Executive Summary

This literature review focuses on social alienation and the “American Dream.” Social alienation is a trend in our society in which people withdraw from one another, resulting in feelings of isolation and hopelessness. The American Heritage Dictionary defines the American Dream as “an American ideal of a . . . successful life to which all may aspire.” Of particular interest regarding social alienation and the American Dream are changes in our society contributing to declining trust in others, which seems to have resulted in disillusionment with the American Dream. The current trends toward a temporary and flexible workforce, declining social capital, and growing disparities in income are issues of concern. In addition to reviewing the literature regarding these issues, an extensive cumulative data file, the General Social Survey (GSS), was also examined.

In 2003, Brian Starks reported the ability to reach the American Dream involves capitalizing on economic opportunity. Americans believed that loyalty and hard work pay off with security and stability (Starks. 2003). However, many factors negatively influence these attitudes of Americans today. Today, the fastest growing sector of the American workforce is temporary and flexible employment (Sennett 1998). Sennett indicates that the current trends toward a portable and mobile workforce and reduction in long-term employment diminishes our trust of and commitment to others. When workers are temporary, whether working two weeks, two months, or even two years in an organization, people are unable to establish meaningful friendships and associations in
such a short length of time. Additionally, as temporary employees, workers may frequently need to relocate to find better jobs. Sennett reports that this mobile workforce adversely affects friendships in this post-industrial era. Before the post-industrial era, friendships, formed within communities, developed over longer periods. In today’s society, friendships seem to be work-based rather than neighborhood based (Putnam 1995). The trend of short-term employment and a mobile workforce significantly reduces the ability to build lasting friendships through employment (Putnam). To illustrate this dilemma, Putnam uses the phrase “the Repotting Theory.” The Repotting Theory refers to the mobility in the labor force, which disrupts the root system of people. This disrupted root system affects the ability to maintain long-term friendships, which increases the likelihood of social alienation. Temporary employment and a mobile workforce present barriers to creating social networks and lasting ties with others. These barriers serve to reduce social capital, “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1995:65). Given the milieu of the current workforce, networking and building trust and cooperation in organizations becomes quite difficult.

Another significant area of concern in today’s society is the growing disparities in income. Sennett refers to today’s American society as “a two-tier society… a few winners…lots of folks being left behind” (1998:54). Considering the inequities this country is experiencing, the question arises, what is happening to the middle class? Sennett quoted Alan Greenspan from a 1995 Wall Street Journal article as saying that the unequal income issues “could become a major threat to our society” (1998: 54). As the
wealthy prosper, low-income and middle-class Americans struggle just to make ends meet. This struggle diminishes hopes of attaining the American Dream.

In order to better understand people’s attitudes and beliefs regarding these current issues, the GSS was reviewed. For purposes of this research, the following variables from the GSS were explored: 1) alienation, which included questions based on trust (can people be trusted), fairness (are people fair or do they take advantage of others), and helpfulness (are people helpful or just looking out for themselves); and 2) the American Dream, which included questions about economic uncertainty (unemployed in the last ten years), job certainty or fear of unemployment, and changes in financial situation.

Additionally to the literature reviewed, the General Social Survey, compiled between the years of 1972-2000, provided the study an assessment of individual’s attitude and beliefs about American society. The data from the GSS revealed that over the last 30 years, trust has declined ten percent. Fairness ratings remained the same over time; however, 30 percent of the respondents indicated that they believe that people take advantage of one another. Additionally, 30 percent of the respondents also indicated they believed that people only look out for themselves. According to the GSS, one-third of the respondents had been unemployed in the last ten years. Between 60 and 70 percent of the respondents reported that they felt their job is secure, while 30 to 40 percent indicated that they worry about job loss. These figures depict trends toward a significant lack of trust in others as well as feelings of uncertainty about the future. If the GSS figures are representative of the nation, it may suggest that the hope of attaining the American Dream is rapidly fading.
With society becoming a collection of temporary and mobile workers whose social and economic capital is declining, trust in each other -- and in the future -- corrodes. Trust is integral to bonding with others and feeling a part of society. For some individuals, these concerning quandaries may turn what was supposed to be the American Dream into a surrealistic nightmare. Further study of the long-term effects of unstable working conditions, a mobile workforce, declines in social capital, and rising economic inequality must be conducted to provide greater insight in relation to these alarming trends. The bottom line is this: each and every one of us should be able to attain the American Dream. Each and every one of us should have hope for the future. The whole basis of our economy -- a capitalistic society -- is founded on the belief that individuals control their own destinies. Working hard and making lasting ties -- both personal and professional -- are core processes that we employ in this country to ensure we all prosper. If we lose our trust and yield to these trends in society, we may lose our chances of accomplishing our Dreams. A reversal of these trends in contemporary society must occur to guarantee each of us can reach our American Dream.
REFERENCES


