had failed her and her child in every way possible.

A profile of the majority of the 35 children left under the Safe Haven law, conducted by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, found that:

- 27 had a history of mental health treatment
- 22 had parents with a history of incarceration
- 28 were from single parent homes
- 20 were white, 7 were black

In 2008, 6,600 children were in the custody of the State of Nebraska, making it the second highest ratio of children in state care in the U.S. Also at that time, there were only six practicing child psychiatrists in the entire state, and the mental health services for children and adolescents were scarce, unaffordable, and difficult to access. The majority of older children left
under the Safe Haven laws had extensive histories of mental-health needs, and few, if any had resources to meet them. The parents and caretakers viewed the law as their only opportunity for their children to finally receive care as the last resort, and therefore abandoned their children for safekeeping by the state, which was the original intent of the Safe Haven legislation.

Since November 21, 2008, the revised Safe Haven law allows for the leaving of a child under-30 days of age for care by the state. Services for the needs of children and adolescents with mental-health conditions and other needs have not appreciably improved (and likely, due to a highly-destructive and extremely-costly failure by the Republican governor to “privatize” state services to reduce spending), they have greatly worsened. Despite the crisis revealing the extent of the NHHS dysfunction in providing critically-needed services to poor families, the revision of the law, sadly, eliminated desperate parents’ last recourse in Nebraska, when all their efforts had failed to garner vital services from the state for their children.

As a backdrop to the nationally reported Safe Haven events, the child welfare system in Nebraska was undergoing enormous changes. In early 2002, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services stated in a report that Nebraska failed to achieve “substantial conformity” with the seven safety, permanency and well-being measures for children in the care of the state. In 2003 the governor created a task force to address caseworker workload and retention issues, appropriating over $5.5 million to fund new social service workers in 2004. Despite increased funding, Nebraska continued to have one of the highest rates of children in out-of-home care, and HHS was sued by the Nebraska Appleseed Center for the Law in the Public Interest and the

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35 As reported by the Omaha World-Herald, information gathered in an investigation conducted by the Nebraska State Legislator into the disastrous, privatization initiative driven by the Republican administration, revealed that privatization has resulted in an additional $75 million in direct expenditures. The study also found that additional $75 million or more in other costs, due to the loss of valued and experienced state staff, other system-wide impacts and remediation efforts for affected families, will be forthcoming in future years.
New York based Children’s Rights, stating that HHS endangered the over 6,000 children in the “mismanaged, overburdened and under-funded” foster care system.

Unfortunately, the lawsuit was dismissed, and the governor issued directives to improve the child welfare system, focused on decreasing the length of time children spent before achieving permanent placements. The number of children in the foster care system went from 7,803 in April to 7,603 in July, and was characterized as “dramatic progress” by the governor and on the Omaha World-Herald opinion page. He restructured the Department of Health and Human Services a few months later, creating a Division of Children and Family Services.

In December 2007 a report was issued by the Children’s Behavioral Health Task Force, a group of legislators, HHS staff and child welfare advocates, stating that the goal of the new system was to reduce 7,000 state wards with 70% in out-of-home care to 5,000 wards with 70% in in-home care by 2011. This was to be accomplished by the privatization of the child welfare system (as discussed above), shifting the responsibility from the state to private contractors in June 2009. The goals were to enhance efficiency and accountability while controlling the costs of the failing system. As we have seen, it was another spectacular failure in the state, this time by public-sector rather than private-sector leadership, to address poverty and related problems.
IV. STUDY FINDINGS AND ANALYSES, SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As we have seen, the long-standing control of Omaha’s economic, social and political spheres by generations of small, powerful, elite-circles of wealthy businessmen, spanning three different historical eras, has produced great economic benefits for the city. This includes sometimes astounding personal wealth for themselves, as well as for many of their employees, those in related industries and others having connections to or dependent on them (McNamara, 2007). The complete domination of Omaha by a private-sector type of community culture and narrative however, has likewise helped create and extend extreme conditions of poverty and other social problems for many other of its citizens, particularly those who have no access to the exclusive social and economic networks that enforce and perpetuate the culture.

A. OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE, MODERNIZATION & IMPROVEMENT

While at times the depiction of Omaha’s community culture based on previous research may have seemed harsh to some, we can quite truthfully state, that most members of the disadvantaged, marginalized, excluded, discriminated-against and otherwise alienated groups with which we have extensive experience, will tell you that the criticism was not nearly strong enough! Be that as it may, our ultimate intent has not been merely to criticize, but to present findings and information about the culture and conditions of Omaha, to see if we can discern or point out facts, patterns, perceptions, clues or new understandings, that might be useful in bringing needed change, modernization or improvements, for the betterment of all people in Omaha, or in any other locales where they are needed. The following sub-sections contain what we believe are the most-important findings gleaned through our efforts, including
recommendations on how they might best be applied by interested parties, to achieve the aforementioned goals.

1. Communities, Cultures and Narratives Are Not Static

Despite the fact that Omaha’s community culture has maintained its primary private-sector classification and other characteristics, almost continuously for 160 years since it was founded, recent research suggests that no communities or their cultures are static or unchanging (Sinclair, 2002). Anthony Giddens (1984) points out just the opposite in fact, arguing that communities are continually changing, transitioning and restructuring, even if this process is not immediately apparent.

These findings should be especially important for community advocates working with or specializing in dimensions of “social capital,” where human networks, groupings and collaborations might prove to be fertile ground in which to sew new awareness, ideas and education, to finally achieve progress in addressing poverty and poor social conditions.

2. The Role of Youth and Generational Change in Social, Political and Economic Progress

McNamara’s (2007) interviews with key informants in Omaha, demonstrate a clear pattern of concern among various segments of the population, about what the next generation of leaders will “bring to the table” as the previous generation retires. Some felt that the training of replacements in the elite, private sector leadership had been well underway for years, to insure a seamless transition with little change. Others felt quite differently and expressed hope, that the more-evolved value-systems and extensive knowledge acquired by younger citizens, about the importance of successfully addressing social problems and massive structural reforms, could be the keys to “finally tearing down the Berlin Wall” of the imposing resistance to change.
Our new era of rapidly-evolving capacities for interactions, social organizing and communication through social media and other forms, should enliven the imaginations of the designers of and participants in, the next versions of social structures, processes and practices that are rapidly approaching,

3. A Call for a More “Public Regarding” Community Culture

Dye and Zeigler (1993) are cited by McNamara in his study of Omaha’s community culture, as calling for the private-sector elite to become more “public regarding.” This notion may become more acceptable to the elites for a variety of reasons in the near future, perhaps partially-based on their recent experiences of failure, in attempting to address some of the most-important, local, social problems.

On some levels, they must realize that a greater role and financial support, through higher-taxes or other revenue sources, must be absolutely necessary to effectively address our growing lists of pressing social and environmental crises in the immediate future. There is likely also a growing realization among the elites, that that the wildly-growing levels of wealth- and income-inequality were are seeing in society today, are simply not sustainable and could jeopardize the entire economic system upon which their lives are based.

4. Strengthening Governmental & Nonprofit Sectors and Increasing Citizen Participation

In public-sector community cultures such as Portland, a stronger, more-effective and productive government sector exists, which plays key roles in addressing social problems like poverty, in ways that are not possible for private-sector entities (McNamara, 2007). Local and state governments are especially well-positioned and have legally-authorized powers in creating
avenues and venues for meaningful citizen participation in the democratic decision-making process.

Perhaps most important of all, governments and public administrators could be the key and legitimate actors, to initiate collaborative cross-sectoral projects. Such collaborations have proven to be the most-effective organizational structures to address social ills like poverty, in all arenas of personal, familial and community betterment.

5. Community Culture, Poverty/Social Problems Research and Policy Development

Finally, our greatest hope and highest recommendation is that the findings in this report (and any subsequent research it may have helped generate) be reviewed, discussed and employed by wide-ranging and inclusive individuals, groups and institutions in Omaha, Nebraska and interested communities anywhere, to make needed improvements in cultural performance, poverty abatement and related-social problem outcomes. As we have noted throughout this paper, it should be viewed as a starting point for additional investigations and research, better policy development and more forceful and effective community organization and action.

Progress in these areas will require that those involved in these efforts, transcend and help transform those aspects of the local community culture and narrative that are actually creating poverty and other social dysfunctions, or at best, are providing unnecessary resistance to what clearly and finally, needs to be done to diminish expanding poverty in Omaha and throughout the U.S.
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