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ON BECOMING HOMELESS: THE STRUCTURAL AND EXPERIENTIAL DYNAMICS OF RESIDENTIAL INSTABILITY

a dissertation

by

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Abstract

This study explores the dynamic combination of structural factors, domestic conditions, individual and social characteristics, and personal choices that produced episodes of homelessness among a representative sample of young adults (aged 20 to 45) in the city of Philadelphia in the late 1980's. Forty-three single adult homeless people (31 men and 12 women) were selected from a variety of shelter and nonshelter locations and interviewed in-depth about their experiences of becoming homeless. Statistics describing the residential transitions of the survey participants, and a weighted distribution of the causal factors of their homelessness revealed the major significance of family relations, work and income, drugs (abuse, dealing, and environment), disabilities, and previous institutional experiences. On the basis of written transcripts, combinations of these contributing factors have been identified. Interview selections are provided to illustrate these combinations, or the dynamic "pathways to homelessness," and the active decision-making processes of the participants. The study findings are interpreted as showing that, considered independently, neither reductionistic models of homelessness that emphasize the causal influence of deviant behavior (primarily mental illness and substance abuse), nor the deterministic models of homelessness that examine structural factors independent of their biographical mediation (such as the housing and income crises), are sufficient for understanding the complex relationships that produce episodes of homelessness. While historical, social and economic factors determine the extent and demographic distribution of residential instability in the population, the mediation of those factors in the domestic conditions, personal experiences and restricted choices of men and women is critical to understanding how people become homeless. This study includes a chapter examining the historical, social and economic contexts of residential instability among young adults in Philadelphia.

On Becoming Homeless: The Structural and Experiential Dynamics of Residential Instability

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Table of Contents

Section	Page
Introduction	1
I. The Literature on Homelessness	7
A. The Demographic Profile of the Homeless	8
1. Some Historical Background: From "Skid Row" to the New Homeless	8
2. Comparing Skid Row With the Current Homeless	12
B. Defect Models: Pathologizing Homelessness	24
1. Mental Illness and the Homeless	25
2. Alcoholism, Drug Addiction and Criminality	39
C. Conclusion	44
II. The Historical, Social & Economic Contexts of Homelessness-The Case of Philadelphia	48
A. The Demographic Profile of Philadelphia's Homeless: The Other Yuppies	52
B. The Uneven Development of the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area	57
1. The Flow of People and Jobs	57
2. The Racial and Economic Structure of the Philadelphia Region	67
3. The National Context of Philadelphia's (Under-) Development	75
a. Suburbanization	75
b. Deindustrialization	78
C. The Housing and Income Crisis of the City of Philadelphia	79
1. Housing and Income In Relationship to Each Other	80
2. The Housing Part of the Crisis	86
a. Deterioration, Gentrification, Speculation, Segregation	86
b. The Housing Crisis and Housing Finance	92
c. Housing as a Commodity	97
3. The Income Crisis	100

a. The Labor Market, the Service Economy and Low-Waged Work 100
b. Young Adults In the City and Their Prospects For Employment and Job Training 107
c. The Restriction and Decline of Government Benefits 115
4. Fiscal Crisis in the City 121
D. Trends in Household Formation: Signs of Residential Instability 126
E. Conclusion 130
III. Stratification and Subjectivity: A Theoretical Model For Understanding Homelessness and Its Experience 135
A. The Social Selection Process 136
1. Social Class and Mental Illness 137
2. The Social Selection Processes of Homelessness 142
B. Conclusion 146
IV. The Research Setting 148
A. Identifying the Research Setting and Study Population 148
B. The Emergency Shelter System 151
1. The Administrative Structure of Shelter Alternatives 151
2. The Shelter Assignment Process 157
3. A Note on the Unsheltered Homeless 160
C. Conclusion 162
V. Methodology 164
A. The Sampling Design 164
B. The Interview 169
1. The Interview Schedule 169
2. The Interviewers 171
3. The Interview Procedure 174
VI. The Pathways To Homelessness 178
A. Summary Framework: The Pathways to Homelessness 179
1. The Data 179
2. Coding Procedures 180
3. The Findings 180
a. Places 181
b. Reasons for Place Transitions 183
c. Context Events and Conditions 184
4. Weighting the Contributing Sources of Homelessness 185