The Culture of Homelessness

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Introduction
1. Background of this Presentation
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   A. I will speak from a client perspective
   B. My opinion doesn’t matter
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3. Terminology
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4. Wow, this presentation has a lot of slides!
What is “Homeless”?  
Discussion: How do you define “Homeless”?  
Homeless: not having a place to do things in private

What is “Culture”?  
culture (kchr)n  
a. A collective, shared response in terms of beliefs, values and actions to a set of shared memories (e.g. “American” culture)

American Culture
What is “Culture”?

culture (klchr)n

a. A collective, shared response in terms of beliefs, values and actions to a set of shared memories (e.g. “American” culture)

b. A collective, shared response in terms of beliefs, values and actions to a shared situation (e.g. “Youth” culture)
The Situation

No Privacy means everyone can see you

Early in the project, we were looking for one of our contacts who lived under a bridge, but no one was in the camp when we arrived. “You want to film this camp?” [one of the researchers] asked. As soon as the question was posed, it hit both of us. Why had we thought even for a moment that this would be okay? Filming this public-made-private space would have been the equivalent of walking into someone’s house unannounced and filming their home and possessions. People do not recognize this because social space is so neatly and officially categorized. At Catchout Corners, cars would slow down as people took pictures of the men gathered there, like animals in a zoo. The men are deeply offended by this but powerless to stop it.

At Home on the Streets, p. 45
The Situation
When everyone can see you, they can judge you

American culture tends to assign blame. Things don’t just go wrong; someone made them go wrong. The homeless are seen as responsible for their own fate.

Labeling theory tells us that what we observe in someone’s behavior is fundamentally affected not just by what they are actually doing but also by who we think that person is.

At Home on the Streets, p. 158

One goes, often quite suddenly, from being a person with a set of socially acceptable identities, to being “homeless”, an identity that trumps, if not obliterates, all others.

At Home on the Streets, p. 141

The Situation
When the public can see you, they judge you

The homeless were congregating in front of the [homeless shelter] for dinner. A school bus approached that was packed with Anglo junior high school students being bused from an eastside barrio school to their upper-middle and upper-class homes in the city’s northwest neighborhoods. As the bus rolled by, a fusillade of coins came flying out the windows, as the students made obscene gestures and shouted, “Get a job.”… For the passing junior high schoolers, the exchange was harmless fun, a way to work off restless energy built up in school; but for the homeless it was a stark reminder of their stigmatized status and of the extent to which they are the objects of negative attention.

Down on Their Luck, p. 198

The Situation
When social services can see you, they judge you

Welcome to [THIS AGENCY]!

[This agency] is a Christian ministry to persons who need a meal…

A person who comes [here] for help should realize that he or she has a serious life problem including bad habits, some of which are willful idleness, lack of self-discipline at the job site, alcoholism, drug abuse including nicotine addiction, chronic faultfinding with others and general unworthiness.

[THIS AGENCY] DOES NOT EXIST TO SUPPORT PEOPLE WHO WILLFULLY AND CONSISTENTLY INDULGE ANY OF THESE BAD HABITS. Evidence of refusal to turn away from these bad habits… will be grounds for denying help… YOU MAY BE ASKED TO LEAVE AND NOT RETURN… UNTIL YOU WANT TO LEAD A NEW LIFE.

Welcome sign at an agency that serves meals to the homeless.

Down on Their Luck, p. 85
The Situation
When businesses can see you, they judge you

Those who were homeless were daily consumers in their neighborhood convenience stores. But despite that fact that they routinely were consumers by definition of the term, they were still treated as nonconsumers. For example, one store owner put a three-minute time limit on their shopping, after which they would be asked to leave. Even though they were spending money at a business, this did not mean they were welcomed there.

At Home on the Streets, p. 158

The Situation
When politicians can see you, they judge you

Amending Title 15, Chapter 385 of the Minneapolis Code of Ordinances relating to Offenses—Miscellaneous in General.
The City Council of the City of Minneapolis do ordain as follows:
Section 1. That Section 385.50 of the above-entitled ordinance be amended to read as follows:
385.50 Loitering.
(a) No person shall loiter:
(1) On the streets or in a public place or in a place open to the public with intent to solicit for the purposes of prostitution, illegal narcotic sale, distribution, purchase or possession, or any other act prohibited by law;
(2) On the streets or in a public place or in a place open to the public or in a private place with intent to commit any act of burglary, robbery, theft or theft-related crime, or with intent to vandalize or damage public or private property.

The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty has found that “of 234 American Cities, 40 percent make it a crime to sleep in public spaces.


By 1999 all fifty of the largest cities in the United States had enacted or reenacted vagrancy laws.

At Home on the Streets, p. 155
The Situation

When politicians can see you, they judge you

[The police officer] issued me a ticket for $271.00, “camping in a vehicle”, an amount equal to 28% of my monthly income at the time. Of course, it makes sense if you use “governmental logic.” If a man can’t even afford a place to live and has been reduced to sleeping in his car in a dark parking lot where he may be mugged or killed, a very uncomfortable way to sleep, the city should assess a substantial fine. It’s probably a deterrent to prevent all the “homed” people from leaving their warm, comfortable beds 2-3 times per week to enjoy the utter luxury of parking lot sleeping.


The Situation

When the police can see you, they judge you

Don’t get me wrong. I like police when they’re chasing criminals. Somehow, though, they became something different when they are preventing me from attending to my most basic biological needs. Somehow, when they are standing between me and sleep they seem less than heroic.


Like most police work, the police response toward the homeless was essentially reactive, in that it was conducted in response to calls for increased vigilance. But it was conducted, not on behalf of the homeless, but for the benefit of other citizens who were the primary complainants. This distinction was not lost on the homeless. Hoyt, who worked at the [homeless shelter], often complained about the treatment he thought the homeless received relative to other groups. He told us a number of times, “We can call the cops down at the [shelter], and it takes them forty-five minutes to get there.”

Down on Their Luck, p. 99

The Situation

Judgment leads to harassment

The Situation

Declared Hate Crime Deaths (FBI statistics) vs. Undeclared Hate Crime Deaths of Homeless Individuals (NCH Data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Total (1999-2012)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racial</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Situation

When the homeless are visible, they can be judged and harassed by everyone.

Response #1: Try to stay invisible
  • Problem: It's difficult to get help if you are invisible

Response #2: Ask for help and become an open book
  • Problem #1: You give up even more privacy (e.g. make a spectacle of yourself on a street corner, divulge your personal history repeatedly to strangers, etc.)
  • Problem #2: Getting help with one problems does not guarantee solving other problems

The Situation

Try to stay invisible

Prime versus marginal space

Prime space has economic or quality of life value.
  • Commercial real estate
  • City Parks
  • Desirable housing

Marginal space has little economic or quality of life value.
  • Industrial areas
  • Run down neighborhoods
  • Along railway lines
The Response

Try to stay invisible

Prime versus marginal space

To the homeless, "prime" space is:

• Secluded
• Near services (e.g. soup kitchens, plasma centers, casual labor sites, etc.)
• Close to "transportation" routes (e.g. pathways, railroad tracks, etc.)

"Prime space" for the homeless is also prime space for drug dealers, predators, etc.

Marginal space becoming prime space disrupts the homeless population

• Republican National Convention in Saint Paul
• Target Field being built across from Sharing and Caring Hands
• Community revitalization/gentrification

The Response

Try to stay invisible

East Village amenities unavailable due to homeless concerns

After reports of loitering, overnight sleeping and drug-use in the East Village, public lounge chairs have been removed and public washrooms have been closed, except for special events. Recent monitoring of the area has shown that homeless people and possibly others are using public facilities in ways that were "not intended" in the original plan for the area. [A spokeswoman] explained there has been particular concern around people sleeping in the public washrooms overnight, or sleeping on the lounge chairs for extended periods. "When we were planning that area, we went through an extensive visioning program. After what we’ve watched and observed, our intentions were clearly different than how these facilities are being used right now."


The Response

Try to stay invisible

Re: "River Walk chairs removed, public washrooms closed" (Letter to the Editor)

The quote from [the spokeswoman] was particularly disturbing. Clearly her "extensive visioning" of the area didn’t include the people who already populated the area before gentrification. … [T]reating those who remain homeless as somehow less than desirable users of our public washrooms and public seating is infuriating. What bathrooms do you expect these people to use and where would you find it acceptable for them to sit to take a load off their feet?

Homeless people do stay in other areas, but key resources keep them near shelters, restaurants and the hotels that bring convention-goers who become panhandling targets. … The area around (the day shelter) proved to be ideal, with the day shelter itself providing a number of services, a fast food restaurant and several convenience stores for small purchases of food, beer, coffee and other essentials, and several railroad lines providing a quick walking route downtown. Empty buildings, several rail and street overpasses, and small copses of trees and brush were all capable of providing shelter.

Activism and Creating a Translational Archaeology of Homelessness; p. 446

We quickly learned that the material landscape of homelessness is transitory, depending on season, invisibility and access to locations suitable for occupation, and efforts by government officials or private property owners to keep homeless people out.

Activism and Creating a Translational Archaeology of Homelessness, p. 447
The Situation

Try to stay invisible

Choosing the right parking space is an essential survival skill. Choosing the wrong one will draw the attention of residents, business owners, and police, and you will be moved on early. There is enough work involved in setting up for the night that moving on costs you at least an hour, and it is an unpleasant hour, one in which you have to listen to a self-righteous jerk with a badge and a stick tell you how you ought to be living.


The most important thing for someone homeless is staying clean and having good hygiene. If you appear clean, then you are more likely to be employable, enjoy socializing with people, and less likely to be kicked out of public places. Basically, never look like you are homeless if possible.

http://www.philforhumanity.com/Homeless_Survival_Guide.html

The Response

Try to stay invisible

From a homeless perspective, how accessible is your facility in terms of prime marginal space?

• Proximity to transit lines
• Probability of harassment for being homeless in that neighborhood
• Proximity to other services

The Situation

Response #1: Try to stay invisible

• Problem: It's difficult to get help if you are invisible

If we meet a homeless individual in our professional capacity, they are visible.

Response #2: Ask for help and become an open book

• Problem #1: You give up even more privacy (e.g. make a spectacle of yourself on a street corner, divulge your personal history repeatedly to strangers, etc.)
• Problem #2: Getting help with one problem does not guarantee solving other problems
The Situation

Become an open book

Examples of questions on Rule 25 assessments and Combined Application Forms (application for County benefits):

- How much income (cash or checks) did or will your household get this month?
- How much does your household (including children) have in cash, checking or savings?
- Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental health problem?
- Have you ever been verbally, emotionally physically or sexually abused?

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The Situation

Getting help with one problem does not guarantee solving other problems

It is important to recognize that although our discussion has separated the various constraining factors into distinct categories for analytic purposes, they actually occur simultaneously, interact with one another, and frequently blur into one another. Together they compose a holistic web in which the homeless are ensnared by multiple strands. This helps explain why disengagement from homelessness is often so difficult. Successful extrication involves cutting through a complex of interrelated entanglements that include a mix of resource deficiencies, institutional dynamics, social ties, and cognitive factors.

Down on their Luck, p. 299

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The Situation

Getting help with one problem does not guarantee solving other problems

It is too simple to say that I was going just fine until someone took my shelter away and now I am in chaos. If only someone would give me back my shelter the chaos would abate. Nonsense. I’m not in chaos. I have a definable set of problems and giving me shelter won’t solve them. It is only a tiny piece. Furthermore, I don’t want a cure for my life. Most people who write to me who are homeless chose homelessness. Homelessness was their answer to another problem, a foreclosed home, a lost job, a catastrophic disease which left them bankrupt and disabled, and abusive family, a lack. Alas, this is the hardest thing to explain. Homelessness was a positive step toward solving other problems.

http://guide2homelessness.blogspot.com/
The Situation
Getting help with one problem does not guarantee solving other problems

Outreach plays a crucial role in work with people who are experiencing homelessness. …
It involves developing sufficient trust to help people consider receiving services and the benefit they might accrue from them. It may well mean developing rapport with people who, because of their experiences, have no expectation of a positive outcome.

TIP 55: Behavioral Health Services for People Who are Homeless, p. 33

“I’ve been f***ed over so many times that I need some affirmation.”
House of Charity client complaining about referrals to permanent housing programs that didn’t produce housing

For homeless clients, sobriety may help with securing housing, employment, education, etc.

On the other hand, sobriety may simply remove a coping mechanism for a chaotic, unstable, unpredictable, dangerous situation.

Never take away defenses until a participant has a replacement defense or coping mechanism in place.

Gayle Thomas
The Response

Getting help with one problem does not guarantee solving other problems

• Upper class focuses on the past.
• Middle class focuses on the future.
• Lower class focuses on the present.

The more complicated a piece of machinery, a system, an equation is, the more things can go wrong.

Once something goes wrong, its effects are compounded by the complexity.

The Situation

Getting help with one problem does not guarantee solving other problems

It might be argued, of course, that if the homeless would only look beyond the moment to the future, if they were not so “impulse” or “present-oriented”, they would see the fruits of [investing in their future]. But the issue … is one of articulation between the present and the future … [T]he difference … "lies not so much in their different orientations to time as … to their different futures." Most people of a higher status see a positive articulation between immediate present and their future. They have a strong sense that what they do today will yield a tomorrow that is just as good or better than today.

Clearly, such a sense is not pervasive among the homeless. Most of them have little confidence that their actions today will yield a better tomorrow for them … It is not so much because they are present-oriented … Rather, it is because the tomorrows they can realistically imagine are not ones that inspire … the investment of whatever limited resources they may have scrimp to save …

Down on their Luck, P 170
The Situation

Getting help with one problem does not guarantee solving other problems

Most social services look to Benjamin Franklin:
• God helps those who help themselves.
• Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.
• Energy and persistence conquer all things.

Most homeless place more faith in Murphy:
• Murphy’s Law - Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.
• Gattuso’s Extension of Murphy’s Law - Nothing is so bad that it can’t get worse.
• Murphy’s Principle of Infinity - You can never run out of things that can go wrong.

Resistance to work in one area (e.g. sobriety, medication compliance, etc.) may be done in anticipation of something going wrong in another area.

From a client’s perspective, they are being asked to give up:
• A coping mechanism
• A social ritual
• Friends
• Their protection against the pains of withdrawal for the possibility of ...?
The Response

“Homeless” culture: a response to becoming homeless

How do people become homeless in the first place?

How do the homeless cope with the situation of being homeless?

How do people leave homelessness?

[^1]

The Response

How do people become homeless in the first place?

Structural Factors vs. Individual Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural Factors</th>
<th>Individual Factors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing stock</td>
<td>Income (actual and potential)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political view of homeless</td>
<td>Remaining invisible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance programs - eligibility</td>
<td>Maintaining eligibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance programs - target</td>
<td>Agreeing to program participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>populations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number and quality of agency staff</td>
<td>Working with staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of homeless</td>
<td>Navigating the system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance programs goals</td>
<td>Unrealistic personal goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[^1] The process of obtaining low income housing is plagued with bureaucratic complexity, often insurmountable for those homeless individuals who might lack government identification and, we would add, the skills to negotiate complex bureaucracies.


[^3] Down and Out in America


[^5] Text from my wife
The Response

Structural Factors

Since political and economic structures predict increases and decreases in homelessness, we can conclude that there are a significant number of people disenfranchised by macrolevel forces. They therefore are not completely responsible for their condition, or at least it seems that society significantly shares in that responsibility.

At Home on the Streets, p. 165

At this moment when our state’s affordable housing sector is as fully realized as ever, various economic, demographic, and political forces have converged to make “homes for all” even more elusive. If we had unlimited resources, our solution might be clear: simply ramp up production. But we live in a resource-constrained world, driven by questions about whether every dollar is used for the maximum benefit of people served.


The culture of the United States is saturated with an intense individualism, a bootstrap vision of social mobility. We see our country as a land of opportunity, where anyone who tries hard enough can be successful. But inverting that logic yields a rather dark worldview: if working hard leads to success, then, by deduction, those who are unsuccessful simply are not hard workers. The policies that follow from this conclusion allow us to construct problems such as poverty and homelessness as individual and not social in nature. We therefore can ignore them; they are not our problem.

At Home on the Streets, p. 1
The Response

Structural Factors vs. Individual Factors

When a social worker sits across the desk from an individual client:

- The focus must be on the individual and his or her individual barriers
- Little can be done to change the structural factors the client faces

During a one on one counseling session, if a client blamed their homelessness on limited housing stock, institutional racism, poorly designed government subsidy programs and fragmented social services, what would our response be?

The Response

Structural or Individual Factor?

"Why don’t they just get a job?"

- Skills limit most homeless to unskilled or semi-skilled jobs such as construction, fast food, lawn care, etc.
- Employers can legally discriminate based on appearance, employment history, job references, lack of a telephone, etc.
- Many of these jobs are not conveniently located (e.g. most new home construction jobs are in areas away from public transit)
- Full-time employment often conflicts with the homeless schedule (e.g. meals at food centers, shift work vs. emergency shelter hours)
- Many jobs incur up front costs (e.g. tools, uniforms, union dues, etc.)
- Increased income can make an individual ineligible for benefit programs
- Once employed, the individual must wait for the first pay check
- Saving enough to afford housing can take several months

The Response

Structural or Individual Factor?

"Why don’t they just get a job?"

- The work the homeless get is often seasonal or sporadic (e.g. dependent on the weather, etc.)
- Temporary jobs are common, but:
  - By their nature, they do not provide income to sustain housing
  - Employers tend to be more predatory
    - Less likely to pay for Worker’s Compensation, Unemployment Benefits, etc.
    - More likely to refuse to pay
    - More likely to expose workers to hazardous situations
The Response

Structural or Individual Factor?

“Why don’t they just get a job?”

Research into the employment activities and income sources of the homeless across the country has shown that the vast majority are either working or looking for work, and that some form of employment is often cited as the most frequent source of income.

For a full discussion, see chapters 4 and 5 in Down on Their Luck. Snow and Anderson.

Low-paid workers received no fringe benefits, had no union protection when they had grievances, and had no employee assistance programs to help when they had personal or job-related problems. Many subjects had been repeatedly fired from or quit a variety of jobs following personal crises or economic disasters, which are common in the low-income community (a car breaking down means being unable to get to work; an illness without sick time may mean being fired or forced to quit; marital conflicts or problems with children occur and no personal days are available; a fire or broken furnace in the apartment means missing work).… Since our subjects do understand in an insightful – if unacademic – way that options are closed, they frequently confront employers, resist work demands, and choose other survival strategies that are independent of the primary labor force.

Checkerboard Square, p. 73
The Response

Structural or Individual Factor?

Individuals who are homeless are more likely to be sick as a result of their living conditions or injured because of the type of work they perform. Exacerbating the latter, the informal nature of their employment leaves those who are homeless little recourse for work-related injuries.

*At Home on the Streets*, p. 80

Almost all of those who regularly caught work at the Corner got shorted on their pay at the end of the day and sometimes got stiffed altogether: “A guy will pick you up on Monday and say he’s got five days of work and that he’ll pay you on Friday. So you work all week and then on Friday, he never shows to pick you up. I stopped doing that. You gotta pay me every day.” – Potato Water

Those who caught work off the Corner would talk often about being left in other parts of town at the end of the day and not taken back to Catchout Corner after the job was done.

*At Home on the Streets*, p. 83

The Response

Both a Structural and Individual Factor:

Margins:
- The distance between a person and homelessness
- The amount of bad luck someone can absorb before chaos sets in
- The area on the fringes of society

Margins:
- Material assets
- Earnings
- Spending potential
- Goodwill from others
- Community support
- Family support
- Cognitive skills
- Stress tolerance
- Physical health
- Security of belongings
- Reliable communication/transportation
The Response

Margins:

For someone with small margins to become homeless, any one of the following could cause homelessness:

- Car breaks down
- Seasonal work ends
- Company goes out of business
- Firing
- Eviction
- Can't stay with friends
- Illness/injury
- Arrest
- Natural disaster
- Fire
- Relapse
- Aggravation of chronic health problems

The Response

Margins:

For someone with large margins, all of the following together could cause homelessness:

- Home gets destroyed
- Home was uninsured/insurance is void because of the way the home was destroyed
- All cars, bikes, etc. were in the garage and burned too
- All credit cards, bank cards, identification, cash and check books burned
- All relatives are out of town and cannot be reached for help
- Cannot get to work to cash out PTO
- Red Cross won't provide temporary shelter
- No benevolence funds available through places of worship

The Response

Margins:

Everyone encounters bad luck at some point, of course. But its effects are not the same for all of its victims. For most individuals a minor automobile accident or a dying car engine leaves them unsettled for a day or two; for a few others it alters their life course. What accounts for the difference? Why are some individuals more vulnerable to strokes of bad luck than others? The answer lies in part in the individual's economic and social situation. Most people can absorb a run of bad luck without being thrown off course. Most of the homeless, however, had been so marginally situated, both economically and socially, that they did not have the resources to parry an encounter with bad luck. In short, many, and perhaps most, of the homeless are individuals who were particularly vulnerable to bad luck, not so much because of personal disabilities or incompetencies, but because of their already marginal existence.

Down on Their Luck; p. 267
The Response

Margins:

Although Mitch, Cora, Harry, Amy and Nina can be understood to have been vulnerable to homelessness due to family problems, mental illness, or physical disability, it was their own resistance to institutionalization, family abuse, the foster care system, and [predatory] landlords that caused each of them to incur periods of homelessness. Had Cora, Harry and Nina tolerated physical abuse, as millions of Americans evidently do, they could have remained housed. … Cora’s resistance to a slum landlord, to various low-paying employers, and to the city welfare department has also extended her periods of homelessness.

Checkerboard Square, P. 33

The Response

Margins:

“Margin” issues associated with family of origin:

- Alcohol and drug use in the home
- Childhood abuse
- Neglect
- Out of home placements
- Repeated relocation
- Transitory neighbors
- Lower quality of education
- Lack of financial resources
- Lack of housing resources
- Long-term planning
- Life expectations

The Response

Margins are often small from the beginning

Those who grew up with small margins may adapt more easily to the homeless culture than others.

A guest shared with me that she was the third generation staying at People Serving People, first with her grandmother and then later again with her mother, and finally as a 19-year-old pregnant mother she had returned. In the conversation she indicates that she grew up thinking shelter life was normal because she had seen her family in shelter since shortly after her birth.

Jim Minor; former CEO of People Serving People
The Response
Margins are often small from the beginning

For the majority of the homeless, however, family relationships appeared to be nonexistent, weak, or, at best, highly ambivalent. Moreover, most of the homeless came from families that were quite marginal economically and are therefore not in a position to offer much financial support. … Unlike most Americans, then, many of the homeless come from families that have little economic or emotional support to offer in times of need, whether that need is occasioned by structural forces, personal disabilities, or just plain bad luck. Down on Their Luck, p. 265

The historical record is clear on one point: Although there are many things to draw on in our past, there is no one family form that has ever protected people from poverty or social disruption. …
The Way We Never Were, p. 5

The Response
Margins are often small from the beginning

Most of our participants had a great deal of family strain in their biographies. While some on the street maintained contact with their families, the majority of them had tumultuous childhood experiences. Many felt abandoned by their families, though they usually would simultaneously blame themselves for the discord. … [W]e found that while some of our participants maintained contact with their families of origin, most had extremely strained, and often non-existent, relationships with them, clearly feeling more at home with their street family. … Often, family strain were embedded in poverty. Nearly all of our participants on the street grew up poor. A large proportion of them lived in government housing, others in extremely indentent neighborhoods. This environment can add to family strain and break down of social support, particularly in light of the fact that regulations exist to control who and how many can live in each unit of government housing. Para some, even if their families would have been willing to house them, doing so meant risking losing their subsidized home altogether.
At Home on the Streets, pp. 88-90

The Response
Margins are often small from the beginning

Consistent with previous research on homeless people … the interviews revealed an astounding amount and degree of child abuse (suffered by the homeless). Since we asked about abuse only in a general way (“Were there problems in your family when you were growing up?”), I can only assume that more subjects may have been abused than the more than half who described severe physical and sexual abuse (emotional abuse was even more prevalent, but it is not included in this figure). Checkerboard Square, p. 47
The Response

Margins are often small from the beginning

Youth transitioning into adulthood are at increased risk for homelessness. Our study found ages 16 to 18 were the most common ages to first experience homelessness. Most homeless youth come with childhood histories of trauma and long-term health issues. About half were physically abused, 1 out of 3 neglected, and 1 out of 4 sexually abused as a child. More than half (58%) have had at least one placement in a foster home, group home, or facility for persons with emotional, behavioral, or mental health problems.

http://www.mncompass.org/housing/3-things-about-homelessness

The Response

Margins are often small from the beginning

Many associated risk factors have been identified for adolescent homelessness, including family conflict, leaving foster care, running away or being thrown away, physical or sexual abuse, and coming out to parents as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning one's sexual identity (GLBTQ). … For many study participants, the decision to live on the streets was a logical and natural alternative to remaining in possibly dangerous and unstable home environments. It provided a means to their generating social capital.

Lost in the Shuffle: Culture of Homeless Adolescents, p. 134

The Response

Individual Factors

Small margins create a mindset:
• “Down on their luck”
• Instability and mobility vs. having a plan
• Fatalism versus personal responsibility
  o Collect what you need and it gets stolen,”cleaned out”, etc.
  o Parts of the “system” work against other parts
  o Overcoming one barrier sometimes solves problems and sometimes creates new problems
The Response

Individual Factors

Emotional toll

There is a correlation between homelessness and:

• Mental illness
• Chemical dependency
• Poor physical health

but we should not assume a one way causative link.

Isn’t this where “Social Services” come in?

Homelessness itself is a risk factor for mental and substance use disorders, given the many life challenges and disruptions that people who are homeless face: for example, stress, loss of social connectivity, increased threats, harm through victimization and exposure, and deterioration of health status.

TIP 55: Behavioral Health Services for People Who are Homeless, p. 9

When the mood on the streets is bad, things are more strained and tempers quicker to flare. This was not simply the characteristic of particular people, but rather any given person encountered at the wrong time. This is not difficult to understand; not many of us are totally immune to stress … and the stressful nature of being on the street likely would get the better of any of us from time to time. “All of us are good people,” Potato Water put it, “but any of us … you catch the wrong person at the wrong time, it can be bad.”

At Home on the Streets, p. 123

The point here is twofold. The condition of being homeless can, in fact, trigger mental illness. … Moreover, management of mental illness is structured such that it can be nearly impossible for a person who is mentally ill and homeless to get aid. Not only does the model of service provision require the person who is homeless to go to the services, but also it requires a series of ordered steps, forms, interviews, and so forth, which might be difficult for a person with mental illness to execute. For the person who is mentally ill, getting off the streets is analogous to getting out of a straitjacket. A sane person is able to get out of a straitjacket; it simply requires that certain moves be done in a certain order. However, mentally ill people must often cannot order their thoughts and actions, and so the jacket can effectively restrain them.

At Home on the Streets, pp. 78-79
The Response

Individual Factors

Homelessness itself is a risk factor for mental and substance use disorders, given the many life challenges and disruptions that people who are homeless face: for example, stress, loss of social connectivity, increased threats, harm through victimization and exposure, and deterioration of health status.

TIP 55: Behavioral Health Services for People Who are Homeless, p. 9

“You got to be strong out here, mentally. I see people over time just going crazy. They’re normal at first, and then after a while they just lose it. Like they’re not there anymore.”

Homeless man in Birmingham, Alabama

At Home on the Streets, p. 79

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The Response

Isn’t this where “Social Services” come in?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Response to Homelessness</th>
<th>Accommodative</th>
<th>Restorative</th>
<th>Expansive</th>
<th>Exclusionary/Expulsionist</th>
<th>Containment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Operational Perspective</td>
<td>Sustenance- oriented caretaker</td>
<td>Treatment- oriented caretaker; Medical perspective</td>
<td>Salvation perspective</td>
<td>NIMBY perspective</td>
<td>Harassment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Down on Their Luck, p. 78

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The Response

Isn’t this where “Social Services” come in?

Social Service agencies are supposed to help people overcome their individual barriers, but:

- Social Services are limited
- Social Services aren’t always service oriented
- Social Services can be inconsistent in their approach
- Social Services often conflict with the homeless culture
The Response

Isn't this where "Social Services" come in?

Accommodative agencies:
• Do little to move individuals out of homelessness.
• Meet the basic needs of those who are homeless.

Restorative agencies:
• Often deal with homelessness but not its related issues.
• Often deal with issues related to homelessness that the homeless face but do not deal with homelessness itself
• Often fall back into an accommodative stance in response to increased numbers of homeless.

Increased numbers of homeless aggravate the responses of Exploitative, Exclusionist and Containment agencies.

The Response

Isn't this where "Social Services" come in?

Chemical dependency and mental health treatment programs are Restorative.

Some dynamics that treatment agencies should keep in mind while dealing with homeless clients, beyond the dynamics that all of their clients face, include:
• Sleep deprivation
• Dangers from side effects of medication (e.g. drowsiness makes the individual more vulnerable to assault, robbery, etc.)
• Theft or confiscation of personal property
• Predators who seek out prescription medications
• The need for cash and the ease of selling prescription medications

The Response

Isn't this where "Social Services" come in?

"Homeless advocates are always focused on what are believed to be the root causes of homelessness, and providing the basics of food, shelter and clothing to those who do without," [Kevin Barbieux, a homeless blogger] continues. "And although those things are important in their own way, they don't affect homeless people with the intensity that sleep does (or the lack thereof)."

Sleep deprivation has also been linked to an increase in mental illness, drug abuse among teenagers, and higher rates of violence and aggression. Schizophrenia-like symptoms may also start to develop, which is problematic in a population that already experiences a higher than average likelihood of suffering from the disease.

The Response

Isn't this where “Social Services” come in?

Those individuals who are street homeless often reject what is being made available by the social service system. Alternatively, we also might say that service institutions have proved incapable of reaching this group in a meaningful way. Either way, those on the street highlight not only the overall failure of our society to provide for the poor but also failures of specific institutions charged with that task. The former leaves us with the suggestion that we ought to provide more services to those who are poor and homeless, but the latter adds an important nuance that questions exactly what kind of services we ought to offer and how we ought to organize the institutions that provide them.

At Home on the Streets, pp. 2-3

The Response

Isn't this where “Social Services” come in?

Exploitative Agencies:
• Examples include plasma centers, temporary labor businesses, pawn shops, etc.
• Focus on entity’s profit, not the wellbeing of those with whom they do business.
• Some social service agencies function in this way by:
  o Employing homeless clients in money making operations
  o Changing programming to qualify for grants, etc. instead of pursuing grants that support successful programming

The Response

Isn't this where “Social Services” come in?

• Social Services are limited
  o Each agency deals with at most a few of the issues that homeless clients face.
  o Agencies are rarely holistic.

We have gotten better at smoothing pathways to housing for those with fewer obstacles, and have developed longer-term supports for others, but we still struggle to find feasible paths for those with significant mental health issues, dealing with violence, and those whose starts in life included so much adversity that they have never developed the skills and support networks needed to gain a foothold on a path to stability.

http://www.mncompass.org/housing/3-things-about-homelessness
The Response
Isn’t this where “Social Services” come in?

- Social services aren’t always service oriented
  - Social services have often been set up to control undesirable elements of society
  - Agencies often have to “control” clients to overcome NIMBY dynamics
  - Agencies and their workers have a vested interest in the status quo
  - The homeless rarely engage with social services from choice
  - Clients are aware of the power differential between themselves and the person across the desk
  - Services are sometimes structured around funder requirements more than the needs of the clients

As [the director of the homeless shelter] commented, “I’ll sleep and feed almost anybody, but such help requires that they be deserving. Some people would say I’m cold-hearted, but I rule with an iron hand. I have to because these guys need to respect authority. … The experience of working with these guys has taught us the necessity of rules in order to avoid problems.”

_Down on Their Luck_, p. 81

Few of the subjects interviewed in North City regarded the purposes of social welfare as altruistic, at least not that of the dominant bureaucratic institutions such as welfare departments, homeless shelters, or child welfare agencies. These agencies were viewed as hostile and controlling components of society’s police functions.

_Checkerboard Square_, p. 98

For a full discussion, see chapter 5 (“Institutions of Control: Social Welfare as Contested Terrain”) in _Checkerboard Square_, Wagner.
Isn't this where “Social Services” come in?

- Social services aren’t always service oriented
  - Agencies often use buzz words such as “client centered” but then assume the client is being resistant or manipulative if they request a change of counselor.
  - To the clients, agencies generally aren’t servants. They are part of “the system” that creates obstacles.

"When these people come in, you’ve got to size them up, see what they’re really like. … It’s important that the caseworker not be too cynical, though. Otherwise they would never offer services to anyone. But it’s also important to look for something in the individual that makes you feel they might be salvageable."

Director of a social service agency,
Down on Their Luck, p. 83

The Response

Whereas middle-class people are often voluntarily consumers of child and family counseling or other mental health services, the poor are more often “involuntary” users. Their families are primarily the ones investigated for child abuse and neglect, and their children are those most frequently removed from the home. They are the group most often ordered to undergo counseling or drug treatment or are those incarcerated in prisons and mental hospitals. Nor can the poor’s involvement with public assistance or shelter programs be adequately described as voluntary, although technically they have the right to freeze or starve rather than apply for benefits. The power differential between a client and a social worker who can make life-and-death decisions as to whether that client will be granted a welfare check cannot be compared with problems middle-class consumers have in their relationships with physicians, therapists, or teachers.

Checkerboard Square, p. 98
The Response
Isn't this where “Social Services” come in?

- Social Services can be inconsistent in their approach
  - We say anyone could become homeless but often assume our clients need help others don't.
  - We use structural barriers to explain our failures (e.g. lack of funding, shortage of housing, etc.) but don't let clients use them to explain their situation.
  - We establish a therapeutic rapport with clients while maintaining professional boundaries.
  - We “meet clients where they are” and focus on their strengths while acting like their situation won't change without our intervention to deal with their weaknesses.
  - We fight to remove the stigma of homelessness, addiction and mental illness but assume our clients will engage in anti-social and self-destructive behavior.

The Response
Isn't this where “Social Services” come in?

- Social Services can be inconsistent in their approach
  - We decry our clients use of “illegitimate” means to get money but then encourage them to rely on their “resourcefulness” when we can't provide them with a bus pass.

The Response
Isn't this where “Social Services” come in?

Service providers most often paradoxically seek to reabsorb those who are homeless in “normal” society while at the same time holding tight to the us-them dichotomy that is a necessary part of the treatment relationship. Their rhetoric varies seamlessly and ironically by suggesting that those who are homeless are “just like us”, on the one hand, but diseased and needy on the other.

*At Home on the Streets*, p. 175
The Response

Isn’t this where “Social Services” come in?

Social services make certain assumptions:
• The homeless need us
• Our clients tend to make poor choices for a variety of reasons, most of which require professional intervention
• Working within the system leads to the desired outcomes
• Dealing with personal factors without addressing structural factors can solve a person’s problems
• The paperwork must be filled out properly

The Response

Isn’t this where “Social Services” come in?

• Social Services often conflict with the homeless culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Service assumption</th>
<th>Homeless reality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and drug use cause homelessness</td>
<td>Alcohol and drug use are a response to a depressing, chaotic, boring situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental illness causes homelessness</td>
<td>Stress and anxiety of homelessness exacerbate or cause mental illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless need to leave the homeless community to succeed</td>
<td>Friends can be more important than an apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Traditional” family structure is the most desirable</td>
<td>“Family” can take many forms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Response
Isn’t this where “Social Services” come in?

In Chicago, a seven-year wait confronts poor people hoping to move from homeless shelters to longer-term subsidized housing. Those judged psychotic, however, can make the move in only two weeks. Yet there are very few takers .... One woman, Zaney, insisted she was not crazy despite the fact that she heard “angry but nonexistent” voices. When the researcher suggested several times that she just “pretend” to be crazy in order to get an apartment, Zaney would shake her head .... It’s not that Zaney is unable to reflect or think straight, .... it’s that “crazy” means something different to her and the other women .... something akin to “weak”. They see psychosis as something that “arises when a woman is not strong enough to cope with the difficulties of homelessness,” and believe that “only those who give up the struggle to get out became flagrantly ill.” Refusing help is a “kind of signal”. It means: I am not crazy. I can survive on my own.


Our services often don’t line up well with what the homeless want
The Response

The Homeless Culture

The longer someone has been in a culture, the more they internalize its characteristics.

Individuals who find themselves on the streets for the first time tend to have very similar cognitive orientations to the experience. They are quick to assert that they are not really like the others on the streets, and they tend to feel that there is something dangerous and contaminating about associating with such people.

Down on Their Luck, p. 178

Ultimately either the recently dislocated manage to rekindle or develop non-street relationships and tap into the resources such relationship make available, or they are forced into increasing association with other homeless. As time goes by, their aversion to street affiliations tends to diminish.

Down on Their Luck, p. 182

The Response

The Homeless Culture

Safety

- The homeless are at risk for harassment/violence
  - The homeless are safer when they stick together and stay invisible

- The homeless are at risk of violence from each other

- There is a pecking order in homelessness
  - Homeless on homeless violence is less common than other harassment, but saving face and not backing down while avoiding violence are important
  - There are predators in the homeless community

- The homeless are at risk of exploitation from each other
  - Weaknesses must be hidden or overcome
  - Homeless must trust and distrust their fellow homeless at the same time
The Response

The Homeless Culture

Safety

Looking weak on the street is dangerous and getting out of an argument takes tact.  
At Home on the Streets, p. 111

Fights rarely erupted, even from the most heated arguments, because no one really wanted to fight. All seemed to recognize that life on the streets is dangerous enough without fighting one another. Conflicts would reach a pinnacle where a fight seemed imminent, but rather than boil over, the parties usually would begin carefully working their way out of the conflict. This took skill because reputation is an important protective veneer on the street.  
At Home on the Streets, p. 122

The Response

The Homeless Culture

Belonging

The homeless community provides:
• Validation
• Relationships
• Protection
• Resources

The Response

The Homeless Culture

Belonging

Generally, the homeless who share resources can count on reciprocal help when they need it. Those who do not help others or do not repay debts eventually have to rely on their own very limited resources rather than getting help from the homeless community.
The Response

The Homeless Culture

Belonging

Research by Paul Piff (University of California, Berkeley) and associates has found that people who perceive themselves to be from a lower social class are:

• More apt to rely on others for resources
• More concerned with maintaining relationships
• More communal in their response to chaos
• More focused on the welfare of others
• Better at discerning another person’s emotional state
• More likely to use engagement-related non-verbal behaviors
• Less likely to feel as sense of personal control over circumstances
• More honest
• More generous and altruistic than those who perceive themselves to be from a higher social class.

As noted in many ethnographies and community studies of the poor…, a strong norm of sociability, including dense social networks, characterizes the community. That is, street people actively seek out each other to spend time together and to participate in various primary groups. Not only do these groups become a central organizing principle in their lives, but street people often suffer depression, anxiety, and boredom when placed in … other circumstances that geographically separate them from their peers.

Checkerboard Square, p. 148

Although these youth had run from or been abandoned by their families of origin, they had not, in fact, abandoned the cultural ideal of a family unit. To survive on the streets, they formed new street families complete with pseudo parents, siblings and other extended family relationships… During each interview, a repetitive theme surfaced about life on the streets and the formation of “street families”. What most professionals would regard as a negative experience was described positively by many of these youth… They now had a family upon which they could depend, and this generated feelings of security. Some of these youth stated this was the first time in their lives they could “act like a kid”, while others said they were discovering their lost childhood and finally felt part of a family, a community, a society, and a culture.

Lost in the Shuffle, p. 157-158
The Response

The Homeless Culture

Belonging

Street-based ties ... generate commitment to the activities in which the relationships are grounded, as is reflected in the sanctions that may result from withdrawal from such activities. Three kinds of sanctions or penalties are particularly salient. First, the individual risks social rejection by those who expect him or her to participate in peer-group activities. Second, the person is threatened with the possibility that others will withdraw their material support — a particularly distressing consequence for the many homeless who rely on others for minor but daily material support. And, third, since a sense of both self and morality is based in part on these relationships, their disruption may cast doubt on an individual's sense of moral selfhood.

*Down on their Luck, pp. 291-292*

The Response

The Homeless Culture

Esteem (and American cultural values):

- Independence
- Self-reliance
- Wealth

Homelessness is not perceived to embody any of these. Homelessness appears to work against esteem and self-actualization by:

- Undermining a person’s perceived value
- Focusing the person’s energy into the lower levels of the Hierarchy of Needs

The Response

The Homeless Culture

Esteem in the homeless community is established by:

- Maintaining one's place in the pecking order
- Being a resource for others
- Knowing where to find what one needs

Homeless clients who tell us:

- They are not like the other homeless
- They don’t need us
- We can't teach them anything about addiction or homelessness

may be demonstrating a healthy self-image and sense of esteem
The Response

The Homeless Culture

Self-Actualization (vs. Boredom)

• Boredom is endemic in homelessness
• Boredom robs incentive and imagination
• The activities of homelessness are boring
  o Lining up for services
  o Waiting for your number to be called at the Social Security office, the Day Labor office, the Walk-In Clinic, etc.
  o Reading and filling out forms
  o Answering the same questions for every intake you go through

Those on the street are confronted with hours upon hours of idle time, and the human psyche was not built for such deprivation. Boredom is the problematic condition that often is absent from research and discourse on homeless, but it should not be underestimated in its significance … For those on the street, passing time becomes something of an art.

During our stay on the streets, Potato Water tried to catch work one morning. Unsuccessful, he noted that he might as well get drunk, and he did. This was a common practice. Substance use would be delayed in the hopes of getting work, but in the absence of work, it became a way to steal time. In contrast to the perception that substance use directly is a factor preventing those who are homeless from “gainful employment”, for most of those on the street, drinking and drugs were readily set aside for the opportunity to work.

Self-Actualization

Amya Theater Project is a unique creative process that brings together homeless and housed individuals to create and perform a theatrical production. Amya turns “homeless” from a word back into a person. Or persons. Living, breathing, laughing, singing persons. Who act — yes, act — in entertaining, genre-defying productions that are guaranteed to change your mind, if not your life.

Art From the Streets provides a safe and encouraging place where people who are homeless come to draw, paint, and create during free, twice-weekly open studio sessions. This year’s Open Studio sessions will culminate in our 22nd Annual Show and Sale, where participants exhibit and sell their work to the public.
The Response

The Homeless Culture

Self-Actualization

In American culture, self-actualization is usually seen as an individual task. Even team sports name the Most Valuable Player.

In homeless, self-actualization happens as part of the community. You become what you are in your relationship to others.

The Response

The Homeless Culture

Communal

This makes leaving homelessness difficult.

• How do you turn your back on people who watched over you during the time when you were most in need?
• How do you let not share your resources?
• How do you let your friends fend for themselves?

We can house the homeless and still make them feel homeless.

The Response

The Homeless Culture

Communal

The logic of not leaving “homelessness”:

• While I am homeless, I rely on my network of homeless friends.
• If I do not return the help, they will cut me off.
• If I get housing but something goes wrong and I lose my housing, I will need them again.
• If I didn’t help them while I had a place to stay, they won’t give me help when I need it.
• I should help them while I have housing (meaning let them crash at my place, cook food, do laundry, etc.).

(I take it back. The homeless do think about the future!)
The Homeless Culture

Exiting homelessness

The communal aspect of homeless culture makes leaving homelessness difficult. In fact, street people are so strongly associated with the social networks they develop on the street that … the worst thing that can happen to some street people is to be isolated from their peers:

“When you’re homeless, you have no privacy, no corner of your own. You’re often with people 24 hours a day. And this seems weird, maybe to the public, but you get used to it … and then it’s not good for you when you get placed [by social workers] in some small room far away and you’re isolated [when you’re used to being with people. That’s why people, they keep going to places like soup kitchens. A lot of them (formerly homeless) don’t eat, they’ll have maybe a coffee, they’re there to socialize, see their friends.”

Checkerboard Square, pp. 121-122
The Response

The Homeless Culture

Exiting homelessness

The communal aspect of homeless culture makes leaving homelessness difficult.

The notion of street homeless communities as consequential friendship networks is further supported by the way in which relationships are maintained between those who are able to get off the street and those still on it. While we lost personal contact with him, reports were that Lockett eventually left the streets, got married, and acquired a relatively stable job. The men at Cathout Corner told us he still comes down and spends time with them. Motown noted, “He comes by and hangs with the folks, help us out when he can, you know. He knows this is where he came from. The Corner helped him out, and now he helps out the Corner.”

At Home on the Streets, p. 113

The Response

The Homeless Culture

Exiting homelessness

The communal aspect of homeless culture makes leaving homelessness difficult.

My first night in the room alone feels strange. Without a TV or radio, the deadly silence fills the room, and I can hear every sound outside as the sun sets. I seem to be waiting for a loudspeaker to blast at any minute … it finally hits me that this is what I have been working toward. I must now live on my own without the routines, rules, or help of the shelter.

Shelter: One Man’s Journey from Homelessness to Hope, p. 117

Questions or comments…
Sources
Articles
Sources


Books


Presentations


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