An ethnography of homeless men in Las Vegas

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AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF HOMELESS MEN
IN LAS VEGAS

by

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Bachelor of Arts
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1990

Master of Arts
University of Colorado, Colorado Springs
1993

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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in

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ABSTRACT

An Ethnography of Homeless Men in Las Vegas

by

Kurt Borchard

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Most recent research on homeless men (1) uses quantitative methods, (2) frequently blames homeless men for being homeless, and (3) does not consider the different meanings different groups assign to homelessness. These studies cannot address (1) the usefulness of other methods in studying homelessness, (2) what other factors beyond personal problems may contribute to homelessness, and (3) how different groups in different locales view the condition.

In this dissertation I use qualitative methods first to think about the popular meanings of male homelessness in Las Vegas, Nevada, in the late 1990s, and second, to consider the meanings that local homeless men attribute to their condition. To first determine the popular meanings of male homelessness locally, I (1) describe traditional U.S. values and how these greatly inform the perception of homelessness, and (2) analyse the content of
several local newspaper stories, other documents, and the statements of
non-homeless persons on homelessness. To consider the meanings that
local homeless men attribute to their condition, I conduct an ethnography of
homeless men in Las Vegas. My methods for this ethnography include: in-
depth interviews with several homeless men and homeless service
providers; participant-observation with homeless men; descriptions of the
physical areas these men occupy in various Las Vegas sites; descriptions of
the larger cultural setting that informs the men's outlook on homelessness;
and an analysis of the diary of one homeless man.

Through this research, I hope to undermine stereotypes about
homelessness, and to provide information on homelessness from homeless
men. This research can then inform social policy in ways that less
empathetic research has not.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Within the last twenty years there has been an increasingly large body of literature on homelessness in the U.S. (see Rossi 1989:65). Most of this literature, however, is limited in at least one of three often overlapping ways. First, most of these studies use only quantitative methods: ethnographic studies which consider homelessness within a local context are underrepresented in this literature (Snow and Anderson 1993:18-19). Second, much of this research "blames the victim," or places the responsibility for homelessness on individual homeless persons by focusing on their homelessness as a consequence of personal problems. Third, such quantitatively-oriented studies and research which focus on individual responsibility cannot consider the different meanings that different groups in different locales assign homelessness. Homelessness carries different meanings depending on who is interpreting the condition, as well as where, when, why and how it is being viewed.
Because much recent research on homelessness is quantitatively-oriented and focused on individual responsibility, it cannot answer a key theoretical and practical question: what can qualitative research contribute to our understanding of the causes of homelessness that lie beyond personal problems?

In this dissertation I use multiple qualitative methods (discussed in Chapter 2) to consider the meanings given to male homelessness. I consider first the dominant, or popular, meaning(s) of male homelessness in Las Vegas, Nevada, in the late 1990s, and I reflect on how they are informed by local beliefs, attitudes, laws, and social policies regarding those men. Second, I produce an ethnographic account that explores how those men contest and resist popular meanings, as well as create and promote alternative ones.

Through the use of multiple methods (such as content analysis, participant observation and in-depth interviewing) I develop an “experience-near” (Geertz qtd. in Snow and Anderson 1993:19) account of local male homelessness as opposed to simplistic accounts based largely on hearsay and speculation. I consider local popular accounts of homelessness first because they do not communicate simply information, but also constitute a particular framework for understanding this condition. Popular accounts, however, are often neither based on systematic research, nor usually attempts to understand homelessness from the perspective of homeless persons. In order to create a more “experience-near” account, I then develop an ethnography of homeless men that focuses on patterns of social interaction, local contexts and the details of their everyday social life. I argue that this
multi-method study adds information beyond that provided by exclusively
survey-based studies and will help to understand the varied ways in which the
condition of homelessness occurs and is reproduced.

I am particularly interested in addressing the social problem of
homelessness in order to reduce its occurrence and to improve the forms of
assistance offered to homeless men. Therefore I argue that those approaches
which investigate the meanings of homelessness within specific environments
are more useful for addressing this condition than findings generated through
sweeping demographic- and survey-based studies. Although such studies
may provide a broad understanding of large-scale trends regarding
homelessness on the state- or nation-wide level, they are of little use in
understanding a phenomenon which occurs differently in different contexts. A
study exploring national trends in homelessness, for example, cannot address
the unique and specific climate, laws, and economy of a distinct area such as
Las Vegas and the needs of the local homeless population.

The personal problems faced by homeless men only partly explain the
causes of homelessness. Through this dissertation I argue that homelessness
partly results from approaching (in both research and in programs of
assistance) it as a result of an individuals' personal problems at the expense
of other explanations (Snow and Anderson 1993). But recent studies on
homelessness also consider how different meanings may be constructed
regarding this condition (Fiske 1991; Snow and Anderson 1993), and these
alternative meanings provide different insights as to why homelessness
persists and what might be done to address it. Hopefully this dissertation will
provide information which would allow local policy makers to address homelessness beyond the usual approaches which "blame the victim," or which focus solely on these men's personal problems.

In order to accomplish these goals, I will evaluate the meaning of male homelessness in Las Vegas through a cultural studies approach. Cultural studies is an intellectual tradition and an explicitly political approach to the study of culture. It promotes critical investigation of "common sense" meanings, and attempts to investigate dominant (or popular) meanings in order to de-naturalize them and enact social change. The approach was initially developed by British literary theorists (Turner 1990) as a method of studying (and validating) the once marginalized concept of working-class culture. Today, cultural studies may be defined as the study of culture that proceeds through considering ideology, discourses and the differential power that groups have in attributing meaning to social events. Although cultural studies has a unique history, it also both draws from and informs other forms of critical cultural analysis such as critical Marxism, some strains of postmodernism, feminism and postcolonialism (Agger 1992).

Cultural studies assumes that all cultural phenomena have textual qualities, and that all texts are sites of struggle for culturally negotiated meanings. Meanings are produced by discourses, which are "socially produced groups of ideas or ways of thinking that can be tracked to individual texts or groups of texts, but that also demand to be located within wider historical and social structures or relations" (Turner 1990:32-33). There exist many discourses, but all are not equal. There is a hierarchy of discourses:
some privileged versions of "Truth" are presented as universal. Power and politics, however, are always implicated in the production of such "natural" meanings which underlie a discourse. Cultural studies problematizes the idea of a singular Truth, and promotes the view that meaning is a site of struggle between different groups. Scholars in cultural studies are interested not in discovering Truth, but in asking how particular truths are constructed, maintained, reproduced, contested and transformed.

Cultural studies is well-suited for studying the meanings of male homelessness in Las Vegas, as the meanings attributed to this condition are produced by groups holding differential power. For example, former President Ronald Reagan once articulated a dominant discourse on homelessness by advancing that many homeless people in the U.S. "make it their own choice" not to seek traditional housing, and that a "large percentage" of homeless individuals are "retarded" people who voluntarily left institutional settings (Cannon cited in Wallace and Wolf 1994:60). This dominant discourse constructs homelessness as an individual's problem and "fault," but also as a choice involving an individual's civil rights. This discourse emphasizes individual agency in explaining homelessness. Homeless people are represented as guilty of personal failures or bad life choices. Such a representation justifies a less-than-sympathetic, uncaring or often downright hostile attitude toward homeless individuals. As our ex-President saw it, these individuals either "chose" homelessness over better options, or are "guilty" of stupidity, laziness, mental illness or retardation, thereby "deserving" to be without shelter.
In contrast to Reagan's discourse, another discourse presents homeless persons as victims who, because of circumstances beyond their control, have been rendered destitute and shelterless. The latter discourse emphasizes structural elements leading to homelessness, placing more emphasis on the individual's environment rather than on personal character flaws leading to this condition. This discourse is also evident in the development of government programs designed to assist the impoverished (including the homeless). These two extreme positions (the first presenting homeless individuals as individually deserving of their plight, the second presenting homeless individuals as victims of unfortunate social circumstances) can often be traced in references to the "guilty" versus the "innocent" poor, and particularly in distinctions between the "undeserving" versus the "deserving" poor (Caton 1990:3-4; Block, Cloward, Ehrenreich and Piven 1987; Gounis 1993, Katz 1993). The issues at stake in such discourses revolve around the causes of homelessness, who is to blame for it and what should be done about it. In other words, it addresses how responsible are homeless men for their homelessness, and how responsible is the government or community for assisting those men out of their condition?

In this dissertation I focus specifically on men because the issue of responsibility is particularly charged when considering male homelessness. Although the recognition of male homelessness as a large-scale social problem in the United States dates back to the Civil War (Hopper, 1990), it has been reported that women (Caton, 1990:30) and displaced families with young children (Curry, Jiobu and Schwirian, 1997:173) currently constitute the two
fastest growing segments of the homeless population. The degree of personal responsibility which may be placed on homeless women and particularly children is usually not as contested an issue as the degree of personal responsibility assigned to homeless males. Because children are considered the legal responsibility of their parents, the state can intervene if a child is neglected in any manner, including if the child's housing is not considered adequate. Although children may become homeless by running away from their families (Cat on 1990:33), particularly to escape physical or sexual abuse (Wagner 1993), the degree to which they should be considered individually responsible for their homelessness is rarely an issue of public debate.

Similarly, the degree of individual responsibility that should be attributed to homeless women for their predicament is considered differently than the responsibility assigned to homeless men. In one study, homeless women were often victims of negative family environments involving physical or sexual abuse (Wagner 1993). In addition, in a study of homeless persons living in three major metropolitan areas, Snow, Anderson, Quist and Cress observed that homeless women with children, "are advantaged by being eligible for public assistance, particularly AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children]; their families also appear to be more inclined to lend a helping hand than are the families of homeless men" (1996:94). The authors also noted that even single women without children were often more likely to receive income assistance and money from family or friends, who also seemed more likely to assist these women off the street sooner than homeless men.
Just as female homelessness has been increasingly studied for its distinctive characteristics, male homelessness is also worthy of study. A cultural studies perspective is useful for considering the uniqueness of male homelessness because the discourse of responsibility is so pervasive in explaining this condition as opposed to that of women and children. Because males have traditionally been the higher income-earners of the two sexes, their material existence does not seem as linked to financial dependency on others. However, men still represent the largest proportion of the homeless population, both in the U.S. (Shlay and Rossi 1992) and in Las Vegas.

This dissertation will also consider the meanings of male homelessness within a particular cultural context: that of Las Vegas in the late 1990s. The unique culture of this city includes an economy heavily dependent on gambling and tourism revenues, which in turn affects people’s migration patterns to Las Vegas (as both tourists and residents) and their expectations once they are here. Here also the meanings of "responsibility" weigh heavily in debates over gambling as a social problem, and seem to parallel somewhat the discourses which present homeless men as individually responsible for their condition. The culture of this city is also influenced by its desert location and extreme climate. Thus, the local culture, economic base and climate must be considered when assessing why certain homeless men might be drawn to Las Vegas, what practices they engage in while they live here, or why certain men might become homeless once they arrive. Additionally, the local availability of charitable or government assistance for homeless men, as well as the manner in which homeless men are both viewed and treated by the general public in
Las Vegas will surely affect these men's self-image, their condition, their survival strategies, and the likelihood that they will stay here.

My interest in the local meanings of male homelessness is also informed by my personal background and experiences. In the spring of 1993, I worked as the director of a Men's Transitional Program for the Salvation Army in Fairbanks, Alaska. The program was designed to assist homeless men out of their condition by providing them a guaranteed place to stay for 90 days, as well as weekly one-on-one meetings where I would work with each program participant in developing strategies toward permanently ending his homelessness. The shelter space provided by the Salvation Army was enough for ten participants to live in a bunkhouse with individual lockers, a shared shower, a recreation room, and a dining area. In addition, breakfast and dinner were provided for all participants free of charge. My role as director of the program consisted in ordering, purchasing and tracking program supplies as well as building maintenance needs, plus scheduling, supervising and evaluating four program monitors who were available to the participants 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I would also interview potential program participants and select candidates who seemed most likely to successfully accomplish the program's goals, conduct weekly one-on-one meetings with each resident to track his progress toward his stated goals upon entering the program, and address any problems which a resident might have had in following the program's rules and regulations.

After a cut in funding, I decided to leave the program and return to graduate school. I am very proud of my association with the Salvation Army,
and the role I may have had in helping a few homeless men change their lives. However, during my stay as director I couldn't help but consider the assumptions underlying this assistance program. Our 10-bed program was very small, and for that reason my job was to select (out of hundreds of applicants) those candidates who had the best chance of "succeeding" in the program. This meant that one underlying assumption in particular drove the selection process: some homeless men were considered more worthy of assistance than others based on their ability to articulate and achieve goals in line with our mission statement. One program goal was the notion of "progress," or the idea that success was measured by the degree of activity each man undertook to secure a stable housing arrangement. Goal-oriented homeless men were to be selected for the program because the Salvation Army needed to justify its funding by documenting "success rates," or the degree to which the program actually helped end its participants' homelessness.

By assuming that some homeless men are more worthy of help than others, the Salvation Army (and the Men's Transitional Program) was implicitly promoting the idea that these men had a great deal of choice in whether or not they remained homeless. This discourse thus promoted an individual's agency in ending his own predicament. However, the program could not address the local social-structural reasons explaining the existence of so many homeless men in Fairbanks (approximately 300 on any given night) in the first place. The purpose of the Salvation Army's program was to "save" individuals,
but the program's design did not allow us to address local homelessness as a social problem with structural dimensions.

Although we would turn a dozen or more men away every week, there was another, night-by-night shelter in Fairbanks which held nearly 200 homeless men, women and children. This shelter had neither counselors nor criteria for admission, except a mandatory prayer service. This agency, called the "Rescue Mission," would then warehouse homeless persons in large bunkhouses and provide for immediate shelter needs, with a 30-day limit of assistance. In contrast with the Salvation Army, the shelter had no program to help address why individuals had become homeless, to convey what other resources were available to the indigent in Fairbanks, or to evaluate what personal steps a homeless person could take to end his/her homelessness.

Together, both the Salvation Army program and that of the Rescue Mission constructed a discourse which viewed homeless individuals as suffering from character flaws. The religious ideology of both programs, which promoted being "saved" or "rescued" by caring churchgoers, required homeless individuals to recognize their condition as a sign of personal failure, not as the result of structured inequality. While the Salvation Army program promoted the notion of individual responsibility despite structural constraints such as seasonal variations in employment rates (particularly affecting manual laborers at greater risk of becoming homeless), the Rescue Mission promoted an understanding of homelessness as a character flaw requiring restoration of religious faith. Although each of the two programs provided a specific type of relief service for homeless persons, the long-term goals of each agency were
not directed toward ending homelessness locally. Indeed, both programs assumed there would always be a homeless population in Fairbanks, and that the best approach to this problem was to provide immediate relief to as many people as possible, or to select a few who could successfully end their homelessness.

My experience with the Salvation Army program left me wondering why homelessness is so frequently addressed in such a manner. Although several of the homeless men I met during my stay in Fairbanks were able to "succeed" in the Salvation Army's program, many could not. Those able to succeed had quite a task ahead of them. Most needed to secure a steady job, often with employment backgrounds exclusively in manual labor. The men often found it difficult to receive messages from potential employers at the shelter's single phone. In addition to dressing appropriately for interviews (often using second-hand clothing), the men had to determine how they would get back and forth to the interviews without a vehicle. Besides these barriers, the men were also limited to finding work with a schedule synchronized with the program's curfew rules. Some would miss meals in order to work, and then would eat larger portions at breakfast because their first paycheck had not yet arrived.

Several of the men experienced other barriers to employment such as disabilities, mental illness, substance abuse problems, or criminal backgrounds. Although program participants were selected in part because they had plans to use other social services in the community to address their conditions, they often experienced the same transportation problems in
gaining access to those services as those participants trying to find work. Many would begin the bureaucratic paperwork often required in order to access these services (particularly governmental assistance programs), but because of overuse and limited office hours, the program participants would often become frustrated. In Fairbanks, the indigent had very limited options for accessing treatment programs for alcohol and drug dependency without insurance. These individuals then often used free services such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, but without the same intensive support as those who go through programs specifically designed for drug or alcohol withdrawal and treatment. The stressfulness of being homeless also led some individuals to return to substance abuse, crime, and neglecting to take daily medications necessary to control their mental illnesses.

Meanwhile, despite all these pressing concerns, a participant’s time in the transitional program was rapidly diminishing. I usually selected men who had developed a focused, sequential and realistic plan for addressing (usually many) interacting issues that had led to their homelessness. Those who applied to the program without a plan were rarely even considered precisely because they had so little time to save enough for an apartment provided that they first land a job, Social Security, disability, unemployment checks, or other benefits within a month of arrival. After waiting an additional two weeks for their first paycheck, the men would be halfway through their allotted stay. Within those remaining 6 weeks, they next had to save enough money to pay for their first and last month’s rent on an apartment as well as a deposit, which in Fairbanks ran between one and two thousand dollars. To complicate
matters, program participants would often be encouraged to begin payment on
debts ranging from hospital bills to child support. I spent many hours helping
participants to develop plans, as well as directing them to social or other
services which could help them achieve their goals, but because the difficulties
facing them were so numerous, few could actually complete the program's
ideal goal of ending their homelessness.

Because such a gap existed between the men's goals and their
possibilities for achieving them, I began redefining what success meant for
program participants. I started believing that the program was successful for
some participants if they were "off the street" for a while. I believe they felt
that way too, as several individuals pursued their stated goals only in the most
superficial sense. I also felt a modest amount of success by simply directing
some of the men toward social services they had never heard of or were not
aware they might have been entitled to. One man, who was terminally ill and
without any material resources, simply wanted to find a place to live before he
died. After he applied for Social Security benefits, I discovered his terminally
ill status made him eligible for a State apartment complex for senior citizens.
He stayed in the Men's Transition Program for one month while the paperwork
was being processed.

My work experience at a homeless shelter made me realize that even
agencies with good intentions, such as the Salvation Army, neither address
the larger reasons behind individuals' becoming homeless in the first place,
nor change how certain discourses justify homelessness. For each individual
who was brought into the program, many were turned away. Neither those
admitted nor those turned away were men who had committed crimes for which homelessness was a punishment, but agencies such as the Salvation Army and the Rescue Mission seemed to promote a discourse which placed the blame squarely on their shoulders. I realized during my time as a director that although I made an immediate impact on a few homeless men's lives, I was not engaging the root causes of the problem.

Interested in uncovering why homelessness was addressed primarily in this manner, I came to consider how shelters designed to alleviate homelessness may actually help perpetuate it (Snow and Anderson 1993) because their model of assistance blames the victim without critiquing systems of structured inequality. One important reason why homelessness persists is because some classes benefit from our current distribution of resources. Classes which benefit from structured inequality create, justify and reproduce a system where those who aren't successful have only themselves to blame. Such a system may also socialize those who suffer from structured inequality to believe that this system is fair and just. Following this argument, I want to consider (1) how popular discourses construct particular meanings assigned to extreme poverty and homelessness, and (2) how alternative discourses might construct an oppositional view of the social inequality leading to this condition.

Sociology is particularly well-suited for both understanding and critizing the causes of homelessness. If we are to address the problem in anything more than a superficial way, we must focus not on trying to save individuals from homelessness after the fact, but on preventing homelessness from happening altogether (Snow and Anderson 1993). Ironically, part of this study
will explain the cultural conditions in Las Vegas which promote and even exacerbate the problem of homelessness. However, the intent of such explanations is not to reproduce the status quo, but to act as a catalyst for social change. As Karl Marx once said, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (Marx qtd. in McLellan 1977:158).

Having argued that homelessness is an important social problem, and that new research should be undertaken, my dissertation will investigate local homelessness primarily through comparing the dominant meanings and popularized accounts of homeless men with an ethnographic study of the lives and practices of homeless men and homeless service providers. The purpose of this study is to develop a multifaceted and structural account of the local aspects of this condition. I will analyze and compare: local newspaper reports on both homelessness and local events affecting the homeless population; other documents concerning homelessness; my own observations of local homeless men; and the statements they and those who assist them made concerning each of their experiences with homelessness. Finally, after considering why a social scientific approach may be useful in addressing homelessness and in implementing social change, I will also discuss the inherent limits of such an account for both addressing and changing this condition.

In the second chapter of this dissertation I review the literature relevant to my topic of study. First, I document general historical trends regarding the ways homelessness has been understood in the United States. Second, I
consider how the changing treatments of this condition have been informed by a range of other processes, including poverty, the relationships between law and poverty, and the sources of dominant American values informing views of the poor. Third, I analyse important sociological works on the condition of homelessness and their findings. Fourth, I explain how several recent sociological studies of homelessness influence my own project.

My third chapter provides a detailed description of the qualitative methods I used to study several dimensions of male homelessness in Las Vegas. These include: a content analysis of local news reports and documents concerning homelessness; in-depth interviews of and participant observation with local homeless men and homeless service providers; and analyzing the diary of one homeless man. Finally, I discuss new developments in ethnography, and illustrate their implications in chapter six where I provide an experimental narrative based on my interview with one man, and in chapter eleven, where I present these men’s research suggestions.

In chapter four I consider the dominant or popularized meanings assigned to local male homelessness. I developed these meanings by (1) performing a latent content analysis of several local newspaper articles and other documents concerning homelessness, and (2) by analysing key themes in my discussions with homeless service providers regarding how homelessness is addressed locally. I seek to uncover how these articles, documents and statements promote particular views of this condition. I find the documents frequently constructing local homeless men as a threat to both
individuals and our tourist-based economy, and articulating the need for their social control and segregation. The interviews frequently mention that resort and casino interests attempt to limit the presence of indigent persons in tourist areas, and that local donation campaigns and agencies (sometimes supported by local resorts and casinos) also work to separate homeless men from the Las Vegas community.

In chapters 5 through 10, I will present my ethnographic analysis. The methods I use in these chapters are participant observation of and interviews with homeless men and homeless service providers, an analysis of documents found at local agencies used by homeless men, and an analysis of a homeless man's diary. In chapter five I detail an encounter I had with a local homeless man in order to present his own thoughts about and experience of his condition. Chapters six through nine each present a grounded theory typology concerning different subjects: the various reasons these men became homeless (Chapter 6); the bureaucracies of the shelters which many of these men use (Chapter 7); the survival strategies of these men (Chapter 8); and their fear of violence and crime (Chapter 9). In Chapter 10, I briefly review the results of another experimental aspect of the more "experimental" aspects of my research, which invited homeless men to discuss how they would conduct research on homelessness.

Hopefully, this ethnography will add to our understanding of homelessness on a local level in a way that challenges the assumptions of the dominant or popular discourse on homelessness, and will help provide the basis for informed social policy on this problem. In the conclusion, I discuss
my findings, the policy implications they may warrant, and the limits and possibilities of this research in addressing the social problem of local male homelessness.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a vast and increasing body of literature on homelessness. The first purpose of this chapter is to document general trends regarding the way homelessness has been historically understood in the United States. I will consider how the treatment of this condition has been informed by popular views of poverty, how these views have informed the relationship between law and poverty, and the sources of dominant American values informing views of the poor. Second, I will overview several sociological studies on homelessness, particularly their strengths and weaknesses. Finally I will present two recent studies on homelessness which use various methods, and how these studies will inform my own study.

Defining the Focus of My Study

The condition of homelessness has existed since the beginning of human history (Caton 1990:3; Snow and Anderson 1993:7). Homelessness throughout the ages has been caused by a large variety of factors, including mass disasters, migration patterns, and political upheaval or war (Bahr 1973:18;
Caton 1990:3). For the purpose of this literature review I, like Snow and Anderson, will not be considering all forms of homelessness, but a specific sub-type of homelessness within the United States: the homelessness of males whose condition is informed largely by economic and personal factors, a group which researchers frequently refer to as "homeless street people" (Breakey and Fischer 1990:36-37; Snow and Anderson 1993:9). By focusing specifically on the homelessness of men on the street, I will be able to concentrate my attention on homelessness as a condition of poverty rather than as a result of factors such as mass disasters, migration patterns or political upheaval.

Food, clothing and shelter have been traditionally considered the three major requirements for human existence. The order of these requirements, however, does not indicate the degree to which they all must be met to ensure long-term survival. Although the immediate needs of nutrition and the warmth and protection of clothing may seem of primary concern in ensuring human life, the ability to rest, to gain shelter from the heat and cold, and to avoid harm in a protected environment is essential if the first two conditions are also to be met. But while housing has long been considered essential to human survival, individuals have often found ways to temporarily neglect that need, or to meet it in highly unconventional ways. This physical or residential condition of homelessness, where the requirement of conventional permanent housing is not being met, is often presented as the most commonly understood dimension of homelessness (Snow and Anderson 1993:7). However, two other dimensions of homelessness discussed by Snow and Anderson (1993) include
"the presence or absence of familial support" (p. 7) and "the degree of dignity or moral worth associated with various categories of homelessness" (p. 9). Other researchers (Bahr 1973:17; Blumberg, Shipley and Moor 1971:912; Grigsby, Baumann, Gregorich and Roberts-Gray 1990:142) have also recognized the importance of both family ties and ideas of self-concept linked to a homeless identity as key dimensions of homelessness. Each of these dimensions also helps frame the way poverty-caused-homelessness has been understood and addressed in various historical eras and cultural environments. I will consider all three dimensions of homelessness in my study.

Changes in the Popular Meaning of Homelessness from Feudal Europe to the 20th Century in the United States

One starting point from which to consider the meaning of poverty-caused-homelessness is in feudal Europe. In that era, street beggars were a common presence in cities (Snow and Anderson 1993:10). These individuals, however, were only a small part of a larger body of poor and alienated people whom several researchers (Bahr 1973:19; Giddens 1971:32; Gilmore 1940:7; Lofland 1973:40) refer to as "floating populations," or newly freed serfs and peasants who became mobile once separated from their feudal ties. Before the Middle Ages, the strength of intimate kinship networks meant that begging and homelessness rarely occurred, except during periods of intense economic and social upheaval (Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989:39).
In the Middle Ages, the religious tendency to idealize poverty meant that the poor often received pity and charity (Bahr 1973: 20-21; Weber 1958:177-78). However, in the fourteenth century, religious values which denigrated poverty began to emerge, as well as both a growing concentration of wealth among the Franciscan order and notions of worldly activity and success promoted by Renaissance humanists (Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989:40-41, Snow and Anderson 1993:10). These trends, combined with the impact of the Black Death on England in 1348, provided the impetus behind that country's passage of a vagrancy statute in 1349 (Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989:41). As Snow and Anderson indicate, "the first vagrancy statutes were designed expressly to force the dwindling pool of laborers to accept low-wage employment and to keep them from migrating in search of better opportunities" (1993:11). Such laws provided England with a way to maintain a supply of cheap labor which its feudal economy then required.

The passage of such statutes also marked a larger social shift toward a negative perception of poverty and vagrancy. Snow and Anderson note that in the fourteenth century, the sin of sloth was redefined from spiritual vice to include physical idleness (1993:11). Caton also states that during this period "there were numerous legislative attempts to impose increasingly severe penalties on 'vagrants,' defined as able-bodied, unemployed wanderers" (1990:4). Cohen and Sokolovsky (1989:44) emphasize that during this period, governments in England and Europe began to discriminate between a variety of beggars, selectively enforcing laws designed to severely punish those who were
able to work. Attacks on the poor in England grew even stronger in the late fifteenth century, as the public's perception of the problem of idleness was exacerbated by a discourse that emphasized the poor's potential for crime (Chambliss 1964). Many writers in this period decried the emergence of rogues and vagabond groups as a threat to all civilized society, and at times equated these with sorcerers (Salgado 1972). Similar views were also in vogue in Europe during this period. For example, Martin Luther edited the confessional tale of an expert in roguery in 1528 as an example of "how mightily the devil rules in this world" (Luther 1860:3).

Thus, a sea change in the discourses on extreme poverty and homelessness occurred between the traditional, or feudal, era and the beginnings of the modern era in both England and the continent. These changes, however, were largely informed by the other sweeping social changes that were occurring between these eras. In general, the modern era marked a break from the past, or tradition where monarchies ruled, where ascribed statuses were more important than achieved ones, and where individuals produced goods for direct consumption rather than trade. Other defining characteristics of the modern era included: the Enlightenment emphasis on the rationality and perfectibility of humans; explanations based on empirically-based science as opposed to religious beliefs; mass migration to urban centers; and the eventual development of an economy based on the mass production and consumption of goods and services (Tarnas 1991). Those who suffered from extreme poverty in the traditional era were not usually blamed or punished for
that condition because such poverty was seen as "God's will," a condition at
times even glorified in religion (Bahr 1973:20-21; Weber 1958:178). However,
in the transition to the modern era, extreme poverty and homelessness began
being considered a social problem that was to be addressed through a
technocratic approach to politics, or an approach which promoted social
engineering to alleviate such problems (Fay 1976:37-38). Enlightenment
philosophers began arguing that poverty could be eliminated through the
democratic reorganization of society. In addition to the notion that humans
could work to improve social conditions, though, the transition to the modern era
in England and Europe was also marked by a shift from feudal to capitalist
economies. This shift in economic systems was largely based on changing
religious values which denigrated poverty and upheld an individual's hard work
and materialism as indicators of his or her salvation.

According to Max Weber (1958), the formation of new religious values,
particularly the Protestant ethic, provided the conditions allowing capitalism in
the West to occur. Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, promoted the
notion of a "calling" as a state of life given to an individual by God, one which
was not to be rebelled against. Luther's definition of the "calling" was modified
by the Calvinists, who indicated that it "is not a condition in which the individual
is born, but a strenuous and exacting enterprise to be chosen by himself, and to
be pursued with a sense of religious responsibility" (Tawney 1958:2). Poverty,
once considered holy, became viewed with disdain, while labor grew in
importance as an indicator of spirituality and salvation. The negative view of
poverty promoted by Calvinism also paralleled the Calvinist doctrine of worldly asceticism, or the idea that an individual could prove that he or she had been chosen by God to be saved through the accumulation of material wealth. The phrase "worldly asceticism" is used to indicate that the accumulation, production and investing of material wealth or Earthly goods was not for the purpose of enjoyment, but in order to show that an individual had been pre-destined for salvation: "you may labour to be rich for God, though not for the flesh and sin" (Baxter qtd. in Weber 1958:162). Weber's thesis was that an ascetically-oriented religion led to capitalism's later form defined by the accumulation of wealth for wealth's sake alone. Weber thus documents many of the original religious sources informing the negative views of poverty-induced homelessness promoted during the modern era, particularly the stigma associated with this condition.

In the transition to the modern era, legal measures were also increasingly implemented in order to control the impoverished. By the late 16th century, England began developing poor relief laws, which were created in order to limit the movement of the wandering poor (Stone 1984; Webb and Webb 1963:250). However, a dramatic rise in homelessness in England was also documented in the late 16th and early 17th century. This increase was largely attributed to the effects of the Enclosure Laws combined with a near doubling of the English population and increasing urbanization as those from rural areas flocked to cities such as London (Snow and Anderson 1993:11). The growing centralization of government and political power in the 17th century
in both England and in Europe meant that laws against vagrancy were increasingly enforced (Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989:45). As Snow and Anderson document, official responses to increased vagrancy during this period were often brutal. Once rounded up, punishments often included the stocks, flogging, branding, imprisonment, mandatory military service, and occasionally hanging (Beier 1985). In addition, "[t]he Slavery Act of 1547 placed convicted vagrants in slavery for two years, and the Vagrancy Act of 1597 permitted a sentence of transportation to the colonies" (Snow and Anderson 1993:12).

Thus, considered sinful, potentially criminal and beyond hope, destitute homeless persons in England in the 1600s were often sent to work in the colonies such as Australia and what would later become the United States (Caton 1990:5). Although some of these individuals were given more work than they could handle, there also existed a curious anomaly in dealing with impoverished immigrants in the American colonies which was handed down from England: paupers had to show legal residency in order to receive support. This rule greatly undermined the material survival of new immigrants and migrant workers, the very groups that the agrarian-based economy of the colonies required for their development. Although these poor could petition for settlement rights, they were often denied admittance, causing them move from city to city within the colonies (Deutsch 1937:39-54). This first group of transient and frequently non-local poor, particularly sailors and new immigrants, were often assisted in coastal cities through workhouses, shelters and soup
kitchens developed largely because of their needs (Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989:47; Snow and Anderson 1993:12-13).

Although small economic depressions occurred in the United States before the Civil War which at times caused minor fluctuations in the rates of homelessness, a most noticeable increase in the population of homeless individuals occurred in the U.S. after the Civil War (Caton 1990:7; Snow and Anderson 1993:12). Although many families, women and children were temporarily dislocated, this emerging group of homeless was largely composed of single, unattached and highly mobile men (Hopper 1990:13). Other nineteenth-century trends, such as an increase in immigration and urbanization in the east, as well as an increasing need for mobile laborers to work mining, ranching, railroad-building, and harvesting jobs within developing western states, combined to influence the development of a new homeless population and a new area where they lived: the hoboes of "skid row" (Anderson 1923; Bahr 1973:25-26; Caton 1990:7-8; Hopper 1990:13; Snow and Anderson 1993:13).

Before the Civil War, homeless persons tended not to occupy specific areas of urban space which today are frequently referred to as "skid rows." Although soup kitchens, almshouses and prisons encouraged some homeless populations to concentrate into specific areas (or, more precisely, specific buildings), homeless individuals and beggars more frequently slept in any convenient area like basements, hallways and alleys (Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989:48). The emergence of skid rows seemed to coincide with the increasing
stability of the homeless population after the Civil War when, for example, a building was rented by the City of New York in 1866 specifically to house homeless individuals because homelessness was so commonplace (Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989:48). Additionally, an economic panic in 1873 caused 30-40% unemployment rates, which increased the number and use of bread lines and emergency shelters. "To appreciate the magnitude [of homelessness at this time], for example, in the City of Brooklyn the number of persons receiving outdoor relief tripled in the decade following 1851 and then more than doubled again by 1877, to 50,000 persons" (Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989:48).

The practice of charitable and philanthropic organizations concentrating housing for homeless persons in particular areas of cities began in the 1870s in major eastern cities in the U.S. In New York, Chicago and Boston, rapid development of municipal housing projects and emergency shelters for homeless persons continued through the early 1900s (Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989:49). Along with the development of specific areas where homeless men would congregate came the first sociological study which attempted to explain the phenomenon, the lifestyles and practices of homeless men, and why specific areas of certain cities became "Hobohemias," or centers for homeless persons.
The First Sociological Study on Homelessness

The emergence of the hobo in the 1910s and 1920s coincided with the maturing of the Chicago School of Sociology, a school devoted to naturalistic methods of social inquiry and interpretive analysis of social phenomena. Nels Anderson’s *The Hobo* (1923), written in Chicago during this period, has long been considered the first seminal sociological text on homeless men in an urban area, using naturalist methods of inquiry. Similar to several of the interpretive studies on homelessness which were to follow, (Spradley 1970; Wiseman 1970; Snow and Anderson 1993) Anderson’s methodology included participant observation, content analysis, and the mapping of “hobo” institutions (1923:15). Giving detailed descriptions of the institutions serving homeless men and the services they provide (pp. 27-39), Anderson also describes the practices hobos use to “get by,” or survive (pp. 40-57). In addition the author constructs a typology of hoboes based on field observations as well as accounts of the way hoboes interact with non-homeless persons. The final portion of his study considers both the hobo’s intellectual life and place in popular cultural texts (such as songs and poetry), and the problems associated with programs developed to assist the hobo out of homelessness.

A strength of Anderson’s study is his focus on hobo life in context. Anderson finds that the hoboes’ existence centers around a pattern of rural migratory work in the summer, followed by a winter return to urban centers, often called the Main Stem or Hobohemia. He notes that hoboes were attracted
to this area of Chicago because its Main Stem was a central location for inexpensive services and employment agencies for these men to find more rural unskilled labor. Anderson estimates that because of this cyclical employment pattern, the center of Chicago doubles from 30,000 to 75,000 persons when "hard times" occur, with up to a half-million unskilled laborers coming through the Main Stem yearly (1923:3).

Anderson's account also indicated how different groups made sense of the condition. Hobo culture at this time was both intellectual and community-oriented, according to Anderson. Not only were unions such as the International Workers of the World active in recruiting hoboes as members, but hobo intellectuals, poets and other artists often convene at Chicago's Bughouse Square. These homeless men seemed to fare better economically than those groups of homeless men who were to follow (Snow and Anderson 1993:14), and during this era their lives were often romanticized in songs and popular culture. However, popularized accounts of hobo freedom through nomadic life fail to account for the misery experienced by those living in abject poverty (Monkkonen 1985:3-4). Hoboes still suffered from poor health due to unstable incomes and alcoholism (Anderson 1923:131-136), and thousands died yearly simply from accidents while "riding the rails" (Snow and Anderson 1993:14). The problems of poverty, vagrancy and alcoholism seemed related to another, more negative perception of hoboes which was evident in newspaper editorials and public discussions of the "tramp problem" during this period (Allsop 1967:110).
Homelessness from the 1920s to the 1960s

Nels Anderson himself recognized that Hobohemia was disappearing by the time his book was published. The settlement of the western frontier, the mechanization of agriculture and the declining use of railroads due to increased automobile production are all cited by Snow and Anderson (1993:14) as contributing to the decline of the hobo era. However, the Great Depression of the 1930s caused a resurgence in the homeless population nationwide. Monkkoen (1984:2-3) notes that the development of the social welfare state, including “social security, unemployment benefits, worker’s compensation [and] various forms of subsidized medical care,” also helped close the era of the industrial tramp following the Great Depression. The Main Stem environment which promoted hobo self-sufficiency, however, was then replaced by skid row communities and social welfare systems that allowed homeless men to exist primarily on charity.

The Great Depression did cause rates of homelessness to rise significantly across the U.S., particularly the homelessness of women, children and entire families. Although federal government programs for the homeless were begun in 1933, the help they provided tended to require proof of residency, a particularly difficult requirement for the wandering poor and transient workers (Snow and Anderson 1993:15). However, by 1936 many of those made homeless by the Depression were reabsorbed in the workforce, and the onset of World War II greatly alleviated homelessness, as many of
these men became soldiers or otherwise supported the war effort (Snow and Anderson 1993:15). The end of World War II did not see a substantial increase in the homeless population, and the 1950s brought a sense of prosperity to the U.S. which had not been seen since the 1920s.

**Studies on Homelessness from the 1960s to the 1980s**

Several qualitative sociological and anthropological studies on skid row and its now frequently older, disabled homeless male population were next conducted in the 1960s and early 1970s. James Spradley's *You Owe Yourself A Drunk* (1970) considered the process by which "urban nomads" in Seattle survived through brief periods in total institutions such as jail and hospitals between stays on the street. Spradley's methods included using the letters of a homeless man, in-depth interviews with other homeless men, field notes of their activities, and descriptions of the environments where they lived. Jacqueline Wiseman's *Stations of the Lost* (1970) focused on the dynamics between homeless male alcoholics, their friends, the institutions they looked to for charitable assistance, and officials such as police, judges, or others under whose jurisdiction homeless men occasionally came. Wiseman used field notes of interactions between homeless men, their friends and family members, police and judges, and descriptions of spatial segregation practices used by authorities to contain homeless men and limit their presence in middle-class environs. Both Spradley and Wiseman focused on process, discussing the way
homeless male alcoholics would move from flophouses to the street to jail, hospitals or mental health facilities. This cycle often allowed these men intermittent periods of rest and rejuvenation which frequently would allow them to return to their previous lifestyles. The strength of both texts was in documenting that the process of "rehabilitating" skid row alcoholics, although ostensibly for their benefit, was also an integral part of the powerful's attempt to control social space, reproduce moral order and promote "social hygiene."

In the early 1970s, in-depth studies on homelessness were also conducted by Howard Bahr and Theodore Caplow. These studies, however, framed homeless men as deviant, indicating they frequently became homeless by choice through the abandonment of their social network. Bahr and Caplow (1973) used the term "disaffiliated" to describe this social process that might lead some men to homelessness and "hypothesized that men who severed ties with the institutions of work, church and family were more likely to drift into homeless and stay there" (Hopper, Susser and Conover 1985:190). However, the authors' analysis of data indicated only that homeless men had severed such ties, and not that such "disaffiliation" necessarily preceded their homelessness (Hopper, Susser and Conover 1985:190). Disaffiliation as a cause of homelessness was thus never empirically confirmed. Bahr and Caplow's thesis tends to focus on the deficiencies of homeless men which lead to their homelessness. But, as Hopper, Susser and Conover (1985:190) have noted, the disaffiliation theory is inapplicable to understanding many aspects of homelessness today, including evidence of social networks commonly used by
homeless men (Snow and Anderson 1993), the existence of which directly counters the implied withdrawal and isolation of homeless men presented in Bahr and Caplow's disaffiliation model.

Survey Research on the “Crisis” of Homelessness in the 1980s

In the early 1980s, the rate of homelessness rose significantly across the nation, along with a change in the demographic characteristics of this population. Previous researchers noted the homogeneity of homeless men as a largely Caucasian group of older males who might be retired or have employment problems due to their use of alcohol (Bahr 1971, Spradley 1970, Wiseman 1970). In the new decade, however, the homeless population began to include younger people, and persons of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds who lost their housing through urban renewal and/or their employment in an insecure, deindustrialized job market (Hopper, Susser and Conover 1985). The neglect of social welfare policies and the development of an increasingly labor-hostile economy during the Reagan Administration, along with the urban renewal and gentrification of skid row areas, also increased the visibility of homelessness (Snow and Anderson 1993:17).

According to Snow and Anderson (1993:17), the increased visibility of homeless persons displaced from skid row and the emergence of new types of homeless persons heightened the public's awareness of and interest in the problem. Studies across the U.S. were conducted on the issue, many of which
were, however, rooted in the assumptions of positivist and deductive-based social science research. Recently, Snow and Anderson (1993:18) noted that the majority of this research on homelessness used "questionnaire surveys of the homeless or of shelter providers," and that these studies tended to regard the homeless solely through the "enumeration of their demographic characteristics and presumed disabilities, such as mental illness, alcoholism and poor health."

Such studies have both strengths and weaknesses. Snow and Anderson find that questionnaire surveys are useful for generalized understandings of the demographics of homeless persons, and that this information can be used by social service agencies who work with them. However, because such research designs tend to be "congruent both with the interests and agendas of funding agencies," (1993:18) they tend to imply that the homeless themselves and their characteristics are the source of homelessness. This approach to social science research also may intentionally or unintentionally reflect a pejorative attitude toward homeless persons similar to the one evidenced in the statements of former president Ronald Reagan (See Chapter One). Snow and Anderson criticize such survey-based research on homelessness for assuming that the condition is one which individuals bring upon themselves, or for "blam[ing] the victim and misrepresent[ing] the nature of homelessness" (p. 302). The authors also note that such studies "tell us little about life on the streets," and in particular have ignored the experiences and perspectives of homeless persons (1993:19).
Survey-based research projects on homeless men have usefully confirmed that the personal problems they face across the United States are multifaceted and interacting, including but not limited to disabilities, the abandonment of kinship and friendship networks, alcohol and drug abuse, mental illness, and criminal histories (Shlay and Rossi 1992). However, several researchers (Hopper, Susser and Conover 1985:192, 204; Snow and Anderson 1993) have criticized survey research that is focused solely on determining the personal problems of homeless men. These personal problems should not simply be considered as distinct and separate issues from a social environment which makes it extremely difficult for anyone to escape homelessness. Personal background and social circumstances combine, overlap and affect each other in various ways. In a large sense, this overlapping of problems and issues is what makes both addressing and attempting to change the plight of homeless men anywhere in the U.S. such a difficult proposition.

While not denying that homeless persons are to varying degrees responsible for their social positioning, Snow and Anderson's study clearly indicates that, in recent studies of and in the development of programs for homeless persons, individual responsibility has been overemphasized at the expense of understanding the condition as complex. If programs attempting to end homelessness are to succeed, they must also acknowledge and be constructed around differences within a heterogeneous homeless community. Changing the conditions of homeless men may also require the reform of mass shelters, which could currently be seen as simply "managing" the problem as

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opposed to solving it (Cuihane 1992). These band-aid approaches may actually reproduce the condition. Snow and Anderson present the paradox of needing emergency services for those on the streets, but that those services rarely assist the long-term homeless in getting out of their situation. As they and other researchers conclude, mass shelters are frequently unable to address the specific problems that contribute to different individuals becoming homeless (Cuihane 1992, Gounis 1993; Hopper 1990).

Studies such as Snow and Anderson’s then represent an approach which combines an interpretive-based analysis of homelessness with a reading of secondary data in order to consider the structural forces behind homelessness. Although some earlier studies, such as Spradley’s You Owe Yourself A Drunk and Wiseman’s Stations of the Lost embodied an interpretive and contextualized approach to studying homeless alcoholics, the early 1980s saw a decline in such an approach, and in the late 1980s and early 1990s, an increasing number of studies combined multiple paradigmatic and methodological approaches.

I will now conduct an in-depth analysis of two such studies. I have chosen these two because while one promotes a critical/structural approach to understanding homelessness, the other takes an interpretive/micro-level approach. Like my own study, each of the following studies are of a specific region (the former takes place in New York City, the latter in Austin, Texas). The former study embodies a critical approach, using survey data to indicate trends within our deindustrialized economy which affect the survival strategies
of homeless individuals. The latter study primarily uses qualitative methods in a
grounded theory approach to understand the lives and practices of homeless
men and women. In addition to describing each study, I will indicate their
immediate relevance to my own work.

Innovations in Research on Homelessness: Hopper, Susser and
Conover’s 1985 Critical Study

In 1985, Kim Hopper, Ezra Susser and Sarah Conover published an
article on the makeshift economies used by homeless persons in the wake of
large-scale deindustrialization in the U.S. The article challenged the prevailing
assumption that the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill was the primary
reason behind the increase in homelessness, and that public debate regarding
the problem of homelessness should be centered around the issue of
(homelessness caused by) deinstitutionalization (1985:184). Instead, the
authors contended that deindustrialization and the accompanying “wholesale
changes in the political economy” provided a better explanatory model for
understanding new types of homelessness in the area of New York City, the
focus of their study (p. 185). Because Las Vegas’s unique economic
cornerstone of legalized gambling and entertainment promotes very similar
trends to those indicated by Hopper, Susser and Conover as occurring within
the deindustrialized economy of New York City (hereafter referred to as NYC),
their study provides important insights which I will also incorporate into my own study.

Hopper, Susser and Conover indicate that three different explanations of homelessness tend to dominate other researchers' studies on the topic. First, the authors indicate that the majority of studies on homelessness tend to focus on the personal problems of individuals. (Some of these studies charge that "owing to perverse will or damaged judgment, homeless people prefer to live that way" (p. 189). Certain other studies assume that, as previously indicated, homeless persons suffer from self-induced "disaffiliation," (p. 190) isolation and withdrawal.) However, this view again cannot usefully explain why such individuals seem to develop intricate and essential networks of friends and organizational support systems on the street (p. 190). Second, the authors dispute the argument that an increase in deinstitutionalized psychiatrically disabled individuals has led to an increase in their presence as homeless persons. As Hopper, Susser and Conover (1985:191) note, this thesis "ignores the telling fact of a significant time lag between the major waves of deinstitutionalization in this country (early and late 1960s) and the appearance in large numbers of the psychiatrically disabled on the streets (late 1970s)."

The authors note that the decreasing availability of low-cost housing within New York City provides a better explanation of why psychiatrically disabled persons became homeless in the late 1970s: these individuals once had adequate, low-cost housing options which were then eliminated. Third, Hopper, Susser and Conover note that some studies consider homelessness to be the final result of
many individual problems or precipitating events (p. 192). The authors criticize these studies for failing to consider structural changes in the political economy which have also undeniably influenced increasing rates of homelessness.

Thus, Hopper, Susser and Conover believe that by considering trends such as an increase in minimum wage employment and a decrease in available low-cost housing within NYC, a different approach to understanding homelessness may be developed. The authors focus on the "urban survival strategies" rooted in makeshift economies that homeless individuals in NYC develop in order to survive (p. 193). "In particular, [the authors] examine features of the economic restructuring of the city that have made the lot of poorly educated, labor-market entry aged, minority men increasingly precarious" (p. 193). They show that the groups most likely to become homeless are those most disadvantaged by a shift toward a deindustrialized economy. This approach is radically different from those which blame homeless individuals for personal dysfunctions and/or disabilities. Their findings also parallel some of my own research in Las Vegas, such as my ethnographic data where men discussed "downsizing" has having caused their unemployment. Similar to the findings of Hopper, Susser and Conover concerning shelter-using men in NYC, data on homeless men in Las Vegas taken from the 1997 Stand Down for the Homeless survey of local homeless men also indicate that African-American men are over-represented in the local homeless population compared to Caucasian men.
Hopper, Susser and Conover note that in NYC, jobs in the labor market are increasingly concentrated at one end or the other of the wage scale. This has been precipitated through three trends; the loss of manufacturing jobs, the loss of public sector jobs, and the growth of low-wage jobs in the service sector (pp. 196-198). In addition, Hopper, Susser and Conover find that deindustrialization has resulted in a loss of housing opportunities for economically marginalized individuals in NYC. Low income housing was in decline in the early 1970s, and the number of neglectful slum landlords increased during this period in order for the owners of certain properties to make up the difference between “rising maintenance and operation costs coupled with stagnant rents” (p. 199). Eventually, these buildings were no longer profitable or were condemned, resulting in the “trickle down [of] poverty” for those tenants evicted as a result of owners inability to draw a profit, in spite of maintenance neglect (p. 200).

As evidence of these trends, Hopper, Susser and Conover show that 87 percent of the low-priced hotel rooms in NYC were lost between 1970 and 1982. Ironically, some of these properties have displaced “single tenants in order to rent the same room--at vastly higher rates--as emergency housing for homeless families” (p. 202). The authors use other survey data of first-time shelter users in NYC, not to attribute homelessness to the disabilities of these individuals, but to indicate that the theory of deindustrialization being at the root of homelessness “is not inconsistent with empirical findings” (p. 204).
Analyzing survey data, Hopper, Susser and Conover find that the majority of men entering the shelter system in NYC are African-American, that they are less likely to be employed in skilled or semi-skilled labor than were their fathers (p. 205-207), and that their jobs were usually unskilled or low-skilled jobs with low pay and low job security. The authors also note that “the majority of men show no evidence of serious psychiatric disorder” (p. 209). The authors indicate that surveying the employment trends of these men compared to their fathers may better indicate why their earning capacity is limited. Data also showed that many of the men experienced serious childhood problems, potentially indicating why their family or kinship networks may no longer be supportive. Each of these trends may ultimately combine to lead these men toward “permanent disenfranchisement from participation in the formal economy” (p. 211). My ethnographic research also indicates that working-class men in Las Vegas feel that they no longer have the same career opportunities in the local deindustrialized economy, and that these men seem to have had great difficulty in maintaining (and thus relying on) kinship networks.

Faced with a changing economy that has marginalized them, the authors contend that these men in NYC now must compose survival strategies in place of traditional, full-time employment. Many of the men do work, but these jobs are frequently seasonal, temporary and/or highly mobile (pp. 212-213). Hopper, Susser and Conover call these strategies the “economies of makeshift,” which represent not the fact that homeless people occasionally work, but that poor people might occasionally become homeless. Indeed, intermittent
homelessness may be one of a series of subsistence strategies implemented by
the poor in order to survive. Four key characteristics of the economies of
makeshift are listed by Hopper, Susser and Conover: “their strictly ad hoc
character; mobility; resort to public relief, charity or begging; and participation in
the underground economy” (p. 214). In my own research, I devote a chapter to
understanding the difficulties men face in gaining traditional forms of
employment, as well as the makeshift strategies that homeless men in Las
Vegas implement.

Within the economies of makeshift, living as a homeless person can then
be seen as an “occupation” in and of itself. Surviving while homeless takes
work and the development of a set of skills. One may even resort to
homelessness in order to “reserve a privileged resource [such as reliance on kin
or friends’ residences] for later use” (p. 216). The authors contend that this
helps clarify why there is such a rapid turnover in shelter beds within NYC. In
addition, shelters which embody the principle of “less eligibility,” or making relief
as uncomfortable as possible to inhibit patterns of dependence by the poor, also
seem tacitly designed toward only sporadic use of such relief agencies by poor
persons (p. 218). The authors further argue, however, that although some men
use shelters as part of a larger repertoire of survival strategies, others aspire to
becoming permanent members of the shelter staff, while still others develop as
entrepreneurs within the shelter system, selling cigarettes, drugs, clothing, other
items, or services. In this way, Hopper, Susser and Conover explain that the
differences between shelter staff and residents is more fluid than it would
ostensibly appear, and that "the functions of public shelter are multiplying" (p. 221). In my own study, I discuss the ways in which homeless men in Las Vegas also experience the bureaucratic structure of shelters, and how they themselves understand shelters as anything from a temporary relief agent to a site for indefinite communal living in place of other options. These use patterns show the differences between the stated purposes of such shelters and the way that impoverished individuals actually use them to meet their personal needs (Spradley 1970; Wiseman 1970). I also consider their survival strategies beyond attempts to find work and using charitable agencies for relief.

The next study I consider, Snow and Anderson's *Down on Their Luck*, will also greatly inform my own research. Snow and Anderson's study relies on an interpretive and grounded theory approach which gives the voices and experiences of homeless men primacy in determining what their research will focus on and how it will proceed.

**Innovations in Research on Homelessness: Snow and Anderson's Multi-Method 1993 study**

Written by David Snow and Leon Anderson, *Down on Their Luck: A Study of Homeless Street People* was published in 1993. Relying on methodological techniques such as participant observation, observation of homeless agency theory and practice, and by tracking a sample of the homeless through key institutions, Snow and Anderson develop another much
needed alternative perspective of homelessness based largely on a grounded theory approach rooted in that group's own lived experience and self-understanding.

In discussing their interpretive perspective and rationale for their choice of methods, the authors emphasize contextualization (1993:19-30). Similar to Hopper, Susser and Conover, Snow and Anderson consider homeless survival strategies to be "the product of the interplay between the resourcefulness and ingenuity of the homeless and local organizational, political, and ecological constraints" (p. 21). Snow and Anderson then translate this theoretical perspective into a twofold research strategy of interviewing and observing the largest possible sample of homeless in Austin, Texas they could (six hundred hours spent with 168 homeless persons), and through tracking 767 homeless through the core institutions they use (pp. 22, 26).

For their ethnographic strategy, the authors promoted themselves as "buddy-researchers," participating in the activities of the homeless, wearing old clothes and avoiding academic English while consciously presenting themselves to the homeless as researchers and not part of the homeless population. Their tracking strategy of homeless individuals was accomplished by randomly selecting eight hundred names from a sampling frame of all adults having contact with the Austin Salvation Army shelter within a period of fourteen months. The Salvation Army records provided basic demographic information for the authors, who then negotiated access to the records of six other institutions for those within that sample, including police, employment, and
hospital records (pp. 26-28). Both the ethnographic and tracking strategies, the authors contend, allowed for a longitudinal understanding of the homeless and of their careers (p. 29), a view typically difficult to accomplish through survey methods. I did not have the same access to tracking homeless men's records through various institutions as did Snow and Anderson. However, like Snow and Anderson, I want to present these men's own experiences and thoughts in my ethnography.

In an attempt to give homeless persons a voice in research which concerns them, the authors create a typology which combines a folk or lay typological model based on participant action within homeless systems, and a social science model which seeks an outside understanding of such systems (pp. 37-38). Three broad dimensions of contrast are observed within homeless subcultures: differences in life-style, cognitive differences, and temporal differences. This general typology then subsumes observations of differences in migration patterns, sleeping arrangements, embracement of a homeless identity and the amount of time spent on the street among the individual homeless. Like Snow and Anderson, I present ethnographic information that indicates how local homeless men differentiate between various types of homeless persons. The ways in which homeless men differentiate between members of their group include: differences based on the length of time certain subgroups have been homeless; whether or not individuals use services for homeless persons, whether or not individuals are still trying to find work, and subsistence strategies. Furthermore, in my own attempt to give homeless men
a voice in research which concerns them, In Chapter 10 I ask the men how they
would conduct research on homelessness.

The bulk of Snow and Anderson's study similarly focuses on the daily
routines and survival strategies of the homeless. The authors observe a typical
day on the streets, as well as the organizational responses and perspectives of
those agencies which "work with" the homeless. These organizations and
agencies include those whose mission statements are directed specifically at
assisting the homeless (Salvation Army, soup kitchens), agencies which
regularly deal with the homeless but whose services are not exclusively for
them (hospitals, treatment and detox programs), agencies which profit from the
homeless (day labor companies, plasma centers), and, finally, organizations
involved in containment or expulsion of the homeless population (police and
neighborhood associations) (p. 78, table 3.1). The authors provide descriptions
of these agencies/organizations, and participants' interactions with those
agencies and their staff, and descriptions of homeless street peoples' relationships with each other, as well as how they interpret their homeless role.

In my own research, I have used Snow and Anderson's idea of investigating
homeless men's perception of shelter life in order to develop my own chapter on
how local shelter-using men understand the bureaucratic organization of these
shelters. I also devote a chapter to following one man for several hours to get a
first-hand view of his practices, routine, and interaction with social service
providers.
Snow and Anderson indicate that the view of homeless persons as personally responsible for their predicament is often made explicit in a we-only-help-those-who-help-themselves mentality of social service providers. Such an approach to charitable assistance does little to explain how larger social forces trap the homeless in a vicious cycle, and how particular homeless people learn to live with and find meaning despite those circumstances. Through distressingly similar stories of individual homeless persons' lived experience, Snow and Anderson show that many organizations which interact with the homeless do little to change their long-term plight. For example, the story of Marilyn, a homeless woman who sprained her ankle one winter, indicates the irony of often free hospital services to the homeless when these services are usually limited to outpatient procedures. Marilyn was instructed to "stay off her feet," a task almost impossible for a street person (p. 88). Within days she returned to the hospital with her ankle now broken, only to be released again with the benefit of a cast and crutches (pp. 88-89). Through excerpts from interviews, I show that some local homeless men also are critical about the stated missions in comparison to the actual practices of homeless service providers. The men discuss contradictions in the theory versus practice of some shelters, as well as why several men avoid shelters altogether.

By tracking a sample of homeless individuals through both the Salvation Army and Texas Employment Commission records, the authors are able to observe attempts by the homeless at gaining regular employment (p. 112). Snow and Anderson show that many homeless persons are interested in
regular work despite popular notions to the contrary, and they present the many obstacles to regular work such as lack of proper clothing, a stable job history, reliable transportation, and homeless shelters structures which limit work hours (pp. 118-122). Following the tracking sample results, statements from the homeless indicate the often short-term, menial and under-the-table employment these individuals tend to receive. There are also personal examples of institutionalized assistance through labor and income supplement programs. Their chapter on "Shadow Work" presents personal accounts of how many homeless get by without regular employment through drug sales, prostitution, selling plasma, panhandling, scavenging and theft, among other activities (pp. 145-170). In my chapter on survival strategies, I also investigate the barriers local homeless men face to securing traditional employment, and the shadow work and others strategies of makeshift to which some of these men turn (some of which are unique to Las Vegas).

The authors consider large-scale social trends, biographical factors and the explanatory strategies of homeless persons, such as "bad luck" (p. 266), to understand the complex and overlapping reasons various subjects became homeless. The authors also examine economic trends, deindustrialization, and the decline of lower-income housing in the U.S. for their overall effect on trends within the homeless population of Austin. These themes will again appear in my own work. My ethnographic data show that homeless men’s self-perception as to their condition include both personal and structural factors, such as addictions, problems with the law, deindustrialization, an increasingly expensive
rental market, and the excessive charges and confiscation practices of weekly apartments.

In an interesting critique of "common knowledge" regarding the homeless, Snow and Anderson propose that alcohol and alternative realities (what some presume to be mental illness) may actually be mechanisms for the homeless to deal with a bad situation, as a key to some homeless people's survival. In other discussions of homeless men's sense of self, they discuss the embracement of a homeless identity as opposed to distancing one's self from that identity, and "fictive storytelling" (embellished or imagined tales used to improve a person's sense of self) to show that these techniques are used differently among various homeless persons. In my chapter where homeless men explain why they became homeless, I also consider the complex and interacting relationships between mental illness, substance abuse, gambling, and homelessness. In particular, I discuss several problems in trying to determine cause-and-effect between each of the above issues, and suggest that an interpretive research approach such as mine underscores the limits of attempting to explain homelessness by focusing on individual factors.

As an in-depth, contextual account of homelessness, Snow and Anderson's book promotes an interpretive understanding of this condition. Acknowledging the context in which homelessness occurs and reporting the lived experience of homeless individuals help provide a critique of reductive studies which presume that general laws exist to explain why people become and stay homeless and to devise programs to solve the problem. The authors
offer no simple solutions to such a multifaceted, complex issue because the paradigm they operate under presumes that simple answers don't exist. I discuss the policy implications of their study in relation to my own in the final chapter of this dissertation.

**Conclusion and Implications for my Research Design**

Overall, I believe that the first step toward both ending the stigma associated with homelessness and understanding the personal and structural roots of this condition might require the production of more complex, contextual studies such as Snow and Anderson's work and Hopper, Susser and Conover's analysis. Both studies show that overly simplistic accounts of homelessness may in turn help reproduce the problem they seek to explain. In general, I want my own study to embody the grounded theory approach of Snow and Anderson while also making use of the assumptions of Hopper, Susser and Conover's study that considers the effects of a deindustrialized economy on the survival strategies of homeless persons. This approach may at first seem paradoxical, because the use of grounded theory assumes that theory is developed from the collection and analysis of data. However, as I detail in the next chapter, I develop an ethnography using an open-ended research approach (of mainly talking to and observing homeless men) to understand local homelessness. This data will show that survival practices of homeless men are intimately embedded within the cultural environment of Las Vegas, a city which some
researchers (Gottschalk 1995) present as an example of a deindustrial or postindustrial economy based on the marketing of images, entertainment and the spectacular.

In my next chapter, I will detail the methods I will use, including content analysis, participant observation and in-depth interviews by myself and a homeless man.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The first question I seek to answer is: On the local level, what are some of the popular meanings given to male homelessness? In order to accomplish this, I use content analysis and in-depth interviews to analyse the themes expressed in local documents and in the statements of non-homeless persons. The second set of questions I seek to answer are: What does it feel like to conduct an in-depth, face-to-face interview with a homeless man? How did this mode of collecting data at times promote my own self-reflection on the research process, on the plight of those individuals whom I studied, and on myself as an ethnographer (Chapter 5)? What are the various reasons these men became homeless (Chapter 6)? How do these men understand and work within the bureaucracies of the shelters which many use (Chapter 7)? What are the survival strategies of these men (Chapter 8)? How safe do they feel (Chapter 9)? And finally, how would these men conduct research on homelessness (Chapter 10)? To answer these questions, I engage in participant-observation with homeless men, in-depth interviewing with them and an analysis of a homeless man's field notes. I use these methods in combination to construct my ethnography.
Although social science researchers often tend to define themselves through allegiance to a particular methodology, researchers who use a cultural studies approach frequently rely on a range of methods to relate social and political trends to the daily life practices of oppressed individuals (Agger 1992:1). One cultural studies researcher of homelessness (Fiske 1991), for example, fruitfully engages in the latent content analysis of several newspaper articles, interviews with homeless men, and national statistics in order to place the practices of certain homeless men in the historical context of an increasingly hostile governmental response to the plight of the impoverished during the Reagan administration (p. 461).

In this dissertation I outline the major themes of a popular discourse on homelessness and contrast those against the values, practices and experiences of homeless men in order to indicate the limits of popular accounts in understanding and explaining homelessness. I also show that homeless men are influenced by popular discourses about them and their condition, but that they may contest and resist those meanings, and build their own meanings regarding their condition. In this research my focus is localized, because I consider an analysis of popular discourses and the meanings given to homelessness by homeless men at the local level to be more useful for amending local social policy than a state- or nation-wide focus.

In order to specifically consider the differential power that local groups have in attributing meaning to social events such as homelessness, I will first analyze the themes of homelessness used in local documents. I will conduct
a latent content analysis of newspapers articles, signs, posters and mailings, and present excerpts from an interview with a local official concerning resort and casino practices that restrict homeless men's (and others) First Amendment rights. Second, I will conduct an ethnography of homeless men in Las Vegas, using data from one man's diary, 36 in-depth interviews with others, and participant-observations with these men, their environments and practices. Through this triangulated approach (Denzin 1978), I empirically assess the meanings of local male homelessness expressed in different discourses.

The Methods I Used and the Paradigms From Which they Were Drawn

To present the popular discourse on local homelessness I have engaged in a latent content analysis of several local newspaper stories, signs, posters, and the statements of local social service providers concerning homelessness, and developed a grounded theory regarding the basic themes found in them. To indicate the experiences of local homeless men, I engaged primarily in an ethnography of homeless men in Las Vegas. Here my methods included: in-depth interviews with several homeless men selected through convenience and snowball sampling techniques (which I detail later); participant-observation with homeless men and people who interact with them; and an analysis of the diary of one local homeless man. These are all framed by my analysis of the larger cultural setting. My use of varied methods is
informed by Denzin and Lincoln's (1994:12) suggestion that because no single method grasps the subtle variations in ongoing human experience, a wide range of interconnected methods should be used.

The methods I use are informed by both the interpretive (sometimes called constructivist) and critical paradigms (Guba and Lincoln 1994). In the interpretive paradigm, individuals create multiple realities and the researcher notes the subjective meanings social actors attribute to their actions and the actions of others. As Guba and Lincoln (1994:113) phrase it, "[t]he aim of inquiry is understanding and reconstruction of the constructs that people (including the inquirer) initially hold, aiming toward consensus but still open to new interpretations as information and sophistications improve." To structure such an approach, I will use a grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) research model which I will detail later.

The research I present here is also informed by the critical paradigm. It aims at transforming the marginalized social position of homeless males in Las Vegas and critiquing the social mechanisms that impede this transformation. Critical ethnography involves applying insights from critical theory to the practice of ethnography. Critical theory developed when social theorists such as Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse began explaining how changes in capitalism helped perpetuate, as well as created new forms of, injustice and oppression (Kinchemloe and McLaren 1994:138). Critical theorists also considered that the social sciences are a product of Enlightenment thought, but have also flourished with the development of capitalism. Given these

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origins and current influences, past and present critical theorists promote the
notion that "a reconstruction of the social sciences could lead to a more
democratic and egalitarian social order" (p. 139). In addition, a focus on
human agency has also been fruitfully added to help amend a deterministic
bend within Marxism, which includes: its iron laws of history, its view of
capitalism as necessarily evil, and its focus on the proletariat as the historical
agents of revolutionary change. These poststructural critiques of determinism
have been adopted by many critical theorists as a way of keeping intact the
Marxist aims of political and social equality within critical theory rather than
abandoning these goals along with more deterministically-oriented Marxism.

Kincheole and McLaren's definition of a critically-oriented researcher or
theorist is worth quoting at length. Such a person is:

a researcher or theorist who attempts to use his or her work as
a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain
basic assumptions: that all thought is fundamentally mediated
by power relations that are socially and historically constituted;
that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or
removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the
relationship between concept and object and between signifier
and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by
the social relations of capitalist production and consumption;
that language is central to the formation of subjectivity
(conscious and unconscious awareness); that certain groups in
any society are privileged over others and, although the
reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that
characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully
reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as
natural, necessary or inevitable; that oppression has many
faces and that focusing on one at the expense of others (e.g.
class oppression versus racism) often elides the
interconnections among them; and, finally, that mainstream
research practices are generally, although most often
unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race and gender oppression. (1994:139-140)

As a critical ethnography, my research fits well with these assumptions. It criticizes the social inequality resulting in homelessness by considering the popular discourses regarding local male homelessness, and by developing "native" knowledge which contrasts with the popular discourses regarding homelessness. By analyzing popular discourses, I take into account the social and historical basis for popular meanings assigned to local male homelessness. Thus the "facts" of homelessness are never neutral, but are constructed differently by different groups (particularly in relation to one's position as a homeless or a non-homeless person). Social relations of capitalist production are central to constructing the "facts" of homelessness from different perspectives. Language in texts such as newspapers are prerequisites for the development of such discourses. For example, privileged, propertied individuals may be more likely to consider the presence of marginalized homeless persons as a threat to that property. Propertied individuals can be understood as having a vested interest in promoting a view of homeless men as threatening so as to gain consensus for laws promoting the restriction of their movement and their segregation. Recognizing this, homeless men may subvert popular discourses and their "taken-for-granted" nature by speaking out about the condition and their experiences. On the other hand, some homeless men might also blame themselves for their homelessness, and reproduce a particular view of the causes of their
condition. I have developed this research so as to present the voices of homeless men, and have asked for their input in the conduct of this research. While parts of this research may show homeless men contesting popular discourses regarding homelessness, others also show homeless men reproducing popular views of their condition. However, the critical aspect of this study promotes greater self-awareness on the part of homeless men, homeless service providers and the community-at-large, awareness which might promote social change.

I have also developed this research in line with the interpretive paradigm, which itself began as a critique of positivism. Herbert Blumer (1969) believed social scientists should ground their knowledge in the everyday life of the people being studied. Interpretive sociologists criticize quantitative analysis because its use assumes transitivity between different contexts. As an interpretive sociologist, I do not assume common meanings exist between differing contexts. The interpretive methods that I use, such as participant observation and in-depth interviewing, situate me close to my subject. These techniques (sometimes called naturalistic) enhance the researcher's understanding of the context of behavior. According to Malinowski, the assumptions of interpretive research parallel the goal of ethnography, which is "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world" (1922:25).

There are four generally noted weaknesses of the interpretive paradigm: it is ahistorical, astructural, overly rational and it underestimates the
role of conflict in social life (Fay 1976:84-88). Like cultural studies researchers, I intend to address some of the weaknesses inherent in relying solely on an interpretive approach by applying the principles of the critical paradigm.

A Cultural Studies Approach to Studying Homelessness

One cultural study of homeless incorporating elements of interpretive and critical perspectives was accomplished by John Fiske (1991). As his assumptions and use of methods inform my own study, I will now consider the strengths and weaknesses of his research approach.

In "For cultural interpretation: A study of the culture of homelessness," John Fiske (1991) draws extensively from another researcher's field notes and employs textual, discourse and structural analyses to indicate that homeless persons often engage in practices opposed to and critical of a social environment that blames them for being without shelter. Fiske uses a systemic model to interpret the micro-level practices of homeless persons as they occur within U.S. social structure and culture. As he indicates, the viewing, reading and daily life practices of homeless men he observed in one particular shelter are strongly informed by other cultural elements, and in particular by the way homelessness is constructed through various discourses in the U.S. For example, using field notes from a fellow researcher, he shows the men at the shelter cheering during a particular scene in the movie Die
Hard, in which terrorists blow up a police van. For Fiske, this instance when homeless men align themselves with marginalized terrorists indicates that "[i]n their reading and viewing practices the men systematically reject the social values that have rejected them" (1991:456). As Fiske further explains, the men's reading practices are analogous with their lifestyles: a homeless man's existence is often intimately connected to the use of objects thrown away by middle- and upper-class individuals and families. The castaway items of one class turn into objects central to this subculture (Fiske 1991:468). In addition, the men subvert shelter rules, working against the reform-oriented intentions of the shelter and the values of its middle-class donors. Such practices indicate that there may be a homology between these men's rejection of dominant meanings attributed to objects and their values, beliefs, practices, and identities.

In addition to micro-level, interpretive analysis, Fiske also situates homelessness within a particular social and historical moment he associates with the sharp reduction of funding for government programs directed toward the needy by the Reagan Administration in the 1980s. He notes, however, that the resultant increase in volunteerism semiotically reframes homelessness as a problem that doesn't concern everyone and that doesn't have to be addressed through social welfare policies designed for all citizens. Fiske shows through the discourse of volunteerism that it becomes impossible to consider homelessness as the result of structural factors (Fiske 1991:460). As he also argues, the homeless are further marginalized through other
discourses embodied in government policy and the media which construct
them as deviants and "Others" (1991:461).

By using these examples, Fiske illustrates how the assumptions of
cultural studies differ from those of positivism and that they can provide a
critical theoretical model rooted in the possibility of political action and change.
The political relevance of the systemic analysis advocated by Fiske makes
cultural studies different from positivist models. A systemic model means "we can
generalize from [these homeless men], not to other homeless, but to the
workings of a system (Reaganomic capitalism) within which these specific
conditions of homelessness have developed" (Fiske 1991:469). The systemic
model relies on the method of discourse analysis, in which specific utterances
(or objects, or practices) are understood within the frame of a specific
historical and social moment. Fiske notes that positivism only allows for
description because, "structures have no practice" (1991:470), while systemic
models are "generative." The systemic model then captures the dynamic
nature of systems and practices, showing how structure and practices
influence one another.

Although Fiske traces the regulation of homeless persons through
discourse as a form of social control, throughout his analysis, he stresses that
the practices of some homeless persons, "can, and often do, take antagonistic
stances to the structures that constrain them and this antagonism can work to
loosen the constrains and modify the structures" (Fiske 1991:463). For Fiske,
particular objects become signs which are the sites of a power struggle
between different cultures, providing "evidence of the competence of the subordinate to exploit multi-accentuality and engage in the struggle for meaning" (1991:465). He believes this theoretical position allows homeless men "socially interested agency" from which they may both criticize and resist the material deprivation from which they suffer (pp. 465-467). Through the gratification of producing a "bottom-up culture of homelessness" (Fiske 1991:471), these men recognize not only the structured inequality which strongly informs their condition, but also refuse a discourse which blames them for being homeless.

Overall, Fiske's study makes a strong case for the contextual analysis of this social phenomenon, the use of multiple methods to grasp the meaning of micropractices informed by macrostructures, and for understanding "the workings of a system (Reaganomic capitalism) within which these specific conditions of homelessness have developed" (Fiske 1991:469). However, one shortcoming of Fiske's study is that he did not engage in field work with homeless persons (Fiske 1991:469). Like many critical social scientists, Fiske emphasizes a structural and theoretical explanation of homelessness, but not face-to-face interactions which would have allowed him to appreciate important differences within the homeless population. In particular, he overgeneralizes the homogeneity of homeless person's ideological stance because he did not encounter their differences through direct interaction. As such, I argue that Fiske may have imputed ideological characteristics to homeless persons which may not be empirically "true."
In the present study I do not assume ideological cohesiveness among homeless persons because of their shared oppression (critical paradigm), but instead start by considering their own understanding of their homeless experiences (interpretive paradigm). Understanding the way of life and point of view of another culture through researcher's interaction with members is what defines the ethnographic research tradition (Spradley 1980:3). Through a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), I use data gathered through observations and interviews as the starting point for my development of a theory which draws important distinctions between different types of homeless men, their experiences, practices, beliefs, attitudes, and "career" (Snow and Anderson 1993). However, keeping in line with the assumptions of a critical approach, I undertook this research in order to enact change.

I believe that merging interpretive fieldwork practices with a critically-based social science project such as Fiske's would also help reaffirm the role of critical social scientists as advocates for oppressed peoples. As Gottschalk (1994) has indicated, talking to marginalized persons directly about their culture, as well as integrating their voices within a social science discourse, seems the best way to support those individuals' own struggles to resist the meanings imposed on them by powerful groups, including academics. Therefore, in the present study I not only observed homeless men and conducted an analysis of the local popular discourses that inform homelessness, but I also spoke directly with them, and asked them how they would conduct research which concerns them. I also included excerpts from
one man's diary to further incorporate homeless men's voices into this research project. Building on the orientations of Gottschalk, I want to extend Fiske's research model into a study that is more explicitly interactive and based on grounded theory.

A Grounded Theory Approach to Analyzing the Themes Found in Documents, Interviews and Observations

I used a latent content analysis of newspaper articles and other documents to develop a grounded theory of the themes that underlie popular local discourses on homelessness. Though in-depth interviews and participant observation techniques, I also developed a grounded theory based in part on the topics these homeless men feel are important to understanding homelessness (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Using a grounded theory approach, I answer the following questions: How do local media accounts, signs, posters and the statements of non-homeless persons frame male homelessness? Why do homeless men think they became homeless? How do they understand and act toward the bureaucracies of the shelters they use? What are the survival strategies of homeless men in Las Vegas? How safe do they feel? Although a grounded theory approach limits the questions which can be developed previous to the collection of data, the critical positioning of my research informs basic questions which make explicit the political nature of my study.
Blumer's discussion of sensitizing concepts (1969:147-151) is also relevant to my research and development of grounded theory, and my questions and thoughts were informed and refined through interaction with members of the field. Through an inductive approach, the key concepts, their indicators and the relationships among them unfolded during both the fieldwork and writing process (Strauss and Corbin 1994:273). My research thus embodies an interactive and dialogical process of refining my research questions based on my interactions with subjects (Spradley 1980:25).

There are several canons and procedures used in a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 1990:6-12). Their guiding principle, however, is the recognition that data collection and its analysis constitute an interrelated process. In a real sense, my "analysis of data" first began through my daily interactions with homeless men in Fairbanks, Alaska. As discussed in my Introduction, my experience working in a homeless shelter allowed me to form the basis for general questions which I further developed during fieldwork in Las Vegas. The research process and the constant development and refinement of questions, themes, concepts and methods then allowed me to proceed with this research and develop my findings. My own focus on the concepts and themes developed here resulted from their "repeatedly being present in interviews, documents, and observations" (Corbin and Strauss 1990:6, emphasis theirs).

To contrast the dominant or popular discourse of local homelessness with the experiential discourse of homeless men, I collected data from varied
sources such as interviews, newspaper articles, signs, posters, mailings, local ordinances and one man's diary. Glaser and Strauss (1967:161-184) indicate that print sources such as articles, signs, posters, mailings, and local ordinances can be coded in the same way as interviews or observations.

Once I collected enough data to begin analysis, I used open, axial and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss 1990:12) to code the data and to develop key concepts and indicators.

In open coding, the researcher looks at his/her data, compares statements/events/actions/interactions, and considers their similarities and differences in order to develop conceptual labels, categories and subcategories (Corbin and Strauss 1990:12). This form of coding allows for theoretical sampling work to begin, and helps guide the development of further questions. Corbin and Strauss (1990:13) advocate this procedure to enhance validity by enabling "investigators to break through subjectivity and bias." For example, through interviews I found that health problems were a significant factor for local homeless men, but through repeated interviews I began to realize that poor health preceeded homelessness in some men, while in others it resulted from homelessness. Further interviews then helped me differentiate between the health problems leading to homelessness and those better understood as its effect.

During axial coding, I approached transcripts of interviews with particular questions in mind. For example, I would ask, "What survival practices do these men use?" I used this technique to find themes, such as
working, selling and bartering, and using public services, across interviews. I then was able to look for subthemes. For example, I discovered that the several different subsistence practices these men use are related to the duration of their homelessness. After this first coding I then went back to the field, collected more data, and re-analyzed it based on emerging patterns. Further visits to the field allowed me to combine, add, or eliminate categories as I made new discoveries.

In axial coding, "categories are related to their sub-categories, and the relationships [are] tested against data" (Corbin and Strauss 1990:13). Categories are also further tested and refined as the application of hypotheses in the field reveals more data. In simpler terms, I would read the data according to the themes/codes I already developed. In this coding stage, themes may be revised and recomposed, and the researcher must also look for exceptions. Observing exceptions is helpful for ethnographers to clarify the rule. Exceptions also help specify when and under what conditions patterns exist as well as their boundaries. Axial coding then allowed me to develop conceptually dense theory, one which further allowed me to interconnect concepts (1990:14).

Finally, in selective coding, all existing categories are unified within a central, core category (1990:14). In my ethnography, for example, I began with the general theme of understanding the practices, beliefs and values of homeless men in Las Vegas and contrasting these to popularized and often stereotypical notions of these men. Selective coding allowed me to develop
key underlying themes, such as trends in the popular perception of homeless men in news accounts, in documents on local homelessness, and in ordinances developed to limit their practices and presence in particular areas. I also used selective coding to consider subthemes in these men's activities which I observed and in the statements they made during interviews. Those include: the acceptance and stigmatization of various subsistence strategies in which these men engage; their views on the purposes of local shelters; and how homeless men at different stages of their career see other homeless men. These subthemes, however, revolve around my study's core theme, which values an "experience-near" account of local homeless men.

The Reliability and Validity of my Study

Qualitative and ethnographic research integrates context. As contexts do not remain static, the strength of a grounded theory tends to lie in its validity as opposed to reliability, which is the ability to produce the same results over time by different observers. Although reliability is always problematic in grounded theory research, the best substitute for it is considering the internal and external consistency of any interpretive account of a culture (Corbin and Strauss 1990:9). First, the researcher may increase the "reliability" of the study by looking for internal consistency. The questions the researcher asks here are, 'Do all the pieces and what I discovered about the field "fit"? Is there consistency in what I weave together? Is there consistency
between what the respondents say and what they do? Are there any contradictions between the data and my theory? Second, the researcher may increase reliability by looking for external consistency. This involves reviewing the literature on a field, cross-checking research findings with someone knowledgeable about the field, asking them if your findings resonate with them, and asking if the explanation you presented is plausible. My research on homelessness displays internal consistency through my development of themes that run throughout the text itself. I also developed external consistency by first having completed my own literature review on homeless research, and then through comparing my current research with the findings of previous studies using similar methods.

Reliability is important in social science research as it allows for findings to be drawn from a particular study to be generalized to other contexts. Corbin and Strauss suggest that grounded theories may provide generalizability by specifying the exact condition under which certain phenomena might occur. This may guide others individuals wishing for a degree of predictability in similar situations. However, as they (1990:15) also stress, "no theory that deals with social psychological phenomenon is actually reproducible in the sense that new situations can be found whose conditions exactly match those of the original study." The generalizability of this research does involve predictability but only on some levels. For example, this study finds patterns explaining the relationship between the length of time a man has been homeless and the survival strategies he is likely to take up. However, as
Corbin and Strauss indicate, my observation of such patterns should not be used to determine their absolute, statistical significance, but rather as a guide to understand how some homeless men might act given certain conditions.

In considering questions of validity, an ethnographer must ask him/herself a daunting question: "do I faithfully represent the truth of a phenomenon?". Herbert Blumer believed this question primarily involved the researcher learning to see the social world through the eyes of the people being studied (1969:139). For Blumer, then, interpretive validity in interpretive research is approached by achieving the closest fit between the group's view and the researcher's. This also parallels Malinowski's view that the purpose of ethnography is to understand the members' perspective (1922:25). Again, this approach is articulated in my own goal of comparing popularized meanings of homelessness with those homeless men give about their practices and experiences.

Various researchers have advocated additional criteria for judging interpretive validity, including a consideration of the researcher's purpose or ideology (Altheide and Johnson 1994). "From this point of view, validity depends on the 'interpretive communities,' or the audiences...and the goals of the research" (p. 488). Altheide and Johnson's radically qualified standards of validity may also be used in evaluating my own research. One of these standards that applies to my research is "validity-as-ideology," where the "focus is on the certain specific cultural features involving social power, legitimacy, and assumptions about the social structure" (p. 488). Using the
"validity-as-ideology" approach, my research may be judged valid based partly on its usefulness for critiquing structured inequality and assumptions regarding who is to blame for homelessness. Another criterion for judging interpretive validity mentioned by Altheide and Johnson is "validity-as-language/text," which considers how the world is framed through cultural categories and language. My research may also be judged valid on this criteria, as I present the popularized and experiential understandings of homelessness as culturally constructed through language, and not natural. A third type of interpretive validity discussed by Altheide and Johnson is "validity-as-relevance/advocacy" (p. 488). My research also exhibits this type of validity because it presents information on the way homelessness in Las Vegas is commonly understood by non-homeless persons and contrasts that information against the experiences of homeless men. Once this information is disseminated, it may affect social change.

There are four further steps I took to improve validity. The first is called the test of ecological validity where the writer shows that what he/she found is not his/her creation. Here I justify my claim that what occurred in the field would have happened even if I had not been there, by acting as a simple observer and collecting observations without researcher interaction. As Adler and Adler have noted, "Simple observers follow the flow of events. Behavior and interaction continue as they would without the presence of a researcher, uninterrupted by intrusion" (1994:378). As I often spent several hours at a time simply observing homeless men in their day-to-day interactions, I believe
I observed occurrences in the field which would have happened regardless of my status as a researcher.

A second step toward improving the validity of this account is accomplished through the writing of a natural history of my field research: the procedures, methods and steps I deployed in the field. I describe these both in this section on methodology, and through my description of more specific interactions I discuss in the ethnography.

A third step I take toward increasing validity was to invite member's validation. In this step the ethnographer offers his/her view of the field to the members, and asks for comments and feedback. I asked homeless men who participated in this study to read and comment on my research findings, and asked them to tell me if I am overemphasizing any details or missing anything of importance. Unfortunately, the homeless men I asked did not give me any feedback, possibly because of other pressing concerns, the length of this manuscript, a lack of interest, or for other reasons. However, while writing this dissertation I knew that I would eventually show it to the men I studied. This forced me to keep those members in mind during the writing process. How and what I wrote, then, was affected by these men being part of the study's audience, even if they did not critique the work or read it.

A fourth step for increasing validity was the test of the competent insiders' performance. This test checks whether an outsider who doesn't know the field could be able to act, understand and anticipate the culture of the field. Although I did not check if non-homeless people reading this dissertation
would be accepted as members of the field, I anticipate that after reading my
detailed, descriptive account of various types of homeless men and their
experiences, a reader could pass as familiar with this culture. Although this
somewhat provides of a test of predictive validity, predictions rooted in
grounded theory are usually limited to specific contexts and circumstances
(Corbin and Strauss 1990:5).

Ironically, I myself was mistaken for a homeless man on several
occasions while engaged in this research. This confusion possibly indicates
another dimension to that of a competent insider's performance. By lingering
in areas where homeless men would congregate, by wearing old jeans and a
T-shirt, and by using public transportation to travel to various research sites,
homeless men who didn't know me as a researcher occasionally thought I
shared their condition. For example, one day simply sitting against a chain
link fence on a street with several homeless men, a man approached me
offering a small container of orange juice. I began to tell him that I wasn't
really homeless, and that I was a student at UNLV doing research on
homelessness so that he could give the juice to someone else. His response,
however, was

Yeah, and I'm the president. Come on, man. You think
you're too good to take my juice? If you was really a student
at UNLV, you wouldn't be out here sitting with all these
homeless guys, you'd be sitting in your warm dorm room.
Don't act like you're above it, like you're better than us. Now,
don't say anything, don't talk, I don't want no conversation,
just take the damn juice.
Feeling unable to refuse without offending him, I politely accepted his offer. Such misidentification has occurred with other ethnographers of homeless persons, possibly because they also attempted to reduce the distance between themselves and their subjects through modified dress and appearance. During an interview with a homeless panhandler in Los Angeles, for example, Jackson Underwood (1993) was once himself given money by passersby.

The validity of a study, however, goes far beyond my being confused with a homeless man. Norman Denzin has discussed triangulation as a way in which a researcher may improve validity, including data, investigator, theory and method triangulation (Denzin 1978:304). This form of increasing validity also applied to my study, as I too have engaged in data triangulation through the collection of data by using different methods, by observing at different times and in different spaces, and by using different data sources. I engaged in investigator triangulation by relying on the observations and field notes of a homeless man as well as my own, and I also pursued theory and method triangulation by using both interpretive and critical perspectives in the interpretation of my data. All these features of my study increase validity through what Denzin calls "multiple triangulation" (1978:304).

However, because this research is also critical, Patti Lather's notion of catalytic validity provides perhaps one of the most important yardsticks for judging my study. Catalytic validity "points to the degree to which research moves those it studies to understand the world and the way it is shaped in
order for them to transform it" (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994:140). I undertook a highly interactive approach to research in part because of my belief that social change occurs most fundamentally at the personal level. During my interviews, at least two homeless men mentioned that by talking to me, they had gained insight into both themselves and their condition, and that they would use this information to change their situations. I hope that this study also provides similar insights to social service providers by explaining how homeless men see themselves, service providers and their practices. Finally, since this research investigates popular notions regarding homelessness, interested community members may come appreciate the differences between their own views of homelessness and those who experience the condition.

**Sampling Issues**

In my content analysis of articles on homelessness, I sampled stories from a variety of local newspapers, including the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, the *Las Vegas Sun*, and *City Life*, which I found through reading newspapers and through a computer search for articles at the UNLV library. In my search I used the keywords “homeless,” “homelessness,” “vagrant,” “vagrancy,” “transient,” “panhandling” and “panhandlers.” Using this technique, I found several articles which discussed homelessness resulting from disasters such as fire, for example. Because these were not specifically poverty-related and usually involved entire families, they were excluded from my final sample.
Because it was difficult to develop themes from several very brief articles where the keywords appeared, I ended up drawing a purposive sample of articles of local events which impacted popular perceptions of the homeless population of Las Vegas. These events in 1997 were: the murder of a tourist on the Las Vegas Strip by a homeless man and the subsequent development of an ordinance restricting panhandlers in that area; the fining of day-labor employers who attempt to pick up homeless and other indigent men on Bonanza Road; and debate over these legal restrictions being a violation of citizen's First Amendment rights.

In the ethnographic portion of this study I operationalized "local homeless men" as those men without a residence such as a house or an apartment who live in the Las Vegas area. Men with these characteristics also constitute the working population from which I drew samples of men whom I then interviewed and observed. I used convenience and snowball techniques to sample from this working population. Convenience sampling means that I included the first or most accessible homeless men I encountered. Specifically, I included men whom I perceived to be homeless by relying on: observations/judgments of their clothing and public activities (such as collecting cans or panhandling); their use of bridges, fields, cars, abandoned buildings or other places for shelter; their use of agencies designed to assist homeless persons; and occasionally their approaching me once they had heard about my research project. If I was in doubt as to their housing status, I would ask them directly if they were in fact homeless, both to ensure the
validity of my sample and to avoid deception by informing those individuals as to my status as a researcher. I sampled men from a variety of locations, including: outside and nearby shelters, "soup lines," parks, bus stations, abandoned buildings, and streets. I approached men of varying ages, races and physical conditions. I also made a point of conducting interviews and observations during different times of the day and week. I interviewed a total of 33 homeless men in sessions lasting between 20 minutes and two hours each. I also conducted three interviews with homeless service providers and advocates for homeless persons selected by convenience.

My ethnographic sample was also developed through snowball sampling techniques (Babbie 1995:287, 303). With this technique, a researcher asks to be introduced to other members of the field, and those members are then asked to participate. I was frequently able to use this technique, particularly in shelters, to gain introductions to individuals whom others thought might add to my study. This combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques is useful for accessing a special population such as homeless men.

The use of convenience and snowball sampling techniques are non-probability sampling techniques which I used because of the highly mobile nature of the homeless population. Drawing a probability sample from this population would be very difficult because there neither exists a list of local homeless persons nor a central site where they congregate. It is thus impossible to know for certain how many homeless persons reside in Las
Vegas at any given time. The 36 individuals I interviewed and observed through these varied sampling techniques constituted my final sample.

Although it is impossible to estimate the sampling error generated from using non-probably sampling techniques, I sampled as many homeless persons as I could in varying contexts and places so as to increase the representativeness of this group to all homeless males living in Las Vegas. However, as I am interested in analyzing the general conditions faced by homeless men in Las Vegas, representativeness is not really a goal of my research.

The Data-Gathering Techniques I Used

My data-gathering techniques consisted of; in-depth interviews; descriptions of the physical spaces homeless men occupy; analysis of newspaper articles, signs, posters, and mailings concerning homeless men; and the diary of a local homeless man. According to Corbin and Strauss (1994:274), each of these data-gathering techniques may provide the basis for the development of a grounded theory.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) justify the use of such varied and multiple methods by suggesting that qualitative researchers today should become bricoleurs, using “a pieced-together, close-knit set of practices that provide solutions to a problem in a concrete situation” (p. 2). Such methods are emergent and open to change depending on context. A large range of skills
are required of the bricoleur: from "interviewing to observing, to interpreting personal and historical documents, to intensive self-reflection and introspection" (p. 2). The bricoleur must also "work between and within competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms" (pp. 2-3). The strength of the bricoleur's account lies in its openness, malleability and partiality. Such an approach left me open to changes and interesting avenues of inquiry as they unfolded.

I also acted as an observer-as-participant in the field. Here my main role was that of observer trying to understand the lives and culture of homeless men in Las Vegas. Although I would typically introduce myself to homeless men I interacted with as a researcher studying homeless men, at times I was a simple observer of their activities, of the physical environment in which they live, and of their interaction patterns with others, including non-homeless persons. I justify the use of this technique on the grounds that it allowed for observations without necessitating researcher interaction with every individual in dynamic situations (Adler and Adler 1994:378).

Although at times I acted as an observer-as-participant, I do not believe I should have gone "undercover," or pretended to be a homeless man and write about that experience. Such a position cannot accurately capture the experiences of someone who endures homelessness on a daily basis and who cannot voluntarily end his homelessness at any time. In this regard, I am following the traditions and procedures of interactionists who focus on the meanings and behavior produced specifically by members of the group. For
example, in their research on homelessness, David Snow and Leon Anderson state that the stories of homeless persons, not of the researchers, were the basis for fieldnotes (1993:24-25). The authors rightfully differentiate between those in the culture with first-hand experience, and themselves as researchers who may also be able to experience the subculture but who go home after the research day is done. Following this logic, I did not want to place myself in the proverbial shoes of these men because I am not homeless. I simply wanted to get their stories and understand their experiences from their perspective.

It would be misleading, however, to say that my own interpretations, emotions and feelings are not part of this research. Therefore, in portions of this dissertation (particularly in Chapter 5 where I discuss meeting and hanging out with Jerry) I directly acknowledge my personal and emotional involvement with subjects by using my self as a research tool (Adler and Adler 1994:385-386). Noting one’s own feelings and actions is important for today’s ethnographers because, as Martin Heidegger phrased it, "what is decisive is not to get out of the circle [of interpretation] but to come into it the right way" (Heidegger 1962:195). Like all researchers, I was undeniably part of the field I studied. Entering the circle of interpretation in this case means that I acknowledge my understanding of the field to be inextricably linked to who I am, including my previous experiences with homeless men mentioned in the Introduction. Because I brought my emotions and autobiographical issues into the field with me, I also engaged in sustained self-reflection and introspection, as advocated by Denzin and Lincoln (1994:2).
Ethical Issues and the Politically-Oriented Nature of My Study

Ethical issues are a part of every form of social science research. The most important ethical issue, however, may well be gaining the consent of those who are studied. To accomplish this most effectively, I created an “Informed Consent Statement” which was reviewed and approved by the University of Nevada Las Vegas Department of Sponsored Programs. The form, which appears in the Appendix to this study, explained the focus of my research, described what participation involved, that participation was voluntary, and indicated that the names of all participants would be changed in my final written work to insure respondents’ confidentiality. I presented a copy of this form to each subject who, if interested, would then sign, initial, or simply read the form and verbally agree to participate. The form also provided me with a handy way of introducing myself as a university student and of explaining to a given man why I wanted to talk to him.

The Informed Consent Statement, however, could not be used in all aspects of my fieldwork. For example, although acting as a simple observer involves deception in its extreme form (Punch 1994), I used this technique so as not to interfere with unfolding events or conversations. Avoiding harm to the subjects is the most primary ethical issue in social science research (Babbie 1995, Fowler 1993:132, Punch 1994), and I believe that no harm came to the individuals being studied in my research through the use of this technique. To further insure that no harm will come to my subjects, I have
changed the names of all homeless men in the ethnography, as well as the names of all shelters and any other social service providers for homeless persons.

Another practical issue of my study is that it is a political and selective account of a culture, which is true of any account of a culture whether or not it is made explicit by those presenting it. Simply stated, there are power relations embedded in all forms of ethnography. Drawing attention to the distance separating the ethnographic text from the lived culture makes it possible to criticize the totalizing and grand narratives of Enlightenment science that have been reproduced in realist ethnographies. Today, a humbler ethnographer may claim “partial truths” (Clifford 1986) which are never entirely objective, but which have value specifically because they claim only a partial and always politically-charged understanding of a given culture and its members. I discuss this issue further in the following section.

Experimental Ethnography, Realism and Self-Reflexivity

Working Men! To you I dedicate a work, in which I have tried to lay before my German Countrymen a faithful picture of your conditions, of your sufferings and struggles, of your hopes and your prospects. I have lived long enough amidst you to know something about your circumstances; I have devoted to their knowledge my most serious attention. I have studied the various official and non-official documents as far as I was able to get hold of them--I have not been satisfied by this, I wanted more than a mere abstract knowledge of my subject. I wanted to see you in your own homes, to observe you in your every-day life, to chat with you on your conditions
and grievances, to witness your struggles against the social
and political power of your oppressors.
Friedrich Engels, 1845, *The Condition of the Working

It has been argued that the relationship between the
researcher and his subjects, by definition, resembles that of
the oppressor and the oppressed, because it is the oppressor
who defines the problem, the nature of the research, and, to
some extent, the quality of the interaction between him and
his subjects. This inability to understand and research the
fundamental problem, neo-colonialism, prevents most social
researchers from being able accurately to observe Black life
and culture and the impact racism and oppression have on
Blacks.

The danger of a literature...derived from inaccurate
inferences and selective samples, is not only that such
images may lead to selective perception. No less dangerous
is the manner in which we interpret the images created by
ethnographers in a learning process that is geared, not
toward the pursuit of truth, but toward the assertion and
affirmation of the myth of our own innocence. We come to
believe that in carrying around the ethnographer's
"enlightened" images we are, on some level, cleansed of
prejudice.
Mitchell Dunnier, 1992, *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability
and Masculinity*. p. 147.

The three previous quotes, which span a period of almost 150 years,
comment on several issues that have been raised about ethnographic
representation in the postmodern era. I began by quoting Friedrich Engels, a
social scientist passionately committed to the alleviation of social injustice
through reporting the conditions, lives and experiences of impoverished
individuals. In a sense, this motive might apply to all those who attempt to
record the words, experiences and lives of marginalized people. The pain of
poverty and marginality is often compounded by a lack of attention or caring
from others. Relating the plight of the impoverished and marginal to the
general public has long been the goal of well-known novelists such as Charles
Dickens, but there also exists a long tradition which aims to relate these
conditions to the general public, in a possibly less dramatic fashion through
less popular social scientific accounts. Bringing the condition of
homelessness in Las Vegas to the attention of the general public, then, is one
element which inspired this ethnography.

The method to which Engels subscribes is that of naturalistic and
interpretive sociologists (Hamilton 1994:64), using field work in a way not
dissimilar from Herbert Blumer. As previously mentioned, Blumer believed
that social scientists should get an account of social life directly from the group
being studied. The approach sounds simple enough, but the difficulty arises
when one deconstructs the notion of a detached social scientist whose job is
simply to observe and relate social life "as it happened," or as understood
directly "from the mouths of those I studied."

Unproblematically listening to and recording the voices of others
becomes difficult because, as Joyce Ladner's quote points out, the social
scientist is (usually) the person in charge of the entire project. The final
decisions, including edits, word choices, the arrangement of topics and
sources, what is included, excluded, and a host of other decisions represent
the final product of the person who claims authorship. Ladner makes clear
that there has always been an imbalance of power in ethnography: ultimately,
some are represented, while others represent. If marginalized peoples are
speaking, it is through the ventriloquized voice of the social scientist who frequently (and as is certainly the case in my relationship to my subject matter) has not experienced the marginalization him/herself.

Ladner's concerns regarding neocolonialist tendencies in traditional ethnography are important, because they direct our attention to the roots of ethnography. As Dan Rose (1994) indicates, the practice of ethnography was an important precursor to the industrial era, as European colonists used explorers' descriptive texts as "cultural maps" which informed their subsequent colonization of Third-World regions. Rose believes that this early use of ethnographic texts should be kept in mind by today's ethnographers because ethnography can easily reproduce imbalances of power. Rose indicates that the realist tendencies of ethnography reproduce oppressor/oppressed relationships between the ethnographer and those who are represented by privileging a certain style of ethnography. By breaking out of traditional patterns of ethnographic writing, Rose finds that ethnography can be better used for the purpose of criticizing existing systems of inequality.

Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey (1995) have also investigated a shift in the writings of social scientists, particularly in the production of ethnographic texts. The authors note that different textual constructions of reality have both vastly different assumptions and implications. More traditional ethnographic texts presume Realism, or a general confidence that the world can be known, that there are clear distinctions between the observer and the observed, that language can reflect reality, and that social science can be written with little
self-reflexivity on the part of the social scientist (1995:42-43). Recently, however, social science has undergone a "crisis of representation," (p. 44) whereby once taken-for-granted Realist textual practices are now under scrutiny. Today's ethnographer is encouraged to recognize that he/she is a part of the field which he/she studies, and that the basic distinction between the observer and the observed in social science is today less obvious. Again, Ladner's quote is an indication of this concern: could an ethnographer reproduce patterns of inequality through the very practice of traditional ethnography? Atkinson and Coffey (1995:46-47) cite Edward Said who remarked that because social scientists once drew a clear distinction between rhetoric and logic, European observers of culture were once considered detached and neutral. As Said believes, the assumed objectivity of cultural observers helped hide the fact that much scholarship on the East was Eurocentric. Today, the "rediscovery of rhetoric" (Atkinson and Coffey 1995:46) implies that social scientists would do well to recognize that they also cannot cleanse themselves of cultural assumptions. This recognition makes the social scientist's background, experiences and writing style as important to the production of a given ethnography as the culture under study.

Recent trends in feminism have also influenced current ethnographic styles. Feminism "in general encourages an examination of power and powerlessness," and thus considers that in any form of writing, "muted groups are often seen--and must often see themselves--through the categories of the dominant" (Atkinson and Coffey 1995:48). Ethnographers then need to be
careful not to perform a double subjugation (Atkinson and Coffey 1995:48), or reproduce the powerlessness of certain groups through power dynamics embedded in traditional ethnographic practice and language. The earlier quote from Mitchell Dunnier expresses well the warning that although "it is incumbent of the ethnographer not to take on the world views of the powerful or the dominant" (Atkinson and Coffey 1995:49) when representing marginalized peoples, it also does not automatically follow that the "enlightened ethnographer's" descriptions are cleansed of bias. If ethnography is to be truly "enlightening," it must also be publicly scrutinized, and this scrutiny must include those who have been written about.

Recognizing that language is not a neutral medium of representation is also important for today's ethnographers. While literary realism has long been the preferred genre of ethnographers in anthropology and sociology (Van Maanen 1988), the problem with this mode today is that its omniscient, third-person narrative style both reproduces and veils the ethnographer's authority. To counter this, contemporary ethnographers have replaced this style by creating texts which violate realist conventions: dialogic writing which include multiple voices (Dwyer 1977), non-linear narratives such as "stream of consciousness" fiction, and poetry (Richardson 1994).

In this dissertation, I incorporate ethnographic innovations in two particular sections. Although the vast majority of this text is written in a realist fashion, Chapter 5 is an experimental, narrative ethnography (Underwood 1993). Here I present the ethnopoetics of Jerry, a homeless man.
Ethnopoetics can be defined as "the everyday forms of rhetoric and spoken performance of social actors" (Atkinson and Coffey 1995:54). This experimental chapter is a detailed description of Jerry's speech and actions, which include many contradictions between his statements and actions. In addition, I also describe my own emotional reactions in response to Jerry's situation. If poverty is painful, then researching poverty means taking on the unpleasant task of closely interacting with and attempting to understand those in pain. In this chapter I negotiate not only my feelings and reactions to Jerry's plight but also the contradiction between my own role as a "neutral" researcher of abject poverty and my need to make an ethical response to a request for assistance. Indeed, I feel that one imperative of researching marginalized peoples is to show that their social location is reproduced primarily through an individual's lack of empathy with them, and this includes the ethnographers. The key skill for interpretive sociologists is to take on the role of the other. As one homeless man phrased it in the course of my research, "I used to think homeless people were different from you and me."

In Chapter 10, my other experimental chapter, I present the research suggestions of homeless men. After reviewing the literature, I could not find any study which specifically asked homeless men how they felt they should be studied. Given that my project seeks to present the views of these men, I though that incorporating their views and ideas about research methods might provide insight into how they may be further involved in research which concerns them.
Conclusion

My dissertation examines data drawn from popular/media accounts, other local documents and my own ethnographic fieldwork. I hope that by presenting information from varied sources, I can better understand and critique the various meanings given to local homelessness. I will first present the popular meaning of local male homelessness through analyzing the themes used in several newspaper articles, and in one interview with a local official discussing the practices of resorts and casinos. Second, I will present the statements of homeless men about homelessness in my ethnography.
CHAPTER 4

POPULARIZED MEANINGS OF HOMELESSNESS IN THE U.S. AND IN LAS VEGAS

As indicated in my earlier review of the literature, the meanings that have been attributed to the condition of homelessness, and to homeless men in particular, have varied historically and contextually. While in some eras and cultures homelessness and abject poverty were glorified as spiritually noble practices, in other eras and cultures the condition was considered an indicator of moral or spiritual decay, of insanity, of disease, and of high potential for criminal behavior. Before considering the current local meanings attached to male homelessness, I will briefly overview dominant American values, and explore how they shape the way in which homelessness is often popularly understood and constructed in the U.S.

Traditional American Values that Inform Understandings of Homelessness

Homelessness in the United States had been greatly informed by certain traditional values held by its citizens. In particular, the Judeo-Christian
religious tradition and the value placed on the Protestant work ethic in this country are important for understanding the stigma attached to poverty and welfare. As noted in Chapter 2, the Protestant work ethic heavily promoted individuals to show signs of their salvation through work leading to material accumulation. This source of dominant U.S. values has helped structure and define our nation's view of work, and of those individuals perceived as lazy, incapable of or unwilling to work. Some would also argue that the decline in the Protestant work ethic in the U.S. has lead to increases in certain social problems, such as increased homelessness.

The Judeo-Christian religious tradition and the Protestant work ethic are also interrelated with other traditional values held in the U.S. such as individual achievement. One of the founding premises of the U.S. was that its citizens were not bound by a rigid social class system, such as the one early colonizers had experienced in Britain. Horatio Alger myths, or stories about individuals who succeed materially despite humble beginnings, also constructed the United States as a meritocracy where individual achievement determines one's social class and material wealth. The importance given to achieved rather than ascribed characteristics in the U.S. has allowed many individuals to experience upward class mobility. Furthermore, legislations such as the Civil Rights Bill and the Americans with Disabilities Act have continued to promote the notion of a "level playing field," or the belief that if an individual fails to succeed, it is largely his/her own fault.

Values stressing the importance of individual achievement share strong parallels with other core American values such as competition, material
success and the value of honest hard work as a means to material success. The U.S. economic system promotes and distributes rewards differentially based on a competitive market. Unlike socialist systems where all citizens are provided for by the state, a capitalist market economy breeds competition which is believed to motivate individuals to do their best. Such a system parallels the Protestant ethics' definition of spiritual success in material terms, and the achievement of this materialism through honest hard work. This system also tends to promote an unforgiving view of those who do not achieve material success, and in particular those who either do not or cannot achieve material success through hard work.

Another core American value for many, however, is the notion of individual freedom. The notion that an individual can determine his or her own fate makes the U.S. very appealing to people from other countries where the political and economic orders circumscribe individual action and limit an individual's opportunities. Individual freedom in such a competitive and material-success oriented culture, though, does not benefit everyone equally. In the U.S., large numbers of people live in abject poverty with little hope of escape and experience little compassion from those more fortunate. Our dominant values of individual achievement, competition, and material success through honest hard work also simultaneously tend to promote a strong negative reaction to the poor as individuals who deserve their fate. While socialist countries such as England, Denmark and Sweden have developed systems to insure that all citizens receive the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, education and health care, United States citizens remain unconvinced
that such systems are truly necessary to help this country's poor. U.S. citizens often feel that support of the welfare state might undermine the conditions of competition and promotion based on individual achievement which have allowed the U.S. to develop one of the richest economies of all industrialized nations (Block, Cloward, Ehrenreich and Piven 1987).

While dominant American values inform the general meanings citizens attach to homelessness, these values can only be understood as providing the most basic guidelines for understanding how Americans generally act toward these individuals. Because of important regional differences in the U.S. informed by variations in local historic events, the development of state or local laws, and the economy and variations in climate, it is also necessary to consider the meanings of a topic such as homelessness which have developed in specific regions and time periods. The dominant meanings of homelessness in Las Vegas in the late 1990s, then, are generally informed by traditional values promoted in the U.S., as well as more specifically structured by this area's history, economy, climate, and people.

Informed by my research of several local newspaper stories, other documents, and discussions with local homeless service providers, I will now discuss some of the meanings I have found which are frequently assigned to homeless males in Las Vegas.

\footnote{Dozens of articles discussing homelessness have appeared in the major Las Vegas newspapers such as the \textit{Review Journal} and the \textit{Sun} over the last few years. However, a computer search of these revealed that the majority of these articles are reports of fires or similar accidents which left individuals or entire families homeless. Again, in this project my focus is on poverty-induced homelessness rather than homelessness caused by accident, disaster or}
Local Meanings: Homeless Men as a Threat

One of the dominant discourses long associated with homeless males presents homeless or vagrant men as a threat (Bahr 1973:41-42). As Peter Marin (1987:175) phrased it, the “homeless, simply because they are homeless, are strangers, alien—and therefore a threat.” In Las Vegas, the view of homeless men as a threat is embodied in several news media reports, ordinances under consideration by the city, attitudes and practices of non-homeless persons, and occasionally by homeless men themselves. The long history of laws prohibiting vagrancy (discussed in Chapter 2) indicate that considering homeless persons as threatening is not new. However, my focus, on the reproduction and embodiment of this discourse in Las Vegas in the 1990s, will show the distinctive way in which this characterization is currently perpetuated. Using local newspaper articles, ordinances and the segregation of homeless and near-homeless men from particular areas in Las Vegas as evidence, I will argue that one popular discourse presents local homeless men as threatening.

Perhaps the most sensational recent series of accounts which presented homeless men as a threat were news stories concerning a homeless man accused of stabbing James Smith, a Scottish tourist, to death on the Las Vegas Strip in January 1996. A front-page report on the incident was published by the Las Vegas Review-Journal (RJ) on January 4. The report called Trent Strader, the man accused of the fatal stabbing, a political upheaval. For that reason, I focused more specifically on articles which
"panhandler" twice within the first two paragraphs, and called him a "vagrant" in the report's third paragraph (Flanagan 1996a). The article further describes Strader as "angrily mumbling" after approaching a group of people for "a handout" just before the stabbing occurred. Further, the article claims that Strader "showed little remorse" after the incident, and that he began chuckling once handcuffed while proclaiming "I guess I now know what it feels like to be a murderer" (Flanagan 1996a:3A). In addition, police homicide Sgt. Bill Keeton was quoted as saying, "I have no doubt he [Strader] will have a history with us" (Flanagan 1996a:3A).

On January 5, the second front-page article on the incident stated that police thought Strader might be connected to another stabbing on the Strip which had occurred in December of 1995. Described as a "homeless man" and a "transient" in the first two paragraphs of the article, Strader's legal name is not introduced until the third paragraph (Flanagan 1996b). The article also noted that since Smith's stabbing, the Las Vegas Police Department had been inundated with phone calls from reporters from Scotland, Los Angeles, New York and Washington inquiring about the incident (Flanagan 1996b:2B). After descriptions of the attack and Strader's subsequent apprehension, the article noted that news reports from Scotland described Smith as a "nice" and "friendly" man who enjoyed visiting Las Vegas at least three time a year (Flanagan 1996b:2B). The article concluded with a statement that Strader had been seen sleeping out-of-doors, followed by another statement given by an anonymous Las Vegas resident who had seen a man who looked like Strader tended to focus on poverty-induced homelessness, particularly that of men.
on December 21 on East Sahara Avenue: "He was walking around badgering and screaming at motorists. He looked at me and shook his fist angrily because I would not open my car door" (Flanagan 1996b:2B).

The sensational news reports of the story represent the first step in the development of what Stanley Cohen (1980) calls a "moral panic:" a process whereby the media focus on an individual or group as a threat to societal values and interests, promoting a large-scale response. Media accounts structure and define public perception of an event, and, as Cohen says,

even if they are not self-consciously engaged in crusading or muck-racking, their very reporting of certain 'facts' can be sufficient to generate concern, anxiety and indignation or panic. When such feelings coincide with a perception that particular values need to be protected, the preconditions for new rule creation or social problem definition are present (1980:16).

Cohen (p. 9-17) argues that the media accounts often present "folk devils" as deviant subcultures engaged in violence. Through amplification, exaggeration and the use of stereotypes (p. 18), the symbolic threat such subcultures represent to the social order is then perceived as real once a moral panic takes hold, and the group is then frequently addressed through identification, labeling and control by authorities.

Significantly, the repeated identification of Strader as either a vagrant, a transient or a homeless man in news reports emphasized his being part of a particular "alien" social group with unique characteristics. The articles thematically developed the idea of homeless persons as a threat to tourists on the Strip -- one of the most surveilled and socially controlled tourist attractions.
in the world. The articles developed this theme through repeated emphasis of Strader's homeless status and acts of begging before the stabbing, as well as stereotypical descriptions of his behavior as that of a deranged homeless person both before and after the stabbing. The idea that a murder in broad daylight could occur on the Las Vegas Strip, one of the world's top tourist destinations, created a sense of moral panic.

It was the third RJ article on the incident, published on January 6, which began to solidify the event as a moral panic, as authorities in Las Vegas began addressing the negative publicity regarding tourist safety in Las Vegas generated by both national and international media reports. The RJ article reprinted a photograph of the cover of the Glasgow, Scotland Daily Record published January 5 in which the headline read "KNIFE MANIAC KILLS SCOT IN VEGAS." The first paragraph of the Daily Record article stated "A Scots tourist has been knifed to death by a crazed beggar in Las Vegas." The first paragraph of the RJ article, by contrast, stated that "Las Vegas officials say the city is safe for tourists despite the fatal knifing" (Geer 1996a), while the article's second and fourth paragraphs note that a "high bail" of $500,000 dollars had been set for the suspect because "of the seriousness of the crime" and because "Strader has no ties to the community" (Geer 1996a). In his discussion of homeless persons as disaffiliated, Howard Bahr said homeless persons are those individuals "outside the usual system of sanctions, and hence [the individual's] behavior cannot be predicted with any certainty" (Bahr 1973:41). The bail, an amount apparently impossible for a homeless man to
post, then represented a community response to an outsider who seemed disaffiliated.

A spokesman for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitor's Authority (LVCVA) and two Las Vegas Police officers were then quoted to establish the continued safety of Las Vegas as a tourist destination. LVCVA spokesman Rob Powers said the stabbing "appears to be a random act by a deranged person," which had received a great deal of publicity because such incidents are so rare in Las Vegas, a city which, he said, "rightfully has a reputation of being the safest resort in the country, if not the world" (Geer 1996a:2B). Police Lt. Dan Mahony reaffirmed this statement, calling Las Vegas "the safest tourist destination in the country" (Geer 1996a:2B). Police Sgt. Chuck Jones also added that most homeless people are "docile," but that because some may have criminal backgrounds or experience mental illness, "it is very, very important not to antagonize somebody" (Geer 1996a:2B).

Such statements from officials who were attempting to control the negative impact which the stabbing could have had on the tourist industry might well represent their awareness of the devastating economic effects that other murders have had on similar tourism-based economies. In 1993, after nine international tourists were murdered in Florida within a period of eleven months, a spate of national and international media attention also caused a moral panic regarding the safety of tourists visiting Florida (Beck 1993). The ensuing attention was believed to have caused stock in Disney corporation to fall $1.50 per share immediately after back-to-back murders (Beck 1993:40). Also, some tour operator's Florida bookings declined from thirty to fifty percent
in the wake of the murders (DeGeorge 1993:39). The negative impact which the murders had on Florida's $31 billion tourist industry (DeGeorge 1993:40; Zbar 1993:6) also included Britain issuing its first-ever travel advisory for a U.S. destination (Florida). Also, a domestic corporation issued its own travel advisory for its employees after the murder of one of the corporation's executives (DeGeorge 1993:39). After a British newspaper described one of the slayings of a Yorkshire man through the headline "GUNNED DOWN LIKE ANIMALS," Florida's Governor Lawton Chiles pulled $350,000 worth of Florida's promotional advertising in domestic and international publications for thirty days. One tourist official claimed the advertising blackout was carried out in order to not "draw attention to a negative" (Zhar 1993:6). Although the governor also ordered an additional 840 police officers to patrol major airports and created a 1-800 telephone information line to help quell visitor's fears, other officials recognized the negative impact such attention would have on one of Florida's most important industries. As Florida's Department of Commerce Secretary Greg Farmer phrased it, news of the most recent murders would "have a very, very negative impact" on Florida tourism (Zbar 1993:6).

However, in the case of the Las Vegas murder, the emphasis of Strader's homeless status, even in later RJ articles, may have undermined earlier attempts by Las Vegas authorities to present the incident as "a random act by a deranged person." An RJ article published March 14 reported on a LVPD ceremony which recognized the bravery of two security guards who had helped apprehend Strader. In that article, Strader was again referred to as a
"vagrant" twice within the first five paragraphs (McKinnon 1996a). Mike Tell, one of the security guards receiving an award, also stated that Strader "was obviously a vagrant" who "showed no remorse" and "laughed" after having been apprehended (McKinnon 1996a:2B). Strader was also referred to as "the bloody vagrant" toward the end of the article.

Reports of the murder committed by a homeless man also seemed to raise questions not only regarding safety of tourists, but the safety of Las Vegas residents as well. Within weeks after the murder, a sign appeared on the sixth floor of the Flora Dungan Humanities building on the University of Nevada Las Vegas campus which warned that "THIS BUILDING HAS BEEN ACCESSED BY HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS DURING EVENINGS AND WEEKENDS," and that these individuals "MAY BE ARMED." Advice was given on the sign to "REPORT, DON'T CHALLENGE" any homeless individual encountered in the building after hours (English Department 1996). Although a homeless man was later arrested in the building, the sensationalized reporting of the Strader murder seemed to affect one University department's perception of all homeless men in general as threatening and capable of violence. The warning was posted in several areas on the sixth floor, and was printed on official University of Nevada Las Vegas, Department of English stationery.

In addition to some residents' increased fears of homeless persons, local officials and casino owners have since attempted to introduce legislation in order to prevent similar incidents involving homeless persons from occurring on the Strip. In January of 1997, one year after the fatal stabbing, a Las
A "Vegas Review-Journal" article noted that County Commissioner Lorraine Hunt had begun working with casino and resort owners to develop a measure outlawing "aggressive panhandling" on the Las Vegas Strip. Echoing the tendency toward prejudicial characterizations of all homeless persons apparent in both newspaper descriptions of Strader and UNLV English Department signs, Hunt stated that panhandlers should be restricted from the Strip because "[w]e need to make Las Vegas Boulevard a showplace, not a garbage dump. We want to make it an enjoyable experience, free of harassment and intimidation of people" (Greene 1997:1B). A similar measure prohibiting panhandling specifically in the downtown area of Las Vegas was passed in 1995. The RJ article also noted the recent broadcasting of police warnings asking viewers to donate money to charities rather than give cash directly to panhandlers. Police Sergeant Richard McKee further tried to discourage support of panhandling, saying that one of his officers knew of a panhandler who was "raking in $50,000 a year" (Greene 1997:6B).

Before the ordinance to restrict panhandling on the Strip was proposed, I was able to speak to one panhandler, whom I will call Ron, about his practices. Despite his limbless and non-threatening presence, Ron indicated that hotels and casinos on the Strip would use such an ordinance against aggressive panhandling to limit the practice of all panhandlers. He said that if more panhandlers began appearing on the Strip, the owners of the hotels and casinos would "kick them off the property." He indicated that only a handful of panhandlers, like himself, are currently tolerated. According to Ron, the development of other ordinances, such as those which regulate the distribution
of handbills on the Strip to particular areas (which Ron called "the white line laws," in reference to the white line on Strip sidewalks which once designated where someone could and could not distribute handbills) are also useful for limiting the presence of homeless individuals and others who use signs while begging for money on the Strip. Furthermore, Ron indicated that panhandlers who ignore ordinances or who panhandle without signs are often informally harassed or told by casino security to leave the property. Men such as Ron are aware that their practices are often not appreciated by hotel and casino owners trying to control the image they present to the public, and the overall environment in which the image is presented.

Considered threatening by tourists, locals and public officials, homeless men are sometimes even considered threatening to each other. A homeless man whom I will call Bill discussed his fear of other homeless persons with me during one in-depth interview. When I first encountered Bill, he had been on the street just over a month and was reluctant to associate with any of the homeless population which he was now part of:

Bill  But um, it's amazing, the people I've dealt with
Kurt  Right
Bill  Some of them are really cool. Some of them I wouldn't trust to throw them. You know, some of them seem really cool, but I wouldn't trust, right?
Kurt  The people you dealt with in the shelter?
Bill  Right. You know because you're getting every type, walk of life, some of them are like really intelligent and like maybe they just came out here and found it really hard to get a job and set up like they planned. You know what I'm saying?
Kurt  Yeah.
Bill  And uh...
Kurt  but you've had problems with other people?
Bill  Uh, no because (laughing) I don't trust them.
The perception of homeless men as a threat, then, affects those men in a range of different contexts and situations. The recognition that such men are relatively unrestricted in how they live becomes a guiding principle for interpreting them as either a literal or symbolic threat to individuals, to social institutions, and to each other. Because homeless men have so little, they are perceived as having little to lose: in Las Vegas, this perception manifests itself specifically in news reports on homeless men, individual attitudes and beliefs regarding homeless men, certain institutional statements promoting particular views of homeless men, and hotel/casino owners' attempts to restrict the presence of homeless men near tourist areas.

Local Meanings: Homeless Men Should be Restricted From Certain Areas and Activities

If I walk through the park near my home and see strangers bedding down for the night, my first reaction, if not fear, is a sense of annoyance and intrusion, of worry and alarm....and I am tempted--only tempted, but tempted still--to call the "proper" authorities to have the strangers moved on. Out of sight, out of mind. (Marin 1987:44)

Another dominant meaning attributed to homeless males in Las Vegas is that these men need to be geographically restricted, segregated and/or removed from particular areas or places in the city. Using newspaper articles, I will discuss the recent development of local ordinances which fine potential employers for picking up often destitute day laborers on Bonanza Street, and how such ordinances work to restrict the presence and movements of these
men. I will also discuss an interview with a local ACLU representative who indicated that in Las Vegas, the presence of homeless men is also frequently restricted within the highly controlled spaces of casinos as well as the surrounding property. Finally, I discuss the geographic segregation of homeless men from popular tourist areas, evident in the centralization of services for these men near North Las Vegas.

According to a *Las Vegas Sun* article, the Las Vegas City Council unanimously approved an ordinance on June 23, 1997 which made it illegal for individuals or companies to hire day laborers off the street (Cardinal 1997a). Councilman Gary Reese ostensibly introduced the ordinance for "safety reasons," yet the *Sun* article notes that the ordinance restricts those employers whose pick-up practices pose no immediate threat to traffic safety. The article states that "even if employers aren't slowing down traffic while picking up workers, they can fined up to $1000 or given six months in jail" for doing so (Cardinal 1997a:3B).

Although the article notes that the city is developing a new, legal pick-up station to accommodate the day laborers, questions have been raised regarding the constitutionality of the ordinance. The article indicates that the ordinance may have originated out of complaints from businesses on Bonanza road where day laborers were traditionally picked up. These businesses "complained to Reese about problems with the workers using their bathrooms, drinking their coffee and scaring potential clients" (Cardinal 1997a:3B). In another article in *City Life*, J.J. Bartz of Metro's Homeless Evaluation Program (HELP) stated that "the majority of them have drug and alcohol problems, and
they just work to support their habit" (Kiraly 1997:13). An employee who works on Bonanza road is further quoted in the City Life article that the men often steal, vandalize, and leave trash in the area. Despite what seem to be complaints based on prejudicial characterizations, the Sun article indicates that the ordinance will probably stand if traffic safety, and not free speech, is considered the issue underlying its creation.

The articles also note that such day labor jobs are both good for the community and the men who desperately need them. David Norment, coordinator at the Salvation Army shelter, told the Sun that many men who seek work on Bonanza road also use the shelter's mailboxes and showers. Norment said that the new ordinance would further restrict the already limited possibilities for employment by economically marginalized men who "can't even pay for their health card or their union card to get employed" (Cardinal 1997a:3B). The City Life article described how one homeless man, David Villapando, tried picking up work on Bonanza road between stays at the Salvation Army and St. Vincent's shelter (Kiraly 1997). He said that he came to Las Vegas expecting to find work after a dry-walling job in Fresno ended. Reiterating the comments of Norment, Villapando also stated that he "didn't know you needed a sheriff's card and all that stuff," to work in Las Vegas, and ended up trying to find day labor work on Bonanza, "trying to make a dollar today so I can look for a job tomorrow" (Kiraly 1997:13).

Additionally, the City Life article notes the potential racial clashes which may result from the city's new centralized pick-up location for these laborers. Through interviews with the day laborers, the article indicates that underlying
racial tensions exist between Caucasians, African-American and Hispanic groups looking for work on Bonanza Road. Before the ordinance, however, each of these groups of laborers were able to stay in "their" particular areas of the street. Now, however, the city's proposed centralization of day laborers and a solution to the "traffic safety issue" may cause increased hostility from racial groups forced to intermingle while competing for scarce jobs. As one Hispanic laborer quoted in an article phrased it, "if you put us all together, there's gonna be fights, maybe even killings" (Kiraly 1997:12). Another regular day laborer who is African-American said "I've seen some real knock-down, drag-out fights, and this [the new pick-up site] is only going to make it worse. I'm not going there" (Kiraly 1997:13). Apparently, the city's solution to what was presented as a traffic safety problem may cause indigent men increased stress and danger, possibly causing many to forgo trying to find such day labor jobs. One homeless man I spoke with, however, said that the problem with the new pick-up area wasn't necessarily racial clashes between men. He explained that while trucks could once drive down an entire block and slow down to pick up certain men, the new, cramped pick-up area designated by the city allows no such spacing between men to let employers indicate interest and begin often brief negotiations. Racism is only one potential division among men jockeying to be employed in such a cramped space (Cardinal 1997c).

As late as October of 1997, however, hundreds of men still stood on Bonanza in hopes of finding work (Cardinal 1997c). City Councilman Reese explained to Denise Cardinal of the Review Journal at that time that he did not
want the police to begin fining individuals until signs explaining the ordinance had been posted. The next step, according to a Metro police officer Phil Roland, is to “hand...out warnings” (Cardinal 1997c:7A). In addition to these warnings, the article indicates that publicity from such newspaper articles on the Bonanza Road ordinance, which emphasize these laborers’ potential for violence, may further reduce employers interest in visiting such a potentially explosive area. In addition, newspaper characterizations of these men as violent may also reduce public sympathy for them in their quest to continue looking for work on Bonanza Road.

The ordinances limiting the practice of day laborers in Las Vegas constitute but one strategy used to restrict homeless persons and their survival practices, however. Another ordinance which prohibits panhandling in the Fremont Street area was enacted by the Las Vegas City Council in 1995 (Greene 1997). The enactment of this ordinance coincided with the gentrification of the area through the development of the Fremont Street Experience, a 1,400 foot-long canopy of lights and 54,000 watt sound system which has now turned the street into a outdoor pedestrian mall (Kroloff 1996:88-89). The canopy and sound system was meant to economically rejuvenate Fremont Street, the city’s original center for neon lights and gaming, which began suffering because of increased competition from the Las Vegas Strip’s explosive casino development during the 1980s and early 1990s. Apparently the project has succeeded in bringing tourists back downtown, drawing some 25,000 people a night (The Economist 1996:27).
But this rejuvenation required more than just an impressive light show. The Fremont Street Experience now employs a small army of security guards, whose job is to protect both the casinos and tourists through controlling who can and cannot stay in the area. During field research, I observed several homeless men sleeping in the bushes just one block from Main Street Station and Fremont Street (on the perimeter of the gentrification project) who were told by security guards not to come to (or, if already present, to leave) the Fremont Street Experience. When I asked one security guard what he was instructed to do if he saw a homeless person on Fremont Street, he told me, "we don't have them [homeless people] here. They know better."

One member of the local ACLU described a similar incident which he witnessed on Fremont Street:

Let me tell you another story...that you might want to have in your files. During one of the ACLU board meetings – my offices are right down by Fremont Street, and during one of the ACLU board meetings we broke for lunch. Several of us went out to Fremont Street to eat. And we bought our meal at – I can't even remember where, but it wasn't at McDonald's, and we came back and sat down at one of the McDonald's tables. Right next to us were three people, again, who looked like they were down on their luck who appeared to have purchased a single meal between them, and they were sitting and eating their meal and we were sitting and eating our meals which we had purchased somewhere else. They had purchased their meal at McDonald's. The security guards came up – we were sitting right next to each other – came up to the folks at the table next to us and said, "I'm afraid you're going to have to get up and circulate" which really astonished me and I said, I asked one of them, "Why do they have to get up and circulate, I don't get it." And there really wasn't a coherent response to that. The real reason is they looked like they were poor, and they looked like they might be homeless, they looked disheveled, down on their luck. And McDonald's didn't want them sitting at their table eating their food.
The ACLU representative also noted that in Las Vegas, laws have been developed so that casinos and other businesses can limit the presence of homeless and other indigent persons on (or even near) their property. He then described to me in detail a number of ordinances and legislation specific to Las Vegas which he felt represented a violation of their civil rights:

There seems to be an extraordinary willingness to do whatever they believe will insure that public space is pretty, is pleasant, isn't distressing, isn't discomforting to anyone. They're willing to do anything, regardless of whether or not what they do infringes on people's constitutional rights. There are a zillion examples of what I'm talking about—the handbill ordinance, the commercial handbill ordinance on the Strip, the policy that they implemented which has now been rescinded which limits where cab drivers can go without being at risk of being cited for being in the wrong neighborhoods, the Fremont Street ordinance which prohibits all sorts of First Amendment activities, the easements that have been filed by several major hotel/casinos that prohibit the use of public sidewalks around those casinos for all sorts of First Amendment activities, the willingness to turn over, enforce – you know, the front line at least, enforcement of all of these laws to private security guards that work for these hotel/casinos. Indeed, I have it on good authority that at one point in time either the city council or the county commission was actually discussing in earnest as a very real possibility of perhaps giving away pieces of Las Vegas Boulevard, actually giving away pieces of the Strip, to hotel/casinos. All of this is outrageous it seems to me, all of it is outrageous and unacceptable and all of it redounds to the disadvantage of poor people, because they use these laws to push poor people around.

Indeed, on October 9 of 1997, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against the City of Las Vegas, Mayor Jan Jones, the Fremont Street Ltd. Liability Corporation, and its president Mark Paris over an ordinance restricting the First Amendment rights of visitors to the Fremont Street Experience. “The suit states that even though the Fremont Street Experience
is public property, a city ordinance allows a private management company to prohibit free speech activities” (Cardinal 1997b:1A), including the distribution of literature and the solicitation of charitable donations.

Because homeless men are perceived as a threat not only to individual physical safety but also to the economic viability of the city’s tourist economy, they are often segregated from casinos and other tourist areas in many ways. While some of these prohibitions include specific ordinances (or de jure forms of segregation), a less formal yet highly effective restriction placed on homeless men in Las Vegas seems evident in the centralization of services for homeless persons on the border of North Las Vegas. This de facto segregation arguably occurs in part as a result of the tourist-based hotel and casino industry. Charitable services for the homeless on the border of the City of Las Vegas exist several miles away from the largest gaming resorts in the city, and the area on the Las Vegas Strip where eleven of the world’s thirteen largest hotels stand. Furthermore, the many resorts and casinos which donate money, food or services to charities for the homeless do so not on their property, but near the border of Las Vegas Metro with North Las Vegas. As one homeless service provider indicated, this translates into local resorts and casinos seeing charitable donations to homeless shelters in North Las Vegas as “good business”:

The hotels – now remembering that the hotel industry, which is really unique to Las Vegas, are especially sensitive to transient or homeless people being on the streets. When mom and pop come from Iowa, they need to feel the magic of the town. They need to know that they can walk safely 24 hours a day, go wherever they want, not be worried about being panhandled, not worried about being attacked, not worried about being
injured, and heaven knows we need to hide that part of life because if they’re here for vacation, you’re here for fun. You don’t pay the money to see the things you can see at home. You come here for something different, and to get all swept up in the environment, the lights and the entertainment and the people, etc.. The hotel casinos are as interested as we are not to have people loitering and hanging around their places of establishment. So it’s far easier for them and they gladly put some of their donation money to places like us to make sure that doesn’t happen. It’s just a good business decision. It will hurt their business if there were not programs like ours.

While the services they provide are invaluable for the survival of homeless men, the delivery of services so far from the resorts themselves serves to remove homeless men from the areas where they could offend tourists. In other words, the donation of goods and services by major resort and casinos to charities which serve homeless men in North Las Vegas ensures that these resorts reduce the presence of homeless men near their businesses.

Local Meanings: Homeless Men Deserve Charitable Support, but Through Donation Campaigns and Agencies That Keep Them Apart From the Las Vegas Community

In local media accounts and other documents, homeless men are also occasionally presented as objects of pity, or individuals in need of assistance. However, the forms of assistance encouraged by local relief agencies and officials frequently reproduce homeless men’s marginalized status within the community, the wisdom of providing services for men away from the
community-at-large, and the image of individual homeless men as untrustworthy.

In the mail solicitations of one local charitable organization, for example, homeless men are evoked to increase donations, but are simultaneously presented as outsiders. For example, one homeless shelter’s mail solicitations were sent just before Thanksgiving with pictures of a bearded man eating a cafeteria meal, one presumably provided by a charitable organization. The Thanksgiving holiday marks the period of the year most homeless shelters find successful for eliciting sympathy and gaining donations (Snow and Anderson 1993). The text within the mailer that this particular organization used reads: "When these people come to us, cold, hungry, and in despair, they are often shocked when they're not turned away, or treated like worthless junk" (mail solicitation from Las Vegas Rescue Mission, emphasis theirs). Solicitations such as this one present homeless men as objects of pity with the self-image of "worthless junk," men who are used to being treated as human garbage.

However, the mail solicitation also presents homeless persons as "these people" and "they," as compared to "us," those social service providers who mailed the flyer and also those community members who received it by mail. This phrasing positions homeless men as people outside, and not part of, the community. There are two connotations within this phrasing: First, even when homeless men are considered worthy of charitable relief, their status remains as individuals external to the Las Vegas community. Second, the mailer promotes the idea that such outsiders are not an entire community's
responsibility, but may be helped at the whim of charitable individuals. The homeless are someone "we" can help, but only if "we" want to.

The mailer also implies that the sympathy homeless men receive through concerned individuals is best routed through charitable agencies and organizations. The distance between "us" and "them" widens as concerned individuals deliver impersonal forms of assistance, such as cast-off objects, canned food, or the money which was solicited in the previous ad. This practice/text allows individuals who are not homeless to be physically and geographically removed from the problem, as such donations are "sent in." This assistance is then centralized and distributed by administrators. Canned foods, often gathered through "canned food drives" at places such as supermarkets and movie theaters, are especially useful for transport into the two-mile radius in Las Vegas where shelter services are centralized, with their lengthy shelf life through the use of preservatives. The lower nutritional value of canned compared to fresh vegetables also reflects the lowered status of the homeless persons who receive them.

Finally, posters in store-front windows in the Fremont Street area present homeless panhandlers as addicted spendthrifts. These posters instead promote a charitable relief organization as the most appropriate form of assistance for homeless persons. The posters, which show a picture of one hand dropping change in another person's gloved hand, read:

IF YOU GIVE SPARE CHANGE, THINGS WON'T CHANGE. Too often, spare change given to panhandlers is spent on drugs or alcohol. By giving your spare change to M*A*S*H*, instead, you'll help people who really do want to break the cycle of homelessness. M*A*S*H*, the Mobilized Assistance
and Shelter for the Homeless is a City of Las Vegas/Clark County facility that will centralize all of the services the homeless need to get off the streets permanently.

POSITIVE CHANGE NOT SPARE CHANGE
Produced by the Downtown Las Vegas Partnership

These signs in Fremont Street area shops discourage giving money directly to panhandlers by indicating that the money may be used to buy alcohol or drugs. These signs parallel the measure passed in 1995 which prohibits panhandling specifically in the downtown area of Las Vegas. An earlier mentioned RJ article from January 1997 also indicated that homeless men are not to be trusted with direct donations (Greene 1997). The author noted that a recently televised police warning asked viewers to donate money to charities rather than give cash directly to panhandlers. Police Sergeant Richard McKee also stated in the article that one of his officers knew a panhandler who was "raking in $50,000 a year" (Greene 1997:6B). The statement implies that some men may be con-artists, and also reaffirms that donations to relief agencies, which require proving one's poverty, are the best form of charity since they can eliminate con-artists posing as homeless.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented evidence which support my development of three major themes concerning homelessness in Las Vegas consistently articulated in recent newspaper stories and other documents. The three themes are: that homeless men are a threat; that homeless men should be restricted from certain areas, places and activities; and that
homeless men deserve charitable support, but through donation campaigns and agencies that keep them apart from the Las Vegas community. Popular perceptions of local homeless men may also include other themes, such as the degree to which homeless men are mentally ill, engaging in substance abuse, and/or are deserving or undeserving of their plight. Such debates, however, seem to be less useful in understanding the concrete ramifications of local responses toward homeless persons based on recent reports of a homeless murderer, the violence of day laborers on Bonanza Road, and the legal measures taken by local resorts and casinos to limit the presence and activities of homeless men. These themes may explain more about local reaction to homeless men than others (such as the prevalence of mental illness, substance abuse and/or deserving of homelessness) which are generally applied to understanding homelessness across the U.S., for example.

Overall, the popular image of homeless men as threatening and needing to be socially controlled may well be a product of our local economic base, which involves both reproducing and justifying vast economic inequality. Tourism is the dominant industry of the state, and that industry relies on the influx of individuals with disposable income. While resorts and casinos are happy to see well-to-do individuals coming into the state, they are not so keen on the prospect of paying taxes for social service programs to support those individuals with little income or resources. By reducing welfare programs to a bare minimum, the state actively discourages homeless and impoverished individuals from staying. Although charitable programs exist in Nevada and

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provide an important form of relief to homeless men. They also are part of a system which reproduces homeless men’s marginalization from both the community and from the tourist-based economy.

I will now present my ethnographic narrative of an interview I conducted with one local homeless man, Jerry. The interview presents a different body of information concerning homelessness than those themes which I found in local newspaper stories and local documents.
CHAPTER 5

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE OF ONE LOCAL HOMELESS MAN:

.. JERRY

The following ethnographic narrative concerns my interaction with one homeless man I call Jerry. I wanted to write something which showed what it felt like to conduct an in-depth, face-to-face interview with a homeless man. I also wanted to show why this mode of collecting data at times promoted my own self-reflection on the research process, the plight of those individuals whom I studied, and myself as an ethnographer.

I met Jerry at the bus depot downtown. He and I were sitting on separate benches waiting for the 113 line to the shelter. He was about 5'5", and his face was concealed by his salt-and-pepper hair as he hung over his cane, head hanging toward the ground. His shoulder blades protruded from his blue T-shirt. His arms were thin and covered with scabs.

I figured out he was homeless rather quickly. He was talking to another man whom I'd seen at the free breakfasts given by the Catholic Worker up on Washington and D Street. Jerry told him that he'd be going over to [Working Shelter] later. Once the man left, Jerry immediately looked through a nearby garbage can, where he found a McDonald's cup that contained only ice. Leaning into the can revealed the back of his blue pants, which were stained
brown, and a pink rope which held them up. He came back and quickly consumed all the ice and water in the dirty cup, ignoring or not caring about people staring nearby.

He looked at me over his shoulder. He had two days' stubble on his cheeks. His bright blue eyes were a suprizing contrast to his otherwise defeated appearance.

"How you doin'?" I smiled and said.

"Hey, all right. How you doin'?" he said.

We made small talk, about the weather and how long we'd been in Vegas. He asked what I did, and I told him I was a student at UNLV. When he asked what I studied, I told him homelessness. I told him I'd love to talk to him, and offered to buy him something to eat.

"Oh hey, I'm homeless," he said. "I'll talk to ya."

I sat beside him. He began talking into the tape recorder.

"I came to Las Vegas a year ago. I am homeless, I'm 53, an alcoholic but I have chronic emphysema. I'm having a hard time breathing. When you get down and out, you can never get back up. You cannot get off the street."

"How long have you been homeless?" I asked.

"Been homeless a year, since I got here," he said.

"Where did you come from?"

"Miami Veterans Hospital. I was in the VA hospital in Miami, and I decided to come to Vegas because I was here before, you know? In this town, it's bad to be homeless, but at least you can get something to eat once in a while. It's a town where you can eat in."

"So, were you homeless in Miami?"

"Yes, I was."
"What type of work did you do?"

"Plumbing."

"So, you came out to Vegas because it seemed like a better place to be than Miami?"

"Yes sir," he said. "I been here before and the police don't really bother you. They don't even want to take you to jail because all they do is kick you out the next day. They tell you. I asked them once to let me stay there. They said, 'We don't have room for you here, you just gotta get out.'"

"The police?"

"Yes," he said. "And that's the truth. I said 'Well can't I just spend a few more hours, just stay another day and night?' He said 'No, I'm sorry. We don't want you here. We don't have room for you guys here.'"

I pause. "What types of services have you been able to access since you've been here? You mentioned [Working Shelter]."

"That's about the only one. It's hard to get any kind of aid here in town. It really is. It's just at different places, [Religious Shelter], they got different places to give out food at certain days and at certain times, you know? And you got to be at the right spot at the right time. You don't get much help here at all in Vegas."

"So you said you were going to probably stay at [Working Shelter] tonight. Where do you usually stay?"

"On the street. Park. I got a letter from a doctor, saying I'm chronically ill. I'm gonna show them that. Hopefully they'll let me spend the night there."

As he mentioned the doctor, I noticed a white square about one inch in diameter underneath one of the blades showing through the shirt. I also
noticed his clear plastic identification bracelet, still on his wrist. He began
coughing.

"Boy, man I wish I would have met you before."

"Oh, really?" I said, surprised.

"Yeah. Just to talk to somebody is good."

"Oh sure," I said, caught off guard by the comment. "No, and I'm interested in the experiences that people have had. It seems like a range of a lot of different experiences that homeless guys have had here in Las Vegas."

"Well a lot of them get checks, and they just gamble their money. And they're homeless by choice. Um, they just get their money and they can't do nothing, they just gamble it and can't do nothing but drink and gamble, and they sit out on the street and they stay there. And they won't pay no rent. But, it's just that there's so many phonies in this town. If you try to pay half the rent, they won't pay half the rent. You wind up paying it all, and the people you meet up with, they're gonna gamble and drink their money away anyway. So it's hard to get anybody to get a place with you. And the guys don't get enough by themselves to get a place. Understand?"

"So, you're talking about having roommates and such?"

"Right, right."

"Well, tell me about what happened when you got ill. Have you been in contact with your family?"

"I have no family and no relatives. Ah, my family's dead, and um, I want to get off the street bad, there's just no way in hell I can do it," he explained, his voice rising. "I get $484 from the government but I didn't get my check this month, I don't know what happened."

"Where does it get sent to?"
"General delivery. Post Office, downtown here."

"OK," I say.

"I didn't get my check this month so I got all messed up," he said, beginning to cough.

I pause. "So you spend a lot of time down here at the bus stop?" I eventually ask.

"Yeah. I go through because this is where the main terminal is, buses come through from all over. What was your name, sir?" he asks.

"Kurt"

"Kurt?" he replies. "Captain Kirk," he says laughing.

"You got it," I reply, being used to the joke.

"It's hard when you're dying, you're old, you got no family and you're homeless, and you can't get off the street. It's just, see I, I can honestly say I don't want to live anymore. But I don't want to commit suicide and jump in front of a bus. Even today I thought, 'I'll just run out in front of one of these buses and let them hit me and take me to the hospital,' you know what I mean? But ah, I know it's kinda fruitful, I mean fruitless. To get off the street is almost gonna be an impossibility."

"I'm surprised that there isn't anybody out, you know, in the community who can give you some support, you know, like to get you into a program..."

"Oh man," Jerry said, "I would love that. But I'm having trouble finding anything."

"Have you checked in with the MASH unit down at [Working Shelter]?" I say.

"No. I never even heard of them."

"OK. The MASH, I think, is a program..."
Suddenly Jerry is asking for matches from a man walking by with a cigarette. The man offers him his lighter. Jerry uses it to light a butt from the ground.

"Excuse me," he says to me.

"Sure," I reply.

When he has it lighted, I begin again. "I think the MASH program is near, it's in the same complex as [Working Shelter]. My understanding is that they'll provide you with, um, sort of the starting place to access services if you need services, like for your health, and you need to find a regular place to stay. They're the first place to go. Um, if you want we can go down there. I mean I know it's there and there are people to help you."

"I will," he says.

"I think they close at three o'clock today, so..." I say, looking at my watch.

"I'm going to miss it, he says.

"I think it's a little too far probably to get there today," I say, nodding at the buses.

"I'm going down there tonight, I got a letter from my doctor. I'll show it to you. I just got out of the hospital. I'm chronically ill. You can read it out loud if you want," he says, showing me the letter.

"Sure, sure," I reply, and begin reading from the prescription sheet.

"Patient chronically ill. Valley Services working on group home. Please allow patient to stay at your facilities until he is placed in a group home, or has improved enough to be on his own."...This is from a public hospital?"

"Yeah, Valley Medical."

"Valley Medical. They give you a prescription there, too?" I ask.
"Yeah, I can't get them filled, though," he says, laughing. After a long pause, he says, "They give you prescriptions you can't get filled." He begins coughing and using his two inhalers.

I wait. "Tell me," I say, "do you have friends out here? I noticed you talking to another guy a few minutes ago with a gray beard."

"He's homeless. He was living in the baseball diamond, over at the park? And the cops finally got on about a hundred of them over there, told them they had to move. He just told me he's staying at the library now, in back of the state library."

"And where is that?"

"It's down on Vegas Boulevard about 4 or 5 blocks from here."

"Have you stayed over there?"

"One night I stayed there," he said. "It's too hard a concrete. The steps, you know? And there's like maybe a hundred, a hundred-and-fifty guys. That's kinda rough."

"OK, now I know where you're talking about," I reply. "It's on the way to [Working Shelter]"

"Right. There you go, Kurt."

"So, how else do you make ends meet? How do you get food?"

"See, right now I'm hungry as hell and I gotta think, and I'm glad I met you because I am hungry. I'm weak right now, I can hardly walk. But uh, I'll get something to eat, through your generosity, and uh, sometimes you just get hungry, buddy. You go without, you dig in garbage cans. See 'cause I can't get to these places, I don't know where they're at, and they change all the time too, you know what I mean?"

"You mean the places that give out food?"
"Right. See there's something at the [Addict Shelter] but it's up a hill, and I can't walk it. When you get off that bus, you're gonna have to walk about three blocks. Up a hill, on Owens, and I can't even walk it so I won't be able to make it."

"Do the bus drivers ever let you ride the bus for free?"

"Very seldom. One time maybe, and one time only."

"How did you get into town? Did you hitchhike, or by bus?"

"By bus. Greyhound Bus."

After a pause, Jerry changes the topic. "Boy am I sick. I shit in my pants, I'm running around with shit in my pants, I'm digging it out with my fingernails, I'm just doing terrible, you know what I mean? I really don't want to keep on going on living, you know? This ain't living."

"Yeah, I, I, um," I stammer and grow quiet, trying to think of an appropriate response. I eventually rephrase my earlier statement. "I keep thinking that MASH program might be able to help you, 'cause I talked with someone down there, and she said that the way MASH works is it's like the first place homeless people should go to, because they have counselors who can direct you to services in the community."

"Sounds good. I never heard of it. But usually you just run into dead ends. I've been to so many places and went there, you know? They just send you to somewhere else. 'Oh we can't help you, you've got to do this first and do that. Go over here and go over there,' and they just want to send you someplace else. They run you around, it really is true, Kurt. When you're down and out, they really don't want to be bothered with you."
"Yeah," I say, finding it impossible to add something hopeful to his outlook. I decide to drop it. As he starts to use his inhalers, I ask, "How did you get the money for the inhalers?"

"I had them before, and I stole them off the cart in the hospital. When they come around for treatments, they give you breathing treatments, and they have them on a cart and they leave the cart there. You just take them off the cart."

"Yeah, well, you need them, so," I say, smiling back at him, hoping I convey sympathy at his theft.

"I know, and I can't get them filled," he says, laughing, "'cause I have the prescriptions on me too for 'em, but I can't buy 'em, 'cause I ain't got no money. So uh, truthfully, I just take 'em. The three or four on me, that's from Valley Hospital, that's from the cart."

"How do you store your clothes?" I ask.

"I have no clothes."

"That's it? What you're wearing right now?"

"That's it."

"Did you just get out of the hospital?"

"Yes I did. I got out this morning at nine o'clock."

"How long were you there?"

"Seventeen days."

"And they just basically let you out on the street with...without..."

"Without no money, I'm sick and they know I'm chronically ill," he says, finishing my sentence. "I'm pooping in my pants, and they know I'm sick, you know? But they can't really do nothing for me. And it's a money-making outfit there."
"So the seventeen days they let you stay," I ask, "are they going to bill you?"

"No," he says. "When I went to emergency, I passed out here at the bus station. And the ambulance took me, and they knew I was chronically ill. I couldn't walk, I couldn't talk. I needed treatment right away for survival, so they break down and they give you that. But they figure I can do just as good now out on the street as I could in the hospital."

"What are your plans for the future, for the immediate future?"

"Well, I wanna get something to eat and go to [Working Shelter] and try to sleep there tonight," he begins coughing. "I hope I have enough strength to check the Post Office, I have to find out what happened to my check, my Social Security, SSI check. But really I have no energy to do anything, you know what I mean? It's crazy. It's nuts."

There is a long pause where I can't think of anything to say.

"How long have you been going to college here?" Jerry finally asks me.

"About three years," I say.

"Have you? That's great."

"It's been nice. Nice school, and you know the weather's nice here in Vegas."

"Well Kurt, what are you gonna do? What kinda trade are you taking?"

"I'm hopefully gonna finish the degree, the sociology degree, and then maybe, um, I'll teach."

"Really?" Jerry says.

"Yeah. But I'd like to, you know, develop this, in order to, to find out what the experiences of homeless guys are, and maybe..."
"It's a living hell." Jerry interrupts. "These guys'll kill you for a dime. I'm serious. Most of them drink. To live on the street you have to drink, almost. First of all, how can you sleep on concrete or the grass, and the ants and the water's turned on, and you gotta pass out and the only thing that knocks you out is booze, you know?" he says in one breath, then begins coughing. "It's no picnic," he finally finds the breath to say.

"Have you ever been attacked out here? Physically, or..."

"Yeah, oh yeah. Yeah, yeah, the bottle guys will try to take it from you if you're sleeping with a bottle. It's like a pacifier. I'll be honest with you, I try not to drink, but I try to go along without drinking. Hey buddy, can I get a smoke from you, please, sir?" he says, calling to the man who passed by earlier with a cigarette in his mouth and lit Jerry's.

The man wears a baseball cap, jeans and a T-shirt, and sports mirrored wraparound sunglasses along with a mustache. He hesitates slightly before handing Jerry a cigarette. He makes no visible facial expression while lighting Jerry's smoke. Jerry thanks him before taking a labored drag. The man nods slightly before walking purposefully toward a bus.

After his first, long drag, Jerry immediately begins a succession of deep coughs. I find myself unable to think about the interview when he begins coughing like that. Having asthma myself, I know how it feels to be unable to catch your breath. The closest thing I can relate it to is being under water, of fearing you will drown.

"At least you're doing something. You're getting an idea of how the picture is," he says to me.

"Well yeah, and I'd love to show it to the people who provide services to homeless guys so they can be better informed how homelessness is."
After a rash of coughing, Jerry says, "Once you get on the street, you just can't get off it. Just put yourself homeless. No relatives, no friends, and none of these guys have any family. Most of them all, believe me, they have no family. What can they do? They don't get a check. A lot of them don't get checks. So they're out here on the streets, in ill health. There's only one place to go, and that's down, deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper, and you just die out here."

I remain quiet.

"Where you from, Kurt?" he asks.

"I'm from Alaska originally," I reply, and Jerry laughs.

"It's cold up there," he states.

"Oh yeah, a lot different from here. This is beautiful for me. I love the weather. When you were working, you worked as a plumber?" I say, returning to him.

"A plumber's helper," he says

"A plumber's helper. Where were you living? Did you spend all your life in Florida?"

"I traveled a lot, but I have spent a lot of time in Florida. I was born and raised in Hollywood, Florida. I have no inclination to go back."

"Did you ever get married or have kids?"

"No I didn't. I never got married and I never had no kids. I've had five or six different girlfriends in parts of the country where I worked, you know, and I lived with 'em. And they were all married before and they had two or three kids, usually by different men. That's why I guess I never got married," Jerry says, smiling before he begins coughing. We pause.

"This is warm weather to you, Kurt," he says.
"Yeah, I love it. It's hot here. Did the doctors or nurses have any kind of advice or recommendations for you when you left the hospital?"

"They see so many sick and homeless people, that they either, people got a lot of money and insurance and they're not homeless and they pay, or they're like me, they're in because I was dying there. I was in real bad shape. I passed out over here," he says, pointing to another area of the bus stop. "I shitted all over myself and the ambulance came and they took me to Valley Hospital in an ambulance. When you're that sick they almost gotta take you. They gave me shots to get my heart going, and they gave me breathing treatments, IV treatments for my lungs and they got stuff they put in your blood now. So they're kinda cold and detached about this. They know you're homeless and you're sick and you're going out and you're dying. It don't phase 'em, they get cold-hearted after a while. They see so much of it. Just another number, add one more to the pile."

"What time is [Working Shelter] going to be open to take you?"

"I'll be going down there shortly after I leave you."

"You taking the bus?"

"Yeah, I have a bus ticket, a transfer. You sometimes find them in garbage cans."

"Well, tell me something, if you were in my position, if you were gonna do a study of homeless in Las Vegas, of homeless guys, how would you go about studying the topic? What would you do if you were me?"

"I would talk to the guys, just what you're doing. They're mostly honest, they're basically honest. They're gonna tell you the truth. And uh, they don't want to be homeless, a lot of them don't, but they have no choice, there's no choice. Once you're there, you're there."
"Yeah. Yeah," I add, quietly. "Well, you want like a hamburger or something?" I ask. "I can go over to that window and get you something," I say, referring to the McDonalds inside the terminal.

"All right. I'd like a cheeseburger, and could you get me some fries and a large glass of ice water? Thank you, Kurt. I really appreciate it."

I return with the food. Jerry eats the whole meal, while talking, in about four minutes.

"How is being homeless here different from other places you've been to? Gambling is really popular here. What are the other differences?"

"They expect you to be drunk and broke and homeless. And they expect you to either get out of town and get some money, or get a job, but it don't work that way. But they expect you to be drunk and broke and lose your job and gamble, you know, win some money and lose it. The cops will even tell you, we expect you to be drunk and broke in this town."

"When you're homeless?"

"Right."

"So they don't bother you like in other towns, the cops don't bother you. How about with casinos, and say like the Fremont Street area up here?" I ask.

"They can just look and tell a guy's homeless. And they tell you to move on."

"Oh, they tell you to move on?"

"Mm hm."

"So they've told you to move on on Fremont Street?"

"Mm hm. They told me never come back."

"How long ago was this?"

"About 5-6 months ago. They said, 'You don't come back on Fremont.'"
"So I take it, then, that they don't even let you into casinos?"

"No, unless you get money. Unless you get a check or something. If you got any money on you at all, anybody can go in, they don't care how you look. And they know if you got money or not."

"Where do you go once you get your check, your money? What type of stuff do you do?"

"I try to rent a place, but the last few guys I met they split on me. Two times in the last three months I gave guys money to get a place and they didn't do it."

"Do you get a weekly or a monthly rental?"

"A couple weeks."

"OK, weeklies. And you get them usually with a roommate?"

"Right."

"How is rent here, compared to other places?"

"It's the same. Food's cheaper here."

"What do you think is the future of homelessness here in Las Vegas? Do you think it's gonna get better, gonna get worse?"

"It's gonna get worse. It will. In time you're gonna see a lot more homeless people here. They're coming from Salt Lake City, Utah, they're coming from California, from all over."

"How do they get here?"

"Freight train, hitchhike. And they will come."

"You ever taken a freight train?"

"Mm hm. Just take a blanket and a water jug," he said, laughing.

"I know they're a few trains that run over near [Addict Shelter]. Some guys stay underneath the bridge over there."
"Yep," Jerry said. "That's true, Kurt, they live up under that bridge. See, the police they really don't want to screw with you, 'cause then they gonna put you up, you know what I mean?"

"So they pretty much ignore you?"

"They tell you to move on," he says before using his inhalers.

"So you told me that about a hundred, a hundred-and-fifty guys stay every night around that library, out near that pavilion, a lot of stairs."

"That's it."

"Where do they go to eat, typically?"

"[Addict Shelter] at 3 o'clock, [Religious Shelter] on Bonanza at 5 o'clock, [Working Shelter] at 10:30 am. They give you a bowl of soup there, at 10:30 am."

"So there's sort of a routine, of going to places for food?"

"Yeah. Those are the three main ones and those are the same time every day."

"How did you find out about that?"

"Other homeless guys."

"Do the people here at the bus stop ever ask you to move on, like the police?"

"All the time. All the time."

"But it's a public area."

"Right, but they tell you, they give you a ticket, and they give you a warning each time they keep seeing you."

"They give you a ticket? How much?"

"Nobody ever pays it. The judge always dismisses it."

"You've been given tickets here?"
"Oh yeah. They'll come by and say, 'You're not catching a bus. I gotta give you a ticket.' They run a check on you to see if you got any warrants, and then if you don't got any warrants they give you a ticket."

"But if you have a bus transfer on you, then you're OK?"

"Yeah. They tell you to get on the bus, though. They don't let you sit here."

"Has anybody ever harassed you at a public park such as this?"

"Oh yeah. I just came from Maryland Parkway park. I was laying out at park, out on Maryland. The police drive you [away] all the time, they say 'You've been here long enough, it's time to move on.'"

Jerry finishes the last of his hamburger. "That hit the spot. That was good, I was hungry," he says.

"Good, I'm glad. You're all done!" I reply, suddenly realizing his bag is empty. "Was that enough for you?"

"Oh yeah."

"I guess that's why they call it fast food. Well, you think homeless in Las Vegas will definitely get worse?"

"Yep. No doubt about it."

We both sit for a few moments, watching the buses.

"So you want to catch a bus, you want to catch the 113 now?" I ask.

"I'm gonna get on it."

"I wanna go down there, I wanna see what kind of help they can give me with that ticket. If I show them that letter from the doctor, I hope it helps."

"You wanna give it a try?" I say, turning off the recorder.
We go over to [Working Shelter] by bus. Jerry asks a non-disabled person who is sitting in the seats reserved for the elderly and disabled if he can have one of the seats. The woman he asks moves, but a nearby woman complains, saying, "You're making a woman give up her seat?" He ignores her. I stand near him, and notice a couple staring at him as he sits, hunched over his cane. I realize he's trying to concentrate on breathing. Before we exit, the bus driver announces nearby landmarks to the stop, including the shelter. I feel people staring at us as we leave the bus, predicting where we are going. The stares seem to have different meanings -- judgmental, sympathetic, apologetic.

The building is a large structure which was once a shopping mall. Outside the bare, weathered exterior, handfuls of men stand outside in blatant violation of the "No Loitering" signs painted on the building. We walk knowingly to the shelter's entrance, a bright blue door with no visible markings. When we get inside he introduces himself to a staff member whom I have met before. He tells the man that he has just come out of the hospital, and shows him the note from the doctor which says he's chronically ill and needs a place to stay. The staff member takes the note, and says he will talk to a residential counselor about getting him a place there tonight.

Jerry and I wait together. He is given a chair in an area where chairs normally are not allowed because of the fire code. Jerry asks if there is a water cooler nearby, and is told no. He then asks if he could please have a glass of water brought to him, again explaining his condition. The staff member cooly asks another front desk staffer to please bring him a glass of water.
Jerry thanks the man, and consumes the water quickly. After several minutes, Jerry says, "I hope they give me back my papers," referring to the fact that half of his worldly possessions now lie in the hands of someone else. I tell him that they're good people here, and that they'll return his letters and forms in a couple of minutes. He tries to relax and breathe while we wait.

The staff member returns, expressionless, holding his papers.

"I'm sorry," he says in his booming voice, "but unfortunately we can't help you here. We talked to your doctor, and we just don't have the facilities to help someone in your condition." He hands Jerry back his forms, and holds out his other hand. "[Addict Shelter] is a few blocks up the street, on Owens. We've called them, and they say they have the facilities and the staff to help you. Here are two bus tokens," he says, placing them in Jerry's hand. "You'll have to go across the street and catch the bus, then catch another bus up Owens."

"I can't go there. The bus doesn't go all the way and I can't walk up that hill," Jerry says, his voice rising while looking at me.

"Well, unfortunately we can't help you here. This gentleman will assist you to the bus stop," the staff member says, referring to the man who brought Jerry water a moment ago.

I am momentarily confused, but soon realize that the staff member thinks Jerry is here by himself.

"That's OK, I'll walk him back," I say to the staff member.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."
On the way back to the bus stop, Jerry re-explains why he won't go to [Addict Shelter] because of the hill, maybe in part because he's unsure if the [Working Shelter] staff member heard him. He says that he wants to try another facility in the flat, downtown area where he stayed before and the people know him.

"See, I told you they just give you the run-around. It's crazy."

"It is," I reply, still numb from the shelter's response. I still can't believe that someone so obviously in need was not accepted by a shelter run by a charitable organization.

"You know, I think I would've had a better chance of getting in if I hadn't showed them the doctor's note. They'd rather I sleep outside than take responsibility."

His awareness of the irony in his situation depresses me. He starts to talk about other shelter options, though, and I turn on the recorder.

"Three weeks ago I spent about 8 days at a transitional living facility, eight nights. Then I left and went to the hospital, I went to the VA clinic? And I wound up at Nellis Air Force Hospital for two days and two nights. On Friday I went to Valley Hospital, but I knew I was in a catch-22 situation over there [he says, pointing back at the shelter] because I'm too sick, they can't take me. It's the run-around, remember told you about the run-around? They always give you the run-around."

I repeat the story of Jerry's rejection from [Working Shelter] into the tape recorder, and that they gave him tokens to go to the [Addict Shelter].

"That's right, they said I was too sick," he adds, leaning into the recorder.
The people at the bus stop, however, seem inspired by his story of rejection, and begin to talk about their own experiences with different shelters. An Asian man says that they aren't religious in the charitable sense at the shelter, but instead that it's a business. One younger White man with a southern accent begins to say that, of all the places he's stayed in, the [Addict Shelter] was the best.

"At least they care about you," he said. "These other places," he says, pointing his thumb back at [Working Shelter], "they don't even want you to carry stuff in the shelter. What are you gonna do if you can't have any stuff?" he says to me, while Jerry nods.

After reboarding the bus back to the station, Jerry takes a seat reserved for the disabled. People stare while he coughs and inhales his medication.

Once we arrive at the bus station, I remember Jerry's military experiences, and ask more about them.

"I was in the Army in France '60, '61, '62 I came back from France. An honorable discharge."

"So you are a veteran, then. Do you get any benefits for that?"

"No I don't"

"How come?"

"That's the way it is. If you don't get connected while you're in the service, you don't get it. You better get the service to put it in black and white, so you get it."

Suddenly Jerry notices a friend, a young man, passing nearby. He asks him if he could have his bus pass. "Please," Jerry says, "I gotta have a pass. It'll give me a place to sleep. They won't kick me off if I have the pass."
Come on, please," he begs for a couple of minutes, his voice rising. "Look, I'll give you all the tokens I got." Shaking, Jerry pulls seven tokens out of his wallet, and a transfer.

"I can't do it, Jerry," his friend says.

"Come on, I put you and your girlfriend up when you were on the street. I need a place to stay. I can't sleep outside, I can't walk around because of this emphysema."

The friend smirks and looks away, shaking his head.

"Quit trying to guilt trip me, Jerry. I need this pass too," the friend says.

"Look, I'll give it back to ya. Just give it to me for tonight!"

"And how am I gonna get it back?" the friend asks rhetorically.

"I'll be here tomorrow morning," Jerry says.

"I can't. I'm sorry," the friend calmly states before walking away.

Jerry mumbles something, looking away from his friend.

"Let me ask you about what just happened," I say after the friend leaves. "You just talked to a guy, and you just asked him if you could borrow his bus pass."

"Right," Jerry explains. "I helped him before. I put him up several times. I've had apartments about three times in Vegas. So I got my money, I spent the whole damn check in about three weeks straight. I put him and his lady friend who goes to church with him up. I know him pretty well."

"You want to use the bus pass so you can ride the bus all night long?"

"Yeah, you sleep on the bus."

"You do that before?"

"Yeah."

"And they don't kick you off?"
"No. You get off, at the end of the line. Then you get on the next bus."

I think about sleeping like that until the bus arrives that Jerry and I need to take. We leave the bench and walk toward it, talking about how it will take him to the next shelter he'll try and stay at tonight.

We get off at the closest bus stop and start walking gradually toward the shelter. Jerry sees a garbage cans near us and begins to explain how he gets food to eat.

"If you have a bus pass you can stand next to the garbage and look in it. You always find some kinda food, some lunch bag somebody just threw out, cause they're eating and they're changing buses or something. Any of these bus stops, you get off the bus and you check the garbage. You'll find something to eat."

"It works best around bus stops."

"Right. See, like this can here?" he says, pointing to one. "Also, usually there's a half a quart of beer. There's no town like this for a quart of beer and food. That's why all these homeless people are here."

We get to the next shelter after a couple of blocks walk. The facility looks more like several single-story apartments than a shelter. It turns out to be a transitional living facility for ex-offenders and substance abusers, providing housing and meals for 6-8 men in each apartment at $80 a week per person.

Jerry tries talking to the man in charge in the front office. We wait several minutes. He eventually tells Jerry to come in, while I wait at the doorway. As Jerry sits at the desk, the man tells Jerry that despite his having lived there before, he will need $80 up front for the first week, and that he'll
have to look through his files to see if he has any outstanding debts from previous stays. Jerry says he's paid all bills. He also tells the man that he has a SSI check coming from the government. After looking through his files, the man hedges. He finally tells Jerry he doesn't have any space open at the moment. He does, however, recommend an extension of the facility two blocks up the street.

Jerry wants to sit a while before we begin walking. I ask him to tell me about the center.

"If the judges only knew it. They want people to be incarcerated 6 months, and they send them here. They think they're locked up for 6 months. Within 72 hours they gotta be up and find a job. They gotta get a job and start paying their eighty bucks a week."

"What's that job board for, on the wall over there?"

"When you go somewhere you sign your name, when you go out, and where you're going, and when you should be back. Like you gotta go to AA meetings, approximately 7 a week here. And then they charge you eighty bucks a week to stay here. You get three meals, basically coffee and a doughnut for breakfast that they get for free at the local bakeries, and a bologna sandwich with mustard for lunch, and at supper you get supper."

"And you said a hundred and fifty men live here?"

"Right. They put 7-8 in a room. Mainly people on parole and probation."

"How big are the rooms?"

"Small," he says, smiling.

"What are the rules here?"
"Well, if you do things you're not supposed to, they give you hours to work, different chores like cut trees or bushes, and then they take the hours off of you again."

"So if you break certain rules you get assigned extra work hours?"

"Right, like if you walk on the gravel, that's breaking a rule."

"And you said there's no common rec room here?"

"No, nothing at all. It's a working place. They just want you to pay them that $80 bucks a week."

After explaining the housing facility, Jerry and I begin the walk, cutting through a gravel lot behind the local Knights of Columbus. We walk toward a bus owned by the Knights, which has the word "Hope" on the front. We get as far as the bus and Jerry needs to stop. He grabs hold of a handle near the bus door, and says, "Hold on." I wait a few feet away.

At first, I think he has a bad case of gas. Then I notice he is looking down at his feet. Diarrhea has fallen down his pants, and now sits in a small pile by his left slipper. Suddenly I see him grimace, reaching into the back of his pants with one hand while pulling the clothing away from his body with the other. He whips his left hand covered with diarrhea toward the ground, throwing the feces. He repeats this motion again, and then begins to wipe his hand on the front wheel and wheel well of the Hope bus.

"I shit myself again," he says angrily. "I'm sorry, Kurt."

"Oh hey, don't apologize," I say, feeling queasy. My mind has gone completely blank from this unexpected turn, but I somehow manage to assure him that I'm not sick or upset by what happened. "You had an accident," I say.
He curses as he continues to try to clean himself. I notice he is shaking. After restabilizing himself on the bus, I mention that he could rub his hand in the gravel nearby to help get rid of the shit. He begins to do this, and asks me if he looks all right from behind. I say yes. I can't really see a difference from the stains on his pants from before.

"I gotta go back. They have a bathroom there."

"OK," I say.

He switches his cane to his clean hand and we begin walking back to the transitional living facility which just turned him down. He repeatedly states that he hopes they will let him use the bathroom.

Back at the beige one-story front office, Jerry asks the young, casually dressed man in change if he could please use the bathroom in his old apartment nearby. When the man suggests he use the one in the main office, Jerry's reply is high-pitched. "Please, I can't use that one because of all the handles. I need to use the one in the apartment. Please!"

The man in change relents. Jerry goes into the apartment. As he enters I notice he leaves feces on the door handle. After taking a seat on the concrete outside the building to wait for him, I see he is also trailing it into the apartment carpet on his slippers.

"I sure made a mess in their bathtub," he says after returning, sitting down on the concrete near his slipper stain. I notice a couple of flies land on the stain, then they land on both of us.

Suddenly he looks me in the eye. "Are you sure this is what you want to do?," he says, referring to my research. "Doesn't this depress you?"
"It’s very depressing," I say without hesitation, realizing that there's no other way to think about it. I'm having a hard time looking at him. "I guess I'm doing this because I think it’s awful that people in your condition are without a place to stay. There's so much wealth here and then there are people with nothing. It, ah, seems really unfair to me."

"It's criminal. It's a crime," he said. "America survives to keep the rich man rich, to keep him in money, with tax breaks, and the poor man poor, the homeless homeless, and they're gonna stay that way. There's no way to get off the street. They send you here and they send you there, and then they can't take you in and the send you somewhere else. And you really can't do nothing to get off the streets. It's almost an impossibility."

"Kurt, I noticed you have a bus pass," he eventually adds. "I really need a bus pass. I don't know if they'll let me stay here tonight. I'll give you all my tokens," he says, repeating the offer he made to his friend. "It's security for me. It'll mean security for me."

We talk about the pass and he notes that he usually gets a reduced fair pass for half the price of a regular pass because of his disability. I ask him some questions about the complex before I make my final decision. I then tell him I need to go do something, and that I'll be back in a few minutes.

"You promise? Because I can't take it if you're gonna lie to me. Don't tell me you're coming back if you're not coming back. I can't take no more lies."

"I'm coming back, Jerry. You have my word," I say before I leave.

I then walk up to Fremont Street toward a cash machine. The people there are well dressed. An older couple walks by me wearing fanny packs and
carrying small buckets of change. They talk of making dinner plans. I decided that I can't part with my bus pass, because I need it to travel downtown and to the border of North Las Vegas to conduct research. But I decide that I should give Jerry enough cash for a reduced fare pass. If I were in a similar state, I hope someone would do at least that much for me.

When I return, Jerry is drinking a pop similar to the ones stacked inside the manager's office. He is very happy to see me. He explains that an old friend of his who's in charge of the complex this evening has offered to let him stay. We talk about how great that is, and that maybe this can be a more permanent place to stay than [Working Shelter] would have been.

"This is for you," I say, handing him the ten dollars for the bus pass quickly so that none of the men nearby see me give it to him. I also try not to touch his hand. On the walk back from the cash machine I'd even been thinking about what I could do to avoid shaking his hand when I say good-bye.

"Well, I'm glad you got a place to stay. Maybe you can use the ten for a bus pass next month. I have to get going," I say, feeling drained. "Thanks very much for letting me hang out with you today, Jerry."

"Thanks so much for this, Kurt," he says, holding up the bill. "You don't know how much this means to me," holding out his other hand to shake.

I take his hand, unsure now which one he used to clean himself by the bus. His grip is firm, not the grip of a sick man. We both smile as I walk away. On my way to the bus depot I stop in to the nearest casino to use the bathroom. I wash my hands several times while the shoeshine man looks on.
Jerry's statements present several themes which I will further develop in the following chapters based on other interviews with homeless men. These themes are: the reasons for a man's homelessness; bureaucratic structures of local shelters which he may use; his other survival strategies, and the violence he may face near such shelters.
CHAPTER 6

HOMELESS MEN EXPLAIN WHY THEY BECAME HOMELESS

In this chapter I present the reasons homeless men give to explain their condition. Based on grounded theory categories developed from interview data, and similar to the typologies created by other researchers (cf. Snow and Anderson 1993; Shlay and Rossi 1992), I created several general categories in order to better understand the many ways these men became homeless.

Several researchers across the U.S. have looked at the various factors that seem pivotal in either causing or contributing to homelessness. Shlay and Rossi (1992) conducted a secondary data analysis on the findings of 60 surveys of homeless persons across the U.S. The authors analyzed the following interrelated factors which they believed contributed to homelessness: structural factors such as housing market dynamics, economic restructuring, and welfare policies. However, they placed a greater emphasis on what they termed the “personal vulnerabilities” (1992:138) of homeless persons. They developed a typology of these vulnerabilities which includes: rates of disability, the abandonment of kinship and friendship networks, indicators of alcohol and drug abuse, indicators of mental illness, and criminal histories (Shlay and Rossi 1992:137-41).
Since survey-based research involves asking respondents a pre-formed set of closed-ended questions, this approach is limited because it does not allow the researcher to investigate unexplored dimensions of the topic under study. Due to the limitations of a one-directional research approach, I thought it would be more useful to have conversations with homeless men in Las Vegas which would allow them to explain in their own words the reasons for their homelessness. Using an interactive and open-ended interview technique then allowed me to hear why homeless men felt they became homeless. I helped clarify my understanding of respondent's answers by summarizing out loud what I thought the respondents had said, or asking them for clarification. I also gained further insights by asking other questions based on their responses. However, in reporting the results of these interviews the question later became: How can I reproduce their explanations succinctly, in a readable format, and still retain the voices of homeless men? Although I devoted the previous chapter to my entire interaction with Jerry and his story, I wanted to do more than simply transcribe these interviews with homeless men. Therefore, in the following chapters, I chose to develop recurring themes under which I have placed interview excerpts as examples. Ultimately this is a compromise between an approach where I reproduce each dialogue in its entirety, and one where the researcher alone determines the questions, answer categories and the final categorizations developed for the written report.

My research suggests that the explanations given by homeless men as to why they became homeless are varied and diverse. For example, in
Chapter 5, Jerry stated several reasons for his having become homeless. Among the more immediate reasons were his Social Security check getting lost and his release from the hospital with nowhere to live. Other less direct reasons mentioned by Jerry may include his admission of alcoholism, his chronic illness, and the lack of family members who would help him off of the street.

In the following section, I have developed several categories containing the explanations given by these men as to why they became homeless. The categories, however, cannot be understood as exhaustive or mutually exclusive: homelessness is almost never reducible to a singular cause-and-effect relationship. Therefore, portions of a given man's story may be placed under several categories. I will also reproduce excerpts from interviews regarding the daily conditions these men face, conditions which they often presented as greatly inhibiting their ability to end their homelessness.

**Health and Physical Disabilities**

Similar to Jerry’s case, a major concern of several homeless men in Las Vegas is their health and the conditions which they face daily which inform their health.

Sometimes illnesses were considered to be a direct cause of their homelessness:

Kurt  What is your illness?
Bob  I got chronic active Hepatitis C due to a blood transfusion in [date] at [a local hospital]. Some people can just have Hepatitis C and [it will] never bother them their whole life. Mine happens to be chronic and active and they went in and did a biopsy, I have definite inflammation in my liver; therefore, they treated it with interferon therapy, which is a light chemo that tries to attack viral illnesses so that scar tissue on your liver doesn't get any worse. Again, it's still there....

Kurt  Was the illness what precipitated you to become homeless?

Bob  Oh, yeah. I went from making $33,000 a year [to living in a shelter]....I basically got stripped of everything I've ever owned.

Steve  I came out here for a brain operation. I had an aneurysm taken off my brain by our now Lieutenant Governor, Lonnie Hammargren....after the operation I was homeless when I was released from the hospital, and someone suggested [a local shelter], and I said, well, I've been there before. So I came back out here, and I'm rehabilitating.

Marty and Fred indicated that, although not a direct cause, their illness has greatly contributed to their having become homeless:

Kurt  You just mentioned you have AIDS. When did you find out?

Marty  Been having AIDS, man, I found out a year ago. My whole life, man, I never had a girlfriend. I fucked a lot of punks in the penitentiary. I spent twelve years of my life, never one year, out in one, in, out two weeks, in....I've fucked a lot of men in the ass, never got fucked. Been in prison since I was 16....Actually, I don't have to ask nobody for nothing. I'd come out and take it, but I can't do any more time. My life its like, I'm throwing up the way - - I ain't throwing up none, I'm just throwing up yellow mucus. I got diarrhea, I can't hold my bowels. I gotta shit now. I have to always -- I go in 7-11 stores, like yesterday, I gotta keep napkins in case I have to go somewheres and use the restroom, man....I'm gonna die. And I don't want to die in prison.
Kurt [Why did you come to this shelter?]
Fred I came in here for medical reasons. I worked for a company and my contract expired and I had some medical problems I had to take care of and I also had a $2,000 deductible which many programs that you have on health require, in other words you have to pay your first $2000. By coming into a program like this, I can do volunteer work at [the shelter], and at the same time I can go through Clark County and have Clark County pick up my medical bills, and, therefore, I'm not struck with the $2000 and also I have a place to recuperate and I have other people who can look after me in case I need special diets or in case I'm not feeling properly with my medication or anything else....[S]ince this was the first illness I had had in quite a number of years, I didn't feel like I should really pay $2000 up front plus all the other bills as well, and then I didn't know how long I would take to heal, and I was getting estimates anywhere from six weeks to six months, and in that case I figured well, why should I burden all of the cost myself? Since the state of Nevada is very poor when it comes to any sort of insurance or funding the State itself will do. In other words many other states if you don't have proper insurance coverage and so forth the State will help with some sort of either industrial help or whatever. Nevada is not one of the better ones for that.

In addition to health problems playing a major role in some men's having become homeless, others indicated that they have contracted illnesses or injuries since having become homeless, and that they have had difficulty caring for or fully treating them:

Jeff Dentists in Las Vegas do not do dental work on credit. You can't go in there and pay them so much down and do the work and pay them the rest of the money, they just don't it anymore. What happens to the working poor who can't afford $500, $100 a shot to get a tooth fixed? You go through pain or lose your teeth. (Grimacing) I have a bad tooth.

Kurt Does it hurt when you eat?
Jeff No, but it hurts other times, and I can't get to a goddamn dentist which pisses me off.
During interviews, two of the men stopped talking momentarily to rub their feet and legs, pains that they attributed to excessive walking since becoming homeless. The following excerpt is from Ronald’s interview:

Ron  But -- ow.
Kurt  Is your leg okay? (Ronald is rubbing his leg)
Ron  Do too much walking, get pains.

Foot problems and dental problems were also mentioned by a homeless service provider as two of the minor yet insidious health problems faced by homeless persons. These problems were also frequently observed during my field research. In addition to the men who noted foot and dental problems during our interviews, I would regularly notice that interview subjects would be missing several teeth. I also learned that if I wanted to give a man food, the best idea was to give them something soft. Initially in the research process, when I offered men “hard” food such as an apple or even a hamburger, I was confused as to why they frequently turned me down. Later, one man explained that because of his teeth he simply could not eat apples anymore.

The impact of chronic foot or dental pain can be devastating to homeless men. For example, recurring dental pain makes it difficult to eat a varied diet, limiting a man’s nutrition. Foot problems are also quite disabling to men who usually have few other transportation options. Overtaxing such injuries may then compound a man’s other problems, for example, by making it painful for these men to work manual labor jobs or walk several blocks to access different social services such as soup lines and shelters.
The men occasionally expressed other difficulties with using the services provided them, services which some men explained had left them vulnerable in other ways. Several of the men I spoke with who used nightly shelters, for example, expressed concern over shelter sanitation. Their stories range from those already ill who are worried about growing sicker in a shelter, to those who are healthy but who realize that contracting an illness while homeless would make their chances of ending their homelessness even slimmer:

Kurt [How did you come to stay at Shelter X?]
Bob I started off in the annex, that’s the only thing I knew when I first came here.
Kurt How long did you stay there?
Bob Two months. The hygiene here is very poor in the annex. It’s super poor. You don’t get a pillow, you just get a cot.
[and later in the interview]
Bob Anyway, getting back to this place, the homeless place. The hygiene is very poor here. I don’t know if the health department has anything to do with this, but with my illness especially, a blood-borne illness through blood transfusions or dirty needles, you have a lot of communicable diseases here, and it’s filthy here. That is my main concern, that and they need to motivate people.

Kurt [What is life like inside Shelter X?]
Bill You know, they feed you breakfast, and then you have to take a shower, and then you kind of just stay in this like, bunkhouse? Like a little barracks, right? With no inside plumbing. It’s like an outhouse. You know, it’s there for you go to the bathroom.
Kurt Oh.
Bill Now, you know what scares me the most about these places, right, is contracting like, TB?
Kurt Really?
Bill You know, this is what crossed my mind. You know, like to get my health card? You’ve got to take a TB test, right?
Kurt Yeah, for your job.
Bill Yeah, you know but what I’ve learned, my career, if I got TB or something.
Kurt Uh huh.
Bill Yeah, you know.
Kurt Yeah, it would screw a lot of things up.
Bill Yeah.
Kurt And they don’t do any kind of check for you to stay at these places? (pointing back at Shelter X)...
Bill No...
Kurt ...Because they couldn’t...
Bill They couldn’t. You know, it takes four days for the test. But you know, it’s like hepatitis, it’s like, and so, [laughing] I don’t use their bathrooms that often. That make sense?

Ziggy, Jeff and Jerome expressed concern over the nutritional value of the meals they were receiving at different local shelters:

Ziggy [At a particular shelter], the only meal you get out of them is in the afternoons, which is not befitting to be called a meal, in my opinion.

Jeff Typical breakfast is an ounce of cereal, half a pint of milk, cup of coffee and maybe a sweet roll that’s five days old. They expect you to go out and work eight hours on that. And the bag lunch with [a] baloney sandwich, okay. It doesn’t work. You have to give a guy a decent breakfast in the morning, expect him to go out, work, and give him a decent lunch.

Kurt So you’re saying it’s not enough food –
Jeff No, it’s not enough food for the people here.

Jer. The meals they serve here have absolutely no nutritional value. They will sustain you, but that’s about it.

To summarize, while some men indicated that health problems directly led to their homelessness, others claimed that health problems they have developed since becoming homeless, or trepidation at ruining their health from
using services for homeless persons, are inhibiting their ability to end their homelessness.

Addictions: Substance Abuse and Gambling

Several men stated that various addictions, including drug, alcohol and/or gambling addictions, were a primary reason why others around them had become homeless. The following quotes illustrate this:

I'll tell you the two main reasons people are here [in the shelter]: gambling and drugs. (Tyrone)

I notice a lot of people sleep here [in the shelter] because they have gambling and alcohol and drugs [issues] (Bob)

[Among homeless persons,] you have the alcoholics and drug addicts who because of their addiction, cannot break the cycle where they're at. (Steve)

Then you've got the physical disabilities and you have people out here getting paid monthly SSI for the disabilities, but the majority of those are the alcoholics, are the drug addicts. They have that chemical dependency or that mental hygiene inadequacies. When they do get that money, they head straight for the casino. They head straight for the drug houses. They head straight for the alcohol, drug and casinos. And a week later they right back out here. They don't have that responsibility enough about themselves enough to at least go get them a place for a month. So they know the services down here and they can use it. (Ziggy)

Ziggy even described how, in his opinion, those men who receive a disability check but are also substances abusers use the shelter system to intermittently continue their substance-using lifestyle:

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Ziggy  Like now, at this end of the building, you pay three bucks a night and you get three meals a day at the organization here, or you can sleep down on the corner for free and you get no services. And they know that. So they'll get their check during the month and they'll pay $90 to stay here for the whole month, and that guarantees them a meal every day and they can take the rest of that 4 or 5 or $600 bucks and go out within a week or less and blow it.

Kurt  So you are saying there's really no incentive for somebody maybe even to leave here if they're getting an SSI check or something?

Ziggy  Yeah. I mean, even if they're getting a check. Now, those people should be limited to the services that they can get, because they are supplemented every month. I mean, they just sit around and wait for that check to come, to go out and "hoo-rah" for a week.

Although many men blamed other’s homelessness on alcoholism, drug use or excessive gambling, several of these same men did not explain their own homelessness as addiction-related. Only once did a man besides Jerry, named Albert, start an interview by pointing to his substance addiction as precipitating his homelessness:

Kurt  I'm talking to [Albert] at [a local shelter]. It's Sunday, the 28th of September. And he was just going to tell me how he got out on the street.

Albert  Boy, I'll tell you what, if I had to [go to] somebody else and tell them this -- you seem like good people, man. Well, I'll tell you, I'll be truly and totally honest with you. I was married for 17 years and I started using drugs and I started drinking alcohol. And before I knew it, the alcohol and drugs just totally overruled my life, man. I mean, I used to be a chef at [a Strip hotel] for five years, I was a chef at [another Strip hotel] for two years...I've been [in the] culinary [union for] 13 years. But through the drugs and alcohol, it drug me out here to this point where all I'm doing is living day to day. And I pray to God and I seek out the Lord to try to change my life.
Gambling also seemed an important explanation for many homeless men I spoke to as to why several of their peers had become homeless. Again, however, few of these individuals indicated gambling was an important contributing factor as to why they themselves became homeless. Gary was one exception:

Gary  [Once you become homeless, you’ve got to] make a battle plan. Like me, I've got to stay out of the casinos, 'cause that's [a] weakness with me, so I got to stay out of there.
Kurt Do you like playing slots? What type of game?
Kurt How much would you play? How much do you tend to play, if I may ask? How does it go for you?
Gary I don’t intend to play no more (laughing). But me myself, I'll sit down at the table and I'll stay there until I'm broke. That's one of the things that keeps me homeless unfortunately. So I've got to get to where I don't go in casinos no more.

Albert and Gary’s candor, however, were unique. In four interviews with other men, several other factors relating to their homelessness were discussed before each mentioned that they considered themselves to be an alcoholic or drug addict. Only toward the end of his interview did Larry, for example, mention his drinking patterns as alcoholism, and only at the end of a list of other reasons why he became homeless:

And like I say, it's a vicious circle. If you have some sort of disability, or in my particular case my education isn't updated, therefore I can't really get a job in my profession. Then again, I had medical problems on top of that. I'm blessed with the simple fact that I was in the military and I am honorably discharged, because I can go to the VA hospital if I have to. I can go to the VA hospital anywhere in the country. But there are some of these guys that are
out here that aren't in that situation. They have no place
to go, basically. They need a medical system and they
need to basically address the fact that there are homeless
people here and some of them are mentally ill and they
just basically -- you know, myself, I'm an alcoholic, I'll
admit it. I have been for quite a few years. I'll get off and
there's times I might go, like I said, as long as a year and
a half without even drinking a thing. Then all of a sudden,
boom, one day something will happen and I'll jump back
onto the bottle for a week or two. That's my biggest
problem right now. That's something I have to deal with
on my own.

Others seemed to attribute their homelessness to factors other than an
alcohol, drug or gambling problem, despite evidence to the contrary. Ronald,
for example, initially said he was homeless because he had "no money." Only
because I had heard his story in another context a week earlier did I know his
story involved other reasons, including a DUI arrest:

Kurt I met [Ronald] last week. He was talking with a few guys
about how he became homeless, and I wanted to ask him
again what those circumstances were.
Ron The reason I'm here?
Kurt Yeah.
Ron No money.
Kurt I think [last week] you mentioned something about losing a
job and your family being in another shelter, too.
Ron Yeah. I got terminated from my job, and I had enough
money saved for three weeks' rent on a weekly basis that I
was paying my rent.
Kurt You were staying in a weekly motel?
Ron It wasn't a motel, it was an apartment, but you could pay
weekly or monthly. I was there eight months and paid on a
weekly basis, $160 a week, which averaged about $640 a
month. I had a good job. I was making 24.66 an hour.
Kurt What did you do?
Ron I'm a concrete cutter; I cut concrete. But I went out on
Friday night, I got pulled over for drunk driving, impounded
the company truck. I went out the next day and I lost my
job.
Kurt So you were driving the company car when you were stopped for DUI?
Ron Yeah, exactly.

Two other men I spoke with only told me about their patterns of substance abuse after the taped interview had ended, one saying he had been a cocaine addict for years, the other an alcoholic. What seems important about this trend is that, although homeless men are frequently represented as personal failures due to a lack of self-control, most of the homeless men I spoke to did not voluntarily represent themselves in this manner. This may be because, as one researcher on homelessness phrased it, "[e]veryone likes to feel competent and we all tell stories that put us in a favorable light, both for our audience and for ourselves" (Underwood 1993:56).

There may be several explanations as to why these men didn't mention alcoholism, drug addiction or gambling earlier in interviews discussing the causes of their homelessness. Perhaps the homeless men I interviewed did not want to reproduce a "magic bullet" explanation of why individuals may become homeless because of the degree to which such stereotyped notions of individual loss of control leading to homelessness are held by the general public. They may also be well aware of just how much a substance or gambling addiction is responsible for their homelessness, but may not like admitting it. The tendency toward downplaying substance or gambling addiction in my interviews, however, contradicts the work of Fiske (1991) and Bahr and Caplow (1973), who theorize that homeless men frequently reject middle-class values. If these men are rejecting some dominant social values
in practice, they are also very hesitant to admit, much less emphasize, substance or gambling addiction as a key to explaining why they are homeless. Overall, in interviews, these homeless men retained dominant values against alcoholism, gambling or drug addiction, or at least against these addictions when they interfere with a person’s ability to maintain a stable living arrangement.

The perception of homeless men as lacking self-control, however, is often a view that permeates the shelters’ assistance to these men. Bill, for example, stated that various shelters use more-or-less stringent methods to insure that everyone in the shelter is alcohol-free, and that, although he drank occasionally, he implicitly understood the rationale underlying this policy:

Bill Mainly, you know like they do breathalyzer on you, right?
Kurt They do breathalyzer [testing] on everybody?
Bill Yeah over there, where we just came from [a shelter].
Kurt OK
Bill Well, over at [a different shelter] they don’t, but if they catch you drinking they’ll kick you out. Which is cool, right?

Jeff further explained a shelter’s “zero tolerance” alcohol policy, indicating that shelters rigorously screen potential residents for alcohol use because many shelter programs are developed around the notion that alcohol or drugs might have seriously contributed to a person’s homelessness:

Jeff Not all the rules are popular. You can’t drink, zero tolerance.
Kurt How’s that enforced?
Jeff You’re kicked out of the program. You come in drunk, they’ll kick you out.
Kurt Do they use a breathalyzer?
Jeff Use a breathalyzer, unless the guys' staggering, falling down drunk. You come back, you get a chance to explain yourself to the director of personnel, and they'll keep an eye on you, and [if it happens again] you're kicked out of the program. But you're told that when you walk in, so you know it's a zero tolerance on alcohol and drugs. If you were out there on the streets because of alcohol, and you try to make a commitment to get back on your feet, you're going through a program to help you get back on your feet, then you have to believe what caused you to fall on your ass the first time, and that's the alcohol or the drugs. If you don't do it, this program's not going to help you. You can go through this program and get out and you'll be back on your ass, back here in three months because you haven't given up drinking and you haven't given up drugs. So that's important, when I enforce that, I have drug officers to enforce the rules here, that's my basic job here.

Mark also said that although shelters demand sobriety and provide a place for alcoholics to "dry out," they frequently cannot test for other drugs. Such selective enforcement of a "zero tolerance policy," then, means shelters ultimately experience limited success in attempting to control the substance use of men on the premises:

Well, obviously you have people here that are here due to chemical dependencies, alcoholism, drugs or whatever, who, no matter how much money they make and what they do, their expenditures are always greater than their income and they have no life. They have trouble depending upon themselves. Alcoholism is an insidious disease, and a place like this is good. You come in here, there is no alcohol on these premises, you can dry out, and then at that point you have the option of getting your life back together. With drugs it's a little different. (Mark)

In many of the above instances, it was difficult to indicate the degree to which substance abuse was a contributing factor toward a man's becoming
homeless. An individual's substance abuse and/or gambling may have put into motion a series of other events, such as an arrest, the loss of a job, the depletion of savings, the dissolution of a marriage, and the severing of other family ties, each of which arguably facilitated his homelessness. On the other hand, any one of the aforementioned events could also have pushed a man from once being a social drinker, drug user or gambler, to a habitual user and/or gambler. Determining which is cause or effect between addiction and homelessness becomes even more difficult to uncover by the time a man becomes homeless. Once homeless, a man may resort to substance abuse or gambling as a form of escape from the problems associated with homelessness, or a way to tolerate an intolerable situation. Jerry, for example, indicated earlier that the use of alcohol or drugs is frequently of some comfort to those who end up homeless. The difficulty in determining cause or effect is also obvious when considering the relationship between homelessness and mental illness.

Mental Illness

The difficulty of trying to determine how many homeless persons in the U.S. are mentally ill is well-documented. In their national overview of surveys of homeless persons, Shlay and Rossi (1992:138) estimate that a third of the homeless currently experience some form of mental illness. But Snow, Baker Anderson and Martin (1985) found that only ten percent of a sample of homeless persons in Austin, Texas were mentally ill. Clearly, how one
operationalizes the concept of “mental illness” and the indicators one chooses to gather data is important.

Although I have no training in psychiatry, I encountered during fieldwork homeless men whose behaviors seemed (in my unprofessional opinion) to be symptomatic of mental illness. I experienced great difficulty in trying to interview these individuals, and my requests were frequently turned down. After approaching one man who was gesticulating and verbalizing to no one in particular, for example, he simply told me “I'm busy.” Another asked me for change, whereupon I offered to buy him lunch and asked if I could talk with him about his homelessness. He took me up on the offer, but most of our “conversation” consisted of him turning his head to the side and mumbling when he spoke. He also refused to let me use a tape recorder or take notes.

However, one man who I believe was mentally ill granted me an interview and allowed me to spend several hours with him. I ran into Jorge, a charming man in his late 50s, several times during the course of my research. He always fascinated me with his perspective and stories:

I have my brains completely controlled....There is a secret hospital. There are medical doctors who pick me up and take me there. I have my brains, my sight and everything controlled, but I have my own system for knowing things. They are criminals from the Nazi party who control my brains. I don't remember anything. If I remember anything it is because I have espionage with my enemy [laughs]. (Jorge)

Coca-Cola prevents heart attack. I told a doctor at a hospital this and he told me, 'You are crazy.' But then his nurses gave Coca-Cola to all the patients with arterial sclerosis and they started getting better. When you drink Coca-Cola, your whole body gets better, your circulation. I told a woman who was dying to drink Coca-Cola every day, and she lived for another
ten years. You know when she died? The day she stopped
drinking Coca-Cola! (Jorge)

Even Jorge, however, was not always easy to talk to. Occasionally he
seemed think I was not really a researcher, but a spy who wanted to kill him:

I think you are important people. Are you sure you are not from
a newspaper? Because, please don't be offended if I tell the
truth, but if you want to kill me please shoot me now. (Jorge)

Other than a few individuals like Jorge (most of whom did not want to
be interviewed), the majority of the men I encountered did not seem to be
experiencing serious mental illness. Only Sam admitted having been placed
in a “psycho ward” once for a few weeks. This brief institutionalization
occurred after years of personal problems and episodic violence within his
family:

Kurt So I take it that maybe your illness precipitated your
becoming homeless or something such as this? I’m not sure. You can explain it better than I could.
Sam It was just family problems and it kind of made it
worse with the Anxiety Disorder. I have a 16-year-old
son and he was just kind of drawing apart from me and
becoming aloof, and I think my wife was interested in
somebody else, so she kind of let it be known that she
wanted me out of there, and I kind of caused the thing to
come to a head by telling by son I didn’t think he loved me
and I grabbed a knife and acted like I was going to kill
myself, which I knew I wouldn’t have, but I committed
suicide before and I was just getting too dependent on
them and I was sucking love from my son. I just needed
his love.

Paul initially explained to me that he had lost the full use of one arm
from a farming accident when he was 16. Although he contradicted himself
several times during our interview, he smiled often and seemed very happy. However, when I turned the tape recorder off, he told me about his difficulties in walking and thinking since he tried to commit suicide. I then asked him if I could turn the recorder back on while he re-told the story:

Kurt  So you were telling me about how your arm is unable to move, and you were telling me what happened with playing a guitar.
Paul  Yeah, well, that was due to, I was listening to Santana, and trying to play it, but I shot myself in the head. I don’t know if I was stupid or what. I don’t know if I’m suicidal or what, I don’t know. I think I wanted to feel the pain, man, just to see what it was like.
Kurt  Were you depressed at the time?
Paul  Uh, no. I wasn’t depressed at all. I just said I was going to shoot myself, and I asked a friend to bring my gun, and I lit myself up, man.
Kurt  Where did you hit yourself in the head?
Paul  Right there [points to forehead].
Kurt  Oh, you did?
Paul  Yeah, it’s right there. If you put your finger there, you can feel it. That –
Kurt  I trust you, yeah, but –
Paul  I’m not a liar, one thing I ain’t.
Kurt  No, I believe you. So, did they remove the bullet then?
Paul  Yeah, they took the bullet out. I was in surgery several hours....
Kurt  How old were you when this happened?
Paul  Oh, about 21. Yeah.
Kurt  So you hadn’t left Lincoln, then?
Paul  Oh, no, no, no, this is [a small town in] Colorado. I did a little traveling in my time. Yeah, I did. The streets slowed me down some. Being I was run over and everything. Yeah, slowed me down quite a bit.
Kurt  But you seem like you’re getting around okay now.
Paul  Oh, yeah, I’m happy. Yeah. I’m happy.
Kurt  Good.
Paul  Nothing gets me down, man.
Kurt  That’s good. That’s good. What kind of gun was it, if I may ask?
Paul  Oh, it was a 22 snub nose.
Kurt  And you owned that? That was your gun?
Paul: Yeah, yeah, I owned it, yeah. So, they can't get me for suicide, because it was bought and paid for.
Kurt: Well, that is an amazing story. It's not every day you talk to somebody who survived that.
Paul: Yeah, oh, yeah. Well, you know when you want to die, you just put your hand in your own — in your own life, and I figured it would go through my brain, man, and unfortunately it didn't. I'm still here.

Although there are undoubtedly a greater percentage of mentally ill individuals among homeless persons, determining the degree to which the illness has led to overall increases in homelessness is also complicated. Segal and Baumohl (1980), for example, indicate that deinstitutionalization is an important contributing factor in explaining the rise in the mentally ill homeless. Hopper, Susser and Conover, however, criticize such research, because it neglects "the role of social context...in defining the practical consequences of disorder or disability" (1985:191). Furthermore, the authors note that there was a significant time lag between major periods of deinstitutionalization in the U.S. and an increased appearance of homeless mentally ill persons. The authors believe that the gradual reduction in affordable housing stock, such as Single Room Occupancy hotels, throughout the 1960s and early 1970s is what eventually caused deinstitutionalized persons to become homeless due to lack of other housing options (Hopper, Susser and Conover, 1985; Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989:59).

In Las Vegas, the number of mentally ill homeless persons is also difficult to determine. One homeless service provider, Becky, explained how she saw the issue and pointed at the limitations of local resources directed towards homeless mentally ill persons:
Kurt Speaking of mental health, how much is that an issue in Las Vegas?
Becky Major problem. Major. It's probably a major problem everywhere, but in Las Vegas it's definitely a major problem. A major problem amongst the homeless population. There is not enough service for the mentally ill homeless. There's not enough. There's not enough housing for them. There's not enough always empathy for them.
Kurt Are there community-based mental health programs at all?
Becky Some. Salvation Army has what they call the Path Program and the Pathways Program which are some of the most comprehensive programs for the homeless down here. But even they can't house as many people that need to be housed that are mentally ill. I don't know how we're going to solve that issue other than to get into more funding. There are a tremendous amount of mentally ill homeless out here.

Another homeless service provider, Sue, stated that in Nevada there seemed to be more funding for social service programs directed at homelessness rather than mental illness. She felt that such funding, if spent differently, could have prevented mentally ill persons from having become homeless instead of trying to care for them after-the-fact:

Kurt Another problem often associated with homelessness is mental illness. How is that addressed in [your shelter]? How much of a problem is that?
Sue Yeah, I think nationally, and I don't think very many people will deny this, nationally there's a tremendous problem and correlation with mental illness and homelessness. It's kind of like a dual diagnosis in psychiatric terms. There are not many resources nationally either that deal with it, and we're not any different on a local level. We're not a shining star in that arena. Part of is how society looks at it, part of again relates to money, part of it is funding sources. There's not much money to fund mental illness, but there's more money to fund homeless. Okay, so which part of the pot do you pull the money out of?
Each of the homeless service providers also addressed the problems they face in trying to help mentally ill homeless persons within the confines of their programs which are directed toward a more general homeless population:

Becky I'm able to tell you who they are, then it takes a lot of nurturing and a lot of ability on the workers to be able to let that person sit a little longer in the day room, continue to look for alternatives for that person, not just turn them out. Many times homeless mentally ill people get put out of programs because they act mentally ill. And, it's a reality most places are not equipped staff-wise to handle the mentally ill. You have certain amount of line staff that are not experienced enough to handle the mentally ill. We get many of them in here actively psychotic, suicidal, homicidal, both, the dual diagnosis, schizophrenic, so you have to be able to have enough staff around that knows that population enough to not escalate the issues, who are more tolerant. Mental illness is a problem.

Sue The challenge that programs like ours have is you're dealing with – and the resident-work program, for instance, you've got 350 men maybe in the program, all diverse, different background, different personalities, different character, different value systems, different everything. So now you take that conglomeration, put them all together under one roof, and then maintain sanity, maintain organization where you're not – it's real tough. And I have to tell you I think we do it well, and that's not my world and I don't know how we do it well, but we do. I think as an insider but looking at that side from an outside perspective, how hard it is when you don't have things so rigid that you have no independence or no individualism to the other end of the spectrum where you've just got everybody doing their own thing. And how you get that balance in between, it's really quite interesting.

Although the service providers seemed to indicate that mental illness preceded and even caused much of the homelessness they encountered, one
homeless man, Ziggy, offered a different explanation, namely, he considered that the stress of homelessness itself can "drive you crazy":

Kurt I meant to ask you about mental illness. There's a common perception that this is a big problem with homeless people.

Ziggy It's the very biggest. I've been in this program for six months, maybe. I've seen thousands of homeless men. Homelessness itself can drive you crazy. I've seen an old man in the street—I'll give you an example. When I first came to Vegas after I lost my job, when I lost my car, with the magazine, I worked for a T-shirt company, selling T-shirts on the Strip, and I met this one guy who was on the streets. Totally sane, totally normal. And as time went on as he got dirtier and dirtier and hungrier and hungrier, he started losing it. I mean, your self-respect goes, then your mind goes. It could be temporary, but when hunger, desperation, people see you, give this reaction to you, depression, your self-esteem is gone, your pride is gone. You start just lashing out mentally, and all of a sudden you lose perception of reality. You really don't care about what you look like or you smell like, or what people think of you. You're in your own little world. In a matter of months I saw this guy [go] from a normal person to about an idiot. A guy who didn't bathe, who didn't care anymore. Who had lost 60 pounds in a matter of months. And no one cared. He wandered the Strip and no one cared. I mean, if even a cop, somebody, would bring this guy over here, but no one bothered to tell him about it. Where you can get help, where you can get clothes, where you can take a shower, where you can eat.

To some extent, Ziggy's thoughts parallel those of Bachrach (cited in Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989:59), who believes one should distinguish between two groups: the homeless who have mental illness and the mentally ill homeless. The latter group may be defined as those who have at one point been referred to a psychiatrist. The former group may seem mentally ill but have had no contact with a mental health facility. The labeling of mental illness by
professionals, although imperfect, would seem to be a much better indicator for assessing the rate of mental illness among homeless persons than the judgment of laypersons. Stereotypes of homeless men as mentally ill may partially originate from homeless men’s survival strategies being radically different from those of the dominant culture. In Chapter 8 I will discuss behaviors such as scavenging which, although seemingly bizarre to some, constitute homeless men’s survival strategies.

**Loss of Regular Employment**

Perhaps the single most important factor men cite to explain their homelessness was the loss of a full-time job. Ziggy felt that his being fired for no reason led directly to his homelessness:

> As a matter of fact, I worked for Catholic Charities here in the warehouse as a dispatcher for the guys that go out and pick up the donations and whatnot. I got laid off. I got fired. No reprimand, no bad actions or anything on my part. I just got straight fired. Why? So now here I am again, out here, trying to use whatever services are necessary to get myself back into society, to be a viable part of society. But like I said, just through no action of my own, I get released from this place and here I am [in a shelter] again. (Ziggy)

Clyde, on the other hand, said he had been laid off and forced into homelessness because of changes in the U.S. economy:

> I got laid off in Los Angeles and that’s what brought me here. I was a supervisor in a factory. The new word, though, is downsizing. If you’re not bilingual, you’re at a disadvantage. That was a factor in the discharge. (Clyde)
Bob believed he was “worked out” of his job because of an illness and because he overburdened the company’s insurance policy:

I don’t have a degree, I did go to college, but I was gifted in sales and I’ve been in sales -- out of 17 years that I’ve worked, 13 of them have been in sales. Real Estate, golf equipment and life insurance. I made a really good living. When I got ill, I tried to work, and I got so ill, I passed out. Medically, I just couldn’t work. And I maxed my insurance policy -- quarter of a million -- and the company worked me out so to speak. (Bob)

Some, however, said they were fired because they were judged irresponsible. For example, Ronald lost his job because he was arrested for DUI while driving the company car:

Ron I had a good job. I was making 24.66 an hour.
Kurt What did you do?
Ron I’m a concrete cutter; I cut concrete. But I went out on Friday night, I got pulled over for drunk driving, impounded the company truck. I went out the next day and I lost my job.
Kurt So you were driving the company car when you were stopped for DUI?
Ron Yeah, exactly.

The difficulties some men face in regaining regular employment once they have become homeless will be discussed further in Chapter 8 which discusses these men’s survival strategies.
Recently Released From Jail or Prison

One social service provider, Sue, told me that men who have come from prison may also use the shelter for housing while they're trying to secure employment and a more traditional living arrangement:

We have the new homeless, though, that come in and they're just kind of stuck, they don't know how to get back up, they don't know how to live in Las Vegas. Maybe been recently released from prison. This particular state, they could have committed the crime here, but not been a resident here, so they're back here, now they have to understand in this state you must be registered as an ex-felon. In this state we require work cards that are not usually [required] in other cities. There also is an explanation for it if you are an ex-felon does not mean that you can't get a Sheriff's card. It just means there may be limitations on that, or maybe not, just depending on the nature, the length, the crime, the length of the conviction. (Sue)

Tyrone was a perfect example of the social service provider's description of the circumstances that might lead a convicted man to homelessness. He had lived in Arizona but had been arrested in Nevada, causing him to become homeless in this state after having been sentenced to undergo a substance abuse program:

Kurt I'm at the yard of [Working Shelter], and I'm talking with [Tyrone] who is telling me how he became homeless recently.

Ty I got arrested with $3 worth of speed in Laughlin, and they remanded me -- I live in Arizona, and I got busted in Laughlin which is right across the river. They remanded me to this state to do a year in a drug program here. So when they released me from jail, I had no home, no food, no money, no clothes or anything else, so that's what I'm
doing here. This is the first time I've ever been homeless, and that's the reason for it, is because of that.

George, who had both a full-time job and an apartment before being arrested, was using the shelter while waiting for a trial which he feared would be expensive:

Kurt I'm talking with [George] and he is telling me how he's been jailed recently and how he managed to come to [the shelter].
G. I got, went down and turned myself in on some warrants that were out for my arrest that were bogus warrants anyway. I mean they were real warrants, but the crime, I didn't commit, so. But anyway, instead of finding out who accused me of the crime and all like this and they just decided to put me in jail. And so I spent 15 days in jail the first time, got out, and I almost lost everything then. Then I spent another 55 days in jail after that when I came back from another preliminary hearing. They finally found their victim, who happened to be a homeless guy. That's how I found out about the homeless shelter and stuff like that from listening to them talk about it. Plus I went by on the bus after I got out and I just came in. But like I said I got a good job, had a nice apartment, I had everything going for me. I've been doing fine on my own since I was 18 years old. So I just ended up coming here.
Kurt Have you met other guys [at this shelter] who have been to jail?
G. There's one other guy I met, he just got out of jail, he was just here, he just gone back to work.

Larry said that he had been “semi-homeless” before coming to Las Vegas due in part to time spent in jail:

Kurt Did you come [to Las Vegas] specifically for your family, or did you come out for work? I know you've been back and forth a few times.
Larry Well, I came up here -- I was in Laughlin. I had some court problems down in Bullhead. And I started out in 1990 with two DUI's and $760 in fines. Now I owe the State of
Arizona right at $4600, because [when] they put you in jail down there, they charge you $46 a day. And that's not counting fines or anything like that. So consequently I was semi-homeless there.

In general, incarceration seemed to have caused some men to be unable to maintain permanent housing. Once released, these men began relying on shelter services. Men such as Tyrone and George also distinguished themselves from what they saw as the "real" homeless. George, for example, began his interview by saying, "I'm not really homeless, but I'll talk to you." They felt incarceration had temporarily impeded their ability to earn a living through legitimate means. As almost none of these men could be considered career criminals, they often did not think their homelessness would endure or would be repeated.

Loss of Family Network

The family networks of the homeless men I spoke with were often fragmented or nonexistent. Few men had relied directly on support from their family of origin since having become homeless, but there were exceptions. Bob, for example, once contacted a family member for assistance, but eventually could no longer tolerate living with that member:

Kurt You mentioned that your brother was helping you for a while...and other family members, what's your relationship like with them?
Bob I've got three brothers. All of them make $50,000 plus and one's a multimillionaire. The multimillionaire has helped me out; I sold real estate for him for three and a half years.
He's real hard to work for. I couldn't work any longer with him. Too much stress, he's very [into] competition, and in his company, which they're in commercial, no resident, all commercial — their bottom man makes 50 grand. If they don't make 50,000 or better, he gives them a year and you're gone. That's how competitive the company is. Which $50,000 in commercial real estate is not a lot of money. You can land three or four deals, and make that in a matter of four or five months.

Kurt Did you stay with him for a while?
Bob Three and a half years. Too stressful for me.

Brandon indicated that he viewed his homelessness as an “adventure,” but that he would return home to family if he could not eventually get a job and apartment in Las Vegas:

B. I just got back out here about two weeks ago. I went home to see my family.
Kurt Back to Detroit?
B. [Nods] Then I returned, because this is like a challenge. And I'm very -- I don't know what the word is, dexterous? But I'm very determined in certain ways. If I meet a challenge, then I'll stick it out no matter how long it takes.
Kurt So did you tell your folks you were out here? Do they know?
B. Oh, no. I told them it was an independent venture. If I make it, then I make it. If I don't, then I'll stand upright and accept my graces and return.

Brandon's friend Hector also knew his family would help him, but for the time being he still wanted to try and “make it” on his own:

Kurt Do you have any family that know [you are homeless]?
H. Yeah. I got people. They're in California. My brother helps me now. If times are too hard, I can get [help from him]. [But] I'm 45 years old, I can't be scurging all my life. I'm not lazy, I just got stuck out here, and, you know, what can you say? But, I don't know. I figure I'll make it. Just keep trying, I guess.
However, like in the earlier example of Jerry, several men I spoke to indicated that they had no family to turn to once they realized they might be on the verge of homelessness, or that they had severed ties with their spouses, girlfriends, and/or other individuals who once belonged in their social network. Thus, several individuals, including Albert, Bill, Clyde, Jim, Sam, Mark and Ziggy, had divorced. Mark, for example, attributed one of his instances of homelessness to his divorce:

Kurt   You've been in here [a local shelter] 12 days now?
Mark  No, I came in here Wednesday, I believe the 25th of September, so I believe it'll be 14 days tomorrow. This is the second time I've been in here. The last time I was recently divorced, lost everything; I was totally destitute, I had absolutely nothing, and the program was different then.

In one particularly graphic account, Sam explained the incident which precipitated his divorce and ultimately ended his contact with other family members:

Sam    But recently I had an incident which made me think that there is a God.
Kurt   What happened, if I may ask?
Sam    I was alone and separated from my wife and my family. And this was after a real bad incident. One Thanksgiving weekend my wife was going to leave me and take my 13-year-old son with her. And my 30-year-old sons, three of them all around 30, they were going to make sure I didn't do anything violent, because I have a violent temper, or did have most of my life, but I had been reading psychology and got off caffeine since 1999. This was in '94 when it happened. So I really didn't -- I don't get mad anymore. Well, I got mad then, you know, because it was such a devastating thing to me to lose everything. So anyway, after they beat me up --
Kurt   Your family?
Sam Yeah, my three sons, they beat me up pretty bad.
Kurt What precipitated that?
Sam Because they provoked me and so I went after them, but once I saw them cowering on the floor I didn't do anything, and then the other two, they tackled me, and then another time later on, about an hour later, I just went up and shook the window of his car, and my older son, you know, he caused the whole thing, so that's when they beat me up. I just ran when they all three started coming at me. I just ran. I was 59 years old and out of shape and they tackled me and they beat me up, so I filled the house up with gas and I just turned off the water heater and turned down the thermostat so it wouldn't go off, and it's a rented seven bedroom home, and something ignited it; you know, the refrigerator coming on or something, some spark, and it just blew the whole house. I was sitting on the couch and it just blew me back and I came forward and I just looked around. I could see all my neighbors and I could see the sky -- it was 9:30 at night. So I just got up off the couch and walked through the rubble and walked out to the street.

Ziggy and Bill, respectively, explained losing track of or not wanting to contact members of either their family of origin or family of procreation, in part because of divorce, or the loss of other social ties due to a separation between individuals:

Kurt Tell me something, have you ever been in contact with your family since you've been homeless to talk with them, maybe if they could help you out?
Ziggy There is no family. I mean, I've got a daughter, but I lost track of her; in-laws, I lost track of them before I even got divorced. You know, it's not a very friendly arrangement with us. I didn't like them from the beginning anyway. Then once we divorced there was a little more animosity between us, so.
Kurt Mom and dad? Brothers, sisters?
Ziggy No more. It's just myself. So whatever I get, I get.

Bill You know I can't really write home and ask for money. I really go against that.
Kurt: You’ve a, you got folks living and stuff?
Bill: Oh yeah. They’re in Oklahoma. It’s weird out here, you know in Albuquerque I knew people and places, you know, I could stop in for dinner (laughing), you know I had friends I could go do my laundry at their house, you know.
Kurt: Oh yeah, a network of people.
Bill: Yeah, you know, a circle of friends, we go back years. It’s quite different when you come to a new town and you don’t know anybody. Um, it’s not as easy as you think to get a job...
Kurt: What made you leave Albuquerque?
Bill: I had broke up with a relationship I had been in for seven years. You know, and, sometimes it’s hard when you’re a couple, right, and friends are having to choose sides. ...Yeah and you know also she kept half, you know, she’s got the place. I just put my stuff in storage. And um, I didn’t have a lot of -- I had a hundred bucks saved up, and you know it was just time to go away. It also helps ease the breakup too, you know, she’s not just right around the corner. You know?

Two men, Sam and Paul, indicated that they grew up in foster care homes. Sosin, Colson and Grossman (1988) note that homeless persons are more likely to have been raised in foster care family situations. Although Paul said his foster family had been good, he had not spoken to them for some time, possible due to memory problems. Sam felt that, in part because his foster parents had sent him to a boarding school, he could no longer ask those individuals for assistance:

Sam: It seems like people took a dislike to me. I just don’t trust people, I think. I’m a misanthrope. I fear and/or mistrust them. And I was always defensive. Something happened to me when I was real young, I think. My mother deserted me when I was four and I went to foster parents. They were pretty nice, but at seven they put me in a boarding school and then at eight I went to another boarding school, all boys. And then at 11 I went back to live with my mother, and at 17 I joined the Army. I fought with my...
mother when I went back to live with her a lot. I ran and butted her with my head right in her stomach when she was pregnant with my half-sister, and I just -- I've been kind of a misfit all of my life. Didn't take anything off of anybody. I fought all my life. I've had probably 50 fights in my life.

**Kurt** Fist fights?

**Sam** Yeah.

Fred and Jeff, respectively, combined the idea that their families of origin were too far away to really help, and that they did not want to bother them with their personal troubles:

**Fred** Right after I had my operation for one week I could not work and that was for insurance reasons primarily. So then you're totally relieved of any duties.

**Kurt** How did your family react? Do you have family locally or --

**Fred** I don't have family locally at all. In fact, I haven't seen most of my family in a few years.

**Kurt** So they didn't know really about your --

**Fred** They didn't know about my illness.

**Kurt** You just mentioned families. I was thinking to myself, have you been in contact with your family?

**Jeff** Oh, yeah. I just talked to my sister because it was her birthday.

**Kurt** So, are they in the area?

**Jeff** No, they're in California.

**Kurt** Do they help you out at all? Do they know you're staying here?

**Jeff** Yes and no. They know I'm staying here right now, because I just called them and told them. But I don't want any help. I'm the only boy, I've got five older sisters. And I've never needed any help until I came to Las Vegas. I don't want to ask them. I'm sure they'd help me out, but I don't want to ask for a loan which is temporary. I don't have a full-time job to back up that loan.

Jorge, who I believe was suffering from mental illness, said that he could not be in contact with his extended family for fear of their safety:
They are criminals from the Nazi party who control my brains. I don't remember anything. If I remember anything it is because I have espionage with my enemy (laughs). If I send a letter or phone call to my family, they will kill my family. (Jorge)

Along with having lost contact with family members and friends, another response frequently emerged. Possibly the most common response to my questions “Have you been in touch with your family,” or “Does your family know you’re out here,” were statements of embarrassment at having become homeless and not wanting to reveal their homeless status to family members. Albert, for example, felt so ashamed of his lifestyle that he would rarely call his ex-wife and children:

And [before I became homeless] I was -- you know, being there with my kids, that was life. My kids crawling up in my arms and laying down on the couch and watching TV with them and helping them with their homework. Now here, you know, they're lucky if I call on the phone, 'cause I'm so embarrassed of my lifestyle right now. I hate myself. I mean, I totally 100% I hate what I'm doing. It's a possessive life. Drugs and alcohol, man, it's just -- God, man, I don't wish it on my worst enemy. The person I hate the most, which I try not to, but the person I would hate the most I would not wish what I'm going through on. It hurts. (Albert)

Kenneth had a similar response to my query. He once had family in Las Vegas, a brother and a sister, but they had since moved. As he explained, he didn't want to contact his family for help:

You know they say 'Kenneth, if you ever need anything just give me a call,' but that's not how it really is. They've got kids to take care of. And I don't want them to see Uncle Kenneth and think 'What's wrong with him?' (Kenneth)
Mark also indicated that members of his family of origin would not accept his homeless status:

Kurt Have you been in contact with other members of your family? Do they know you're here?
Mark Well, my mother knows that I'm here. Well, the last time I talked to my mother was four days before I brought myself in here. I have very little family. I have no family in Las Vegas. My brother will probably never speak to me again, and he's a lawyer and he teaches political science and all this stuff. He's -- $40,000 a year. I would be scum of the earth. My mother was very disappointed in me that I could not keep my life more evenly wrapped.

Some of the men seemed determined that, because they had become homeless on their own, they should also solve their problems without family assistance:

Kurt I'm curious, have you talked to your family since you've been here? Do they know that you're in a shelter and that you might need some help?
Phillip Well, my wife and kids -- I got divorced when I was in Germany, so I haven't seen them, and actually my sons are 16 and 17 now. I haven't seen them since they were two and three. And as far as that family goes, nobody knows. But my parents and that, they just moved to St. Louis and, no, I haven't told them. I just kind of feel that the reason why I got here was because I made bad decisions, and one way to straighten it out is to do it on my own. I've got to do my own thing.

Kurt You mentioned you have some family back in Indiana, have you talked to them since you've been here?
Kent Right, I have. I've talked mostly to my brother. I haven't told him I'm staying at the homeless shelter, I told him that I'm staying at a boarding place, work program, and I got a job. I told him about my plan to head up to Long Beach and maybe head to Colorado, but I haven't really told him that I'm staying in a shelter. I don't want their help. I'm a capable person, I'm going to get out and do it myself. I've
took care of myself since I was 14 years old. I had to grow up. My mom was married to a lot of alcoholics who were abusive and beat on her and stuff, and I didn’t have a chance to be a kid, I had to grow up and do it myself. I’m not going to let this, even being homeless -- I’m not going to fail at life.

Kurt So that’s the primary reason that you haven’t mentioned anything to them?

Kent Right. I’m going to do it all myself personally.

**Rental Problems/Rental Market**

Several men also experienced difficulties with renting apartments or houses in Las Vegas. These problems included: paying for those rentals, negotiating with roommates, and negotiating with their landlords once they had fallen behind in paying their rent. Many also said that renting an apartment in Las Vegas is more expensive than other places they had been, and found the practice by local weekly motels of confiscating the property of those who are unable to pay rent unscrupulous.

When I asked Kenneth what led to his homelessness, he began by stating, “I had a gay roommate I didn’t get along with.” When I asked him to elaborate on the relationship, he said that their lifestyle differences made it difficult for them to live together. Eventually falling behind on his share of the rent, he had to rely on the assistance of a “charitable” religious organization, which he said charged him and 12 others $277 to rent an apartment. This figure is just short of the standard amount of a rental voucher given to homeless persons who apply for government assistance through Clark County. The price of such apartments being set so close to the amount of a

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rental voucher is a marketing strategy that shares strong parallels with Ellie Winberg and Tom Wilson's (1981) description of dilapidated Single Room Occupancy hotels in New York City. The owners of such hotels would typically charge as much as state welfare programs would allow for housing while minimizing their investment in the property, as those who lived there had few other housing options. Kenneth, then, experienced two separate rental difficulties: one in renting his own apartment with a roommate, and another in questioning the motives of a supposedly charitable organization which charged as much as they could from those receiving local government rental vouchers.

Bill acquired a rental voucher from Clark County after he had been homeless and staying in a local shelter for several weeks. At the shelter, he eventually befriended another homeless man named Vincent. As evidenced in the following field notes, Bill had decided to help Vincent by letting him stay in the apartment despite the fact that Vincent had no money and seemed abusive:

I go to Bill's new apartment, the one paid [for] with a voucher from county social services. Vincent is there. Bill is drunk and keeps referring to Vincent as "hombre." Vincent tells him to cut that Spanish-shit out, mocks him, says he doesn't know nothing. He is sitting on Bill's bed. He gives Bill six dollars and orders him to pick up some more booze when we leave. In the car Bill says Vincent helped him out when no one else would, and that he wants to help him now that he has something. (Excerpt from my field notes)

Bill ended up sharing his motel room with this homeless "friend" even though it could get him evicted. The landlord eventually caught Vincent sleeping in Bill's
room, a violation of his tenant agreement. After receiving a warning from the landlord that they would both be evicted if Vincent were caught in the room again, Bill changed his mind about helping his homeless friend: "I like [Vincent] a lot, but if it's him or me, you know who's gonna go."

Jeff stated that wages in Las Vegas were not keeping up with the increasing cost of renting an apartment. He also explained that weekly rental agents were very unforgiving of men who fall behind on their rent, and that there are few local laws which protect those who rent apartments or hotels/motels by-the-week:

Jeff  Rents used to be low, but now people coming in have rents going back up. So in a way the rents have not stayed in tune. There's a lot of weekly rentals in Vegas which is one of the traps people get in. You'll find more people that come to Vegas who get into these weekly apartments. They should be outlawed. [They put people] in the streets within two or three months. Because once you miss your weekly rent, you're out in the street, there's no laws to protect you. You're gone the next day.  
Kurt  So weekly is different than monthly in the laws?  
Jeff  Yes - no. I mean monthlies in Vegas are, again, you don't pay the rent at the end of the month, in a few days you're gone. In California you don't pay your rent, you go through a long process. You can go through nine months of not paying your rent before you're finally out. Here, it's three days, you're out. It's so transitory, they don't care. They don't want to hear your story. 'I was sick for three days, my check is short, I'll make it up next week.' They don't want to hear that shit because they have another person waiting to get that apartment, and another new person coming in. It's either monthly or weekly. If you get stuck with the weekly rat race, it's a circle. You're one paycheck away from being in the streets. If you have a monthly paycheck, you're two paychecks from being in the streets. In a month you don't have your rent, you're gone. [It's only] two weeks in there [weeklies].
Jeff then described how weekly rentals will confiscate a man’s property if he falls behind on the rent. Furthermore, Jeff indicated that, although weeklies seem like an option for men with little savings to find an immediate alternative to the shelter, only one missed paycheck could cause a man to become homeless again:

Jeff: Okay. It takes you two weeks to find a job. Some [rental] places will work with you, some won’t. Most won’t; some will. It’s, okay, “I lost my job, I got a new one, I don’t get paid till this week, I’ll pay you the rent back and whatever late charges.” And most monthlies will work with you; most won’t. The weeklies won’t. They want their money right on the minute it’s due. If it’s due at 12:00, it better be in by 12:00. 12:01 a note’s on your door. By 12:02 they got a lock on the door. And that’s what happens. Here, is the men get out and they get so tired of this place that the minute they get a full-time job, they’re out of here, the first paycheck for the weekly place and they’re back here two weeks, three weeks, four weeks, a month later.

Kurt: So the weekly is part of the cycle that a lot of the guys –

Jeff: Sure, the weekly is the biggest downfall and the worst thing possible thing here in Vegas.

Kurt: You were staying in a weekly for a while?

Jeff: Right. I just got laid off from another job, I left the monthly apartment so I got a job working at a Mexican club as a bouncer, ten bucks an hour. I didn’t have enough money to get into another monthly, so I went to this weekly. And it worked out fine because I was working like 32 hours a week, was getting $360 a week under the table, so rent was like $125 a week, so it was working. But I went to L.A. on an emergency and I came back and didn’t have my job, so without the money getting paid every week, so I came here. The downfall of the homeless person is getting back to the weeklies, they’re going to be back here or on the streets in a couple weeks. They lose their job, it’s all over with. You know, most guys here the first paycheck they get, they want to get out of here.
Jeff was not alone in using weekly rentals which are typically more expensive than monthly ones because of their high turnover rate. Ronald also rented a weekly apartment, but had done so for months at a rate higher than many monthly rentals would have been:

Ron I got terminated from my job, and I had enough money saved for three weeks' rent on a weekly basis that I was paying my rent.
Kurt You were staying in a weekly motel?
Ron It wasn't a motel, it was an apartment, but you could pay weekly or monthly. I was there eight months and paid on a weekly basis, $160 a week, which averaged about $640 a month.

Alex found it difficult to keep up with his weekly rental payments as well once he lost his construction job. He said those payments were “two-hundred-plus dollars a week.” This meant Alex was paying about $800 a month as a single man living in an apartment.

To summarize, rental problems such as: difficulty in paying rent, difficulty with roommates, and expensive weekly rentals with limited grace periods for paying were mentioned by several men as contributing to their homelessness.

**Conclusion**

Based on grounded theory categories developed from interview data, and similar to the typologies created by other researchers (cf. Snow and Anderson 1993; Shlay and Rossi 1992), I created a general classification...
scheme in order to better understand the many ways these men became homeless. I must stress again, however, that these categories are in no way "mutually exclusive." In other words, the causes which may lead a man to homelessness are overlapping and may frequently interact with one another. One man, for example, has both health problems and was recently released from prison. Two men engaged in substance abuse then lost their full time jobs. Several of the reasons listed above, such as loss of a permanent job, may seem to have analytical primacy in understanding why someone became homeless, but other reasons, such as loss of family network, may be just as important in understanding why a man was unable to stop a series of unfortunate events from leading to homelessness.

This research, then, does not support the idea that the conditions leading to homelessness are reducible to several categories that can then be used to develop social programs that target specific problems at the expense of others. Instead, I wish to relate to the reader the dynamic social processes which led to several individuals' homelessness. I have used long quotes of the men's own explanations under my headings to indicate both the strength of this classification scheme in forming a generalized understanding of why men became homeless, but also to relate the unique and uncategorizable nexus of circumstances surrounding a man's current lack of shelter.

Homelessness is a condition which many individuals share, but often for entirely different reasons. In developing social policy to address homelessness, therefore, one must consider the unique circumstances which precipitated a given individual's homelessness. For example, Ziggy said that
specialized programs designed to address a problem such as substance abuse may have goals which conflict with a work schedule that a man is trying to keep in order to save money:

Ziggy Like [one shelter], they're pretty good. But if you've already got a job and you run on hard times, you go over there and you're locked down for two weeks. So if you've got a job, you lose that job.

Kurt Locked down. You can't leave?

Ziggy Yeah. It's like two weeks of what they call detox period. So if I'm not a drug and alcohol user, compulsive gambler, I get a job. I go in their program, I have [to] arrange a two weeks' leave of absence. [If not,] when I enter that program, I lose that job, and then I'm back to square one looking for another job because of that program. [Another local shelter operates] basically the same way. They have a two-week detox type program.

Although there are certain patterns in the circumstances leading to the homelessness of these men, there will be a number of men whose unique circumstances will inhibit them from accessing or making the best use of highly specialized programs. Conversely, night-by-night shelters which warehouse homeless people often have difficulty providing any assistance programs beyond immediate shelter needs to homeless men who often suffer from a range of problems.

Social service providers, then, are faced with their own daunting set of problems in providing relief and long-term assistance to end homelessness. For example, several different services for homeless men exist in our community, but homeless men who need specialized services may not be aware of programs with different orientations. Becky discussed at length how
the MASH program is hoping to provide several on-site services as well as a
network among homeless service providers to create a "continuum of care".

Kurt So this is the first place that people should come?
Becky That is one of the first things. This is almost like a
shopping mall, but we run it a bit like a triage in a hospital.
A person coming in here will stop at the front window, do
an intake form which is a few pages of information --
background history, veteran status, medical status,
financial status, work history, emergency numbers,
whatever they have available.

And then they come through that part and see a
case manager. And that case manager will do a needs
assessment on that person, anything from they need socks
or Band-Aids for their blisters to employment skills to
mental health skills to ascertaining if it's a dual diagnosis,
is it a person that needs substance abuse, is it a person
that could benefit by a work program, a shelter work
program, or is does this person need to go to a detox unit
because they're actively coming down from a substance at
that point, is it somebody that needs to go to the state
facility and have their psychotropic medications filled—it
could be anything—any gamut. It could be a
homicidal/suicidal person coming through to the person
who's never been homeless and just got their wallet lifted
and they're stranded here in Las Vegas.

So many of the men that come through will be
looking for some short-term intervention. Some of them
are looking for long-term intervention and have been
chronically homeless for years. My particular thing is I've
worked on the streets for eight years with a lot of
chronically homeless people who now I watch some of
those men come back and transition back into — and it's
taken many years to see that transpire and with the
continuum care that we have with the MASH Village has
made that much more accessible and attainable and not as
hard for some people, especially people that have been on
the streets a long time.

...So we have to do a lot of explaining. A lot of ours
is of intimacy with the person, to be sitting like I'm sitting
with you and be able to say this is Kurt Borchard, and Kurt,
what's unique to your situation? We've been able to be
much more relaxed with people, be much closer to people,
giving them back a little dignity and a little bit more identity
than just slamming through, "Well, I can't get you this
service, and you need to move on.” We’re able to actually
lay out something that same day. So that a person comes
in and doesn’t leave with nothing, even if it’s a lengthy
conversation that says we care, that these are some of the
things that you need to be able to accomplish, you’re
making some of these choices and this is how I can
facilitate this without enabling that person. And so I think
that that’s one of the most unique things about having the
crisis intervention center portion of the MASH Village is
that we can reach a lot of the population, and we can
always give them a little something to go on.

So, like I said, when somebody comes through, if
they’re a veteran, we normally have a veteran service on­
site three of four times a week from the vet center or the
Veterans Administration itself to assist maybe that veteran
with upgrading a discharge, obtaining a DD2-14 some
necessary documentation, applying for benefits or letting
them know where the medical care that they may need is
available in this community.

Three times a week the Employment Security
Division, State of Nevada Employment Office comes on­
site complete with a modem so that they can plug in their
computer and actually pull up actual listings working with
the veteran population and the regular population as well.
The services include community health, Homeless Health
Care comes onsite—they bring at least a three-person
team with them which would be a person that could do
substance abuse counseling, a social worker, and a nurse.

One problem with this approach, however, is that many homeless
people don’t know such a “clearing house” agency exists. Indeed, as Ziggy
explained, most homeless people don’t use agency information, but instead
find out how to access social services from other homeless people through a
“street network”:

Ziggy At 7:00 tonight over at Cashman Field there’s a church
called Ministry on the Streets. They come every Thursday
night at 7:00 and they feed real well. Now, tomorrow night,
between 7:00 and 8:00, there’s a lady who’s going to come
right at the end of this parking lot and feed. And she feeds
pretty decent. And she’ll also be here again Friday night.
So for those who work and don't get off till 3:00, that's Tuesday nights; Cashman Field, Wednesday, and Friday nights here in the parking lot, Sunday evenings on the other side of the parking lot, and who knows who else might show up and feed sometime during the week.

Kurt How did you find out about these?
Ziggy By talking to the people on the street. You talk to these people in these agencies and they don't know jack. And in the papers that they do give you for the services that they think they got a handle on are no longer available or these places are closed down or moved or no longer providing these services. So your best information for getting any information is talk to people on the street. You get a lot better information.

Kurt A lot more current.
Ziggy A lot more current. Updated information.

These networks are a lifeline for many homeless persons. However, without constantly updated and accurate information, homeless men (and women) may inadvertently attempt to address their homelessness through less appropriate agencies, or through shelter programs designed for other types of homeless persons. In the next chapter, I address these and other issues involving the bureaucratic organization of shelters as a dominant response to homelessness.
CHAPTER 7

THE BUREAUCRACIES OF SHELTERS

Poverty is asking for help. I will tell you how it feels. You find out where the office is that you are supposed to visit. You circle that block four or five times...You go in. Everybody is very busy. Finally, someone comes out and you tell her that you need help. That person is never the person you need to see. You go see another person, and after spilling the whole shame of your poverty all over the desk between you, you find that this isn’t the right office after all -- you must repeat the whole process, and it never is any easier at the next place. (Parker 1989:556-7)

Go to any government agency, or, for that matter, to most private charities, and you will find yourself enmeshed, at once, in a bureaucracy so tangled and oppressive, or confronted with so much moral arrogance and contempt, that you will be driven back on the streets for relief. (Marin 1987:47)

In the first of the preceding quotes, one woman describes her interaction with an unnamed charitable organization or government social service provider. She indicates both the process by which assistance to the poor is commonly delivered today through bureaucratic organizations, and also the feelings an applicant may experience when making a request from such an impersonal source of assistance. In the second quote, a man indicates why many such bureaucracies fail in their overt mission to help the homeless.
A bureaucracy may be defined as a formal organization based on characteristics which include: 1) a clearly outlined division of labor, 2) a set of rules and regulations, 3) a hierarchy of authority, 4) the impartial selection and promotion of individuals based on technical competence, and 5) detailed, written records of the activities and practices of the organization and its members (Curry, Jiobu and Schwirian 1997). While assistance to the poor in traditional societies was once delivered directly through primary group associations, assistance for the poor in modern society has become administered through bureaucratic governmental assistance programs and religious charitable organizations (Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989:39-41). Such programs and organizations are also a primary source of relief for men currently homeless in Las Vegas. However, in the case of destitute persons, the combination of impersonality, task specialization and increased efficiency of such bureaucratic forms of assistance could be seen as paradoxical, and sometimes even contradictory. Thus Jerry (discussed in Chapter 5) had to travel many miles from one shelter to another before finding one which would accept an individual in his physical condition.

The pros and cons of an increasingly bureaucratized society have been analyzed in depth by Max Weber. In general, Weber saw bureaucracies as an extension of rationalized logic pervading modern society. He was pessimistic regarding the future of our rationalized society, seeing rationalization and bureaucratization as inescapable traps we have created which, although capable of handling large volumes of cases, may also limit our spontaneity and humanity. Weber’s theories are especially useful to understand both the
possibilities and limitations inherent in any attempt to overcome homelessness within a bureaucratically-entrenched society.

In this section I will discuss how homeless men in Las Vegas experience bureaucracies which provide them with direct shelter and food relief, and how these men understand such bureaucratically-organized forms of relief as simultaneously addressing and reproducing local homelessness. I will discuss men's thoughts on three different shelters (which I will call "Working Shelter," "Addict Shelter" and "Religious Shelter"). I will also indicate how the men relate the bureaucratic structure at each shelter to their delivery of assistance.

The Bureaucracy at "Working Shelter"

Several of the shelter-using men I spoke to gave me extensive accounts of the bureaucratic organization of those shelters. These accounts were often explanations of the shelter's division of labor, rules and regulations or hierarchy of authority, sometimes followed by their own evaluation of these characteristics. Bob provided me one such explanation:

There's actually a lot of functions that happen at [Working Shelter]....They have the men's work program, and I'll tell you the details. And then they have what you call the homeless shelter annex. The annex is simply a place where you sleep on cots, no sheets, no pillows, no nothing, and it's from the duration at 6:00 p.m. till 5:45 in the morning. No food, no nothing. The work program is a place where you get a sheet, a bunk, they do some of your laundry, you get three meals and a place to sleep in exchange for – they have three definitions of people here and they're diagnosed with a different color card. You have an orange card, it's called a P. A. card, which means Program
Assistant. Then you have a red card, the people that are not full-time employees, they work out of the job office. Then we have white cards which are full-time employees, and they chose to live here because it’s only 20 percent of your weekly income based on your gross, not your net. I don’t think that’s fair. (Bob)

Bob’s description indicates that the shelter’s organization involves several characteristics of bureaucratic structure. The shelter has specific rules, which are different in different areas. Bob also discussed the division of labor and hierarchy of authority within the main shelter based on the color of the "cards," or the color of a small dot on an otherwise white, laminated badge worn by each of the men there. These badges and their different colored dots provide a visible indicator to everyone at the shelter of a man’s name, his bunk assignment, and the terms by which he agreed to participate in shelter life.

Possibly the clearest and most detailed explanation of this system came from Alex. His description is worth quoting at length, because it clarifies both the distinctions between different types of badges and status levels in the shelter, and also the different rules applied to men of different statuses:

Kurt [Could you] explain the dots to me and how the system works here in terms of work and chores?
Alex When you first come in to the program, you’re a red dot. If you have no job, like I came in basically off the street, I was unemployed at the time and I got no money coming in whatsoever, so I’m a red dot. And the red dot is then assigned to two days of chores on an eight-hour basis, and then you have two days off and two days on. The way the red dot works, it’s like you’re the lowest, you know, you’re the private of the bunch, but yet you get the more days off to yourself to be able to look for another job. So you work two days on, then on your two days off you can go into the job office. The first time you will get out guaranteed, you know, they’ll get you out right away so that you got some money, and then you go out and look for jobs yourself.
An orange dot is a volunteer, which is called personnel assistant. So when you become an orange dot, you'll work 40-plus hours here with your two days off, and you'll get a steak dinner on Saturdays.

And if you have a white dot, the white dot means -- okay, on the red dots now, you have a lot of rules. At 9:30 the lights are out in the dorms. At 11:00 you have a curfew. By 11:30 they have a bed check. All red dots have to be in bed by 11:00. You're not allowed on the floor after 6:30 in the morning. Now, the orange dots, they're allowed on the floor, they can go to sleep after they get off of work when they're working here, because sometimes they'll work different hours. They get their steak dinner and they don't have curfew. If they want to go out and stay out all night long, that's fine. You know, they can pretty much kind of do what they want. But they still have to -- I don't know if they have to sign in or out.

A white dot now, a white dot is a person who has an outside full-time job. Basically this is kind of like their apartment to them. They come and they go just basically as they please. I think they don't have to sign in. They do sign out on their way to work as to what time they went to work on those days, but on their off days they can come and go. If they decide they don't want to sleep here tonight, they don't have to. If they don't want to eat here, you know. They pretty much got all of the freedom, you know, to do whatever they want. They just go to work, come back.

Then, of course, each pay day, whatever their pay day is, they have to pay 20 percent of what their paycheck is, not to exceed $75. So if they get paid weekly, they have to make sure that on payday they're back here, because they have 24 hours to pay it. If you don't pay within the 24 hours, then you're out. So you just have to make sure that whatever your pay day is you cash your check, get down here and pay. For $75, you know, I mean, if you’re only making $100, even though it's a full-time job, your pay is still only $75. Now, if you're working a part-time job that's under 36 hours, then you pay $1 for every $5, not to exceed $25. But I don't know how that would work if you were getting paid weekly. That would kind of be a little different. But if you're getting paid daily, you know, not to exceed [the 1 to 5 ratio]. So if you made $100 in one day, you still pay 25.
In several respects, Alex is not simply describing the shelter system, but also indicating the way in which it is used to promote social control, stratification, and hierarchization. Another man, Jeff, also described the shelter hierarchy in a much simpler explanation of the badge system:

Depending on the hierarchy and where you are in the hierarchy in the shelter, they have badges of the different stages in the program. Now a red badge, you have to [work], you have to sign up before 6:30 in the morning at the job office to get a job. Orange cards are PAs, program assistants, most of them are non-paid, they're working [here] 40 hours a week. Those are the basics. (Jeff)

Between Bob, Alex and Jeff's statements, three different colored dots indicate important differences between the types of agreements different men have reached in order to stay at the main shelter. As Alex explained, "White dots" are those men employed in full-time work outside of the shelter, men who pay 20% of their income to live there. As Bob stated, many services beyond immediate shelter needs, such as meals and laundry, are included in their program agreement. "Red Dots" are men who work in the shelter for two days, then have two days off where they may sign up for paid day labor jobs through the shelter's work program. A third category is the "Orange Dots," or program assistants. As Jeff explained, these men work 40 hours a week, usually with very limited (if any) pay, in the shelter. However, on their days off, they are given the first available day labor jobs which come through the shelter's job office.

Although the men at the main shelter can choose one of three different levels of participation, those who stay in the annex are assigned "Shelter
Annex" cards which also often state that the man has "Special Needs."

According to another interviewee, Kent, these men pay three dollars a night to stay and receive three meals at the shelter. A more detailed explanation of the differences between Annex compared to the larger shelter groups, and the underlying logic behind the development of one program for men staying at the Annex and other programs for those who stay at the main shelter, was provided to me by Sue, a service provider:

We have three tiers of a shelter program. The highest tier is the resident-work program and that's where we are the most successful. That's where we put 1100 men to work last year. That's structured. We make a contract with the men. This is the homeless man that never expected to be homeless, didn't want to be homeless, and if the situation was such, he's ready to make change. So, he's not satisfied with his status any more. He just needs a helping hand for this period of time to get him going again. We make a contract, we say, 'Okay, we'll give you three meals a day, laundry service, haircut, clothes if you need it when you first move in. In return, we need you to look for work, we need to have an action plan with your case manager, you need to open up a passbook savings account, and if you work, you need to pay a fair share back to the program. So, we'll help, but we're not going to do it all for you. You've got to take on responsibility for yourself.' So part of it is self-esteem issues, part of is an accountability issue. We want success. We want graduates. We want people to move out, go on with their merry way of life. So we have no interest in retaining them here, we need to move them on. We have about 300 and some beds for that program.

We have a mid-level shelter program right now called the $3-a-bed night. Someone may – they're not with the program yet, but we hope that they'll consider going there. They can reserve the bed and pay $3 a night as compared to the lowest level where it's just first come-first serve, doors open up at 6:00, you stay overnight and you're out in the morning at 5:30.

The $3-a-bed-night, you get tickets for three meals a day, you get case management. They'll have access to case management if they want it. In the resident-work program case management is required and [in] the $3-a-night program [it] is optional, and we hope they'll access it. In just the overnight shelter, they're just in sleeping and out, so there's no additional meals and no case management. (Sue)
According to this service provider, the categories were created to provide the men with different options for addressing their homelessness. The first "tier" mentioned by the service provider would be what the men often called the "White Dots," where the men are employed full-time outside of the shelter. Men must pay 20% of their gross income in order to participate in that program. This payment is referred to as "fair share" by the service provider and various men. During interviews, however, some men would express resentment at having to pay 20% of their income to the shelter run by a charitable organization. Kent even wondered whether or not the program was then really designed to help a man end his homelessness:

Okay, like I was saying, at the annex they charge you three bucks a night. Here if you work a spot job, say you make $40, they take at least five bucks of that, no more than $5. If you work a full-time job, they take 20 percent of your income. Of your gross income. So to me that's wrong. If you gross $200, the tax man takes $40, so [the shelter] is going to take $40 on top of that $40. So how much are you really making? You're not really making nothing. To me that's wrong. They say $5 a day, or no more than $75 a week they'll take. Which is a lot of money. Especially when you're homeless. I mean, if I made $200 a week, it would take me months and months to save up enough money to get a place around here, because rent is really expensive here. (Kent)

Jeff characterized his "Orange Dot" status within the shelter as that of an unpaid laborer, but one ultimately with more freedom:

Kurt Which program are you in?
Jeff I'm in the work program. I'm an orange dot, which means I give [the shelter] 40 hours free of charge. So I have a little more freedom.
Kurt So...tell me about what you do.
Jeff I work in the kitchen. Mainly I work with pots and pans between the lineup. But I work eight hours, five days a week for them. And in return, I don't have a bed curfew at
night. Most of these people do. I don't have to sleep here. Like, if I want to, if I met a girl, I could go to her house and stay there so long as I make it back for the next shift. That's the advantage of being an orange dot.

George, on the other hand, shared the service provider's understanding of the program, one designed to target men who can find full-time jobs and end their dependency on the shelter within a few months:

Kurt: I'm interested in how your experience has been here in the shelter.

George: To me it's been relatively good. I don't see too much of a problem with it. Actually, I think it's a pretty good thing. If you come here and you have a job and they're willing to let, they let you right in, and you just have to prove that you got a job and it's full-time, and you get a white dot and you can pretty much do what you want.

However, George also indicated that those who chose to become "Red Dots" were less likely to see their homelessness as temporary:

Now these other guys come in, they start off with red dots, they have to go do spot jobs, trying to get themselves a job, and most of them, they just want to stay that way. They just want to stay on the red dot status, do spot jobs, and spot jobs are just making a living and living life, I guess. (George)

Men who are program assistants, who often had been at the shelter for longer periods and who were frequently "higher up" in terms of shelter duty and status, seemed to feel more comfortable with the shelter rules than shorter-term shelter residents. Program assistants like Jeff, whose jobs often involved maintaining the smooth bureaucratic operations within the shelter, generally seemed to ultimately understand all rules as purposeful:
Jeff Yeah, and I came over here, and it's regimental. There's a lot of rules, some are silly, some are not. But if you look at the program in general, all these rules really what they are is to get you ready to pay your rent, pay your bills on time, get to work on time, so it's kind of set me up to be on your own again. Other guys [who] come in here are used to being institutionalized, come from prisons, come from jail, and have been on the streets for a long time and don't have those skills they need. And other guys come in here who have those skills just, that it's just [based on] other circumstances [that] they come down here, you know, they lost their job, whatever. But the rules and regulations here are meant to teach you to get back into the groove of being on your own again. Eventually, once you find a full-time job and you're used to paying a fair share here which is the same as paying rent, you have to be at a job at a certain time, there are consequences if you don't, same as if you go to a job late, you get fired. So the rules here basically are designed to get you back on your feet and get you independent again.

Jeff also acknowledged that some of the men who came into the shelter might not be able to follow all the rules. In those instances, he indicated that the shelter would then not be of much assistance to someone who could not figure out how to address his own homelessness:

Kurt You've been here a few months, how many guys would you say have successfully made it through that series of steps you just talked about?
Jeff Well, since I've been here, I'd say 100. Maybe a little more, maybe a little less. A lot of guys who come in here don't make it more than two or three weeks. Some of them don't make it more than three days. They can't follow the rules.

Implicit in Jeff's statements are the ideas that some men are worthy of being assisted "out" of homelessness, while others may not be, and that the role of this charitable organization is primarily to help those who can also help
themselves. These views are also apparent in the statements of Sue (the service provider), who said that the basic goal of “Work Shelter” was to create "graduates," or those who would get full time jobs and, "move out, go on with their merry way of life. So we have no interest in retaining them here, we need to move them on."

Men who were program assistants/security workers and had relatively high status within the organization at the shelter, however, also tended to be longer-term residents. Several of the men I spoke with did not seem concerned with leaving the shelter, but seemed to have found a niche within that system as shelter support staff. Their role could be seen as somewhat akin to "middle management," or a go-between for the social work administrators and social service providers hired to run the shelter, and those men with either "White Dot" or "Red Dot" status. Jeff explained his status within this "elite" group, charged with supervising other homeless men and diffusing problems before paid security guards are called in:

Kurt: How do people see different groups in a place like [Working Shelter]?
Jeff: Okay. You can tell by the jobs that we have here. There's security. We're a 12-man force. Elite force. The reason I use the word elite, is [because that is] the word our directors use. You are the best of the best in this program. We're the people that can actually function here. We can follow the rules, we know what the rules are, we can enforce them in the right way, okay.

We have this guy [points to a paid security guard in uniform] to be the asshole. I'm the mediator, okay. If a guy comes in drunk, I can mediate and find out what the hell happened and give him the chance to go out and come in. We're the problem-solvers...We have a problem over here, have a problem over there. It's raining, we have 125 spaces [at another building, and some] guys came in [requesting shelter there]. There is extra space but the
roof leaks, they got to move people, they need that extra space. His solution is 'Get the fuck out before I call Metro.'

My solution is to go over, look the place out, see how much space they got, see if there can be any space in the near future, if it stops raining, you're on the waiting list, you're next in line. That never happened, they left.

My job is to keep shit from getting out of hand. Now, we have guys in in-take, pretty nice guys. guys, little more education, you know, they can deal with people. Then you got housekeeping. Housekeeping is made up of the old-timers.

Although Jeff says he is part of an elite force, he then indicates that men who are "Red Dots," or who work two days on and two days off in less prestigious jobs within the shelter, also fulfill an important function in the shelter organization. Jeff notes that another subcategory within "Red Dots" are those in housekeeping jobs which are often assigned to older men with possibly less strength or who are less skilled. Ironically, then, a shelter which to most outsiders (and even to some inside) would seem created in order to address and help end each man's homelessness, may also create options for some men for a long-term stay so long as they help maintain the bureaucracy. Such men may arrive homeless, but those who find a niche for themselves in the shelter bureaucracy may develop a unique way of life, a state between homelessness and complete autonomy in a home or rented apartment which may best be described as a form of communal living.

The way that both certain men and the shelter organization perpetuate this communal living arrangement is through a strategic division of labor, maintained by having staff able to determine what these men are and are not capable of, are or are not willing to do (both in terms of rules and chores), and the fact that many of these men choose to stay in the shelter because they
have few options outside of this communal arrangement which would be more suitable. Jeff further explained the differences between jobs for those who stay at the shelter for months or even years, those who stay for a shorter span in a purposeful attempt to eventually rent an apartment, and those who, for one reason or another, stay only briefly at the shelter:

Intake has a lot of the young guys that come in here looking sharp and are able to [function]. Housekeeping is the old-timers that have been here forever, who have nothing else to do but clean the toilets, sweep the place, that’s their only job, spend an hour, hour-and-a-half in the morning to sit back and do whatever they want, which is usually nothing. Those are the guys who can’t function outside. Those are the guys who have been in jail for so long, they just don’t know what it is like on the outside, and they’ve been here for so long that if you would put them in an apartment and pay their rent for six months, they wouldn’t know what to do, okay. Then you have kitchen. Kitchen, we can’t get anybody to go in there okay. We just hijack people. By the different jobs you have, you can tell the different people. If you just sit here in the morning at 5:30...when they start taking them in [at 7:30], you’ll be able to tell who the fuckups [are] going to be, who’s the guy we might call security, who might go to the kitchen, who might go to in-take, okay. You’ll be able to see that these are long-time homeless, the guy who used to come in here try to work the program. You can tell by their attitudes of what they’re like, when they’re waiting to get in. I can see the new guys in in-take so I know just [which] one I’ll be kicking out within the week. I’m always right, who the guy’s who’s going to fuck up. I got to kick out. Who’s going to get a decent job. So there’s the guys who are drug addicts and alcoholics who can’t function out of here. They’re old-timers so they give them breaks. Then there are the guys who really want to work and get out of here, and they’ll go out and find any job they can, and they find guys who work full-time, stay here a few months then they’ll go out. They usually won’t come back. Maybe 20 percent will come back. Then you got the guys who go out, get a full-time job, go out [after they get their] first paycheck. 90 percent of those will be back. That’s how you tell the different type of homeless. (Jeff)

At different points in his interview, then, Jeff indicated that the shelter’s primary goal was to end men’s homelessness through teaching all men to
follow rules, while also stating that many of the men might not be able to end
their homeless because they are "old-timers" who get "a break" around the
shelter which does little to get rid of them, since they have few alternatives to
shelter life. Jeff then felt it perfectly acceptable for men to use the shelter for
different purposes, and for the shelter in turn to use the men for varied tasks
as a precondition for staying.

Bob, however, who had no immediate plans to leave and who had
secured a niche in the intake office, seemed melancholic that some of the men
at this shelter stayed indefinitely. He seemed to think the shelter was failing in
its duty to help end homelessness:

Kurt But as far as a supportive network of people in the shelter,
what do you see happening there?

Bob It's very poor. That's what it lacks. I think at this level, you
need to look at your life, see why you're here. Whether it's
indirect due to medical or family, whatever, and face them,
and stop using from alcohol and gaming, go to your real
problem, stay focused, and solve them. There is nothing
here formatted to solve your problems. They really don't.
It's a sad situation. You can pretty much flop around here.
If you do a couple functions around here then you can stay
here endlessly, which is sad because you get in the
comfort zone, and once you're there, you won't break it
unless some tragic thing happens.

Mark, however, felt that although he wanted to use the shelter to end his
homelessness, others simply came to the shelter with different goals in mind:

Trying to differentiate. Okay. You have those people like
myself who -- well, it's still probably a matter of ego. To me, I
fell on hard times, I fell behind on my bills, I knew what was
coming; I salvaged what I could, I brought myself here to get
myself back out. You have those people that have been here --
okay, I left in June of '95. There are people that are here that
have been here since I was here then. I cannot in myself

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understand why or how a person would do this. If they are satisfied with being here, of course that’s their option. I hope not to be that judgmental. It’s just not for me. (Mark)

Kent, and those like him who were new to the shelter, tended to feel that the entrenchment of certain men there seemed to indicate that the shelter bureaucracy’s most basic goal was to perpetuate itself while simultaneously inspiring some men’s dependence on the shelter itself:

Kurt ...How does it work here, do they have case managers and things?
Kent They have case managers here, but I’ve never talked to any of them. I don’t even know what their goal [is] or what they do....[A man seated nearby] spent two years, that’s a long time to be here. And you’ll see a lot of guys around here that live off the system. They don’t go look for jobs, they intentionally work in the kitchen or they work in the intake office or something like that. They’ve been here for a long time.

(And later in the interview)

Kurt Do they tend to hang out in groups with themselves, are there sort of known groups of people who are longer --
Kent Well, everybody pretty much talks to everybody. If you want to talk to them, they’re pretty cool. But they’re what I call lifers. They have no desire to get out and make it on their own, and that’s really pathetic. Totally pathetic, because my number one goal is to get placed. This is a very depressing place.

The Bureaucracy at “Addict Shelter”

Several of the men I spoke to had used another shelter which also had a bureaucratic structure in place. This shelter maintains different organization patterns, rules, and practices. I will call this shelter “Addict
Shelter," because the bureaucratic structure seems best suited to assisting homeless men who are also substance abusers.

One important difference between this shelter and the Working Shelter was that, for those men without money, the Addict Shelter limited the number of times a man might stay to a maximum of seven days. As I discuss in this fieldnote excerpt, one man then attempted to find a way around a punch-card system used to limit access to shelter to only the "new" or "recent" homeless:

One man shows another man a shelter punch card he has found. He explains that the card allows a person up to seven days' stay in the shelter. He says those who have used the shelter the least are most likely to get in.

The man in charge of letting people in calls out that those who are new have first priority, then those who have only been in the shelter a day are admitted, etc. The man believes the card he found is valuable because it has only been used once. The other men point out, though, that the card is worthless without having identification that matches the name on it.

By the time the "third dayers" are let in, the shelter is full and cannot accept even those who have several unused punches in their cards. The man who found the card throws it back on the ground and leaves.

Ziggy, who had used this shelter, complained bitterly about the irregularity of his admittance to this shelter caused by their policy of giving priority to the most recent homeless. In addition, he found the food worse than the meals at similarly-named shelters across the U.S.:

Ziggy The services that I've used here, acquainted with here are far different than services that I've met in other parts of the country. It's not quite the same.

Kurt Totally different?

Ziggy [Addict Shelter] for instance. [Addict Shelter] here, you go up and they allow you to sleep at night. No problem. That's the good thing. They have a little job development office that they are now starting to incorporate into their
services up there. It's a good thing. I got no problem with that. [Addict Shelters] I've met in other parts of the country and that I've gone to, you go there and they give you five to seven nights' stay. They allow you breakfast when you wake up in the morning, and when you clock in in the evening they also feed you a dinner, a real meal. The [Addict Shelter] here doesn't do that. You go in and you sleep at night and the next night you might get in; the third night you probably won't get in. They don't give you a continuous amount of days. And the only meal you get out of them is in the afternoons, which is not befitting to be called a meal, in my opinion.

Ziggy also explained that this shelter, which technically allowed up to seven nights' stay, was different from the transitional programs which were also on the premises. According to Ziggy, these programs were also offered to homeless men, but only if they met the criteria for acceptance into those programs. He indicated that one was a mental health program, another was for substance abusers, and a third was for men to develop culinary skills:

Kurt  Are there a lot of people trying to get in at [Addict Shelter]?
Ziggy  Not really. And the ones that are has either mental hygiene cases or some kind of chemical dependencies. And that's what their programs up there are geared for. Again, supplemented by either the State or the County or the Federal Government when they do provide these services for the people. Any other services is only like I said, a bed for the night. And then you're out. They do have a couple of programs, like I said, they're incorporating now, like the job developments, and I think they've got a culinary program. But then you have to, like I say, you have to be qualified to join one of these programs. Either drug and alcohol, mental case, or one of these programs like the Culinary Union or something like that. Other than that [the shelter is] just somewhere to go during the day to get out of the sun.
Hector and Brandon also noted that the Addict Shelter seemed to have religious cliques, and also demanded that a man attend a program for substance abusers, both of which Brandon in particular opposed:

Brandon: The [Addict Shelter] is very manipulative.
Kurt: How do you mean?
Hector: Most of the programs over there are religious.
Brandon: Yeah, it's cliques. And if you fit in their clique, then they'll accept you. If you don't, then they'll cast you aside or whatever. I don't have a drug problem. That's why everybody looks at me, "He doesn't do crack, all he does is" -- I might smoke a joint every so often. And it's like I don't have a heavy crack problem or a heavy drug problem and they can't understand it. So when I go in and ask for assistance, they're like, "What do you need assistance with?"
Kurt: So they assume you're doing drugs or something?
Brandon: And I tell them I'm clean.

Sam also indicated, however, that if a man didn't qualify for admittance to one of the shelter programs or was not both completely destitute and recently homeless, he could simply pay five dollars a night to stay in a dorm setting in the Addict Shelter:

Kurt: Have you checked out any of the other services for homeless men in Las Vegas since you've been here, other shelters or soup lines?
Sam: You've got [the Addict Shelter]. It's if you're a drug addict or alcoholic. Luckily, I'm neither one of those. So otherwise, if you're not one of those, you don't qualify for there unless you pay $5 a night. Then everybody qualifies for that, no matter if you're homeless or not.

Keith, however, maintained that all the men at the Addict Shelter, paying or not, were required to attend a church service:
Kurt: What is the schedule like here at the [Addict Shelter]?
Keith: Here you go to church at seven, eat, then you can take a shower and go to bed. They wake you at five.

Even more extreme requirements of church attendance and substance abuse programs may be found at a third shelter in Las Vegas which I discuss in my next section.

The Bureaucracy at “Religious Shelter”

Of the three shelters I examined, the bureaucratic structure of the third, which I call “Religious Shelter,” is indeed the most overtly religious in orientation of the three. Working Shelter, for example, had a non-denominationally specific slogan on banners in their building, which read “The Dignity Within.” Religious Shelter, by contrast, had a large neon sign on the outside of their building which reads “Jesus Saves.” Describing his experience at Religious Shelter, Phillip states that they had the strictest requirements for church service attendance of any of the local shelters he had used:

Kurt: [What other shelters have you used in Las Vegas?]
Phillip: You've got the [Religious Shelter]. You've got to be willing to have the Lord forced down your throat, 24/7. Don't get me wrong, I believe in the Lord, but I don't believe it should get shoved down your throat.
Kurt: So they make you attend services at the Mission?
Phillip: At the [Religious Shelter]? You've got to attend two different services a day. And that's just going a little bit too far. You've got to read your bible for 30 minutes a day and a bunch of other stuff like that. It's just forcing it down your throat.
Kurt: Did you stay there?
Phillip: One day. I ended up telling them what they can do with their [shelter].
Ziggy, who had also stayed at the Religious Shelter, adds that the shelter maintained a two-week "lock down" policy to address the presumed addiction problem of all admitted. As he also claimed, people who weren't addicted to anything would lose their job in order to address a potentially nonexistent substance abuse problem:

Ziggy  The [Religious Shelter], they're pretty good. But if you've already got a job and you run on hard times, you go over there and you're locked down for two weeks. So if you've got a job, you lose that job.

Kurt  Locked down. You can't leave?

Ziggy  Yeah. It's like two weeks of what they call detox period. So if I'm not a drug and alcohol user, compulsive gambler, I get a job, I go in their program, I have [to] arrange a two weeks' leave of absence. [If not,] when I enter that program, I lose that job, and then I'm back to square one looking for another job because of that program.

Albert, on the other hand, thought the emphasis on religion and ending substance abuse at the Religious Shelter was administered with genuine concern for and desire to help homeless persons. He indicated that the shelter's spiritual and moral structure had helped him kick cocaine for three months:

Here comes Mark, my good buddy. We were out smoking crack on the railroad tracks last night. He's a good man. Totally good people. The guy has a -- [talking to Mark] I'm talking now. I'll be over in a minute.

We were in the [shelter] together, the [Religious Shelter]. Now, I'll tell you what. You want to talk about a place, of all places here in Las Vegas that really want to help the homeless people, that really want to help people get their lives together is

---

1 The "lock-down" policy of the Religious Shelter also had the unfortunate side-effect of inhibiting me from meeting and interviewing more men who had used this shelter.
[that one]. It's a Christian-run place. The pastor there is for real. It's a for-real place. I stayed sober and clean over there for about 90 days. And one day I just got that urge to go out. Instead of dealing with that urge and going and doing something else and getting past that urge and going to sleep and waking up and being sober and taking your own -- I still got my money, I went out and blew it, you know. I got kicked out of there. (Albert)

Albert, however, may have thought the Religious Shelter was most helpful because his admitted substance abuse problem and his Catholic background most paralleled the assumptions which underlie this shelter's approach to assistance. Men such as Ziggy and Phillip seemed to gravitate toward other shelters. As they explained, they strongly disagreed with their lock-down policy and overtly religious orientation which, by focusing on their spiritual salvation were ignoring the structural and material reasons for their homelessness.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have focused on men's subjective experience of three large shelters in Las Vegas. The men frequently worked at understanding the rules and orientations presented to them by each of the shelters, and explained both the negative and positive aspects of these rules and bureaucratic structures found at various shelters, particularly in terms of their personal situation. They also determined their own ability to use a particular shelter for their own purposes while simultaneously enduring aspects of shelter life that they at times found frustrating.
The data in this chapter indicate that local homeless men are acutely aware of the possibilities and limits offered by a shelter's bureaucratic structure in terms of managing their homelessness. Homeless men use these aspects to answer two basic questions: (1) whether or not to stay at a particular shelter, and (2) what their role will be upon entry.

In some respects, local shelters are similar to the total institutions discussed by Goffman (1961): for many men they are all-encompassing areas of life, providing a place where their basic food and shelter needs are met, but which also are their work sites and areas for recreation and friendships. However, unlike men in other total institutions such as prisons, mental hospitals, old-age homes and military bases, men at local shelters have a great deal of freedom. Men, for example, are not assigned to a particular shelter. Although each shelter has a particular schedule and rules, the men also have a great deal of autonomy in choosing the role they will play or their status at a shelter, and they can leave at their discretion.

Another key aspect of Goffman's definition of a total institution, however, is the resocialization of those who enter. While Goffman stressed this resocialization as a key to understanding the functions of total institutions, this aspect of shelter's particular bureaucratic structures in assisting homeless men seems to be highly variable. For example, at the Working Shelter, the men have a range of options for statuses and roles they may take on. At the Addict Shelter and Religious Shelter, however, these are more circumscribed.

This research shows that local homeless men not only accept and understand the rationale for, but also criticize and resist, the resocialization
processes promoted in local shelters. For example, several men like Ziggy made statements that questioned the possibility of using shelters services in order to end a man’s homelessness. At several points in his interview, he openly questioned whether the presumed mission of one shelter matched their actual implementation of services:

When they get down here [to the shelter], service is -- they have a lot of services, don't get me wrong, but then the service is also -- if you look at it in a perspective whereas the meals, the showers, and the length of time it takes to get these services, it keeps you here. You're stuck here. Unless you have an extra bit of determination to sacrifice your health and hygiene to go out and look for work, or you sacrifice health and hygiene for the meals and those services that they give you here. (Ziggy)

Now, [there] does come a time where being in the program is more conducive to what you need, because you have an extra opportunity to get showers, to have meals on a regular basis without having to chase it from comer to comer, from food line to food line. That's probably the biggest part of the advantages of in there. I mean, they do have a job office that creates day labor for you. Some [jobs] even turn into extended periods. But with the responsibility you got in here of one day working in, one day working for yourself, it kind of negates what you're actually after: being in a work program. I mean, does that work for them, or work for you? Do you see what I'm saying? (Ziggy)

...who's benefiting from this, other than the programs and the services? Every time you get a service done, somebody is clicking your head. They're getting [monetarily] supplemented for that. For every service they provide to every person, they get supplemented for it. So only the programs are benefiting from the services. (Ziggy)

Ziggy also believed, however, that instead of resocialization, a shelter should focus on allowing men the freedom they need in addressing so many of the personal problems they face. He felt that, even if limited to making them do chores every other day, resocialization was not as important as providing a
structure where more men could choose to work and contribute money to the shelter, thereby benefiting both themselves individually and the shelter:

Kurt  So you're saying the rules of some of the places inhibit the guys from ending their homelessness?

Ziggy  Exactly. Or it slows them down so badly that it's kind of like it just tears down their ego and enthusiasm to continue. So now they have to restructure their whole self and come up with another frame of mind to get out there and do it again.

Kurt  How could they change that?

Ziggy  Well, it's simple. Like I say, if I go into this program and I do have a job, especially if it's a full-time job, why have me -- gosh, incarcerated for two weeks? And I lose this job. Okay. I got the job. That's one of the first steps of rehabilitating these people and getting them back into the mainstream of society anyway. "Come in here, we'll clean you up, we'll allow you to go out and find work," okay. Like, I say, this is a man's work program. So if I can get a job, if it's only a week, if it's a temporary job for a week, who's not to say that that one week may turn into a full-time job?

Now you've got 350, 400 guys in this building. One guy going on a job on a repeat basis is not going to stop the floor from being swept or the floor from being mopped. You've got 300 other guys that can do that. That's why they have a housekeeping department, security department, warehouse department. One or two people is not going to slow down the process that much that you've got to say, "Well, you can't go back tomorrow because you've got to sweep the floor."

Kurt  So you're saying you'd let more guys work more often and have fewer people in the shelter working on the chores that they assign for people to stay?

Ziggy  Exactly. Because they are getting their fair share from these people. When you work, you pay 20 percent of what you make is what they call fair share. Now, the ones that are not working, then let them do that. The ones that are just milling around all day. 'Cause it's not an all-day process to do what you got to do. The only thing in here that's an all-day process is security and the kitchen workers. Okay, so, yeah, rotate with that if necessary. But then, even that you can make allowances, because they got the job office and they're working out of the job office, out of this building, out of this organization. And, like I said, the operative words here are men's work, hyphenated,
work program. But like I say, does that work for them? Or work for you if you get out here and try to make better for yourself?

In conclusion, those I interviewed were frequently aware that several shelters exist in Las Vegas, and that each has different criteria for admittance and different forms of assistance. The men would weigh the pros and cons of each shelter's form of assistance in relation to their immediate life situation and needs. Unlike those "trapped" in total institutions, these shelters are better approached as bureaucracies which individuals have a great deal of autonomy in choosing, using in particular ways, or leaving. That is why these men's experiences also seemed to parallel the findings of Hopper, Susser and Conover (1985), who explain that homeless people today may consider temporary assistance from shelters as part of a larger repertoire of survival strategies to be intermittently relied upon. This may then explain why those shelters which still attempt to "resocialize" homeless men are often considered the least popular options, but the one they selected if survival is in jeopardy. In my next chapter, I discuss several other survival strategies used by homeless men in Las Vegas.
CHAPTER 8

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

In this chapter I consider the survival strategies of local homeless men. Based on the ideas of "makeshift economies" (Hopper, Susser and Conover 1985) and "shadow work" (Snow and Anderson 1993), I examine the varied activities local homeless men use to ensure their material existence.

Hopper, Susser and Conover define economies of makeshift as the ad-hoc subsistence repertoires of homeless men which may include reliance on public assistance, participation in the "underground economy" (selling things such as plasma and cigarettes, for example), and begging (1985:214). Similarly, Snow and Anderson describe "Shadow Work" as selling and trading junk, personal possessions, or illegal goods and services; selling plasma; soliciting donations; scavenging; and theft (1993:145-170). Both concepts show the degree to which homeless men are "grudging players in a rough theater of improvisation" (1985:194), and the way in which these men "make do" when traditional wage labor positions are either unavailable or unattainable.

This chapter presents fieldnotes and interview data describing homeless men's experiences. While popular discourses on homelessness
often question whether or not homeless men want to work, a focus on economies of makeshift and shadow work show homeless men continually working (Hopper, Susser and Conover 1985; Snow and Anderson 1993:146). Through their ceaseless engagement in subsistence activities, homeless men in Las Vegas, like homeless men in other parts of the U.S., often undermine categorical distinctions between "work" and "leisure" (Gounis 1993). This distinction is often used against homeless men to negatively characterize their use of alternative subsistence strategies. However, while the activities of these men may not constitute traditional definitions of work as paid labor, many cannot either clearly be defined as leisure. The desperation often producing makeshift economies of the impoverished also indicate well the extreme difficulties which homeless men face in trying to escape homelessness.

Based on a grounded theory approach I have developed several categories of such "makeshift" activities. Dominant themes emerged based on interviewing homeless men, participating in and observing their activities, and through reading the diary of one homeless man. Under each category I will note specific instances of the activity and present examples of its importance and use.
Trying to Find Full-Time Work

Many homeless men were primarily interested in finding permanent, full-time employment. While such traditional wage labor positions are not generally thought of as part of "shadow work" or the "makeshift economy" of homeless males, it is useful to discuss some of the problems these men faced in trying to attain a full-time job. Frustration from an inability to secure traditional, full-time wage labor also helps understand why homeless men in Las Vegas often end up implementing alternative subsistence strategies.

Some homeless men were able to secure full-time jobs. George, for example, who became homeless after serving time in jail, was able to return to his job after serving his sentence:

I spent 15 days in jail the first time, got out; and I almost lost everything then. Then I spent another 55 days in jail after that when I came back from another preliminary hearing. They finally found their victim, who happened to be a homeless guy. That’s how I found out about the homeless shelter and stuff like that from listening to them talk about it. Plus I went by on the bus after I got out and I just came in. But like I said I got a good job, had a nice apartment, I had everything going for me. I’ve been doing fine on my own since I was 18 years old. So I just ended up coming here. (George)

1 Other studies (Snow and Anderson 1993) have noted that poor people generally want to work in traditional employment categories for wages. As one homeless man I met phrased it, "lots of homeless people I meet are hard-working people. They just can't get ahead."
George's circumstances seemed to make him best suited for the shelter program he was in, where a work program was in place. Such shelter programs encourage the men to work traditional 40 hour a week jobs to pay a portion of their income to the shelter, but also to allow them to save money in order to re-secure their home, apartment, or other traditional living arrangements. Indeed, as Fred explained to me, shelters sometimes strongly promote “work programs,” making them different from those purely for “homeless” persons:

[Sometimes people who come here] automatically think everyone's homeless. And they're not homeless...sometimes they're asked to come in because of different court orders, because of dependencies that they may have, either alcohol or drug. Sometimes it's because of medical problems and it's easier to come through a program like this. Sometimes it's because people are new to an area and they didn't come totally prepared for the differences in the growth and the cards they have to go through and everything else for Las Vegas and so forth. So there are many other reasons, and it's not just [because] a person is homeless that they come into a shelter like this. This is why this is technically not just a shelter. It's a work program. There are certain places which are strictly shelters. (Fred)

However, men who have been out of traditional wage labor jobs for an extended period, those who as Fred mentioned may have moved to Las Vegas without enough resources to secure the credentials necessary for local employment, or those who may not have any local connections leading to employment, may have difficulty finding full-time employment. Having left his job as a waiter in New Mexico, Bill was one such man who sought a traditional wage labor position. He arrived in Las Vegas with approximately $700. His attempts to find work in casinos on the Las Vegas Strip made him realize he
would need identification and certification, such as a sheriff’s card, in order to work:

Bill I had a problem getting my social security card. I had my voter’s registration, I had State ID and stuff right? But they wanted that social security card. And I had to come up with certain documents for that card because if it’s like, under an adoptive name? Long story. It took me three weeks to get a social security card once I got out here.

Kurt That’s a long process

Bill I’ve invested a hundred bucks in cards alone [since coming to Las Vegas]....I’ve got everything but the sheriff’s card.

As he also found out, the casino jobs he thought would be plentiful were highly sought after. Indeed, a newly constructed resort casino like Sunset Station received approximately 50,000 phone calls on its job hotline for only 1,800 positions (Patterson 1997a:16A). In addition, since Bill did not belong to a union, he was excluded from consideration for union jobs at several casinos. Even if he had paid to join the union, thousands before him would have had priority for selection.

Eventually having gone through his savings, Bill began turning in dozens of applications for any job opening he saw related to the food-service industry. He soon found work at a pizza pallor making minimum wage. However, as evidenced through excerpts from his diary, the frustration of his entry-level position combined with abusive treatment from a supervisor caused him to quit within two weeks:

9/26
I saw a help wanted sign at a pizza joint got hired, start tomorrow...
9/28
My Job by [Bill] The food Is Fantastic Detroit style pizza Is Cool!
Very Few Bugs For the side of town It's on. The work chalanging.
I'm Luming a lot. I have never spun Doe for pizza I've learned how
to make a Calzone. My Boss I quit tomorrow!

Screwing Buitch Cunt White trash! I'm making 4.25 hr. No! No
mater what the pay nomater what the work I must and will be
Treated with the respect and Dignity any Human Being Desurves.
their is a diffrence between slacking off Being degrated and realy
trying and Being Belittled because you Don't know Better So I'm not
treated like the speical Human Artict Freind Spoiled Bratt That I Am.
That's ok. They don't know me. what's not ok is being cused out!!
Who dumped the (I Hate to write it Beouse I don't say it) G. Damd
coffee it's 11:30 we close at 12 don't dump the fucken coffie untiill
12:00 I made it for me their better be another G. am coffie filters I
made their coffie for me Don't ever dump the Fuken God Dame
Coffie Untill after 12 please! I didn't know, she sint me home earley
this night I messed up on ticked she came back cussing coping
attitude I wouldn't let her Finish a sintance I keep interupting her
she keep saying don't interupt me And I did the minite she yoused
A cuse word At me I don't leasen semple as that is this is Las
Vagas why are people so Faul....But what I seen she is tipiucal to
Vagas or mabe at 4.25 hr. she has this Right to feal above and
cuss me at. Enough so much for that job

Tomorrow I'm going to go to the owner look I'm going to Fight for
4.25 hr. No I'm going to Fight for digity and my strenth and God will
Pule me throug.

Next Job Please?

I hate Being Unemployed. the only Reasen I'm going to owner is to
fase it lik a man to be

Respected!

Bill eventually found another near-minimum wage job, working part-time
at a security company. His story is a personal example of the effects of the
shift from manufacturing employment as a staple of working-class family
income (Block et al 1987) to a post-industrial, service-based economy. While
manufacturing employment in the U.S. once allowed semi-skilled workers an
opportunity to earn a living wage, the decline in these jobs has led more people like Bill to seek jobs in the growing service sector. Although this local trend reflects "a remarkable proportionate surge in service employment since the early 1970s" across the U.S. (Harvey 1989:156), Las Vegas has an even larger percentage of new jobs within the service industry than in most U.S. metropolitan areas. "According to state forecasts, the largest number of positions will continue to be in the waiter/waitress occupation through 2005, followed by cashiers, salespeople/retail, security guards and blackjack dealers" (Patterson 1997b:16A). Within the local service sector categories of employment, hotel gaming and resort employment accounts for a full 60.4% of all jobs.

Service sector jobs, however, pay substantially less on average than manufacturing positions once did (Parker 1994). Local service positions in the hotel and gaming industry thus provide a major source of employment available to working-class individuals, but because these jobs often require little skill, wages can be kept low as employees are highly replaceable. Harvey calls our current economic period one of "flexible accumulation," in which the accumulation of capital is increasingly centralized while "employers have taken advantage of weakened union power and the pools of surplus (employed or underemployed) labourers to push for more flexible work regimes and labour contracts" (1989:150).

Other men besides Bill indicated that despite wanting to work full time, they could not support themselves on a job which pays the minimum wage.
Clyde, who lost his job as a factory supervisor to downsizing, for example, believed the employment future was bleak for many homeless men:

I don't see much change, unless there's a wholesale change in jobs. There's so many jobs that don't pay a living wage, like hotel/motel, but you just can't live on that. A lot of these guys figure, "I can get the same things through places like [a shelter], so why bother working? I can get it for free." (Clyde)

The instability of employment in our new, post-industrial era was a recurring theme with several of the homeless men I interviewed. Ziggy, for example, explained his experience with limited labor contracts:

I find that jobs here are plentiful, but they're not all that stable. You know, you go to work, you might work for three, four, five, six months, and all of a sudden somebody is saying, "Oh, well, we got to lay you off," just as you are beginning to get a foothold, they say, "Oh, well, we've got to cut back." (Ziggy)

In part because of these employment trends, homeless men may consider other methods for maintaining their material existence, which I describe below.

**Finding Day Labor Jobs**

Day labor, or employment where workers are hired on a daily basis to perform manual labor, is typically a major source of work for homeless men (Snow and Anderson 1993:123-34). In Las Vegas, those employers seeking day laborers sometimes even directly contact homeless shelters to find people:
Kurt You told me about the job program they have at [the shelter].
Bill Right. You know, you can call [the shelter] like if they need extra hands in construction, if they need warehouse work, if they need their lawn mowed. Right?
Kurt Um hum
Bill They’ve got this list and you sign up.

Other men may pick up day labor work on Bonanza Road which is located within walking distance from the major shelters and has traditionally been the area in Las Vegas where day laborers and their potential employers meet. Although recent ordinances now limit the picking up of day laborers on Bonanza Road (see Chapter 4), several of the men I spoke to, however, claimed that the ordinances did not stop them from finding work there.

The popularity of this kind of employment may be explained in terms of a mutually beneficial relationship: at a moment’s notice, some employers need able-bodied persons to accomplish a specific task which doesn’t require particular skills, and homeless men are often willing to do unskilled or semi-skilled labor for quick cash.

Other reasons men seek this type of employment vary. Albert indicated that he used the money from day labor to pay for crack cocaine and the hotel rooms he slept in between shelter stays after his divorce:

Every day you wake up in the morning and you walk out in the streets carrying what you have on your back, everything you own you’re carrying with you. You walk out, you try to do good. You make $60, $70 working out on Bonanza Street and you’re feeling good, you’re tired, you’re off work, and you think, you know, a cold beer. Well, that one cold beer leads to another one and the next thing you know you’re over at the [crack] house and the next thing you know you’re broke and you’re waking up in the morning going through it all over again. It’s just such a sick life. (Albert)
Others look to day labor as a solution to their immediate survival needs. As Bill explained to me, these jobs seemed more practical to him than other forms of stable employment:

Like I said, I've [just] got a job at this security company. See the deal is, you get a full time, paying job, right? If you're not getting tipped, how you gonna survive till you get your first paycheck? (Bill)

However, the flexibility of day labor employment also has a downside for employees, who often work without a contract and without accumulating sick pay, vacation pay and retirement benefits (Parker 1994). Because day labor income is unsteady and involves variable rates of pay, it also is difficult for men who depend on it to pay regular bills for food, rent, electricity and phone use.

Furthermore, day laborers are often at the mercy of their employers in ways long-term employees are not. Jim mentioned having worked as a temporary jackhammer operator for four dollars an hour, but was not given earplugs. Having secured the job through a temporary employment agency, he also had money taken out of his paycheck to pay for transportation to and from the job site. Keith gave a similar account of having been taken advantage of by doing skilled labor for near-minimum wage:

Kurt
Tell me about the type of work you've picked up on Bonanza.
Keith
I ended up doing roofing for a guy for $5 an hour. I've put up ceilings in mobile homes, installed two sprinkler systems. The roofing job was one of those smogbuster
businesses. If I had known it was for $5 an hour, I wouldn't have gone. We had to pull all the tiles and tar paper up to the roof with ropes. This guy bought us breakfast, but we spent a whole day in the sun. I had to put in every nail by hand, no gun. I got tar all over me. I was so dirty, I got a hotel room last night just to clean up. I slept from 6 [PM] 'til 11 [AM], the first good night sleep I've had in weeks. Everybody took Thursday off because of the rain. I don't mind roofing, but he's probably making 2-3 grand on the job. The tar sheeting rows weigh 75 pounds. He didn't do shit all day -- worked for an hour putting in the soft tar. When he paid me I told the guy, 'Is this all I get?' He said, 'That's all I pay.' I told him, 'Next time you see me, don't even stop. Just drive on by.'

Ronald said that only a few weeks previous he was paid over $24 an hour for full-time work as a concrete cutter. However, since a DUI conviction caused him to lose his driver’s licence and his job, he had done the same type of work as a day laborer for half the pay:

Ron  I'm looking for cash-base work, cash basis, where they pay at the end of the day.
Kurt Day labor?
Ron Yeah, day labor, yeah. It hasn't happened. I worked one day last week.
Kurt Where have you been going to look for day labor?
Ron There's a place up there on Bonanza where 50, 60, 70 guys gather around within a mile radius. And I pretty much just hang out away from that. I just walk further up the street.
Kurt How was the work you got on the day you got work? What type of stuff did you do?
Ron It was the type of work I do, concrete. I did a driveway. They paid me 60 bucks for 5-1/2 hours. It averaged out like to be about 10 bucks an hour.
Kurt So a lot less than what you usually make?
Ron [I used to make] 250 a day for 10 hours, four days a week.

Despite the exploitation characterizing it, day labor may be the first step for some of these men toward securing full-time employment. A day labor job did
eventually provide Keith with enough money to secure a full-time job which he was traveling to when he became homeless in Las Vegas as a result of gambling:

Since I saw you last, things have been going great. I got a full-time job roofing. I bought a bus ticket to Los Cabos and I'll have $500 saved. I'll leave next Monday. I'm going to bar-tend down there. My friend who's there got me the job. It's funny I'm running into you; today's my only day off. (Keith)

However, other men feel more pessimistic about their future when they begin their employment as “temps,” particularly when, as Donald found, they acquire such jobs through temporary employment agencies that use shelter residents only when they have few other workers:

Kurt Do you think [your job at a major national clothing retailer] will turn into anything steady?
Don Oh no, it's just for Christmas. I work for Valley Temps. They just call down here when they need overflow [extra workers].

Finding and Accessing Social Services

For some men, a key survival strategy involves discovering and accessing social services, particularly charitable services and governmental social services programs.

In Chapter 7 I detailed the manner in which assistance and charity through large shelters in Las Vegas are frequently given to homeless men. Because of their limited paperwork and the speed of their response to the
immediate needs of homeless men, shelters and charitable assistance are often considered first when they look to agencies for assistance. Ironically, though, the difficulty some of them have in accessing the charitable services designed to help them, while simultaneously trying to find regular employment, sometimes seemed to perpetuate their dependency. Ziggy noted the difficulty he had in both working, and in also accessing charitable services he needed until his paycheck could support him:

[You get up at 4:30 in the morning, you go down to day labor hall and you sit there all morning. And whatever kind of breakfast you might be able to get out here on the street, you miss that. By the time you get back down here [to a shelter], you miss the showers that they provide in the mornings, so now you are lacking in hygiene and sustenance. You sacrifice that to try to get work for the day. You get up there and you don't get work for the day. You come back down here, all the services have ended. So now you've got to wait till the next morning and either sacrifice the sustenance and hygiene again for the possibility of work, or you sacrifice the possibility of work to make up for the shower and the meal that you didn't get yesterday. So like I said, it's six of one and half dozen of another. (Ziggy)]

As Ziggy noted, although finding and accessing social services is not a form of work, the practice at times seems like work. The philosophy underlying social welfare programs in the U.S. generally makes attaining such services difficult. Rooted in the ideology underlying the English Poor Laws which were designed to make receiving charitable relief as unappealing as possible, this structure strongly encourages individuals who can work to do so rather than "taking advantage" of social welfare programs.

Governmental agencies seem to make applying for and receiving assistance even more daunting. Ronald's story is an example of the paradox
of currently being in need but facing processing delays while waiting for
governmental assistance. He describes the uncertainty of a positive response
to his request, the waiting period, as well as the other bureaucratic alternatives
he will consider pursuing if his first request for assistance is denied:

Kurt So what are your plans now, after the DUI and with your family staying at another shelter? Do you have a court date and things like that?

Ron Yeah. Well, I've got a court date in December. But for now I filed for unemployment and I'm eligible for $250 a week, $260 a week. And with that, if I'm not denied, you know, this is my third week being homeless; and sometime this week, in the mid part of the week or toward the end of the week, either I'll receive or I'll be denied my claim, my insurance claim.

But if I'm denied, then the wife is going to have to go to the welfare office and show them the paper that I've been denied, and then they'll help us with some kind of FADC [Aid for Families with Dependent Children] or something, where they give us cash aid. Then we're going to get out of here. This is hard on my family.

He also described his frustration at having his son rejected from a Head Start program because his wife had not held a job while she stayed at home raising their child:

Ron But, you know, my wife wants to work, but we have to put my son -- he's four years old and we got to put him in a Head Start school. We was denied about that too. We went to a program for low income -- well, in our case homeless family -- to get into this program they have for -- what they do is, it's a program they have where families that are homeless, they'll put you in housing, set you up and you don't have to pay the rent. But what you have to do is, they'll give you 30 days where you and your spouse have to have a full-time job, and the only requirements are -- and if you have a child that needs to go to Head Start school, they provide for that. The only requirements are that you have to prove that 20 percent of your gross
monthly income, you and your spouse, that you have to show them a bank statement that you're saving --

Kurt: To be in the program?

Ron: To be in the program. It's a six-month program. And that's great. That's the way to do it. You're talking about 40-hour income -- I mean, 80-hour income with me and my spouse. And we were denied last week on that because my wife hasn't had a job since '93. And the reason for that is because she's been home nurturing my son. You know, but for my wife to go out and get a job part-time, she'd have to pay between 80 to $100 a week to have him in school. That's what she'd be working for. There wouldn't be any income coming in. Very little.

The limitations which some men experience when using local shelters and other charitable assistance, governmental assistance programs, and their frustration at trying to find work may then lead them to consider alternative survival strategies. These include scavenging, silver mining, panhandling, theft, and the creative use of resources and objects.

"Scavenging" for Food, Goods and Change

In Chapter 5 Jerry described his practice of digging through garbage cans for food, alcohol, and bus transfers. Others often engage in such scavenging practices because they believe it is easier than securing regular wage or day labor.

Traditional wage-labor employment frequently requires a modicum of health, references, a contact phone number, transportation and clothing, all of which a homeless man may find difficult to obtain. Similarly, some men may avoid day labor because of previous injuries, mental health problems, fear of working conditions, substance abuse, anger at exploitation by employers,
dislike of day labor jobs, or other reasons. As such they may thus consider scavenging: using or selling things they find which others have discarded in order to survive (Snow and Anderson 1993:162-65). While this source of subsistence may be sporadic, many men I spoke to liked it because, unlike wage labor jobs and dependence on government assistance or charitable organizations, this source of income offered them increased freedom and autonomy.

For example, Jim used a truck (which he also slept in) to collect pallets from supermarkets and businesses around town, which he would then sell back to four local distributors. He learned about selling pallets from another homeless man he saw pushing them down the street in a shopping cart. Jim sold the bigger pallets that weren't damaged for $3 each, and the smaller and/or damaged ones for a dollar each. He told me that a security guard once stopped him behind a supermarket, however, and said there was a federal law against taking things from garbage dumpsters. Although Jim explained to the guard that it was probably a local ordinance and not a federal law, he was nonetheless told to leave the property.

Oftentimes when Jim sold pallets, he would go to the businesses where they only paid a dollar for all types of pallets and then offer $1.25 for each large pallet to the men who were waiting to sell theirs. The next day, he would take those pallets over to another business that would pay him $3 apiece. He said he could make $10-15 dollars at a time that way, but that if the places he wanted to sell the pallets to weren't open, his gas expenses would consume all his profits. He told me that he didn't bother collecting pallets anymore.
because his transmission broke, he had problems with the security guard, and because "there are too many people doing it. If you get going early enough you have a chance, but not later."

On several occasions, I witnessed other homeless men collecting similar objects in shopping carts around the shelters of North Las Vegas, items such as aluminum cans, radiators and even copper tubing. In his study of homeless men in Los Angeles, Underwood (1993:63, 93) found that this practice was sometimes called "canning" or "glassing," in reference to whatever objects were being collected and resold to recycling companies. One man informed me that the copper tubing he found would fetch 50 cents a pound from a recycling business located only two blocks from a major shelter. He also said that such businesses typically paid better rates for larger quantities, explaining why many men would accumulate a shopping cart full of aluminum cans, for example, before cashing them in.

Scavenging can also be carried out in casinos in the forms of "silver mining" or "credit claiming." They consist in men walking around casinos inconspicuously and checking the coin pans which catch the change payout from slot, video poker and keno machines. Occasionally, someone might find nickels, quarters or even dollar tokens left behind by careless players. Another version of this practice involves checking the credits left on a machine to see if coins have been accepted but for some reason were left unplayed. The person who finds these credits can either play them, or have those coins "returned." While this might seem a tedious way of earning money, men indicated that they might occasionally find enough change within an hour to
buy a meal using this technique. The casinos on Fremont Street closest to the shelters are often the areas of choice for men who silver mine, because they can walk through several casinos and leave quickly before being told to exit by security guards. Also, there are frequently more entryways and exits to Fremont Street casinos, and these are often more easily accessible than in the larger Strip casinos. Additionally, the slot machines in many of the Fremont Street casinos are often located in dark or poorly lit areas, making lost change more plentiful.

Casinos, however, strongly discourage this practice through their surveillance systems and security cameras. According to one security guard on Fremont Street, "if you are credit claiming, we ask you to please leave. If you are here gambling, you're welcome to stay and gamble, but if you're looking in the hoppers for money, and that's what we think you're doing, then [we ask that individual to] leave now."

Jeff once described how these silver miners are removed from casinos. He also said that homeless men with limited employment options are most likely to engage in practices like silver mining:

Jeff Have you ever been told to leave a casino or things like this?
Kurt Because I was homeless?
Jeff Is this an experience that homeless people have here?
Kurt A lot. But then you have to understand that a lot of the homeless go in there to silver mine, that's to see if you can find coins in the machines.
Kurt Silver mining, that's finding coins in the –
Jeff Yeah, going by to see if there's any credits in the machines, take them out, that's silver mining. If people are stupid enough to leave the machines with coins in, with credits in, then, hey, somebody gets lucky and gets them out, fine. But, there's – I mentioned a caste system a while back. And
there is a caste system in homelessness. You do have the
derelicts, and there are those that chose to be homeless.
Then you have the alcoholics and drug addicts who because
of their addiction, cannot break the cycle where they're at.
Then you have the homeless who are there because of
circumstances and are trying to get out. Silver mining is one
of the ways [of] trying to get enough cash to eat. Now not all
people do it. Most of the lower caste or echelon of the
homeless [do it]. If you notice the lower echelon are the
ones who are filthy, don't shower, who wear the same
clothes for months on end, when they know they have an
opportunity to take a shower here, get free clothes, and they
don't take - they just have lost basically all hope, all self-
esteeem, all self-worth and they don't care anymore. And
there's no place they can go for help. There is and there
isn't because those people, after a while, no one wants to
help [them]. They're too many lost causes.

Jeff seemed to lump together those men who silver mine and those
who scavenge by next referring to one man he knew as a member of the
"lower echelon":

There's a guy that comes around here called "Dumpster Johnny."
All he does is digs through the dumpsters to get cans and stuff. But
he hasn't changed his clothes in three months I've been here. I've
never seen him take a shower in the three months I've been here.
(Jeff)

Ziggy also indicated that silver mining was more likely to be considered by a
man without full-time work, day labor, or even panhandling options:

Ziggy [S]ilver mining [is] where you go through the casino and
watch for credits on machines. So if a machine has got X
amount of credits on it and you sit down at the machine, they
might play one credit and then dump the machine.
Kurt Have you ever tried that?
Ziggy No, because it's counterproductive. I mean, you spend all
day. And you might not make but four bucks from morn-
till night. Oh, you might get very lucky like some of 'em and
you might make 25, 50 bucks in a day. But why should I
spend all day bobbing and weaving my head across machines, you know, when I can go out and panhandle for four hours and make 15 or 20 bucks, or go to a day labor or whatever, you know, hopefully get known enough, get recognized and start going out [to a job] on some regular basis.

Selling Plasma

Anderson and Snow (1995) have noted the importance of the homeless population as a supply of "source plasma" for the commercial blood plasma industry in the US. The authors found that because homeless people have few dependable economic opportunities, "over time on the streets many homeless individuals come to rely on selling plasma" (1995:181). This conclusion also seems to apply to homeless men in Las Vegas:

Kurt Have you heard about any other kinds of ways people [in the shelter] make money?...
Bill Everybody donates blood.
Kurt No [kidding]. Where's that?
Bill It's up Las Vegas Boulevard, before you get to the overpass. You know, before you get to the courthouse? It's a laundromat and a blood plasma thing. It's 15 bucks a shot. You can donate like two, three times a week.
Kurt Have you done that?
Bill No, I don't know. I'm very queasy about needles. I don't know, you never know about tomorrow though (laughs).
Kurt Have you talked with people who have done that?
Bill Well, they go like twice, three times a week. It's about two hours. It's kind of like selling a part of yourself though, don't you think? It keeps them going, though.

The business which Bill mentions in the above quote is located on Las Vegas Blvd. North, within walking distance of the majority of homeless shelters.
in North Las Vegas. As evidenced from this field note excerpt, other men also mentioned selling plasma to me as an option for making quick cash:

Jim sold plasma twice while in town. [He] received $20 each time. [He] said it takes an hour, [mainly of] sitting and waiting. He said he didn't like it, [that] it didn't feel good. He said they pay $20 the first two times and $15 each of the next three.

But as Kent emphasizes, this means of subsistence can only be used infrequently for those either staying at local shelters, who are new to the state, or both:

Kent  Today for the first time I sold blood to get some pocket money. They pay $20 for a pint. Since I'm from Indiana, I can only donate every eight weeks. A lot of people from here [a local shelter] do that. But they make it hard for people from here to do it, though, they won't take this address [as a permanent address that doners must list when giving blood]. [One blood business] use a magic marker. They mark your finger, which can only be seen under ultraviolet light. It keeps people from going from one place to the next.

Kurt  And giving multiple donations?
Kent  Right.

Although the business that Bill and Kent discussed limits the number of times a person may donate both weekly and monthly, the business also paradoxically creates monetary appeals which seem directed at an economically marginalized population. For example, a sign inside the center reads:

During the Month of July You Will Receive a $5.00 Bonus on the 8th, 9th and 10th Donations.

Thank You! Management

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The reliance of the local plasma donation industry on economically marginalized people such as the homeless is partially evident in the rules which were on display in July of 1997 at the blood plasma center mentioned by Bill and Kent. Listed under a "code of conduct," one such rule stated, "AFTER DONATION PLEASE LEAVE THE NEIGHBORHOOD IMMEDIATELY." Other rules which seemed directed at those without a place to live, were, "PLEASE BE RESPECTFUL OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND KEEP IT CLEAN," and "NO LOITERING AT ANY TIME." However, in our free market economy where blood used in health care is often purchased from the economically disadvantaged, the blood/plasma industry is partially dependent on men who are "donating" largely for financial gain, sometimes with little thought about the condition of the blood they may be passing on to others. Albert, a man addicted to crack cocaine, described in detail his own ambivalence about donating blood with the drug still in his system but also needing the money:

Kurt: How did you get money today?
Al: Plasma.
Kurt: Really. How and where?
Al: Over there on Bonanza and Las Vegas Boulevard. There's a plasma place. You go in there. It takes you about five hours for 15, $20. You get $15 the first time and $20 the second time. But you're hooked up to a machine for about an hour and a half, but it takes three or four hours just to get in to the back, because every homeless person in town goes up there.
Kurt: And you've done that before?
Al: I've been doing it ever since I've been doing drugs, and that's the whole thing. I say 80 percent of those people that are up there giving blood and plasma at these plasma centers that are being shipped out here to these hospitals and all these places there, I'd say a good 80 percent of them...
are around crack addicts and cocaine addicts, 'cause I know them down there. I do drugs with them. In all reality, what I'm saying may put me in some trouble; that's why I don't want to use my last name for one thing, but, you know --

Kurt: I'll change the name on these.

Al: For one thing, it's against the law, but 80%, and I swear to you that's about what I say, because I know. I do the drugs down there, I do the drugs with them. I know the people down there. And all this plasma that's going out to these children, all this plasma that's going out to these hospitals and overseas and stuff is all tainted with that cocaine. Oh, yeah.

I thought about that the other day. I thought, "Oh, man, that's such a shame and I'm contributing too." And it's a shame. And I really ought to not do that no more. If I'm going to continue to do drugs, I better have a conscious to never do that, because that's the first time I ever admitted that to myself. And that's wrong.

Kurt: But they do screening too, don't they?

Al: Oh, sure. [But] I've done crack cocaine the night before I went in there. Like yesterday. I'll tell you the truth. Yesterday I got loaded all night long and on crack and drink, and I slept for an hour today just so I could bring my pulse down so I could go in there and donate. But I pass every one of their -- I don't know whether they're checking this stuff. They say that they check it. They say that they do. I've got signed papers that say that they do. But for three years I've been using crack cocaine and doing regular cocaine and smoking pot and drinking alcohol, and every time my test comes back, everything's okay. How that could be, I don't know. They're obviously not checking it.

Kurt: [And] you're obvious getting paid?

Al: Oh, yeah. I'm getting paid every time and they ain't deferring me. They ain't saying, you know, you can't donate, because every time -- I just had another check about a week ago. They did a draw and sent it in the labs and all that, and I'm still fine to do it. But just personally between me and you, and I pray to God that I do this. I'm going to find other ways of making my money.

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Other Bartering/Selling

At times, homeless men may also barter and sell things to each other, or to businesses such as pawn shops which specialize in giving individuals loans for their personal possessions. Bartering and selling are common practices for most individuals in a market economy, but the conditions under which impoverished individuals must often barter or sell goods or services are sufficiently unique to deserve special consideration.

Pawn shops, for example, provide loans against personal property, usually to individuals in dire need of cash. In the case of pawn shops, if the individual does not repay the loan, the shop claims the property. Three pawn shops exist within a three-block radius of one major Las Vegas shelter, one of which specializes in the pawing of automobiles. Alex described pawning his car in an attempt to avoid a series of debts that eventually led to his homelessness:

So they took the tags from my truck because I didn't have the insurance. And my truck sat and then I was having problems getting jobs because I didn't have the truck. So then I had to pawn off my truck to help pay for bills on the house. So my truck's in the pawn shop right now. (Alex)

Other men may no longer have objects of substantial value to sell. In those instances, things they receive from social service agencies, such as food stamps, can be sold illegally to unscrupulous convenience store employees for half their value in cash. As Bill indicated:
Bill I've never used food stamps either, and I hate to say it, but what I've found out is, if you're homeless they'll give you emergency food stamps for three days.

Kurt Really? That's good.

Bill Yeah, and then, there's a [convenience store] right down the street. Supposedly you're supposed to stand outside, and hold it up, right? And the clerks will wave to you and you go in and they'll buy it from you for like 70 bucks.

Kurt No kidding. (pause) Wow. So they'll give you cash. That's really fascinating. How did you find that out?


As the following instance illustrates, a more common practice among homeless men, however, is trading or selling smaller personal items or vouchers for social services to each other:

Kurt Somebody just came and gave you a couple of meal tickets and you were explaining why he gave them to you.

Ziggy Yeah. Well, like I say, he works every day. He gets up, he gets up every morning. He either has a full-time job or he went to the day labor hall and they gave him like a three, four, maybe a week repeat ticket. He can't use the breakfast and bath coupons that came with him paying for a bed for the night, so he just gives them away. Whereas a lot of guys that come out here, like he gave these to me; what they'll do is they'll run to the other side tomorrow morning and sell each one for a buck instead of using them themselves and they'll take that buck and they head straight for the first quart of beer or the first joint that comes up that they can get for a buck or a few bucks. So, yeah, they -- it's a society of it's own.

Kurt It is.

Ziggy Just like you have people [who] scalp concert tickets.

Steve and Phillip also developed separate cigarette businesses, one working just outside and another inside a local shelter, after discovering a market for individual cigarettes among homeless men. Steve, who had once

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been a carnival entrepreneur, described his business practices. He would give trustworthy men money to go to a tobacco shop one block away where they would buy tobacco and rolling paper for between 55 and 80 cents. He would then roll several cigarettes using his rolling machine, and pay the man who made the trip 2 to 3 cigarettes, and would then roll more which he sold for a dime each, or three for a quarter. He also bartered his cigarettes for donuts. He said his business did not make him much money, but through his activities he could “smoke two packs a day for free, which is pretty good for a homeless guy.” Phillip also sold his hand-rolled cigarettes inside the shelter for the same price, but said he did this primarily because “otherwise guys just try to bum them from you.”

In addition, realizing the stinginess of certain forms of public assistance, some homeless men take advantage of those services through claiming items they themselves do not need but can trade or sell. Bill, for example, once received bus tokens from a social service program, but being already in possession of a bus pass, he said he had sold the “bus tokens social services gave me for cigs and beer.”

**Panhandling**

Although homeless men are often represented in popular and media accounts as panhandlers or beggars, I only observed a handful of men who panhandled, and very few men I interviewed told me that they regularly engaged in this activity.
I was able to meet and talk to Jerome, one frequent panhandler who had been on the street for over ten years. Holding a cardboard sign to solicit donations from people in cars at a major intersection, he received very little money (nearly all of it change) in the hour which I spent observing his interaction with drivers.

His income was also very erratic, and was frequently less than the minimum wage:

Kurt I noticed you because you were out here at Flamingo and the corner here at Maryland Parkway. How is it trying to get money from people with a cardboard sign?

J. Tough. It's very tough. What you got to do is put a lot of hours in to manage to get something because it's erratic. You have to go out there for six hours and make nothing, you have to go out there for 20 minutes and make $12. It's like -- averages out where you got to put in a lot of time and probably works out to about $4 an hour or something like that, and I hate doing it. But I got to eat.

I then asked him how people would react to his sign:

Kurt I'm curious, too, what is the general response with people to your sign?

J. 98, 99 percent of them just look at you, don't say [a] thing, nothing. They look at you like a robot. Then you get some that look mad and everything. Every now and then you get people that want to help you.

(Later in the interview)

J. And then you got the ones that hate you, and then you got them few, one out of 500 or whatever that want to help you. And a lot of them that want to help might have been told never to do it, but they do what they want to do, and they help you.

Kurt What kind of responses have you had from the people who hate you?

J. That hated me? I got spit at once.

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In another example illustrating the range of responses to panhandling which Jerome mentioned, Jerome's friend, who was also panhandling, interrupted our conversation to slam a Book of Mormon which someone had just given him on the ground.

Jerome stated that he and his friend slept outside, usually behind buildings. He no longer made use of local shelters, and said several times that the shelters in Las Vegas are "worthless." Although he had periods of regular employment, he now found it difficult even to hold day labor jobs because of his alcoholism and opiate addiction.

Few of the homeless men I spoke to seemed to think panhandling could actually work as a source of subsistence income. While those who could work or who were newer to homelessness had for the most part not considered panhandling an option, some men like Ziggy had tried it:

Ziggy ...like I say, I'm a curious kind of person so I tried it once. I mean, I'm not going to go for 15 or 20 bucks, and have to stand out in the sun all day, not just standing there. So I gave it up and my curiosity was satisfied for the moment.

Kurt Did you try it on the street, on a sidewalk?
Ziggy Actually, it was down on the Strip. One of the crossings between MGM, Tropicana, Excalibur area down there. I was there for about maybe four, four-and-a-half hours. So actually, it still came to be 5 bucks an hour in my experience.

Kurt Did you have any negative reaction?
Ziggy To panhandling? No, not really. 'Cause some of the people [who panhandle], like I say, you look at them and you can tell that they're not in tune with society anymore.
At this point in the interview, Ziggy gave me a detailed description of those homeless men most likely to panhandle on a regular basis:

...they'll hold a sign up, "Will work" or "Will work for food" and you've even got guys out here that makes no qualms about what they're there for. And they have a sign that says, "Why lie? I don't want to work. I just want a beer." And they stay pretty drunk most of the time. They stay pretty inebriated. And people walk up and just hand them beer, or give them the money to go buy beer. And that's what their sign reads, you know, "Why lie? I just want beer." But that's what they call doing the sign, working the sign. And they make a reasonable amount of money towards the weekend, holidays, a little bit better than other days. But the average one probably makes 15 to 30 a day holding those signs. Some of them are totally legit with what they do with that money that they get and some of 'em [do it] just to support the next quart of beer and pack of cigarettes. (Ziggy)

The stigma often assigned to panhandling, then, is also reproduced by some homeless men, who tend to see begging money from complete strangers as a last resort after having tried working, other forms of charitable assistance, and even scavenging.

**Theft**

In Chapter 5, Jerry mentioned his having stolen inhalers and other medicine at the hospital because he could not afford to pay for the prescriptions he had been given. Although many men told me they occasionally had stolen items for either their personal use, or to trade or sell, only two I spoke with considered this to be their primary source of income.
Brandon claimed he made money from a range of con games and illegal activities:

Kurt  So, what other sources of income can you have besides, like you just mentioned, rolling people and you mentioned day labor. What other ways can you get by on the street?
B. 3-card Monty, nut shell game, selling fake gold, pickpocket. This is what I do, I do it all. I do what I can.

Spirit, who lived in an abandoned building, stated that he extorted the other men and women who lived there. He maintained a group of ex-convicts, whom he called his "boys," to enforce his rule over the building, and reportedly made five- to six-hundred dollars a month from these and other illegal activities, including fencing stolen goods.

Career thieves like Spirit and even con-artists like Brandon, however, seemed more the exception than the rule among homeless men in Las Vegas. Self-reports indicated that the majority of theft among homeless persons seemed to be poverty-driven, that is, petty thefts of items for personal use or immediate trade. For example, one man, which others nicknamed "the Great Kahuna," shoplifted candles from local casinos (in order to light his and his fellow squatter's apartment), food, and other items, such as bicycle inner-tubes, from local convenience stores and retail stores.

Ironically, it seemed that homeless men were more the victims of theft than its perpetrators. Jeff told me about one such incident:

Jeff  If you let somebody without a badge [in] here they may go to the dorms and steal something, you know, and that'll cause problems. We had a problem arise a few months ago,
someone lost a TV and he went off [on] the guy next bed bunk, [but] no one knows who stole the TV.

Kurt  So he brought in a TV.
Jeff  Yeah, some – we have TVs. And so no one knows who stole it, it could have been somebody who wasn’t supposed to be in here.

Jeff also told me how he discovered which man in the shelter had stolen his shoes, discussed in the following field note:

Jeff was complaining earlier about somebody having stolen his shoes. Later he was talking to a fellow monitor in the shelter. "I found my shoes. Somebody was wearing them," he said, smiling.

Steve also said that having had all his personal items stolen was what led him to consider contacting a local shelter for help:

Kurt  How did you find out about [a local shelter]?
Steve  I went completely broke, had all my clothes stolen, my suitcase stolen, and I was really in bad shape. Financially I was absolutely empty, and then with my suitcase stolen I had no clothes and finally I just went to the police asked for help, and they directed me to [a local shelter].

Although theft occurs within Las Vegas shelters, some homeless men prefer shelter life precisely because it is staffed by regular security persons and program assistants. There are also lockers in most local shelters where, for a small fee, one can store personal possessions under lock and key. By comparison, homeless men who sleep outdoors with their personal possessions are easy targets for theft. In one observation, I watched a homeless man take donuts belonging to another man who was wrapped in blankets from head to toe while he slept on the concrete. Another homeless
man who saw what happened did not intervene, but instead simply laughed at the incident.

Perhaps some homeless persons lack of appreciation for the property of others explains why so many of the men I spoke to had developed intricate rituals for securing their belongings while asleep. Take, for example, the measures Bill discussed in his diary for securing his few possessions while sleeping outdoors:

I found an empty Binch....Well, it's time to take my shoes off. I use them as a pillow. 1st the bench is hard and my new shoes are soft and don't smell yet; 2nd, my wallet gose in my sock. I tie my shoes together, and one lace through the button hole on my shurt its reseraining but no one will stell my shoes in my sleep. My paints are tight on my ankles. So I have to take my paints down to get my wallet in my soke. I have no money but my world layes in my back pocket, from pictors (pictures) to I.D....Almost forgot my glasses shirt Pocket Hope I don't Roll over and they slip out and break that is my biggest fer!

Although Bill's actions may seem paranoid to some, other homeless men who had experienced theft regretted not having been similarly cautious. Larry described how he had his possessions taken on several occasions, by both complete strangers and potential roommates:

Larry I've had two other bags stolen down there. One of them -- I was sitting over here talking to a gal in a bar down the street here, and I was just sitting there and I had my bag behind the stool; somebody picked it up and walked off with it. There were a dozen people in the bar and nobody saw a thing. Go figure it out.

Kurt Have you had any other things stolen since you've been out here?

Larry I had a boom box and that disappeared. And like I say, two bags that had all my belongings in it. Well, one of them, the guy just took off for parts unknown. I met him at the VA
hospital. And when we first got together, the game plan was my mother wants out of my sister’s house, so between his disability and her pension check and her Social Security check, we could have got a fairly decent place. And he just up and disappeared, and all my stuff was in the back of his car. All my medications and all my shaving gear, my clothes.

To summarize, most did not mention theft as a source of income, but expressed a greater concern over being the victims of theft, crime and violence. In Chapter 9, I will further discuss the crime and violence which are commonplace in the streets surrounding homeless shelters near North Las Vegas.

**Resource and Object Bricoleurs**

Although services for homeless persons are frequently provided by programs administered by charitable and governmental agencies, homeless men in Las Vegas also must find innovative ways to provide for their personal needs when these programs do not. Frequently, long distances between employment sites and shelters may make access to such charitable services difficult. In addition, due to their already limited resources, many are unwilling or unable to pay for necessary services, such as services which provide a place to rest and/or clean up. In these instances, homeless men become bricoleurs who make innovative use of objects or public facilities for their own purposes (Snow, Anderson, Quist and Cress 1996).
Finding Areas to Rest and/or Clean Up

I have noted one example of this practice in Chapter 5, where Jerry discussed using the local bus system for shelter purposes. Although the bus system was ostensibly not designed to be used as shelter by the homeless, Jerry had developed a method which guaranteed him a warm and safe environment in which he could rest day or night for only ten dollars a month. Indeed, during my own bus trips back and forth to shelters, I frequently observed several homeless men using the local bus system for brief periods of rest.

I discovered another example of an innovative sleeping practice after spending several hours one day with one homeless man. I met him while he ate a free breakfast given by a local charity in a public park. Once he had eaten, we walked to a local library several miles away. Once there, he read for approximately one hour, then got up to use the bathroom. When he returned, his hair and face were washed, he had changed some of his clothes, and he had shaved. He then put his glasses back on and propped his head between his hands with a book situated between his elbows on a desk, looking as though he were reading. In this position, he quietly slept for two hours while the librarian remained oblivious.

Ziggy reported secretly bathing on public lawns through sprinkler systems that were turned on at night, and mentioned that, during the summer, the cold water from the sprinklers provided an escape from Las Vegas's extreme heat. In another variation, Jim, who slept in his truck, purchased a
membership at a local gym for $15 a month. The membership allowed him a locker and access to a shower, bath, shampoo and clean towels.

Finding Free Transportation

Transportation is also a service which homeless men may avoid paying for. Jerry, for example, indicated that he could occasionally ride the bus for free, either by asking the driver to let him, or by finding valid transfers in garbage cans near bus stops. Albert discussed learning to jump freight trains from here to Los Angeles. These trains run near several shelters:

Kurt  We were just talking about jumping trains to get to places. How did you find out about that? How did it go?
Al    Dealing with people out here on the street. You talk to a guy and you say, "Well, oh, man, tomorrow I'm going to LA." "Going to LA? How are you going to LA? You just bummed a cigarette from me, how are you going to get to LA?" "I'm going to go back there on the track and jump a train." "Oh, yeah? Well, okay. Let's see how that works."

However, other men who discussed jumping on freight trains for transportation noted that the practice is dangerous and, as I discuss further in my next section, illegal.

Criminalizing Non-Traditional Uses of Public Facilities by Homeless Men

Although such stories of resourcefulness may seem harmless or even amusing to those who are not homeless, there are several laws in the state of
Nevada which criminalize such practices. For example, state laws prohibit individuals from riding freight trains, and in the library where the man washed and shaved his face, a sign was posted warning that those caught bathing or shaving in the bathroom would be subject to arrest and a $1000 fine. Similar signs are found in the downtown bus depot restrooms and waiting areas. Other signs prohibiting sleeping in one's car on a public street can also be found on Foremaster Street next to St. Vincent's shelter. In addition, the police are not the only ones who take it upon themselves to enforce these laws. In the particular library where Jorge washed and shaved his face, a key must be checked out from the head librarian in order to keep track of who is using the restroom. Once a given man is through using the restroom and returns the key, the librarian may then check to see if the man shaved, for example, by looking for stubble left in the sink.

*Using Objects for Unintended Purposes*

The above instances are primarily examples of accessing resources such as transportation and areas for rest and/or personal hygiene which are inadvertently provided by agencies and others. However, homeless men in Las Vegas are also adept at finding innovative uses for many kinds of objects for the purposes of basic comfort and survival. For example, the use of shopping carts across the U.S. to store and transport personal and scavenged items may arguably be the homeless person's most standardized use of an object which was intended for other purposes. Several men I interviewed
regularly carried newspapers and pieces of cardboard with them in order to have something to sit on, a practice that also helps keep their pants clean. In addition, the uses of objects found were sometimes more fitting of the climate and culture of Las Vegas. Several men I observed used plastic casino change containers for either storing food or as drinking cups. While these practices do not constitute labor per se, they are designed to save or further stretch a man’s already limited resources. In this sense, some have developed ingenious alternatives to services which others are happy to pay for but which they themselves refuse to pay for or cannot afford.

A semiotic analysis of homeless men’s use of objects reveals much about the difference in the statuses of their users. For example, a shopping cart typically represents a temporary repository for items collected in a store which will be purchased. Homeless men, however, often use these carts in a manner more akin to how members of the dominant culture use vehicles, closets, lockers, and wheelbarrows. Indeed, Underwood (1993:57) found that one group of homeless referred to shopping carts as “tramp trucks.” Similarly, most members of the dominant culture purchase newspapers for information, and discard them once the information has been read. A newspaper for a homeless person, however, is rarely purchased because others often discard them, and a newspaper tends to have much more practical applications in a variety of contexts. In can provide a seat cover, a cover for otherwise exposed skin when lying in the sun, a camouflage for personal items left temporarily in an open field, kindling for a fire, covering for car windows when the car is being used for shelter purposes, and other uses which members of the
dominant culture have never considered because, as the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention. Well-to-do members of society create and use products usually designed specifically for a particular purpose, a use which ultimately reproduces the user's consumer status in a market economy (as someone with disposable income). Impoverished persons, on the other hand, are frequently forced to recognize the multiple uses which may be made of an object.

**Conclusion**

The repertoires of local homeless men in their attempts to survive are varied and complex. Although some seemed to engage in primarily one or two of these strategies, many mentioned having used several different strategies at different times. Also, it may be of note that within the span of a homeless man's "career," someone who, for example, may once have been homeless with a full time job may eventually be unable to keep that job due to homelessness, leading that individual to adopt other strategies in a makeshift economy better suited to his immediate needs and current situation.

Based on this research and on the research of others (Snow and Anderson 1993), I might tentatively conclude that the types of survival strategies a homeless man adopts may be directly related to factors such as his length of time spent homeless or his resignation at being unable to maintain steady work. On the whole, it seemed that men who had been homeless for shorter periods or who maintained regular or semi-regular
employment were less interested and less involved than those who could not work in developing alternative subsistence strategies, such as scavenging for food in trash cans, theft, panhandling or selling plasma.

Jerome, for instance, told me that he and his friend’s panhandling income barely allowed them to purchase food, that they had worked in the past, and that he really wanted to find stable work:

J. It’s like -- averages out where you got to put in a lot of time and probably works out to about $4 an hour or something like that, and I hate doing it. But I got to eat. I’m trying to get a job right now, my buddy’s sleeping over there now. He’s going to relieve me.

Kurt Where’s he at? He’s over nearby?

J. Yeah. We’re both trying to get jobs. He’s worked most of his life, [as] I have. He was a crap dealer, construction worker, cook. I worked at a bakery back East, a factory. I wrote Keno here [for] four years. It’s just funny the way you can go downhill fast.

That homeless persons in Las Vegas generally privilege work over other forms of income also confirms other ethnographic research findings on that population (Underwood 1993:59-60). In the following quote, a man named Jerry told Jackson Underwood that in order to learn about homelessness, he should try living like those without money or viable employment options. Only then would he discover their alternative survival strategies:

If you come down here with cash in your pocket, you’re not learnin’ nothin’! That’s no lesson. That’s NO lesson! The lesson is, is when you don’t have a goddamned cent in your pocket. And you’re hungry. And that’s when you learn. That’s when you learn to hit the dumpster. That’s when you learn to panhandle. That’s when you learn to do all this bullshit. (1993:59-60)
In several of my own interviews, men would often differentiate between those homeless who would work and those who had developed alternative subsistence strategies. The following excerpt from one interview provides such an example:

Hector ...I know I'll never push the goddamn cart around.
Kurt So if you see someone pushing a shopping cart around, to you that means something?
Hector No, not necessarily, but they're through. They accept this is what they're going to do until they die.
Kurt But how are they different from you if you're saying it's easy to be out here?
Hector Because I will work, and I'll --
Brandon He hasn't given up that fire yet.
Hector Yeah, I'm in and out. I'm not on the corner trying to get a spot job [today] because I feel a little weak, [I'm] just getting over the flu. I've been on antibiotics and I just got a penicillin shot. Otherwise, you wouldn't even see me here [in a soup line] today. That's how there's a difference. These dudes will be here; come back three days from now the same people will be sitting there. I guarantee you I won't be, or him [Brandon].

Bill, a recently homeless man who kept a diary for this project, also indicated that individuals who use shopping carts to transport their possessions and who scavenge from garbage cans were different from himself. He would consider those activities only under the most “desperate” of circumstances:

9/24/95
One guy showed up a little while ago with his grocery cart Full of cans baged in separate grocery sacks the plastic kind and tied in bundles...I had seen him before hanging around a McDonalds down the block. When he got done tying up his Basket to a trash can he reached down and pulled out several cheeseburgers. I wonder if he raked the dumpster after they closed usually the stuff left over they mark and toss. Would I go so far as to wait until a
McDonles closes to raid the trash for a well raped desposed of cheeseburgers? If I was hungry enough, yes, But I wouldn't ever tell of such a desprat move. With this gentelman I do fell it is more of a lifestyle than a desprat act of starvation. (Bill)

Perhaps Bill's final sentence also indicates that, even among homeless persons, work is often highly valued and those who cannot work are frequently stigmatized by the more recently homeless once they begin engaging in alternative survival strategies.

In general, these interview excerpts suggest that the common assumption that homeless men are lazy or unwilling to work is unfounded. Some I interviewed simply could not hold traditional employment for a variety of reasons. But many I spoke with seemed desperate to find traditional work. Indeed, many felt that securing steady employment at a living wage was key to ending their homelessness. Those who seemed unable to find work were often depressed about it. However, for those willing to work, the condition of homelessness meant that they were facing several barriers in preventing them from finding and maintaining a steady job in a competitive employment environment such as Las Vegas, where those who are not disadvantaged by homelessness are also competing for jobs.

Thus, those unable to secure steady employment may often end up as long term shelter residents (who frequently must engage in some form of shelter work in order to stay), may gain Social Security benefits for the elderly, or may eventually experience health problems from street life entitling them to other government assistance for the disabled. In the meantime, being without friend or family networks, without credentials for gaining government
assistance (credentials sometimes also required for charitable assistance as well), or seemingly without better options, those homeless living on the street might develop scavenging practices when in need of some immediate material goods or services. In some respects, these individuals neither participate in the sector of Las Vegas’s post-modern economy based on the commodification of images, entertainment, and experiences, nor in the sectors of the city’s modern economic system based on the commodification of goods and services. Instead, these individuals’ practices seem to best parallel those in hunting and gathering societies, where immediate subsistence needs drive the collection and at times the manufacture of food and useful objects.¹

However, several homeless men indicated that once a homeless man had taken to scavenging as a major source of subsistence, he has “accepted his fate” as both homeless and unable to find work. Perhaps such scavenging activity may then best serve as an indicator that individuals, particularly those in the underclass, must find innovative ways of somehow securing their material existence once traditional wage employment or government assistance are no longer options, for whatever reasons.

¹ One study of homeless campers residing under a bridge in Los Angeles (Underwood 1993:84) also found their activities to be more like those engaged in by hunter and gatherers: “The hill [to the camp] only takes a few steps to ascend, but it seems larger, partly because it symbolizes the transition zone between different ways of life...It takes but a few steps and a shrug to get from the high technology of jet, cellular phone and fax to the stone age technology of hauling firewood on foot for light, heat and cooking... With its scavenger economy and its rich social life, life under the bridges was similar to that of stone age hunters and gatherers.”
In the next chapter, I discuss several homeless men’s comments on the violence and poverty surrounding several shelters which are centralized near North Las Vegas.
CHAPTER 9

VIOLENCE IN THE SHELTERS AND IN THE SURROUNDING AREA

The theme of violence, both in the personal experiences of homeless men and the generally high crime rates on the border between Las Vegas and North Las Vegas where centralized shelter services for homeless men are located, was repeated again and again in interviews. In Chapter 5, for example, Jerry nonchalantly indicated that since becoming homeless he had been attacked and robbed on several occasions. Other men also discussed violence they had witnessed, had been the victim of, or had perpetrated against others.

First, it is important to consider the general characteristics of the area of North Las Vegas which borders several large homeless shelters. Hunter S. Thompson vividly describes how, twenty-five years ago, this area was strongly associated with crime and vice:

[W]e pulled into an all-night diner on the Tonopah highway, on the outskirts of a mean/skag ghetto called "North Las Vegas." Which is actually outside the city limits of Vegas proper. North Vegas is where you go when you've fucked up once too often on the Strip, and when you're not even welcome in the cut-rate downtown places around Casino Center. This is Nevada's answer to East St. Louis--a slum and a graveyard, the last stop before permanent exile to Ely or Winnemuca. North Vegas is where you go if you're a

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hooker turning forty and the syndicate men on the Strip decide you're no longer much good for business out there with the high rollers...or a pimp with bad credit at the Sands...or what they still call in Vegas a "hophead." This can mean almost anything from a mean drunk to a junkie, but in terms of commercial acceptability, it means you're finished in all the right places....So once you get blacklisted on the Strip, for any reason at all, you either get out of town or [you end up] in the shoddy limbo of North Las Vegas...out there with the gunsels, the hustlers, the drug cripples and all the other losers. North Vegas, for instance, is where you go if you need to score some smack before midnight with no references. (1971:155-156)

In some respects, Thompson's description is still accurate. The rate of violent crime in North Las Vegas is still particularly alarming. At 24.2 violent crimes per 1,000 residents in 1994, this rate is double the rate of violent crime in the Las Vegas Metropolitan area in 1994. Although North Las Vegas is a more integrated area today than it was in Thompson's era (particularly within homeless shelters in the area bordering North Las Vegas), the rate of violent crime in North Las Vegas in 1994 was considered one of the worst among U.S. cities of comparable size. According to an Associated Press analysis of FBI statistics from that year, "North Las Vegas has by far the worst violent crime rate in Nevada and the seventh highest rate of violent crime in the nation for cities of its size" (Riley 1996:1A). (The sample of 381 cities compared those across the country with 50,000 to 99,000 residents).

Despite having also been victimized several times before in other areas of Las Vegas, Mark even noted the violence in his new neighborhood of North Las Vegas:

Kurt Have you encountered violence on the street?
Mark: Yes. I personally have encountered violence on the street. I had never been mugged before I came to Las Vegas.

Kurt: But you have since you've been here?

Mark: Yes. Yes. Yes, I have. Sixteen stitches later and short of $200 in my wallet, a watch, a ring, and some other things, yeah. That was the first time. The second time wasn't quite as bad, but I walked to a casino with a check. There was four Hispanics that were by the check counting area. I walked out, they followed me, they surrounded me. They knew I had money, it was four on one; they were like, “Give me the money, we'll leave you alone.” I handed them my money and they took off. End of story on that. You learn to watch, but there is violence everywhere. You never avoid it totally. And also, we're about a mile from a place in North Las Vegas, and the crime rate there is higher than in the Las Vegas/Clark County area.

Violence on the Streets Near North Las Vegas

The personal accounts of homeless men also attest to pervasive violence on the streets surrounding the shelters which are centralized near North Las Vegas. During one interview, Bob, a man who had never witnessed violence before, described a shooting and other events he had seen since coming to this area:

Kurt: I was asking about the environment in North Las Vegas. We're close to North Las Vegas.

Bob: Yeah, we're real close. We're right on the corner. There's a Mexican restaurant, Guadalajara. There was an incident that I never thought I'd get close to. There was a drive-by shooting. Two people apparently died. It was about 5:00 in the morning. I was coming out of the dorm which is like two-stories up and I looked down on this parking lot, and it's Latino/Hispanics. And I could see that they were all ready to meet. It was 5:00 in the morning and the parking lot was full of people. And I saw taillights on. All of a sudden I saw a car pull up to a group of people and all of a sudden it sounded like firecrackers—da-da-da-da-da-da. A bunch of shots went...
off, the car flew over, hit the traffic signal light. The lights went out, nothing happened for about five minutes. Las Vegas Police came down Las Vegas traveling north, went up Vegas Drive going west. Supposedly they shot. It was a lady and supposedly Metro did shoot the lady. I believe she died, someone got killed in the parking lot. It was really a hush-up thing. It wasn't in the newspaper. The same day I looked, and in the news there was another drive-by on Tropicana, and a pretty good area. That was talked about, but this incident—shut up. It wasn't in the paper; it wasn't in the news, and there was another drive-by that same day on East Trop. I don't know why, but, yeah, I've seen things. The value of life, people lost any value from ladies selling themselves for $5. I stayed away from it because I don't like walking out there because people get jumped and mugged all the time. When I first came here I went down to a local bar where they hung out. I lasted about a month doing it. You're not supposed to drink and come in here, but they didn't monitor it but they are now a lot better. But the value of life here is horrible.

Aside from the above incident, Bob also talked about people he knew who were "jumped" near the shelter, or attacked by surprise while walking on the street. Keith described a few similar incidents in greater detail:

Since you've last been here, four guys have been jumped on the street. That one guy on the bench -- his eye's swollen shut. He got sent to the hospital. That's where he got the bandages [on his elbows]. Had to have stitches. This was just last night, some guy looking for money. (Keith)

(and at another point in the interview)

An older lady got jumped Wednesday down there. A guy got jumped yesterday, carrying a broken TV. It's like, why don't they rob somebody who has money? Nobody down here has anything. (Keith)

Phillip also said that he had been attacked on the streets surrounding the shelters. In fact, he somewhat paradoxically suggested that in order for
me to truly understand homelessness I should camp outside of the shelter, but
with someone else to protect me:

I would not advise a person to do it by theirself, 'cause they can
get hurt. There are some nut cases, like I said. And there's
just some that are no good, and that's with any group, that's
homeless or not homeless. You need to have at least one
person with you. Just camp out, like you was homeless.
(Phillip)

Because the area just outside shelters is considered so violent, many men
choose to carry weapons for protection. Hector and Brandon, for example,
discussed the need to carry weapons in order to avoid such attacks:

Kurt       But there are some things about being out here I
           would think would be pretty tough. I mean --
Hector    It is. Dudes getting knocked upside the head, or
           sleepin' out doors you've got to watch it, 'cause
guys come by and just jump on you just to do it.
           Something to do. It happens all the time.
Brandon  This is like an external penitentiary.
Kurt      Really?
Hector    Yeah. Some loose tracks, man. Me, I'm pretty
careful.
Brandon  I used to stay strapped all the time, then I
           developed a reputation for being strapped, so now
           I can walk around unarmed.
Kurt      You mean strapped...
Brandon  ...Strapped like knife, gun.
Kurt      Oh, okay. Got you.
Brandon  I'm sorry. For those of you listening from New
           York, you know what strapped means. So then I
           developed a reputation for being strapped and
           everybody would leave me alone. So now I can
           walk around unarmed. It's just a mere fact, I can
           put my hand in my [pocket], "I'll do ya" and they
           leave me alone. I pull out a comb or a bar of
           soap.
Hector    But your crackheads, they run together. Your
           jugheads, juicers, your loonies, they're in their own
           world. So there's a little of everything out here.

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You've got to be careful all the time. That's just how it is.

Bill feared being attacked as well, but instead of carrying a weapon, he would attempt to minimize such risks by limiting his access to social services near North Las Vegas to daylight hours. He would leave the area at dusk to sleep out of doors in another part of town:

Bill: But I don't like the idea of, I'm just a skinny little white boy. I don't like the idea of being here late. I've gone around and I know where to get a job, right? I went out to some exclusive neighborhoods and I've found certain parts out there and kind of scoped them out, and I found this one that's way out there. There's a place where I can be left alone.

Kurt: Yeah?

Bill: But actually, I got to know this one guy, out a long long long ways, and he told me where he sleeps, and this is out, on those benches right?

Kurt: Oh.

Bill: And he was right. It's like nobody bothers anybody. I mean you'll see women over there, young girls.

Kurt: And this is the one on Charleston?

Bill: Right. Right by Valley View Hospital. Yeah, but it's not like, they're moving in. It's just like a place to go where nobody will bother them.

Kurt: So there's a few people who know about it, but it's not like, that (I point toward a shelter).

Bill: Right. Yeah, you know, I can't be stuck on this side of town after dark walking around with a backpack. You know I just, I just can't.

Keith also noted that, out of concerns for his safety, he intentionally limits his presence in the area where the shelters are located, particularly after dark:

You ain't got no freedom after dark down here. None. My boss picks me up here [at a shelter] in the morning and drops me off [here] at 3 PM. I just stay here. Especially because of the cops kicking everybody out of the parks at night now. It's a jungle out there. (Keith)
Shelters as a Refuge From Street Violence

Many men indicated that the shelters bordering North Las Vegas are a refuge from potential street violence. Indeed Albert said that the man I previously discussed had refused to stay in a shelter despite others having advised him it would be safer than being on the street:

But, you know, the guy, they told him, "You ought to sleep here," [in the shelter] and he said, "No, no, I'm going to sleep up there" [under the bridge near the shelter]. He came back 20 minutes later, [with the] whole side of his face just caved in. Called an ambulance for him, and he said, "Why didn't you come sleep here?" "Oh, I didn't want to sleep in there." (Albert)

Mark also indicated that the shelter itself was relatively safe compared to the streets right outside:

Kurt: Do you feel like there's violence in the shelter?
Mark: There is very little violence within the walls of the shelter. There is very little theft here, which is surprising. There is verbal abuse, but I have seen very little physical violence. The street 20 feet behind me has a totally different story. This is almost a haven from the violence. You know, you cannot come in here drunk; if you start a fight, you're gone. And there are people that are dependent on this place, so where else are they going to go? So people don't steal, they do their jobs, and they don't start fights.

Men believe that the shelters are generally safer in part because they try to screen for weapons. Phillip carried a weapon for protection in the surrounding neighborhood near North Las Vegas, but he had to give it to shelter personnel in order to stay:
Kurt: Have you encountered violence since you’ve been here in the shelter or on the streets?

Phil: Not here in the shelter, but on the street several times.

Kurt: Can you tell me about that? What happened to you?

Phil: Oh, people try to take something you’ve got and you’ve got to stand up for yourself. Me, myself, when I came in here they took my baby away from me, which is a buck knife I kept on my belt. And if you're going to carry a knife, you can't be bashful in pulling it and using it, 'cause if you are, you're going to get hurt real bad. If they know you mean business with it, they'll usually back off.

Kurt: Did they end up getting anything from you then? They got the knife, you said.

Phil: [The shelter's] got my knife in lockup. You're not allowed to have it in here.

Kurt: Oh, okay.

Phil: Yeah, they got some stuff on me before. That's before I started carrying a knife.

Kurt: You started carrying a knife after you got on the streets?

Phil: Yes. I never carried a knife before. I didn't need it before. Raising cattle you don't need a knife, and if you did, it's always in the truck [laughing]. You didn't carry it on you.

Because weapons are confiscated upon admittance to a shelter, men may carry other objects such as screwdrivers (c.f. Underwood 1993) which may not be confiscated but can serve as weapons if needed.

One reason explaining the need for such makeshift weapons, even within shelters, is that some men manage to enter the shelter with “real weapons,” such as knives, and threaten others. Stories of a knife attack in one shelter were repeated to me by three different men. Because of a lack of information on dates, times, and the characteristics of the attacker, I am not positive that these stories are about different attacks. However, the variations in the places within the shelter where the attacks occurred in the first and second stories lead me to believe that there are at least two separate incidents being discussed in the quotes below:
Kurt  Have you seen any fights or this type of violence in the shelter?

Bob  Yeah, I had someone pull a knife on me in the soup line. I used to work the soup line, and they go in in rows of 15. I stopped on the 15th guy, apparently he was a crack guy, and I said, "You're going to have to wait." And he came back. He said he was going to get me, well, at the end of the soup line, here it is almost 1:00 and no one's there, I'm talking to an old-timer, and the guy came from behind and grabbed and put a knife in me. And this old-time black man, that I'd know, he talked the guy out of leaving me alone. After that I don't even do the soup line. That's why they brought me in here. I've seen a lot of threats. I haven't seen but a couple fights.

Kurt  I know this neighborhood is kind of rough sometimes. How controlled is it in the shelter itself?

Phil  There's a lot of security around. They usually watch all entrances and exits. I haven't really seen a whole lot of tension, I've seen a couple of guys get in an arguments, but most everybody -- and I've seen it on the inside and the outside, usually everybody gets along, everybody just kind of does their own thing and nobody gets bothered. However, a couple of weeks ago there was a fight in the back by the kitchen, and some guy got cut pretty bad. He got his face sliced. But really that's no different than on the street or being in school and fighting the bully or something like that.

You've got to be really careful talking to people. I watched a guy get 46 stitches in here. You've got to be really careful what you ask them. Most people will tell you they want a chance to get a job. I've seen 60-70% of people who leave here with a better attitude. But you don't know. You just have to treat everyone here with respect. (Griffin)

The third man, Griffin, also told me of another violent episode and reiterated that I should be careful when approaching men for interviews in the shelter.

He also indicated, though, that there was safety in numbers in the shelter, and that the men sometimes work together to calm someone down:
To give you a small incident, a guy in the back was getting really violent. I walked up, talked to him, and you'd be surprised how many street people intervened. As long as you treat people with a little respect, you've got no problem. (Griffin)

Although many men I spoke to seemed to agree with limiting the presence of weapons in the shelter, Jeff found it ironic that those who ran one shelter were once in charge of prisons, and treated the homeless men there like criminals:

We need an administration, more important than anything else, we need administrators who are in touch with the homeless people, who know what it's about, who may have been there themselves at one time, who are pretty much compassionate with them. Now, the guys we have now used to run prisons, so they run this place like a prison. They have no idea what it's like for homeless people. They know what prison's like. We're not a business. We're not lawbreakers. We're not felons. I've never committed a crime in my life. They treat us like that. (Jeff)

The reason that a shelter may be run by ex-prison administrators, however, may partially be because of the similarity of the shelter to other total institutions (discussed in Chapter 7) and the unpredictable nature of a few men inside, as I will discuss in my next section.

The Violence of Some Homeless Men

Although most of the men I encountered claimed to have been the victims of violence, some men in the shelter seemed less innocent than others. Shelters must typically make a decision to accept a man with very little, if any, information about his background. Most shelters also could not
afford the expense of running even a simple criminal background check on every man requesting immediate assistance. For these reasons, men who have violent histories may enter the shelter unbeknownst to the staff. In general, most local shelters seem to give all men a first chance, but may later exclude those who become violent once admitted.

One social service provider, Sue, indicated that, because there is such a diverse mix of men and because shelter life can be stressful, she was surprised that there weren’t more incidences of violence:

Kurt Have you had violent incidences in the shelters?
Sue On occasion, yeah. And I have to tell you we’ve really been fortunate from my perspective, this is like a hotbed, this is like all kinds of potential could occur.

On occasion, I would encounter staying in a shelter a man whose background was exceptionally violent. Sam, for example, described several fist-fights with family, police officers and others occurring throughout his lifetime:

Well, I'm 62 years old and I'm in excellent shape. I had a prostate problem for a while and I cured that myself. The doctor wouldn’t do it. He wanted to cut me so I -- I don't trust doctors. I'm a real iconoclast. I usually call myself a misogynist, iconoclast, misanthrope. I don't think of myself -- even back in the days when I was beating my kids I never thought of myself as a bad person. I was just doing what I thought was right.

I finally got off caffeine after -- despite I was 54 years old and I fought a cop and whipped him, and six cops came in and I held them off for a while. 'Cause I black out. I just go into a -- I black out sometimes. I see red sometimes, like a person's face is encircled in red and I just pound it and pound it. When I got off of caffeine after they beat me up and I was older, and this was before the fight on the Thanksgiving weekend. So between 1989, the fight
with the cops, and in 1994, the fight with my kids, I had really mellowed out as I got off of caffeine. 'Cause people that are violent should not have caffeine, it just keeps them violent. (Sam)

Since the shelters tend to restrict behavior, men who have a history of violence may feel more comfortable away from those structures. One such man, Marty, had spent more time inside prison than out, and seemed to take violence for granted:

Marty: I spent four years and six months in (unintelligible) State Nevada, Supermax, on a twelve-year sentence. This is my third time in prison. As of the age of 16, I've been out on the streets maybe about 4 or five times. I never been out on the streets since the age of 16, and I'm 28 now, for a year in my life, man. I serve a 12 years of a life sentence for attempted murder. I used to be a drug dealer, and an ex-gang banger.

Kurt: How did you come out to Las Vegas, because you mentioned you're originally from California.

Marty: Used to be a dope dealer. There's a lot of money out here, transport. The guy I sold to tried to rob me. That's how I wound up in State Nevada twelve to life, attempted murder. We wrestled over his gun, shot him in the neck three times. He's paralyzed from the neck down.

Fremont Street, the Pueblos Projects, Naked City, West side Vegas. Everybody knows me, man. My street name is [removed], a boxer. Been boxing all my life, man, AAU golden gloves, semi-pros, Nevada State Penn, third place, Chino State Penn, third place, you know? Susanville, first place.

Kurt: You've got a lot of experience boxing.

Marty: I love boxing. It's my game. Actually, I don't have to ask nobody for nothing. I'd come out and take it, but I can't do any more time....I gang banged, and in prison, I had four or five male prostitutes at one time. And I lived like a king in prison. The reason why I lived like that in prison is because, it's all I knew man. I run prostitution rings in prison. I'm a Crip. I'm a Crip from birth.
Brandon who also declined to stay at local shelters, mentioned his several run-ins with the police, only some of which he was willing to discuss on tape:

Kurt So you've been harassed by the cops?
B. Not as much as I harass them.
Kurt Okay.
B. 'Cause if they come and mess me with me, I'll have the gall to mess with them back. Instead of saying, "Well, yes, sir; yes, I'll move," I don't want them to have the opportunity for me to turn my back and them to knock me out or something. That has happened to me also. I've had a cop that hit me one time and broke his thumb and gave me Battery, and I had to serve six months' arrest.

Kurt What started that?
B. I don't know. I really don't.

Spirit was also an ex-convict with a history of aggression. Although he squatted in an abandoned building away from the shelters near North Las Vegas, he also intimidated and extorted rent from other squatters in the complex. His success at intimidation and extortion may well indicate why some homeless men who thrive on violence may refuse to stay in shelters.

Spirit occupied arguably the best and most-furnished apartment in the complex, complete with double bed, dresser, several chairs, cooler, and a radio. When I met Spirit I had yet to introduce myself as a researcher and, thinking I was looking for a place to stay, he made it known that he would be the one allowing me to remain on the property. He also offered me a soda, which I thought I should politely accept. After I took a drink, however, Spirit informed me that I would be bringing him a bottle of vodka in return.

Spirit's dictatorship over the community revolved around what he called his "boys," which included Kenneth and two other men named Roberto and Alan. Spirit referred to the row of apartments he, Kenneth, Alan and Roberto
occupied as his "tier," which he said was prison talk for his territory. Spirit had been on the street before, and that he now received five- to six-hundred dollars a month from illegal activities and from the other squatters on the property.

His threatening mannerisms and frequent bursts of shouting seemed to explain the respect given him by the other three men. Despite Kenneth being more muscular, Spirit had an apartment with a running toilet, shower and sink, while Kenneth did not. In my initial tour of his apartment, Kenneth showed me that his bathroom fixtures had been pulled out of the wall. "I go next door to take a shower. It's ice cold, but it works. I have the bath here filled up with water so I can wash my clothes," he said. "It [the water] looks dirty, but it's really not bad, just soapy."

After explaining to Spirit that I was a researcher studying homelessness in Las Vegas, he began telling me that I didn't have what it took to survive in the world, and that he could kill me without thinking twice, statements punctuated with pacing, hitting himself and making physically threatening gestures.

At one point, he announced his personal belief system:

I'm gonna tell you something. I'm gonna tell you a story about this master of psychology who evaluated me. Do you know who Charles Manson was? See, I'm his twin brother. There were two of us. Do you see it? I am my God. I'm a God that's real [pounding his chest]. I'm not your fake, plastic God. I'm not a credit card. Look deep into my eyes [moving within an inch of my face]. I could kill you [his spit hitting my face]! All of these guys here know I'm God, and that's why they worship me. I was doing a 5/10 split in prison when I was 16. You know about the Vietnam War? This fucking master of psychology going on to his doctorate was talking to his
sergeant about me. He said "If I could have had someone to
counsel me, I wish it had been [Spirit] when I had to talk to all
those boys coming back from the war." That was the highest
honor I have ever felt [gritting his teeth]! Nothing your
professors can tell you will ever come close to that kind of
knowledge! Nothing you read could defend you from me. You
see, I can kill anyone with this [points to his head], but I don't
because it would hurt me more. I'm the anti-Charles Manson. I
can destroy anyone at will, but I only use my powers for good.
But if you hurt God, no one will save you! (Spirit)

Although the vast majority of the men I spoke to did not seem violent,
others assured me that even those who did not seem violent at first might
unpredictably become so. Griffin told me a story of one such man who
seemed to have succeeded in leaving the shelter, but then later became
vicious:

A guy came here from California. He left for two months and
then he came back, and he was a completely different person.
He was clean shaven and well dressed. We [later] found out
he had stabbed his wife. (Griffin)

In sum, men may use shelters in part as a way of avoiding victimization
by those like Brandon, Spirit and Marty who do not use shelters because their
practices would not be tolerated on the property. Ironically, however, they
often have to go through high-crime areas such as the borderland between
Las Vegas and North Las Vegas in order to access shelter services. Those
who are required to turn in their weapons for the duration of their stay at a
shelter, and have yet to discover makeshift weapons such as screwdrivers,
may then be defenseless on their way back-and-forth from the shelter.
Conclusion

In this chapter I have focused on the violence in and around the shelters near North Las Vegas. Many respond to their environment through fear, self-defense and protection, and/or submission.

Those I interviewed frequently decide to escape from the violence of the streets near North Las Vegas by staying primarily in shelters, and traveling quickly back-and-forth to more economically viable parts of the city during daylight hours. Jeff, however, specifically mentioned that even though the crime and the dilapidated environment near North Las Vegas would probably not cause physical harm, their feeling “trapped” inside a barred shelter in such a neighborhood might well impact a man’s overall self-esteem:

Jeff  Once you drive to North Las Vegas side, it’s like going into Watts, or going into South Central, or going into Harlem.....I just moved somebody into a new house up on Washington Boulevard. And when he drove us down here he was surprised as shit not knowing that he was four miles away from the poor side of town. He thought he was getting a nice house in the suburbs, and he was driving us back here, and he was like “Shit,” you could see the expression on his face, he was going, “Fuck, I didn’t know I was this close to the shit house.” But it’s true, if you’re stuck in this part of town, you start assimilating yourself to it. You become part of it.

Kurt  You start assimilating?
Jeff  Yeah. For example, once in a while you see a guy here walk out and go to work in a suit and tie. He’s a different man. For a small time, he’s got self-respect back, he’s got his ego back. He’s going out and he’s doing a job. Then he comes back here and he gets his suit off, he puts on his jeans and T-shirts again, he becomes a homeless man. It’s like he’s on a prison furlough. Go out for a couple hours and be human.

Kurt  It’s like the bars on the door [the shelter’s front door is similar to a jail-house door made of black metal bars].
Jeff Exactly, it's like a fairy tale. Did you ever hear the fairy tale where the princess is turning into a swan, and she comes back as a princess when moonlight hits, and then when the sun light comes up, she turns back into a swan? It's the same thing here. Somebody comes up and he wears a suit and tie to go to work, and for eight hours you feel like you've made it, then you come back here and you're scum again. You get that suit off, get the T-shirt on, and you're behind the bars again. You've turned back into the animal.

Jeff's reference to a popular fairy tale seems to illustrate the Thomas Theorem which states that if a person defines something as real, it is real in its consequences. While many impoverished individuals in and near North Las Vegas are unable to secure a living, they are aware that others in the City of Las Vegas and Clark County are experiencing unprecedented growth and economic development. If individuals in impoverished areas come to feel worthless, marginalized and excluded from opportunity, such conditions may also translate into human life itself having little value.

It is difficult to determine precisely how many homeless men are victims of violence and how many are victimizers. However, the segregation of homeless men away from glittering tourist areas and into one of the lowest income and most violent neighborhoods in Southern Nevada may well turn non-violent homeless men fearful and defensive. Such stressful conditions certainly cannot help these men end their homelessness.

In the next chapter, I describe men's reactions to the question, "How would you conduct research on homeless men in Las Vegas?"
CHAPTER 10

HOW HOMELESS MEN WOULD CONDUCT RESEARCH
ON HOMELESSNESS

In the United States, the literature on homelessness has increased substantially, particularly within the last twenty years (Rossi 1989:65). Many of these recent studies, however, are rooted in the assumptions of positivist and deductive-based social science research. Snow and Anderson find that questionnaire surveys are useful for generalized understandings of the demographics of homeless persons, and that this information can be used by social service agencies which work with homeless populations. However, because such research designs tend to be "congruent both with the interests and agendas of funding agencies," (1993:18) they tend to imply that the homeless themselves and their characteristics are the source of homelessness. The authors also note that such studies "tell us little about life on the streets," and in particular have ignored the experiences and perspectives of homeless persons (1993:19).

Thus, while an open-ended, inductive research approach to studying homelessness would allow important insights to emerge, Snow and Anderson's call for increasing the number of qualitative studies can be
extended even further and include a model in which the researcher asks homeless persons how they might go about studying homelessness, and what questions they might ask. My literature review showed that no such study exists. Therefore, I asked several of these men how they would go about studying homelessness if they were "in my shoes."

Although some may question a methodological approach which asks members of a group how they feel they might best be studied, I believe this approach reflects a growing trend toward the empowerment of research subjects, and in particular, socially marginalized research subjects. As Gottschalk (1994) has indicated, talking directly to marginalized persons about their culture, and integrating their voices seems the best way to support those individuals' own struggles to resist the meanings imposed on them by powerful groups, academics included.

The research suggestions of the homeless men provided more than simply answers to a methodological question, but also articulated some of their theories and knowledge of homelessness. Such a research approach allows homeless men a voice in research which concerns them, while simultaneously allowing readers to consider both their own strategies and thoughts about homelessness that are implicit in their research strategies.

Some of the answers were very direct and to-the-point, especially those regarding methodology. Bob suggested a random sampling technique, but one which allowed for quota sampling in order to consider homeless people with diverse characteristics:
Kurt  Last question I have for you, because you're busy. If you were doing a project on homelessness in Las Vegas, what types of questions would you ask, what would be your interests?...If you were like me and you were studying the topic, how would you study it?

Bob  Randomly, take different races, different appearances from here [a local shelter], from people that look like they have been educated, different ages from top to bottom, and all races and all ages.

Like several other men, Steve suggested that my personal approach of talking to men and getting their stories was good, but that some who felt shame and pain at being homeless would probably feel discomfort if I asked probing questions:

Kurt  One of the questions I've been asking a lot of the guys is if you were in my position, if you were going to do a study on homelessness in Las Vegas, talking to homeless men, how would you go about doing the study, what types of questions would you ask?

Steve  That's difficult to answer, because each person here has a story of their own, and a lot of times they don't want to talk about it; and, therefore, some might be difficult for you to get a good truthful answer out of them perhaps because they were ashamed, or perhaps because it hurts. But the questions that you are asking to me are good questions, what you've already put to me. So, you're certainly in the right direction, and I really can't think of anything offhand that you're missing. To go any deeper, like I say, might get into an area that they don't want to talk about. That's just my opinion.

Mark also believed that my real question was about how I could raise the delicate topic of how these men became homeless. However, when I probed his response further, he then said he "misunderstood" my question, and gave an answer concerning a sampling procedure and the possible use of quota sampling:
Kurt Speaking of homeless people, I'm curious, and one of the things I've been asking everyone is if you were in my position, if you were doing research on homelessness in Las Vegas, how would you go about pursuing the topic? What would you do?

Mark As in what question to broach, how to walk around the ego? I don't know. If I wanted to ask myself why I wound up in here, I think my first reaction would be to come up with a dozen excuses. To broach the concept of being homeless, I don't know. "Why are you in [a local shelter]?" is good. "If you had the situation to do over," or, "Do you plan on pursuing more than this?" I'm not sure how you would approach someone and go, "Hi, are you homeless? Hi, do you like being homeless?"

Kurt So you think it would primarily be by talking to guys?

Mark Oh, I'm sorry, I misunderstood the question. The percentage of homeless in Las Vegas, there are approximately 220 males at this program in the building here. There is a smaller shelter in that building that is for women. There is approximately 20 women and 220 males, so you're talking 1/10th or one in ten. I don't understand why females would be less prone to be homeless, except that men would take advantage, where as a female had no money and a guy had a place, a guy would let them come in for the obvious physical benefits. Guys, on the other hand, don't have that to offer.

Like Mark, Keith and Bill had recently become homeless. Also like Mark, Keith and Bill suggested research assumptions that implied homelessness was, at least for some, a temporary condition. While Mark suggested that I might ask men in a shelter, "Do you plan on pursuing more than this?" Keith and Bill's approaches implied that everyone who was homeless is or should actively be attempting to end their homelessness through certain strategies:

Kurt If you were working on a project where you talking to homeless men about their lives, about what the conditions are like in Las Vegas, how would you approach the project, what kinds of questions would you ask? What would you do?
Keith: Well, I would ask what you ask. Basically, how [did] you get here and what [do] you intend to do to get out of it? A lot of people here need help to get out of it. That’s the toughest thing to get off the street, is that you know what you can do, you know what you’re capable of, you know if you got a job you can get out. To get from point A to point B you need the extra help to get you in that situation.

Kurt: So I'll throw out a weird question. If you were in my position and you were gonna do research

Bill: Ok

Kurt: Like I'm doing, talking to people who happen to be homeless

Bill: Mm hm

Kurt: What kind of stuff would you ask them, what would your focus be?

Bill: I don't know if I'd focus so much on how you got this way, I think I'd focus more on their response. How do you plan on getting out of this?

Another recently homeless man wanted to know how homeless people intended on ending their homelessness. He thought the answers might be of some use to him:

Kurt: I wanted to ask you, if you were in my position and you were doing research on homelessness in Las Vegas and talking to homeless guys, how would you approach the topic? What would you do if you were me, in my shoes?

Alex: That'd be kind of a hard decision there, because for one I'm not in your shoes, and number two, there's all kind of people that are homeless, but I've never sat down myself and talked to them. So I wouldn't know how to answer that question, because when I think about it, I'd like to ask a lot of other people maybe the same kind of questions, because the more I know about it, maybe the easier it is for me to learn how to get out of it. I wouldn't know how to go about it myself, you know. Maybe it's just I feel kind of down about being in this position. I don't really like to talk about it I guess. Different things. But that would be a hard one. I couldn't see how to answer that.
George suggested that, in order to truly understand homeless or shelter life, I should try living in the shelter:

G. I don’t know if you’re living here [in the shelter] or if you’re going to stay here or what.
Kurt No, actually I’ve just been talking with the guys.
G. Stay here for a little while and see what it’s like. I mean, it’s not that bad. Actually for me I think it’s great. I tell people, “Come on down, if you can handle it.” I mean you got to remember you’re with homeless people, it stinks a little bit. Some people don’t shower all the time. But other than that it’s cool. You meet some cool people.

Ziggy combined a deceptive, full-participation approach in studying individuals (cf. Douglas 1976) with an attempt to assess a range of characteristics of various types of homeless persons:

Kurt If you were out here, if you were like me, in my shoes, and you were going to do research on homelessness in Las Vegas, how would you approach the topic and what would you do in terms of the study?
Ziggy Well, the best way to actually study this is to get one, maybe two change of clothes, forget you know anybody in this town and just come right out here on the street and do it. Take your tape recorder and just put a mike on somebody so they won’t see the actual — ‘cause people will shy away from you when they see that tape recorder.

Discussing the pros and cons of deception vs. full disclosure in terms of researching homeless persons, Ziggy also alluded to the traditional ethnographic practice of taking notes out of the view of research subjects:

Kurt Yeah, I know. It’s a strange thing, because I do it [get permission to tape and keep the tape recorder in full view while recording] because I want to be honest with people. If I’m going to do research, I’ve got to be honest.
Ziggy Right. See, [but with] a lot of ’em, you won’t get the information. You will miss the most interesting people,
because they don’t want to be interviewed. They don’t want to be on camera, and you will miss some of the most interesting people because of that. So in lieu of that, you have to do it very, very discreetly. And to find out and get close enough to these people to actually talk to them is like what I’m doing right now, living with them, dealing with them, being around them. And just, you know, take notes later, ‘cause you’ll find out you’ll learn a lot more about a lot more people. Like I say, these people are not -- they’re not dummies. They’re not uneducated. They’re not, like I say, drunks, alcoholics and drug addicts, you know. There is some really sane people here. And some of the ones that look and act sane are the ones that are nutty. I mean literally mental cases. And you don’t know until you actually start talking to them. And it’s hard to discern one from the other in a lot of cases.

So, yeah, I would do [research on homelessness] like I’ve been doing for the last six years, just take notes and deal with them one on one and see how they act, see what compels them, what the catalyst is for whatever motivation they’re lacking.

Fred suggested a rather sophisticated project, where the researcher would consider homelessness from several different perspectives. While this project seems to illustrate a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, it could also be classified as a postmodern one, where “partial truths” (Clifford 1986) may be gleaned from each interpreter:

Kurt I’m curious, too. I’ve been talking to a lot of the guys, and one of the questions I ask is, If you were in my position, if you were doing research on homelessness in Las Vegas and talking with homeless men, how would you approach the research, how would you approach the study?

Fred I think I would divide it into several sections. You might want to take it from a caseworker viewpoint. You might want to take it from a person that actually lives in a shelter, that is just a shelter. You might want to look into some of the shelters that are strictly done as rehab centers, such as the Path Foundation, I think it’s called. You might want to look at it from different aspects, and then see what information correlates and what doesn’t, and what should be put into certain little niches and then finally see what all
comes into the heading of why and how a homeless person is. In other words, I don't think you can lump it all into one little pot and say, "Okay, this is a homeless person." I think you have to be able to look at all the different aspects and the different ways they are being helped. I think one of the reasons for the work program here [inside one shelter] is self-evident. Some of the other programs that are around like Path and so forth and so on which are basically for drug and alcohol abuse, I think was basically put into existence because a lot of the funding wasn't there on the mental health angle that it should have been so, therefore, the other was created. But you have to look at each one individually to basically see.

Kurt So you're saying to take a look at homeless in terms of the differences that different people have in coming to a similar state.

Fred Right, and why they do. You've find that some of them come to Nevada because in California there's a lot of beatings by the police and so forth and so on in certain areas that are predominantly meant just for the homeless.

Phillip implicitly questioned my operational definition of homeless men as those residing in shelters or outside. He said that in order to understand homelessness I would have to study the "true" homeless: those who didn't rely on shelters. He mentioned following "the train" of homeless persons, and alluded to a method that included analyzing physical traces of activity by the homeless. He also explained how I could reduce the high risk of such a participant-observation approach by conducting team research:

Kurt If you were in my position, if you were going to do a study of homelessness in Las Vegas, how would you go about doing the study? What types of questions would you ask? What would you do?

Phillip Okay. If I was going to do this, I wouldn't bother with [names three local shelters]. These are people that -- they're homeless, yes and no. Some of them are trying to get up on their feet, some of them is not, but the true homeless ones is ones that you're going to find at the park right over here. Around here between [one particular shelter and another one]. If you go up here by the highway
in the evening, and you've seen where the people climbed over the fences or cut a hole in the fence, go up there and just walk over there and spend some time in that area.

I would not advise a person to do it by theirselves, 'cause they can get hurt. There are some nut cases, like I said. And there's just some that are no good, and that's with any group, that's homeless or not homeless. You need to have at least one person with you. Just camp out, like you was homeless. Just follow the train. A lot of people says homeless people are like cattle. You can just follow and you'll find out where all the feeding is and all this. But the people don't realize this when they first become homeless, so they don't follow.

Sam implicitly expressed the assumptions of a Marxist/critical orientation (Fay 1987) by indicating that, despite all their good intentions, critical social scientists cannot address the underlying economic problem, making the study of homelessness itself futile:

Kurt  Maybe a couple more questions. There's a question I usually ask most of the guys I'm talking to. If you were in my position, if you were doing research on homelessness in Las Vegas and talking to guys about being homeless here, what types of questions would you ask? How would you approach the research? What would you do if you were in my shoes?

Sam  Well, I assume I'd be motivated by wanting to alleviate the situation of homelessness, right? And trying to find out what they could do to help me know how to go about doing it? And I think it's futile, really. It just makes interesting reading and all that, but I'm just real pessimistic about how this country is going. I'm just the wrong person to ask, I think.

Kurt  Well, no, it's your opinion and that's what counts.

Sam  I just -- my mind is blank, because I think it's so futile. What would make it interesting, or what would help the situation? I don't know what my motivation would be. The only way it's been said -- all this stuff has been said before. You won't say anything that hasn't been said before. You know that. And there's only one way that you can really help people in this country and that's to give them jobs and you have to really give them a lot of help in the beginning and that way you'll break this thing.
Ronald also seemed to advocate a research approach driven by critical assumptions, but using interpretive methods. Above all, he stressed observing the difficulties and contradictions men face while participating in bureaucratic social service programs ostensibly designed to help the homeless out of their condition:

Kurt I know you've got to go in a couple of minutes. I should ask you one question. If you were doing a study yourself on homelessness in Las Vegas and you were talking to people, or whatever you'd like to do as a study, how would you approach it? What would you do if you were in my position?

Ron Just exactly the way you're doing it. There's different sides. 'Cause everybody out here has got a piece of the puzzle. And in reality, what I see here is just a big unscrambled puzzle. And everybody's walking around trying to find the pieces to put in. And the system they have here is like a (indiscernible), you try to work with them, but they have the system down to where it's like bucking the bull. You're going head on. You're trying to -- well, you've got enough on your mind, you do what you have to do to try to get back on your feet and find shelter on your own without having to use this. But the schedule that they have --

Kurt The schedule at the shelters?

Ron The schedules and the requirements that you have to meet, meaning the schedules. If you're not there on time, you don't eat. If you're not there at 11:00, 1:00, you don't shower. You have to wait until the next day. So they made it to where what are you going to do? You need to go to look for work. From my past experience, neat has a lot to do with getting a job, you know, your appearance. Well, that's kind of hard to do when they won't let you take a shower. You get five minutes in the shower and that's including shaving. They have 50 to 70 people at any given time, and you have an hour and a half to take your showers. Out of six shower heads they've got, they've got one that works, maybe two. I mean, I can go on and on and on. You know. And you're out there looking for work and you've got no money, you get hungry, so you have to
weigh your pros and cons and decide what are your priorities.

And when I'm talking about missing meals, at 2:30 in the afternoon they serve dinner at [one shelter]. That's pretty close to lunch than it is for dinner, wouldn't you say? I mean, 2:30 in the afternoon your -- at least I am, five days a week I'm out there trying to work. Just because I don't get day labor doesn't mean I'm not out trudging maybe 5, 7, 8 miles on my feet walking looking for a job. It's tough.

Kurt So the way that the shelters assist the guys and the women has been kind of surprising to you, of the way the whole system works?

Ron Yeah, it's -- you know. I'm glad it's not me. I believe in God and I have faith and I have my family. And I'm fortunate in that way, because it's them that keeps me going. I know in my heart that this is just temporary.

Jeff also seemed to advocate observation as a technique, but observation triangulated with talking to people, including those who work with the homeless. He indicated that a researcher could compare the mission statement versus the actual practices of local shelters, and also discussed both checking the data as part of the research process, and getting the results into “the right people's hands,” presumably to affect change:

Kurt I'm just about to run out of tape but I just want to ask you one more question. If you were my shoes, if you were, say, doing research on homelessness in Las Vegas, what would you do, and how would you go about studying that topic?

Jeff What I would do? Observe the streets, observe the people. Observe the shelters. Third, I would talk to the administrators and get their point of view on what they're trying to do. Then talk to the people to see what they're trying to do, actually do, okay. The administrators have their way of doing things and the way they seeing things, so they think they're helping. When they're actually causing more problems. What you have to do as a researcher is when you get the data, you check the data, and once you publish it, have to get the book into the right people's hands, generally the public.
Jerome and Tyrone, however, thought that various problems such as substance abuse, drugs and/or gambling caused homelessness, and that the researcher need only create a typology under which he or she could place a given man’s story. Ironically, however, Douglas also indicated that the researcher should note how the majority of these men want to work. Jerome, on the other hand, felt less sympathy for his peers and indicated that many of them had “attitude” that would make any research project that attempted to involve them difficult:

Kurt I’m curious, too, I should ask you a couple more questions. If you were going to do a project on homelessness in Las Vegas, how would you go about conducting it, what types of things would you ask? What would you do?

J. Well, it would be simple. First thing I’d ask is why you’re homeless, and I guarantee you they’d give you one of those four reasons I gave you. The alcohol, drugs, mental illness, or gambling. Simple as that. They’d give you one of those reasons that’s why their homeless, or when they get a job they lose it. Simple as that. That’s why they’re out there. I’d say most of them don’t want to be. 90 percent of them want to work and everything, but there’s probably five percent or ten that just as soon do that, but it’s small. A lot of people don’t believe that, but it’s true.

Kurt Well, tell me, if you were in my shoes, if you were doing a project on homelessness in Las Vegas, I’m curious to ask the guys, what kind of questions would you ask and how would you approach studying this topic?

Ty I’d probably ask everybody why are you here, and if they give you a truthful answer it’s either drugs or alcohol, one or the two. I would say 90 percent of the people here are here because of drugs or alcohol. That’s a lifetime of using too because you don’t have a lot of — if you look around and look around, what would you say the average age of the people that you seen here is? What would you say?

Kurt It’s hard to say, probably late 30s, early 40s.

Ty Okay, so that goes to show you that something happened during their teens and 20s to put them here. Like me, I’m
50 and I've done my share but I've never gotten in any trouble, but then one day something happens so – but like I said that's the only reason I'm here.

Kurt You look young for 50 actually.
Ty I ain't feeling it right now.

Kurt So just try to find out what types of experiences brought people to where they're at.

Ty Yeah, if you get people to talk to you. Mostly everybody's got an attitude, you can mind your own business or whatever, but like you said you have to approach them if you want your research.

Finally, Albert did not seem interested in writing about local homelessness, but instead wanted to create a documentary film to show the condition to others.

He believed that in-depth interviewing, however, would also work well with footage of homeless men showing where they found shelter:

Kurt Speaking of differences among homeless people, if you were in my shoes, if you were doing research on homelessness in Las Vegas, how would you do the research? What would you do?

Al Oh, God. You know what? I was going to go one day -- and this is when I was serving the Lord, I was going to make this movie, just go around and show all the different places that these homeless people are living. You know, they're sleeping up here in back of the steel factory and they got camps out there, and I was sleeping in the swimming pool with four other people at [a famous Las Vegas resident's] old ranch up there on Rancho. (Indiscernible.) They still sleep over there and camp out over there. If I was going to do it, I probably would just go around and take pictures of these places that they're living in and just do what you're doing: talk to them, interview, see what their feelings are.
Conclusion

The approaches which homeless men suggested in conducting research on homelessness were quite diverse. The men raised a range of important methodological issues, including: sampling techniques; the role of researcher honesty vs. researcher deception in participant observation; if (and sometimes, how) one should ask sensitive questions; considerations of researcher safety while occupying the role of participant observer; and the purposes of conducting research on homeless men.

It is also noteworthy that, of all the men I interviewed, none specifically mentioned using a questionnaire or a survey to gain information on homelessness. This is surprising because, of all the social science research techniques used to study homelessness, conducting surveys is the most popular (Snow and Anderson 1993:18). Perhaps one reason this technique went unmentioned was because of its routine use in homeless research. However, they may not have mentioned survey research techniques because my own approach (in this case, in-depth interviewing) was qualitative. At times, I chose unfortunate phrasing similar to, “If you were doing a study yourself on homelessness in Las Vegas and you were talking to people,” perhaps indicating that I was leading the respondents. It is also possible that based on my own approach to research the respondents gave a socially desirable response (Frey 1989) to my question.

Determining the value of qualitative compared to quantitative approaches, however, was not the purpose of the question or this chapter. I
developed this experimental chapter because, as other contemporary qualitative researchers (Denzin and Lincoln 1994) have recognized, the way a researcher defines validity is a political act. Given my earlier emphasis on the validity of an ethnographic approach where I reproduce the speech and thoughts of those being studied, I thought I should include their thoughts on how research on homelessness should be conducted as well. Although almost all the suggestions these men offered have a long history in debates regarding their use and legitimacy, it still fascinated me that these men consistently articulated thoughtfulness and concern regarding the way social science research should be conducted, and the way social scientists might best treat others in the study of homelessness.

I now turn to the conclusions, limitations and policy implications of my study.
CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

My goal in this dissertation has been to interpret the dominant popular meanings of male homelessness in Las Vegas in the mid-1990s, and then to write an ethnography that presented these men's views and experiences. In other words, I wanted to create what Clifford Geertz calls an “experience-near” account of these men (qtd. in Snow and Anderson 1993:19), one opposed to simplistic understandings of homelessness based largely on hearsay and speculation. I wanted to discover for myself what these men's lives were like, what led them to homelessness, and to assess whether what I had heard about them in the local news was “true.” I hope that my systematic and interactive research approach will promote understanding and reduce the distance between “us” (the dominant social groups) and “them” (this marginalized social group). Homeless men might use this research to better understand themselves, the problems which they face and what they can do to change the local conditions which may reproduce homelessness. I also hope that my research might provide insights to homeless service providers and the community-at-large as to how social policy can better address this condition.
In this research I used multiple methods (content analysis, participant observation and in-depth interviewing). Together, each of these three methods allowed me a cultural studies approach to understanding the construction of meanings around local male homelessness.

Content analysis and interviews with social service providers allowed me to understand the popular meanings regarding male homelessness constructed by the news media, community members, social workers and, in general, those who do not themselves experience homelessness. I investigated the latent themes present in these documents and statements to see how those who do not directly experience homelessness interpret this condition. The themes I developed from these sources suggest that the constructions of homelessness also articulate the particular social position of those producing these meanings. In general, those who feel they might have something to lose by the presence of homeless men, be it their property, personal safety or income from tourists, may promote particular views of homelessness that reflect those fears. Social service providers interests may differ somewhat from those of the community-at-large, but overall this research suggests that their construction of homelessness is influenced by their unique social position. As Peter Marin (1987:47) phrased it, “[e]very government program, almost every private project, is geared as much to the needs of those giving help as it is to the needs of the homeless.”

My use of ethnographic data allowed me to investigate the experiential discourse homeless men present regarding their condition. That discourse tended to emphasize the problems they faced in addressing their
homelessness, and their survival strategies. For example, many of the men I spoke with wanted to work, but had difficulty finding full-time jobs. They complained about the competition for jobs, and the cards and union memberships they were required to purchase to secure casino employment. Often facing several barriers to gaining employment, not the least of which was their homelessness, the men would eventually seek day labor jobs, assistance from government or charitable agencies, or both. Several said that the difficulties of sporadic employment combined with the bureaucratic structure of shelter life made it nearly impossible for them to consider anything beyond daily survival. My ethnographic approach allowed these men to discuss the reasons for their homelessness, their understanding of shelter bureaucracies, their use of other survival strategies, their fear of violence near the shelters, and how they might conduct research on homelessness.

My cultural studies approach, though, involves more than using content analysis, participant-observation and in-depth interviews. Cultural studies research is also political, aimed at criticizing systems of inequality and at transforming the lives of those who suffer from it. I will first present the conclusions I drew for each part of my study. I will discuss both the limitations of my study in understanding homelessness and in changing the conditions leading to homelessness. Finally, I will indicate the policy implications and the potential uses of this study.
Conclusions

In my Introduction, I stated that many recent studies of homeless men rely exclusively on surveys, that these studies tend to "blame the victim" through emphasizing the personal deficiencies of these men, and that they cannot consider the different meanings different groups produce about male homelessness. I asked the question: might other, qualitative forms of research help explain homelessness as a result of additional factors beyond personal problems? I then decided to conduct qualitative research: I would conduct a local study which would contrast the dominant popular meanings of male homelessness with the meaning given to it by homeless men. I indicated that much debate exists over the degree to which homeless men are considered responsible for their condition. Much debate also exists about the government and community's responsibility in creating conditions which may result in homelessness (and subsequently the degree to which they should provide help to those men who experience the condition). I stated that my research topic evolved out of my personal experiences working at a shelter program that provided immediate relief for homeless men, but that this program also implied a discourse that blamed those men for being without shelter. I claimed that ultimately this form of assistance could not address the root causes of homelessness. In contrast, my own study would hopefully reveal the limits of debates which place blame on either the individual or on the system, would indicate the complex interaction that occurs between
homeless men and their environments, and might provide insights as to how social policy regarding homelessness may be improved.

In my review of the literature in Chapter 2 I noted that the meaning of poverty-caused homelessness has changed historically. In particular, the Protestant Ethic emphasized material wealth and hard work as keys to salvation, and subsequently helped stigmatize poverty. I described the strengths and weaknesses of several studies of homelessness conducted in the past 70 years, and I also indicated that several recent studies of homeless men rely exclusively on surveys and tend to emphasize the personal deficiencies of these men in order to justify social service programs. To counterbalance these trends, I wanted to conduct a study similar to Snow and Anderson's ethnography, which both considers the context in which homelessness occurs and which gives homeless men a voice in research which concerns them. Hopper, Susser and Conover's recent study of homelessness which considered the survival practices of homeless men was also influential in my own work.

In Chapter 3 I described in detail my use of three different methods (content analysis, participant observation and in-depth interviewing) which together provided a cultural studies approach to understand the construction of meanings assigned to local male homelessness. I also discussed reliability and validity factors, the ethical issues involved in my research, and the results of my experimental ethnography (presented in Chapters 5 and 10).

In Chapter 4 I reviewed the idea that the dominant American values of individual achievement, individual freedom, honest hard work, and material
success form the basis for what is believed to be a meritocratic system where one gets what one deserves. As I suggested, belief in such a system tends to reproduce a negative view of poverty and welfare recipients in the U.S., and provides the basic framework upon which I discuss the localized meanings of homelessness I found in regional newspaper articles, discussions with homeless service providers, and in other documents (such as signs, posters and mailings) on homelessness. The three themes I found were: (1) homeless men are considered a threat; (2) homeless men should be restricted from certain areas, places and activities; and (3) homeless men deserve charitable support, but through donation campaigns and via agencies that keep them apart from the rest of the Las Vegas community. These localized themes reflect a localized view of male homelessness, which is partially produced by a local economy rooted in tourism. The tourist economy in turn depends on the development of clean, safe and appealing environments that attract individuals with disposable income and that maintain security whose task consists partly in restricting the presence of indigent persons.

In Chapter 5 I gave an in-depth account of my encounter with one homeless man. The account both contrasts with and articulates popular meanings assigned to local male homelessness. I also believe that this account shows the richness of the data gathered from interviews such as this, of the dynamics between myself and one research subject, and is a more-or-less unedited reproduction of his own words concerning his condition. I did not draw conclusions from this specific section because I didn't want to
“interfere” with the possible conclusions that a given reader may develop on his or her own.

In Chapter 6 I presented homeless men’s explanations of their condition. These included reasons such as health and physical disabilities, substance or gambling addictions, mental illness, loss of regular employment, having been recently released from jail or prison, loss of family networks, and problems with either renting or the rental market. These explanations include both personal and structural factors which often interact. I discussed the difficulties (and often futility) of trying to discover which factor has “primacy” in explaining a given man’s homelessness. As I also indicated, because homeless men are most concerned about their immediate survival, they may not be aware of or use the agency or organization best suited to their needs.

The men also expressed interest and concern about the bureaucratic structure of those agencies which purport to help them. In Chapter 7, I discussed shelter bureaucracies as a dominant institutional framework in addressing local homelessness. I presented the men’s thoughts on the bureaucratic structure of three local shelters (Working Shelter, Addict Shelter and Religious Shelter). As the men indicated, through the type of assistance provided, each shelter embodied a different set of assumptions about the problems faced by homeless men and their needs. I argued that, although the shelters may at first resemble total institutions which attempt to resocialize members, they are actually better described as bureaucracies which the men may choose to join, to use in particular ways, or to leave.
In Chapter 8, I discussed several of these men’s survival strategies. These ranged from trying to find full-time work, day labor, or social services, to scavenging for food, goods and change, selling things such as plasma or panhandling and stealing, to using objects and services for their own survival purposes. I concluded that as men stayed homeless for longer periods, the strategies they used seemed to change. Recent homeless men often see finding work as a key to ending their homelessness. Frequently shelter-users, these men are still trying to find work and differentiate themselves from those long-time homeless persons they see scavenging, choosing not to bathe regularly, or who do not (or cannot) use shelter services. I believe this bifurcation of homeless men into those who are actively trying to end their homelessness and those who are simply trying to survive shows that homeless identity is processual and career-like (Goffman 1961; Snow and Anderson 1993), and that those men who cannot participate in the local economy through traditional employment must then find other ways to survive, even if those ways are negatively perceived.

Chapter 9 addresses the violence homeless men face in the shelters and in the neighborhoods surrounding those shelters. My finding that some homeless men are violent parallels the popular theme I found in content analysis and interviews constructing homeless men as a physical threat. However, the popular theme is primarily a stereotype, and cannot account for important differences within the local male homeless population. For example, although some homeless men have recently been released from the violent environment of jail or prison, many more have not. Although some homeless
men may steal or commit criminal acts, most others do not. The vast majority of homeless men I met, many on several occasions, did not seem violent. Instead (and somewhat ironically), these men usually feared for their possessions and safety in the area where shelter services are centralized. If homeless men are presented as a threat in the popular media, it might be important to understand how they themselves feel threatened when attempting to access local charitable relief, and that these conditions certainly deter/delay these men from ending their homelessness.

In Chapter 10 I presented men's responses to the question, "how would you conduct research on local homelessness?" Their responses raised a range of important methodological issues, including: sampling techniques; the practice of researcher honesty vs. researcher deception in participant observation; if (and sometimes how) one should ask sensitive questions; considerations of researcher safety while acting as a participant observer; and the purposes of conducting research on homeless men. Although all the suggestions they gave have a long history in methodological debates, the men articulated thoughtfulness and concern regarding how social science research should be conducted, and how social scientists might best treat others in the study of homelessness.

Two other conclusions might also be drawn from this study as a whole. The first one is that the popular discourse regarding homelessness and the men's experiential discourse are not entirely separable. For example, both homeless and non-homeless persons expressed the popular theme that local homeless men pose a threat and require social control. During my interviews,
men having become recently homeless often expressed the same distrust, fear and prejudice of other homeless persons to that expressed in popular texts.

The overlap between discourses, however, seems to be primarily one-directional. Popular discourses affect homeless men's view of their own experiences and themselves, but rarely the other way around. Homeless men are acutely aware of how non-homeless persons perceive them, and that they are commonly represented as threats, con-artists or objects of pity in media accounts. In the same vein, Dick Hebdige (1979:85) has noted that the media's prevalence in our social world "not only provide[s] groups with substantive images of other groups," but also "relay[s] back to...people a picture of their own lives which is 'contained' or 'framed' by the ideological discourses which surround and situate it." In other words, popular and media images come to affect how we understand other groups and ourselves, and give us information as to how we are expected to be and act as members of particular groups.

The development of an experiential discourse constructed by homeless men thus partially emerges in response to the popular and media discourses about them. This tendency can best be seen in the attitudes of the recently homeless who have long been exposed to media accounts of the homeless. Based on popular accounts, individuals who suddenly found themselves homeless for the first time tended to articulate a prejudicial, distrustful and negative view of others sharing their condition. Recently homeless men often differentiated and disassociated themselves from who they perceived to be the
longer-term homeless, and would occasionally even deny their homeless status altogether. They refused to take on a homeless identity, because they felt their homelessness was only temporary while other’s was permanent.

But even recently homeless men would begin developing an alternative account of their homelessness, and would present information which challenged the stereotypical view of their condition and of the causes leading men to it. Thus, while claiming they weren’t really part of the “truly” homeless, some individuals would also discuss several reasons (both personal and structural) why they had had difficulty getting out of their present condition. Over time, as their personal problems were compounded by structural barriers which further prevented them from gaining their own residence, the recently-homeless would often slowly come to appreciate that all homeless persons are prevented from ending their homelessness by circumstances seemingly beyond their control. Some recently-made-homeless males would then eventually come to feel sympathy for those longer-term-homeless.

Paradoxically, however, at this point they may be well on their way to becoming longer-term homeless men, and would in turn be reviled by newer homeless persons who want to distance themselves socially from what they perceive as “personal failures.”

A second conclusion is that the Las Vegas discourse presenting homeless men as a threat is extended to include the need for and deployment of a program of social control. I have specifically shown the link between the construction of stories on homeless men and the way those stories corroborate with the practices of resorts and casinos, the development of local
ordinances as well the development of programs to assist these men in locations far removed from the tourist attractions and the residential areas of Las Vegas.

However, through my ethnography, I hoped to have shown that this programmatic exclusion of homeless men from participating in both the culture and the economy of Las Vegas results in 1) stereotyping a very heterogeneous group of men who are homeless for many different reasons, and 2) providing an answer to the problem of homelessness primarily from the perspective and interests of Las Vegas residents. By promoting a particular discourse on homeless men and by segregating them through centralized social services on the edge of the city limits, “we Las Vegans” oversimplify the problem of homelessness and have removed the problem from sight rather than deal with it.

Our economy requires that a certain number of individuals fill low-skill, service sector positions, primarily in the resort and casino industry. A large labor pool helps keep these wages low, as there is strong competition for even the most menial and servile casino positions. The popular approach to the problem, however, is how should “we Las Vegans” deal with those individuals who are unwilling and/or unable to take such jobs, to compete and participate in the local economy? I argue that the removal and/or exclusion of homeless men through the centralization of shelters near city limits provides a rather poor solution to this problem.

The homeless men often spoke about local patterns of social inequality, and how those reproduce the status quo. It is important to note, however, that
each man also discussed the limits of patterned social inequality in explaining how he came to be homeless. Usually suffering from a range of personal problems, the men I spoke with often realized that they also had made personal choices which (either directly or indirectly) resulted in their homelessness. They realized that, although Las Vegas was frequently thought to be a particularly unsympathetic city in dealing with homelessness, their personal problems might also have led to homelessness in other locales.

Beyond these two overall conclusions, what I have tried to show through my study is that the representation of the characteristics and personal problems of homeless men are central to understanding the community response, the community's willingness to address homeless men's problems, and homeless men's own self-presentation. Although the men were frequently aware of the personal problems which may have caused their homelessness, they also deeply resented programs of assistance that restricted their freedom, that placed them in threatening situations, that suggested that addictions were the root cause of their condition, or insisted that their spiritual salvation should precede their material needs. Although these may well be important factors in addressing some men's homelessness, most saw them as largely ineffective (and frequently counterproductive) in helping others.

The situation in several local shelters seems analogous to one where patients suffering from a range of different diseases are allowed basic treatment such as bed rest at three different facilities, but are also presented with a specific treatment for a specific disease at each facility, a disease which the individual may or may not have. Charitable organizations and shelters are
bureaucratic structures which are highly effective in dealing with a large number of similar problems. Those in charge of such organizations need certain rules and regulations in order to smoothly and uniformly deliver services to as many needy persons as possible. However, the rules that underlie the type of assistance each such organization provides, and the bureaucratic structure of each shelter embody a relatively narrow theory regarding the causes of homelessness. The men may resent those agencies which purport to care but, because of their bureaucratic structure, cannot address important differences among homeless men (and thus assist them) on the individual level.

Thus, the men present a discourse which both uncovers the strengths and the weaknesses of the shelter system, and which shows that they then use agencies and organizations in a way which best suits their individual needs. They may also forgo these agencies and learn how other homeless around them have survived without relying on (or through more limited contact with) charitable organizations. They may alter several of their practices to meet their daily needs despite having little income. They may develop a new outlook where homelessness itself is seen as a survival strategy for varied lengths of time. They may also find their own unique solutions to ending their homelessness. In a variety of ways, though, homelessness forces each individual to re-adjust to his social environment, to adapt, and to change. It also forces each man to confront their similarities to and differences from the dominant image promoted of male homelessness locally.
Hopefully this research will not simply document the way popular accounts promote a particular view of homelessness, nor will it simply document what happens once one becomes homeless. By contrasting the popular image of the condition against the experiences of local homeless men, I hope that we as a community can also change the way we conceptualize and subsequently address homelessness. First, however, I must address the limitations of my own study.

Limitations

Each way of understanding the social world has its own unique limitations. The most important limitations of my study include: the limitations of an interpretive approach for understanding male homelessness (a paradigmatic limitation); my reliance on the honesty of my respondents (a methodological limitation); and the limits of using a critical research approach to address, reduce or end local male homelessness (a policy development limitation).

One criticism that could be raised against this research is that I acted as an interpreter. Every research act involves interpretation regardless of method. In my research, I collected information on homelessness from several sources and used it to construct an argument.

Some might say that my construction of popular themes are biased, or that I selectively emphasized certain aspects of homeless men’s accounts at the expense of others. After reading this work, one could also ask whether my
constructions of homeless men based on their statements are any better than the media ones. If meaning is a matter of perspective, then one could ask, how are my interpretations superior or more informed than those provided by popular accounts?

This criticism, however, really concerns a more general dilemma faced by all social science researchers today. The dilemma revolves around the idea that, if the social scientist cannot be considered entirely “objective,” can he or she still make knowledge claims?

By acknowledging that I am actively engaged in the construction of meaning, I believe that my account is honest in terms of what is and what is not possible in social science. I cannot hope to present The Truth of homelessness. I do believe, however, that knowledge claims regarding the social world are still possible, because they can be rooted in systematic observation. The purpose of systematic observation of the local media accounts and homeless men was not to discover a singular Truth or set of laws regarding homelessness, but instead to systematically observe how particular groups interpret homelessness in hope that this information may help us (members of the dominant culture and social scientists) re-think how we understand the condition.

As Zygmunt Bauman’s (1987) discussion of the changing role of intellectuals in postmodern society indicates, the job of the social scientist today is to interpret diverse cultures for others. Bauman states that, in the modern era, intellectuals believed that they could uncover the Universal Laws of humanity through science. Unfortunately, as he notes, this approach
frequently promoted Eurocentric views and beliefs as the standard against which other forms of thought, values, and peoples were judged as "retarded, underdeveloped, immature, incomplete or deformed, maimed, distorted and otherwise inferior" (Bauman 1987:111). Enlightenment thinkers "all took the form of life developed in parts of the Western World as the 'given' " (Bauman 1987:111), a trend soon paralleled by European leaders who colonized the world and other cultures in the names of their countries.

Today, the dominance of the Western European world view as The Universal Standard is contested. Particularly in the U.S., the assimilation model failed to produce a homogeneous "American culture" (c.f. Spradley 1970:2). Not only did the intellectual legislator of the modern era then fail to discover the Universal Truths of human behaviors, he also failed in his/her attempts at creating social conditions where his/her world view provided a benchmark for all others. What has continued, however, are attempts by modern intellectuals and politicians to create a benchmark of beliefs, values and culture for all peoples. Ronald Reagan's characterization of homeless persons in the 1980s as "retarded people," for example, invokes the same attempt at judgment which, for Bauman, also defined the viewpoint of intellectual legislators at the beginning of modernity. The national outcry against Reagan's comments by certain groups, though, reflects that although consensus is limited with regards to how should homeless best be addressed, stereotyping those engaged in alternative lifestyles and practices rooted in poverty does not address the problem.
In this work I have attempted to represent the viewpoints of homeless men who often have unique values, beliefs and practices. The work is certainly biased, however, as it embodies my values and beliefs which are sympathetic toward the plight of homeless men. More specifically, it seems clear to me that the general public tends to stigmatize poverty and the poor, and that this stigmatization is part of a process whereby poverty is justified and reproduced. Stating such assumptions provides a radical contrast to previous forms of social science which did not:

The theoretical and descriptive idiom of much research in social science adopts a stance of apparent "objective" neutrality. But we have seen how deceptive this can be. The choice of syntax and vocabulary is a political act that defines and circumscribes the manner in which "facts" are to be experienced. Indeed, in a sense it goes further and even creates the facts that are studied. (Laing 1967:61-62)

While modern social scientists once seemed to promote the possibility of a value-free sociology, Bauman, Laing and others now recognize that today's social scientists should clearly state the values they promote.

Therefore, the criticism raised against this research as my own value-laden construction of meaning regarding homelessness may in fact be viewed as a strength by some researchers if they believe, as Neitzsche put it, that "there are no facts...only interpretations" (1967:267). The recognition that social scientific research cannot be value- or interpretation-free has allowed for cultural studies to emerge, a field which sees research as a political act and thus demands that the researcher indicate what he or she stands for.
I wanted to show the limits of using survey research in understanding homelessness, and to promote an alternative approach. In this research, I thought it best to have homeless men tell me what homelessness was like, what they do and why they do what they do. However, one of the limits of relying on respondents' accounts for such information is that they may not always know why they do what they do, or they may lie. It is difficult to know with certainty how accurate their accounts are. Some may be embellished, and, as some researchers point out, some homeless persons regular embellishment of stories (which Snow and Anderson describe as “fictive storytelling”) may well be a key aspect of their identity (Snow and Anderson 1993; Underwood 1994).

I was able to occasionally control for embellishment by having a man repeat a story to me at a later point in an interview and seeing if it had changed. As a participant-observer, I was also able to witness events, such as fights, that corroborated their stories (in this instance, matching with their accounts of the violent atmosphere outside of the shelter). In addition, although some stories may have been exaggerated, overall they still shared strong similarities with other ethnographers' findings on homelessness in other geographic areas.

However, I did not probe the accuracy of respondents' accounts beyond these measures. To a certain extent, I felt that I had to trust these men to tell me the truth. I hope I also promoted trust and honesty by being open and honest about my project, by showing these men an informed consent statement which further explained my project, and by showing some of these
men my written report after it was completed. I hoped that my own honesty would beget their honesty.

Importantly also, the point of my ethnography was to get information from the men's perspective. I was asking for their interpretation of the condition. Furthermore, if some men did lie when telling me about their condition, I then have to ask why: what would be the purpose of exaggerated storytelling? The answers may include a range of issues, such as a genuine inability to remember what actually happened due to factors including substance use, physical injury or other physiological problems (such as a lack of sleep). Other researchers (Snow and Anderson 1993) have indicated that some homeless men exaggerate their stories to gain prestige among other homeless persons. However, since my approach involved mainly one-on-one interviews, and letting the men talk with as little interference as possible, they did not have the same skeptical audience of peers that might have (as in a group discussion) encouraged exaggerated storytelling. If some men did embellish their stories for other reasons, then I have to wonder about their purpose. Unless they decided to lie just to fool me or to undermine the research, I would think it possible that these exaggerations were motivated by a desire to better convey how truly miserable homelessness is.

Another potential criticism against this research is its status as critically oriented, and the limitations inherent in a critical social science approach for improving the lives of marginalized persons such as the homeless. Such weaknesses include assuming an overly rational view of humans, neglecting the imbeddedness of humans in tradition and history that can dissuade them
from change, and understanding that attempts to address social injustice may instead create other new and unforeseen problems (Fay 1987:8). However, a critical account of local homelessness is also the first step toward the possibility of social change which may improve social conditions. The strengths of this critical account include: its focus on local, specific conditions, the usefulness of research conducted in collaboration with a homeless man rather than simply treating all homeless men as objects of study, and the transformative nature such a study might have on those individuals who participated both as subjects and readers.

Given these limits, I also think this study can provide suggestions and more direct applications for enhancing local social policy designed to address homelessness. I discuss these suggestions in my final section.

**Policy Implications**

I believe that my study has several potential policy implications. These include: how the Las Vegas community might best address homelessness as a social problem; how this study may provide insight for individual homeless men; and how this study might provide insight to social scientists interested in studying socially marginalized people.

Based on this report, the Las Vegas community may not feel inspired to change the ways in which homelessness is typically addressed. Exclusion, removal and blaming the victim, some might feel, is working just fine.
However, based on the findings of this study there might also be three good reasons to consider re-thinking our approach to local homelessness.

First, I have shown that several practices of local homeless men have been criminalized. Our community may want to reconsider this approach in dealing with homeless men because certain ordinances, such as those which restrict panhandling in the Fremont Street Experience and the possible ordinance restricting "aggressive panhandling" within the Strip corridor, may prove unconstitutional. These ordinances may well contradict our citizen's First Amendment right to free speech. Changing such ordinances now may head off several expensive lawsuits directed at the City of Las Vegas and Clark County.

Second, if a pattern of segregation involves exposing homeless men to needless violence as a condition of assistance, those men may also file lawsuits against the city for having placed them in harm's way. It might make sense for the city to facilitate the dispersion of homeless services such as shelters to other, safer parts of the city besides the cluster now bordering North Las Vegas. This could be accomplished through the city donating buildings it has acquired in other areas of Las Vegas to charities which provide assistance programs to the homeless.

Third, if homelessness could be re-framed as more of a community issue and less of an individual one, the community might benefit by incorporating individuals who (at least from my observations) seem desperate to find employment and housing. The vast majority of the men I spoke to wanted to work, to earn a living. Even if some homeless men do not wish to or
cannot work, those who can must first be allowed an opportunity if their homelessness is ever to be alleviated. By increasing local awareness about the problem of homelessness, individuals may come to have other, more personal experiences with homeless persons which may contradict media and popular stereotypes.

This third point also relates well to Snow and Anderson's findings on how to best address homelessness. As the authors state, "homelessness will be alleviated only when sufficient resources are allocated to the problem of economic marginality in our society" (1993:301). Simply stated, social inequality produces homelessness. Reducing the number of homeless men by preventing such desperate circumstances leading to their condition would ultimately be more effective than trying to cure homelessness after-the-fact. This, however, also requires that homeless men be seen as part of our community rather than a cancer within it.

As I write this, a multimillion dollar homeless project is underway locally, one which will replace a shelter mentioned in this study. I was told by members of the administration that it is designed to have a health care facility on the premises, a culinary training program monitored by members of the local culinary union, and a broader range of transitional housing options than currently exists. Beyond simply providing homeless men with a more modern facility, the improvements designed to better assist a diverse homeless population with their range of needs is praiseworthy. However, the new facility is still far removed from tourist and residential districts, and seems to reinforce the idea that homeless men should be kept away from the rest of Las Vegas.
The segregation of homeless men may be part of a larger issue which is specific to the local culture and economy. In Chapter 1 I stated that part of this study will explain the cultural conditions in Las Vegas which promote and even exacerbate the problem of homelessness. On the whole, some of these cultural conditions promote self-centeredness, hedonism, and greed. Ultimately, changing the plight of some homeless men would require local individuals to address this tendency promoted by the local economy and culture. Changing the plight of some homeless individuals must necessarily involve a recognition that helping homeless men (and women and children) is the right thing to do.

This point leads me to consider those homeless individuals who seemingly do not want help. As the following quote makes clear, some individuals shun any form of assistance offered them:

After several years [of working with homeless persons], it became evident that some homeless people did not want to be helped. Because of their actions, some were actually choosing to be homeless....The lack of adequate affordable housing, under-employment, substance abuse, mental illness, spouse abuse, unemployment, and social alienation all contributed to homelessness. Yet none of these were the sole reason. Homeless people themselves were also part of the problem. Social conditions merely expedited homelessness. Homelessness was perceived as a both/and, not an either/or, problem (Elliott 1993:xvii-xviii).

I would agree with Elliot that some individuals choose homelessness. But I would also add that sometimes homelessness is constructed as a choice at the expense of understanding how specific social conditions (such as a restricted labor market, an unsupportive family, an illness or a lack of
affordable housing) may force an individual to make that choice. "Choice" in this instance is not synonymous with "want," or an outcome which an individual actively desires. If indeed some individuals choose homeless, I would also add that very few individuals want to be homeless. As Hopper, Susser and Conover (1985) indicate, for some it may simply be another option in an ongoing struggle to survive.

Given that there is a difference between choosing homelessness and wanting to be homeless, I hope this study can provide local homeless men with some insights, not only as to what issues they face and how the community may better assist them, but how they might better help themselves. A few of the men I spoke to thanked me for talking with them, and said that the interview allowed them a chance to see themselves and their condition in a new light. Albert, for example, cried during much of his interview, and told me afterward that by "talking it out," by explaining that his homelessness was directly attributable to his crack cocaine addiction, he realized that he no longer wanted the drug at the expense of being homeless and losing his family. I don't know if an hour and a half of talking to me about his addiction was enough for him to quit it without social support, but I believed he was sincere about wanting to quit as he stood up, repeatedly thanked me and shook my hand.

This study may have influenced these men in less direct ways as well. During my recent visit with Fred to show him a copy of my work, he mentioned having contacted his family for the first time in 30 years only a few weeks after we first spoke. I later went over the transcript of our first meeting and
interview. At one point I asked him how his family had reacted to the news of his illness and his decision to stay at a local shelter:

Kurt How did your family react? Do you have family locally or--
Fred I don't have family locally at all. In fact, I haven't seen most of my family in a few years.
Kurt So they didn't know really about your--
Fred They didn't know about my illness.

I'm not sure if this earlier question inspired him to contact his family, but I am humbled to think that, after 30 years without a word, it might have. He told me that although his father had already died, his mother and sisters were still around and that their response to his call was animated. Fred then told me that as a teenager he had had court battle with his mother, and that the outcome of this case had caused hurt feelings which both of them found difficult to mend. However, Fred said that his mother seemed happy to hear from him, and that, as he put it, "although time doesn't heal all wounds, it seems to dull them and help you forget. I think we both realize now there is much more we have connecting us than the issues that drove us apart."

Perhaps on this note, I should consider the implications of my study for social scientists in general, how we tend to study people, and the impact we may occasionally have on those we study. I have opted to conduct a study which primarily involved direct, face-to-face interaction with members of a marginalized group. I did this because such studies are underrepresented within the literature on homelessness. I would be lying, though, if I said this type of study was easy or at times even slightly enjoyable. But there were other times when I learned things I would never have if I had distributed survey
questionnaires to a group of homeless men, picked them up, and summarized the findings. There were times where I felt connected to individuals, a feeling I usually very much enjoy. I feel honored that through this research, I got to know these individuals as people, not as numbers agreeing or disagreeing with a series of statements.

Different social scientists have different goals. One of my goals was to analyze the way in which local homeless men are commonly thought of by others. Another goal was to allow these men a chance to speak for themselves, to present information which adds to homeless persons' and the general public's knowledge of homelessness.

Another goal, though, was to promote social change and help reduce social inequality. For me this meant re-thinking how social scientists can interact with people, because critical researchers have indicated that "mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race and gender oppression" (Kincheole and McLaren 1994:139-140). I wanted to re-think how I as a social scientist could interact with the people I study, and how I interact with the knowledge I produce. To facilitate re-thinking these positions, I continually asked myself a range of questions about this research project, such as: am I engaging in research simply to write a report? Am I trying to enlighten readers, those I study, myself? To what degree is this enlightenment possible? What do I owe research subjects for their participation? Do I take into account their feelings, both during the research and in writing the report? If so, does this eliminate my objectivity and

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neutrality as an observer? Or are objectivity and neutrality appropriate goals for me in my research? How do traditional social science approaches limit both what we know and how we know, and how might an alternative research design help reduce my role as a social scientist in reproducing systems of oppression?

I began this research by indicating that the meaning of homelessness may be understood differently through the use of alternative research techniques, and that these techniques may also provide useful information on this condition. I think it is fitting to conclude that the use of alternative research techniques in social science might also lead to a more humanitarian vision of social science and its usefulness in addressing systems of oppression. I believe that an alternative understanding of both homelessness and the role of social science may promote a more humane approach to both.
APPENDIX I

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT
INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

My name is Kurt Borchard. I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. I am preparing for my dissertation which requires me to conduct an extended study. I have decided, because of personal interest, to research homeless men living in Las Vegas.

The purpose of the study is find out the practices, activities and values of homeless men in Las Vegas. I will also study how services for homeless persons are provided. I will observe homeless groups, interview individual homeless men and people who provide services for homeless persons. These interviews will take place primarily in North Las Vegas where services for homeless persons are located. The research will be conducted from August 1996 through May of 1998.

The results of the study will be presented in a doctoral dissertation, a book-length written report, which will eventually be published and available for public reading. A copy of these writings will be provided to any participant who would like one. Any comments or suggestions about this study before it is completed would also be appreciated.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and can be terminated at any time. The confidentiality of the subjects and the data is guaranteed. This means the names of all participants in this study will be changed in all written reports. Also, all recordings of interviews will be destroyed once the project is complete.

Questions regarding the study can be addressed to Kurt Borchard at 792-9399. Questions about the rights of human subjects can be addressed by the Office of Sponsored Programs at 895-1357.

Thank you for your participation in this study.

______________________________
Name

______________________________
Date
APPENDIX II

UNLV HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE APPROVAL FORM FOR THIS STUDY
DATE: August 9, 1996

TO: Kurt Borchard (SOC)
    M/S 5033

FROM: Dr. William E. Schulze, Director
       Office of Sponsored Programs (X1357)

RE: Status of Human Subject Protocol Entitled:
    "An Ethnography of Homeless Men in Las Vegas"

OSP #115s0896-059e

The protocol for the project referenced above has been reviewed by
the Office of Sponsored Programs and it has been determined that it
meets the criteria for exemption from full review by the UNLV human
subjects Institutional Review Board. This protocol is approved for
a period of one year from the date of this notification, and work
on the project may proceed.

Should the use of human subjects described in this protocol
continue beyond a year from the date of this notification, it will
be necessary to request an extension.

cc: S. Gottschalk (SOC-5033)
    OSP File
APPENDIX III

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Racial group, sex, age, status at time of first meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bill</td>
<td>White male, late 20s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Jeff</td>
<td>Hispanic male, early 40s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Griffin</td>
<td>African-American male, late 40s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Kent</td>
<td>White male, late 20s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Fred</td>
<td>White male, late 50s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Bob</td>
<td>White male, early 40s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Clyde</td>
<td>African-American male, early 50s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Kenneth</td>
<td>African-American male, 30s, abandoned building user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Spirit</td>
<td>White male, late 30s, abandoned building user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. George</td>
<td>White male, late 20s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Jerry</td>
<td>White male, early 50s, transitional living program user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Sam</td>
<td>White male, early 50s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Ziggy</td>
<td>African-American male, late 30s, camper/shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Jorge</td>
<td>Hispanic male, late 50s, sleeps outside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Jim</td>
<td>White male, early 50s, slept in truck.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Keith</td>
<td>White male, mid 20s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Albert</td>
<td>White male, mid 30s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Ronald</td>
<td>Hispanic male, mid 30s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Hector</td>
<td>African-American male, late 40s, bread line user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Brandon</td>
<td>African-American male, early 20s, bread line user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. David</td>
<td>White male, early 40s, camper/bread line user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Marty</td>
<td>African-American male, late 20s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Phillip</td>
<td>White male, late 30s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Mark</td>
<td>White male, mid 30s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Juan</td>
<td>Hispanic male, mid 30s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Karl</td>
<td>African-American male, early 50s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Roy</td>
<td>White male, late 40s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Jerome</td>
<td>White male, late 40s, sleeps outside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Tyrone</td>
<td>White male, early 50s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Steve</td>
<td>White male, early 50s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Paul</td>
<td>White male, early 40s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Donald</td>
<td>White male, late 40s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Alex</td>
<td>White male, late 30s, shelter user.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Non-homeless persons interviewed

34. Sue White female, late 30s. (Service provider)
35. Craig White male, mid 40s. (Homeless advocate)
36. Becky White female, late 30s. (Service provider)


________. 1997b. “City Sued Over Fremont Access.” *Las Vegas Sun*, October 9, p. 1A, 8A.


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VITA

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Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Satish Sharma, Ph.D.