

Politicking Homelessness in Atlanta: How does Atlanta Responds to its Homeless

Population?

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Preface

Homelessness in Atlanta is a noticeable and contentious matter. Arguably arising with the deconstruction of large-scale affordable city housing known as Skid Row and conversion of public housing complexes into mixed-used income housing beginning in the 1970s during the peak period of the city's development of public infrastructure and business. Issues of housing or more specifically affordable-housing availability are inevitably tied to Atlanta displacement of its citizen with the most impoverished becoming homeless. This ethnography seeks to gain a holistic perspective on how Atlanta engages its homeless population. By examining the positions of scholars, non-profit organizations, the local activist, and the governmental body of the city of Atlanta I aim to gain a comprehensive story of how the city too busy to hate respond to their visibly poor.

Being a former resident of downtown as well a student of Georgia State University the lives and experiences of those without the fundamental human rights of shelter is a noticeable and everyday encounter. Beyond the visibility, my involvement in organizing these past three years has made homelessness in conjugation with poverty and housing a matter at the forefront of my activism interest. Additionally the recent closing of the Peachtree-Pine homeless shelter and the city of Atlanta's headlines concerning its progress eradicating homelessness with its goal of making it "rare, brief, and nonrecurring." For this study, choosing my setting of downtown Atlanta was due to the desired specificity, personal capacity regarding travel, and the accessibility of networks. Moreover, it seems to be the area of Atlanta with people who are most visibly poor and displaced.

Background & Process

Before embarking on my research, it was vital to gather any assumptions, consider how aspects of my identity could impact my research and collection of data as well as familiarize myself with academic literature written to provide context. To begin, I held a few assumptions due to having an emic perspective given my activism work with the initial suspicion of contention between the city of Atlanta and activist. Not being sure of how exactly this contrast would manifest, simply being familiar with the typical relationship dynamics amongst organizers and government officials of either cooperation or opposition. Knowing many activists in Atlanta, it would be opposition.

Furthermore, concerning how my long-term involvement in activist could affect my collection of data period was vital. My activism work was an asset due to the mass of contacts, and networks that are accessible, but also a possible impediment concerning communication with certain parties particularly government officials. Perhaps they would be hesitant to speak to me wanting to avoid any assumed haggling. Luckily most of my activism work I am behind the scenes, so I was likely unidentifiable. Moreover, minimizing my personal political beliefs when predictably there would be conflict in perspectives as well as inspecting any preconceived elitist notions that I held which criminalize people who are homeless.

Wanting to provide a holistic and balanced ethnography was the goal, however being realistic in my capacity speaking with one representative from each faction being a scholar, activist, city representative, individuals who are homeless, as well as the non-profit organization was the objective. Choosing to collect qualitative information through non-probability judgmental sampling, I selected the identifiable “power players” of homelessness advocacy and service. Criteria of the selection of included personal knowledge of individuals or entities, media coverage, funding of the party, and presumed intensity of engagement. The interviews were to be

semi-structured, recorded, as well as handwritten notes of non-verbal observations that could later provide additional context. Making my questions unambiguous, and straightforward to ensure that there was clarity and possibly baiting to more specific topics. They included inquiry regarding what constituted homelessness and according to whom this definition came from, how their party responded to homelessness, any personal experience or relation to homelessness, the autonomy of homeless individuals in advocacy spaces, their perspective of Atlanta's relationship with its visibly poor and resolutions. I would seek to gain a general understanding of homelessness prior to my interviews by also reviewing literature related to the subject to obtain context on the history, possible obstacles, and perspectives on homelessness.

Beyond conducting perhaps five interviews, at the very least observation was necessary preferably participant observation with any faction. There were worksheets created for both interviews and observations. Interview worksheet consisted of a list of my questions and space to write my notes, while the observation worksheet was more structured. The latter was categorized into three primary sections of how displaced people interacted with each other, pedestrians, and law enforcement officials. From the compiled list, I contacted over 20 representatives from said faction making them aware of the ethnography and my ask which was an hour-long recorded conversation. The interviews were attempted to be scheduled within relative proximity of each other occurring over a three-week period, with observations when weather and time permits.

Literature Review

Before beginning my research, I examined the academic literature on the subject of homelessness in Atlanta. There was a sizable portion of the study, most recently coming from scholar and historian Charles Steffen, but also including dissertations, and articles ranging from the early 1990s to contemporary times. In addition to Atlanta specified literature, there were also

a couple of pieces reviewed in order to gain a general understanding to later then apply to Atlanta.

Steffen's multiple articles focused on examining the city of Atlanta's political governing body, class, and homelessness. Some such as "*The Corporate Campaign against Homelessness: Class Power and Urban Governance in Neoliberal Atlanta, 1973-1988*" recount certain era and expand on the political conflicts. Others "*(Dis)Empowering Homeless People: The Battle For Atlanta's Imperial Hotel, 1990-1991*" reference specific moments of brief power shifts and the intersection of social activism and homeless. The scholarship presented by Steffen is necessary to include due to the detail, longitudinal nature of the work and Atlanta specificity. Other pieces such as William Holland's dissertation "*Who is my Neighbor?: Framing Atlanta's Movement to End Homelessness, 1900-2005*" also analyzes social movements in Atlanta concerning homelessness with a specific interest in the role of religious institutions. Holland's work is key for highlighting the previous decentralization of the movement, and the creation, distribution, extension, and confrontation of frames. Other works such as Christopher Garcia's "*Atlanta's Other Olympians*" contextualizes how these various frames operate an example being regulations of non-profit service providers who allow homeless individuals who are under the influence to enter their facility. More importantly, Garcia's work speaks to the tension and circulation of funding, therefore, power dynamics among non-profits. More quantitative studies such as George Glisson, Bruce Thyer, and Robert Fischer "*Serving the Homeless: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Homeless Shelter Services*" supply analysis and deduction on the results of shelter services, also an expansion of affordable housing discussions.

Reviewing non-Atlanta specific pieces such as Will Sarvis's "*The Homelessness Muddle Revisited*" yields the most definitive and comprehensive history, perspective, and responses to

homelessness from housing being a human right, to cultural perspective of homeless most notably the portrayal of mental illness. The final article “*Dream Denied: The Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S cities*” published on behalf of the National Coalition for the Homeless in 2006 presents a survey of 224 cities policies and laws that criminalize the poorest in the community, ranking Atlanta as number 4 in their “Meanest Cities” rank. The metro Atlanta Taskforce for the homeless held a position on the board of directors of the organization. While the information concerning Atlanta, was helpful this article was useful in familiarizing me in the legislation, enforcement, and ultimately policing and discipline of the homeless population. In all the literature reviewed assisted in situating the current approaches, management, overall history, and issues concerning the homeless population. Notably the conception of frames applied to the associated actors in homeless activism, moreover Atlanta’s track record and relationship with homelessness and its connection to housing. Given this information, I was able to better define and identify the vital questions as well as what entities would be critical informants.

Observation & Interviews

Scheduling my the interview with an activist representative from the Metro Atlanta TaskForce for the homeless was completed with ease due to past relationships with a former member of their board of directors. This interview would be representative of multiple perspectives being they were a scholar studying homelessness in Atlanta, activist, and member of a non-profit organization. I also attempted to contact members of local activist organization #ATLIsReady and the former occupy movement to gain a broader perspective nevertheless we were never able to meet due to scheduling conflicts and lack of timely response. Scheduling my other interview via emails sent to 20 various representatives would not be as an expedited

process. Many of the non-profits contacted referred me to publicist or media representative, flatly decline the request or only opened the door to a maze of dead-end referrals, time conflicts, and unresponsive contacts. However, one of the most influential, i.e., the well-funded non-profit organization the United Way of Greater Atlanta was able to accommodate my interview request. Contacting city officials in departments of housing and urban development projects, human services, health & safety, members of city council as well as employees directly working with the mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms was a bit challenging. My original goal was to speak with former district two city council member Kwanza Hall who previously supported an ordinance that would have combined private business and city interest by “developing” the old shelter into a police station. Similarly, there was much run around regarding who precisely I should speak to, many cc emails often leading me back to a leading consultant in the office of Human Services. All of the interviews were held in private offices or meetings rooms and were on average 57 minutes. They occurred over a three week period, averaging to an interview a week held mostly in Georgia State buildings, but one with the city official happening in Atlanta’s city hall. Through these interviews, I was able to receive a first-hand account and unrehearsed response to questions that sought sincere, inspiring, and perceptive answers.

My first informant principally represented the Metro Atlanta TaskForce for the Homeless; which is involved in both service previously operation the Peachtree-Pine shelter as well as advocacy and social justice. The informant is also a historian and scholar who intentionally aligned his academic interest with his personal activism. The overall ideas from our interview presented tension regarding the cause, convoluted history of Atlanta relationship with its homeless population, and different solutions. The scholar and activist introduced accounts of individual pathology and medicalization vs. fundamental structures inhibiting and enabling

poverty, therefore, homelessness, the benevolent city too busy to care in contrast to the city too greedy to care, criminalization of the homeless as well as the legitimacy of procedures, and power structures mostly upheld by the dollar. Moreover, criticism in response to the city's collection and quantification of the homeless population through point-in-time surveys. These surveys are collected by city representatives essentially searching the town for three or so days counting and naming all of the people without refuge that they see and combining that number with a list given by shelter providers. This informant provided the first-hand context of Atlanta relationship with its homeless citizens, I left with many answers, but even more questions.

The second interview took place that following week with a representative from the United Way of Greater Atlanta. This informant individually handled what the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) department in the federal government call chronic homelessness amongst veterans in Atlanta. Despite my informant's position they did not provide the emic viewpoint that I expected even being unaware of the recent closing of the Peachtree-pine shelter blocks away from their office. Many of their responses demonstrated no kind of specialized knowledge beyond what was available on the website. However, the information remained useful and spoke volumes concerning the general understanding of the condition of homelessness. Expounding that Atlanta is a place of caring people, and if caring citizens, as well as non-profits and the city, come together then we can honestly end homelessness. Lacking deep contemplation and uncritical in the exact role each party has to play in the future and has played in the past this statement accurately exhibits the prevailing school of thought associated with resolving homelessness. So, while they did not give the insider perspective, it was more substantial that they were in an insider position of power lacking knowledge and history of homelessness. However, wholeheartedly endorsing and supporting the city in its efforts. There are no better

words to describe this interview beyond liberal optimism, while it makes you feel hopeful it lacks critical engagement and is no more a sign of progress than women's march protestors marching in vagina hats chanting "This pussy grabs back!"

The most authoritative entity interviewed was the consultant from the office of the Mayor department of Human Services. They were extremely knowledgeable on the management and distribution of government grants and concisely explaining many of data collection methods as described in my prior interviews specifically the point-in-time surveys. When questioned about the availability of affordable housing in Atlanta as well as determinants of what's affordable they referred to the HUD federal method of classification. It almost felt as if they attempted to get me lost in the jargon and acronyms to avoid speaking on contended subjects. However, when they did comment on questions concerning the cause of homelessness, solutions or the recent closing of Peachtree-pine their tone, body language, and diplomatically chosen words told more than any government structure infographic or capitol hill lingo could. Likewise to my first interview themes surrounding difference in accounts and understanding of the poverty-stricken, reemerged in a staunch during this interview, I was practically mentally coding my notes as I left city hall enthused as a researcher, but disgruntled as an activist.

My experience with observation was a bit different, while I wished to perform participant observation at a local shelter or with an activist time conflict, capacity, and my lack of transportation were critical hindrances. Unable to do participant observation with a shelter, I should perform observation independently in the downtown area since it was convenient and within my capacity. One aspect that I did not initially consider was my safety concerning my identity of being a Black woman. My identity would cause many of the men who were more than likely Black and homeless to catcall and sexually harass me consistently at my first attempt. My

safety was a massive blind spot that I missed and should have contemplated being well acquainted with this harassment beyond this ethnographic study.

It was necessary for me to take a step back and negotiate measures in which my research could occur, but I would not compromise my wellness. Strategizing ideas from having a guy friend sit with me as I observed, being mindful of specific days and times, to dressing in a way that did not emphasize any physical features. Ultimately the next attempt at observation I tactically selected where I would be sitting, on what day, during what period, what I would have on and if approached how would I respond. In all the observation was extremely beneficial to my study and there were minimal issues once measures were put into place.

It was a group of about twenty, overwhelmingly Black men congregating in the Woodruff park area. Interactions amongst the people who were homeless to another demonstrated a community that related and communicated as we humans do playing chess commenting on the weather, despite this it was apparent that some did struggle with trauma and/or addictions. Arguably with experiencing homelessness being traumatic within itself, this was not unanticipated. Interactions between pedestrians were primarily minimal with most of the latter avoiding eye contact or any form of acknowledgment of the poorest of our city. In the way of rebellion or assertion of one own humanity, I theorize, some of the displaced people would make loud proclamation such as “Atlanta don’t care about the homeless!”. They would also antagonize mostly women who appeared to be students by catcalling them or attempting to police their movements. A common example of the latter was when the non-homeless civilians opted not to use designated walkways to cross the street, some of the men would shout “That’s not a crosswalk!” or “You are jaywalking!” Finally, the communication amongst the men occupying Woodruff park and local law enforcement patrolling the area was somewhat minimal, despite the

arrangement of power being unspoken apparent. As long as the police maintained control over the bodies they seemed content, nevertheless, if an individual got too loud, then warnings and threats would be given mostly regarding Atlanta's quality of life ordinances which criminalize the homeless population for merely existing. Manifestations of gender power dynamics and the disempowered position of homelessness was an insightful discovery of my observation, would like to explore any scholarly work on the topic when time permits.

Data Analysis

Three primary themes emerged following my coding and many descriptive sub-motifs. The ideas being the construction and variation of narratives, the complexities and bureaucracy entangled in the advocacy, and lack of autonomy of individuals who are homeless. The development and modification of narratives of the different factions mainly emerged regarding the causes, history, and solution to homelessness in Atlanta. From those categories, sub-motifs emerged diagnosing one's lack of shelter as either lack of individual responsibility and a "culmination of failures" according to the city representative. Or in a more fundamental perspective from the activist/scholar of displaced citizens being the poorest of the poor essentially a causality of unjust intersections of systems of oppression such as race, and gender with class or more explicitly capitalism centered. Additionally, historically Atlanta's engagement with the homeless population particularly around the Olympics was framed as either a development on behalf of the city or displacement of the poor Black homeless population. Another conflicting topic was the solution to end homelessness. The city approach was re-assessment of the system to figure out what's most effective. This analysis included depending on an expert to guide the city in resolutions and "increase client input." The United Way representative had a similar, but vague response citing "embracing the diversity of ideas" and

“raising of new minds.” Both of these concepts were repetitive, and non-conclusive at best despite the city having at the very least methods they seemed aimed at management, not elimination. The former Task Force director and scholar believed the beginning to addressing issues of housing as the “tip of the iceberg,” but more so reevaluating housing not to be seen as a commodity or exchange value instead of a human right which would call for structural changes.

This difference in understanding colored any thought that would succeed and would set the tone of positions from the city perspective in staunch contrast to the activist. These understandings seem to have existed on a spectrum of with the city, activist organization such as the Taskforce on opposite sides. The United Way falling somewhere in the middle, but skewing towards the city. A larger sample will be needed especially for non-profits to validate this. Despite this opposition, it was apparent which faction held the most power as human service representative exclaims after a bit of baiting and leading regarding the closure of Peachtree-Pine homeless shelter “...being at Peachtree and pine didn’t move them to the greatest self that they can be...[regarding Metro Atlanta Taskforce for the Homeless] HUD wrong about everything, can’t have money if you don’t follow their rules just the way it works. You don’t have to have their money.”

Secondly, the complexities and bureaucracy associated with service and more importantly funds which to no small extent facilities relationships. The central figure and principal funder within this dynamic is the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development. HUD which is now lead by Ben Carson mandates an umbrella organization named the continuum of care (CoC) which service providers receive public funding from. It is presented as collaborative with each agency having a representative one being a formerly homeless person the other from the non-profit. However, there is hierarchy being a governing council composed of

leaders from various committees holding considerable influence, and specifically for Atlanta the 501 Partners for Home administering fund and ensuring accountability. My scholar informant deemed this structure the “homeless management complex,” which acts as an “assessment agent” to reinforce narratives of individual pathology. Even plainly stating “If a homeless service provider steps outside of those boundaries, questions the legitimacy of policies being enacted at city hall or questions the legitimacy of policies being advocated by downtown business interest well then the continuum of care is going to stop your funding.”

In contrast to the previous quote by the city, representative funding can be assumed to be the understated essence of engagement, more strikingly when combining difference in understanding of homelessness. According to the city official, the CoC evaluation is of a service provider effectiveness and results. However, you have to critically inquire what makes an organization useful if fundamentally the diagnosis of the issue is different. Also, the evaluating of organization effectiveness if based upon the point-in-time surveys innately leaves many holes in their data. Surveys conducted over such a short period and only accounting for the visibly homeless excluding those who might be staying on a friend couch or had enough money for the shelter that night. What about the displaced not accepted into shelters because they do not admit individuals with substance abuse issue, currently incarcerated under the quality of life arrest or reasonably avoiding city officials due to a threat of arrest. Unfortunately, crucial critics such as those above seem to become lost in the layering of systems, and flow of dollars. In all the conflict due to opposing understandings, and bureaucracy of influence formed a rigidly contentious decades-long relationship amongst activist and the city. The tension is as thick and unpleasant as Melania Trump uncomfortably forced smiles next to the President of the United States. However, the power dynamics are reminiscent when a parent punishes a child then

immediately expects them to dry their tears and subdue any emotions to attend a public event. One faction the child (or activist) is evidently dissatisfied but lacks the power to change the circumstance. They could choose to throw a fit (or protest) however they are not the adult (or being well-funded, influential, and legitimate power player) so they maneuver the best way they can. Either taking the challenging continuing to rebel at risk for more punishment (cutting funding) or succumbing to the parental will (the dollar and the popular narrative).

Lastly, through interviews and observation, the lack of autonomy of the displaced people for whom the city, activist, and non-profits advocated for or studied was apparent. Occurrences such as the non-existent usage of people's first language such as people who are homeless, rather than the continually stated word homeless dehumanized the population and contacted them being monolithic. While this was present in all of my interviews, it was most disturbing for the city representative due to her tone, and body language that emitted attitudes disabling and abandoning their humanity. Noticeably it was not until I questioned any of my informants on the self-representation of the homeless population of themselves that it was a topic of conversation. The Atlanta's official spoke of representation not being an issue due to one formerly homeless person having to be on the governing council of each committee or organization. However, one has to ask what and who elects this individual and is their experience representative of the many or the few? Further United Way revealed that they employ some of their former clients and ask a few to speak at their presentations as success stories, citing a family who previously held Information technology degrees before having hard times that now make over six figures. Again, not placing them in positions of power over the direct engagement of the population or being socio-economically representative of the majority of the community based on the success story they proudly recounted. The scholar and task force representative admitted that direct

representation of the homeless by the homeless was likely one of the most significant issues they faced and there was indeed room for improvement. However, it was an issue that had yet to be resolved.

Besides the language, and lack of representation the treatment invisibility of people facing homelessness was astounding. Their bodies were disciplined by the social space to remain subdued and silenced, which called for expressions for rebellion which arguably was also filtered by their identity and assertion of any innate power they possessed. The control and policing of the bodies were physically enforced by law enforcement as well when deemed to step out of the social order. The figurative and literal stripping of one's humanity and autonomy relegated the poorest of the poor to the narrative in which factions applied them to.

Reflections & Conclusion

In reflection while this ethnography offers insightful information on the internal politics and perspectives in the way Atlanta engages it's homeless population there is much more data that can be gathered. Specifically, about non-profit work, there is likely more variation among opinions possibly even some hidden dissent against the popular narrative. There were missed opportunities given I did not get the perspective of a homeless individual, and much more baiting could have occurred with the city and especially the United Way. Despite these blind spots the interviews, observations in combination

To conclude the homeless population represents our city's most abandoned, and vulnerable community. My ethnographic study expounded on the variation and animosity associated with how the city of Atlanta's non-profit organizations, activist, scholars, and government official response to the homeless community. Ultimately coming to the judgment and understanding that there is not a single or perfected response based on narratives as well as

the limitations in the execution of reaction due to constraints of bureaucracy centered upon funding. In all no matter the answer the voice and opinions of the homeless are limited, and no amount of self-determination is granted to them as humans, citizens, nor the most impoverished. If we as a city are to intentionally consider how our engagement we must center the most marginalized in all steps of the process in our mission to eradicate extreme poverty.

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