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## **Keywords**

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## Deconstructing Homelessness

Leah Getchell

Breaking down stereotypes is a task not easily done. The strong, almost inherent image of a homeless person as a bag lady or drunk is a stereotype that stretches throughout all of society. Tracing the roots of the word "homeless" goes back in time to the beginning of the eighteenth century, and then, described a

small cohort of the population. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the issue of homelessness has become more widespread. The word homeless now encompasses a steadily growing population across both the United States and Canada. With the new array of people who are categorized as homeless, the term begs a more in depth analysis on what being homeless really means in today's contemporary society. I will argue that home and homelessness are very individual concepts, and this generic blanket term is one that is outdated and overused.

Homelessness is not only a contemporary issue or the result of the Regan

administration in the 1980s, but was on the rise as early as the end of the eighteenth century. It was the rise of the Industrial Revolution that brought about a marked increase in the homeless population as demand for labor decreased and more and more people found themselves displaced from the workforce. With the changing homeless population today, it is important to re-examine the term homelessness as it now encompasses a wide and varied section of our population.

Unlike today, the majority of the homeless population at the end of the eighteenth century was men, and they were referred to as the wandering poor, or vagrants instead of as someone who was homeless (Kusmer 2002). The idea of the wandering poor came mainly from those men who rode the rails from town to town looking for employment opportunities. Those men, young and old, became known as hobo's, and, to an extent, this term is still used today. The other side of this growing un-housed population included older men, who, instead of riding the rails, gravitated to the inner cities and police "tramp rooms" (Kusmer 2002). The changing social and economic structure of the post-war years, midway throughout the twentieth century, saw this dual homeless identity begin to change, and the development of largely populated skid rows and slum areas was becoming a common part of every big city. Sociologist Nels Anderson was the first to attempt a census of the homeless in 1933, and concluded that a homeless person was,

a destitute man, woman or youth, either a resident in the community or a transient, who is with out domicile at the time of enumeration. Such a person may have a home in another community, or relatives in the local community, but is for the time detached and will not or cannot return (Kusmer 2002: 4).

Within this definition we see being homeless as something of a choice, or a result of unforeseen circumstances. They could also be members shunned from the community or simple passers-by from the rails. In outlining the origins of homelessness in his article "Down and Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History", Kusmer suggests this

definition of homelessness is too restrictive, stating that, if a homeless person is simply one without domicile, this largely impedes our view and understanding of the situation as it has now changed from those early years (2002). The idea that homelessness is a choice is definitely one of the most abhorrent stereotypes still clinging to homelessness today. I was surprised to find that while reading through different disciplinary definitions, the idea that homelessness is a choice, and not a consequence of great societal problems, still lurks in contemporary interpretations.

In Thomas O'Reilly-Fleming's article, "Down and Out in Canada: Homeless Canadians", he allows the narratives of a few former homeless men speak for themselves. In a few cases some of the men were either living in shelters or on the streets and expressed their desire to be there because for them "homelessness was an oasis away from the responsibilities [they were] being asked to perform to survive" (1993: 92). For these men homelessness was a decided temporary getaway from societal pressures, a choice (1993), I maintain, however, the large majority of homeless people are not in this position out of choice, but are forced there by larger socio-economic and political undoing.

The larger societal forces which have contributed to the rise of homelessness, from the eighteen hundreds until today, are largely associated with the modern capitalist mode of production our society now finds itself using. The shift at the beginning of the nineteenth century from feudalism to capitalism saw the disintegration of community subsistence to the rise of the individual. In these subsistence economies everyone is involved in labor and production, whereas in the capitalist mode of production, labor is conditional on demands from the market, thus creating a permanent sector of unemployed people (Encarta 1999). This ultimately leads to an increase in the homeless population as people are unable to pay rent because they do not have secure income. This disenfranchisement can be seen right from the inception of this new mode of production up until today, with corporate downsizing and market uncertainty. This has created what some have called the "new-homeless" (Gregory et al. 2000), as the casualties of the economy are becoming larger and more visible. Due to the overwhelming increase in homelessness, especially in the last two decades, I feel it is appropriate to look more closely at what homelessness really means to the individuals who

carry this label, and try to understand where our concept of "home" comes from, and how it is a highly individual affair.

My interest in this issue stems directly from my experience working at the Sister's of St. Joseph Women's Transition Home in London, Ontario. It was there, in the warm and friendly environment, that I began to question my own perceptions of what homelessness really means, and how my own stereotypes did not fit the reality of the situation. Even though I had my own experiences with homelessness prior to this experience during my time working with street kids in Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa as part of a six month volunteer program through a Canadian NGO, in terms of Canadian homelessness, there were still stereotypes that formed a portion of my consciousness as much as I would not like to admit. Some of the stereotypes which shaped my ignorance and perhaps shape others could include ideas like; loneliness, curbs, benches, and bag ladies, or mental illness, substance abuse, pan handlers, and a sense of fear in those who pass by the homeless. What I encountered working at the transition home does not fit into any image presented above, yet at the same time, most of the women in the home are, technically, homeless.

Another element that got me thinking about what homelessness really means is the actual name of the institution where I worked. It is called a women's transition *home*. This began a sequence of thought patterns that sparked the question, what is a home? Each definition of home I heard from the women was different from the next. This solidified for me that, with the changing face of homelessness in the country, it is important to look at what home really means and how the blanket term of homelessness belittles the situation.

To begin the analysis of what homelessness really means, it is first necessary to look at how home is defined within our Standard English language. In the 1998 edition of the Oxford Canadian Dictionary, home is defined as:

**1** a the place where one lives; the fixed residence of a family or household, **b** a house or dwelling place. **c** the residence of a person's parents, **2** the members of a family collectively: one's family background, **3** the

native land of a person or of a person's ancestors, **4** an institution for persons needing care, rest, or refuge (1999).

The first three descriptions exemplify what we, as a society, would classify as a home as well. It is a place where someone lives, that is, a place within which one can take on the daily activities of living, usually under the roof of a house or other dwelling place. Family is also linked closely with the idea of home, as traced back to the earlier definition given by Anderson. He suggested a homeless person belonged, on some level, to a family or larger community, but was not able or willing to reside with them. The definition which caught my attention, is number four: an institution for person needing care, rest, or refuge. I liken this to the mandate of the women's transition home, or any other homeless shelter, as this is its inherent purpose. In this situation then, is someone who is living in a shelter, for even a temporary period, considered homeless by this definition of home? I think the answer would be yes. By our modern western definition, they are homeless because they do not own the property, or live there permanently.

The idea of home in our capitalist system largely includes the notion of owning a piece of private property, and this again stems from our capitalist approach. British sociologist John Rex came up with a classifying system for people based on the occupation of a particular house type. This classification is based usually on tenure and is described as a housing class. He outlined three main arteries that lead to housing; "possession of capital and credit, thereby allowing entry to the owner-occupier market; a tenancy in a public (social) housing sector; and a tenancy in a private housing rental sector." (Rex and Moore qtd. in Gregory et al. 2000). Rex's seven housing classes are: outright owners, mortgagees, tenants in purpose-built public housing, tenants in publicly-acquired slum properties awaiting demolition, tenants of whole properties belonging to private owners, house-owners who must sublet parts of the properties in order to afford the repayments, and lodgers who occupy one of more rooms in a dwelling shared with other households (2000). Under this classification, those who occupy state run shelters or subsidized housing units, or slum properties, are considered part of the housed under this classification and therefore not homeless. Curious then is the term "homeless shelter." Clearly not everyone is aware of Rex's model of

classification, and therefore it cannot be the sole definer of home, especially within the shelter/transition home setting, but it does allow for needed reflection and perhaps a restructuring of categories.

There is one more definition of home which I found in two different editions of the Encarta Encyclopedia. This is the notion that home is a safe place, one that offers happiness and security. It could be argued then that a dwelling or abode, one of the cardboard boxes seen on a street corner or a tent in Toronto's Tent City, could be considered a home. Tom Gold, who is one of the residents of the growing community in Toronto known as Tent City, claimed that his Durakit trailer turned shelter is in fact a place he considers home (Gold 2002). In the movie *Dark Days*, Henry, one of the residents of New York City's tunnels, said his definition of a home "is having a lock on your door," while another member of the tunnel community said, "Its been our home for three years." It is interesting to hear that even though these people are occupying places free of rent and without access to capital, they consider it a home, while also making reference to security as a vital component of home. Author Jonathan Kozol takes this element of safety a step further when he explains his distinction between a shelter and a home. "Shelter, if it's warm and safe, may keep a family from dying. Only a home allows a family to flourish..." (1988). Again we see the defining element of home, for a lot of people, is the connection to family.

The juxtaposition between shelter and home is a very real one for most homeless people. One could argue that because a shelter is a safe place, a refuge, and a physical form of cover, it could be considered a home for those who lived underneath its roof. Perhaps this is the reason why people who are not physically sleeping on the streets go undetected by society, as they do not fit our category of a homeless person because they have a roof over their head. In New York City the web of homeless shelters is a unique and intricate system which houses thousands of people on a nightly basis. There are some places like the Martinique Hotel, where families will stay up to a year or more (Kozol 1988), but do not consider it their home. This poses an interesting question. Is home determined by the length of time one lives in the same spot, or is the definition of home more measurable as an emotional quotient?

In two ethnographies I have read, both authors spent an extended period of time with

the residents of inner city New York and Boston shelters, specifically for the mentally ill. Both authors make reference to home in their ethnographies, and in most examples the difference between shelter and home is clear. "Do you think this is a shelter?" asked Nora, a resident at Woodhouse, a Manhattan women's residence. "Well, no," replied Alisse Waterston the ethnographer, "I understand this is a community residence." "That's right," she asserts, "This is my home" (Waterston 1999). Here Nora wants to make clear that where she is living is not understood to be a shelter, but a residence, and for her, this distinction allows her to call it her home. The same distinction is made at a Boston shelter for the mentally ill. Ethnographer Robert Desjarlais asks some of the residences who have been living at the shelter for a while if they considered it a home. The overwhelming response was no because it did not have the "feel" of one (1996). Nina, one of the residents who had been there the longest, felt she could not consider the shelter a home because of the restrictions they have to live by. They don't have "the freedom to do what [they] want, like have friends over and cook food" (1996). Another woman described what home meant to her: "Home is a place to wash one's clothes, cook, and eat" (1996). It is clear from these statements that living life on a daily basis, in one's home, meant having certain liberties and domestic opportunities that life in a shelter could not give.

The conversation that began this process of trying to deconstruct the notion of home and homelessness, was one I had with Karla\*, one of the residents at the transition home where I have been working. We were talking about my presence in the home as volunteer who was interested in learning more about the issues of homelessness in my community, explaining to her my previous experience in Honduras. "Well I'm not homeless, I have a roof over my head, and I pay rent to stay here" was Karla's response. It seemed as though she was defending her position, and even though she did not have a place to call her own, she did not consider herself homeless. She was living in a safe, warm, secure building which had a lock on its doors, and she was paying a small amount of rent to be there. In subsequent conversations with her I came to realize that, although she never directly addressed the issue with me again, home for her was her own

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\*Indicates use of a pseudonym for protection of personal privacy.

apartment and the company of her cat. This cat was the topic of many conversations and it was obvious this was an important element to her equation of home.

Through these examples it is clear that home and homelessness can be interwoven to mean different things for different people, and while official dictionary definitions present concise descriptions, there is room for interpretation. There is no shortage of terms and descriptions as to what home is, but I think it is important to look at how homelessness is described. What are the dictionary definitions of homelessness, and what does being without a home mean to those who are without one? The answer from the Oxford Canadian Dictionary is concise. Being homeless means, "lacking a home" (1998). The inference here is so broad that it simply does not do justice to the situation, and perhaps is simply a term that needs to be used for lack of a better one, especially in a time when being homeless means so many different things.

The definition of homeless in the Dictionary of Human Geography is much more sensitive to the issue:

"Definitional problems make it difficult to achieve accurate counts of homeless populations...most operational definitions characterize homelessness as the absence of a place where one can sleep and receive mail" (Gregory et al. 2000).

This lack of fixed address is also a strong theme that reoccurs in personal descriptions of homelessness, and is encoded in government policy. "Home is having an address," (2002) claims Brenda\*, a former street youth in London, Ontario. She is now part of a group of youth that addresses the problems of homelessness by speaking at public forums around the city. This need of a fixed address is also seen in one of the vignettes in the movie *La Ciudad*. The father in this scene wants to enroll his daughter, Dulce, in school. Both of them are rejected because he cannot provide proof of residence to the school's administration (Riker 1999). This kind of bureaucratic web is very common among the homeless. In order to get social assistance, one must have an address in which they can receive their checks. The inherent paradox is clear.

One cannot receive assistance without a place to stay, but cannot find a place to stay without assistance.

Homelessness has been an issue at several different points throughout history, but has become a distinct social issue in the later years of the twentieth century. In the beginning, the term homelessness was something that described characteristics of a specific cohort of people who were defined by their lack of fixed address and their detachment from their local communities and families. With the growing numbers of homeless people in the 1980s and 1990s, the term has become somewhat inadequate and dismissive of the problem. Definitions of home and homeless in our Standard English dictionary are generic, but leave themselves open for interpretation. If home is a place to live, then can a cardboard box, a makeshift unit in the tunnels of New York City, or daily residence in a bus shelter be considered a home? For practical terms, they can be, but it would leave out the very personal and individual interpretive thread. The emotional attachment to home is deeply personal and, the street, or even prolonged residence in a shelter, cannot be considered a home for most people. There are strong sentiments of safety, family, freedom, and fixed address that homeless people connect with the idea of home.

The definition of homelessness in the dictionary is too simple. To assume that only someone who has no shelter is considered homeless does not do justice to the increasing complexity of the situation. By today's standards, a homeless person could be someone who is sleeping on a friend's couch, in stage II or transitional housing, in shelters, or on the streets. Several of these places, especially transitional homes and residences do have a quality, or a "feel" of home, and in fact some residents do not feel as though they are homeless when living beneath their roofs. However, our western societal standards, dictate that they are homeless. Private ownership has become more than a necessity; it is a classifier of wealth and social status. If one does not own his or her own residence, or pay monthly payments on a mortgage, or in the form of rent to a landlord, then they are, by our standards, homeless. This term is outdated. It perpetuates stereotypes which have come attached to the traditional description of homelessness. Clearly the idea of home is a deeply personal sentiment, and by using the generic blanket term, it does not encompass the total situation. Asking questions and educating oneself on the issue of homelessness is one way

we can better understand the situation, and begin to deconstruct the stereotypes.

A new list of ideas can show that homelessness is not a single image of a bag lady or drunken man, images rooted in traditional stereotypes, but one full of diversity and individual circumstance. Becoming educated about the issue and getting involved in the community is the first step in eradicating the negative stereotypes that still cling to homeless people today. Understanding that homelessness is largely not a choice, but a sign of larger socio-economic and political decay is vital for this breakdown to occur. For it is through education that we can begin to end the cycle of poverty and close the gap of inequality. We owe this to ourselves, and to the larger global community.

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