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Introduction: Homelessness in the United States

When coauthor Jason Wasserman was ten, his mother took him to a local soup kitchen to serve people who were poor and homeless in the community. The experience was intended as a lesson in appreciating all his family had, and it still furnishes vivid memories. He can remember the uncomfortable feeling—guilt, tension, and vulnerability. Feeling sorry for the people in line, he remembers disliking one of the other volunteers who yelled at someone for trying to get a second helping of food before everyone else had eaten. He was raised in a solidly middle-class family with a grandfather, who as far back as he can remember, had lectured him about financial responsibility. So on the way home, when his mother asked how he thought those people had ended up that way, his answer was simple. "Bad investments," he responded with confidence.

People always laugh at this story, at the humorous misconception of a child. But the general feeling toward homelessness is equally, although more subtly, absurd. The culture of the United States is saturated with an intense individualism, a bootstrap vision of social mobility. We see our country as a land of opportunity, where anyone who tries hard enough can be successful. But inverting that logic yields a rather dark worldview. If working hard leads to success, then, by deduction, those who are unsuccessful simply are not hard workers.[1] The policies that follow from this conclusion allow us to construct problems such as poverty and homelessness as individual not social in nature. We therefore can ignore them; they are not *our* problems. At ten years old, the answer Wasserman offered was the product of precisely this individualist ideology, which he had been socialized to accept at the most fundamental of levels.

Such visions of homelessness result from deeper fundamental disconnections between "us" and "them" that manifest in all sorts of societal

oppositions.[2] The us-them dichotomy is a way of seeing the world, one that underlies the most difficult social problems of our time, including issues of class, race, nationality, and gender. Of particular interest here, the us-them dichotomy emerges in discourse to separate those who are homeless from those who are not, and then again, with narrower focus, to distinguish those who use services and participate in programs from those held to be all the more lowly, the people who stay on the street.

The social separation inherent in the us-them dichotomy is both physical and conceptual. The former consists of political, economic, and cultural practices that systematically disadvantage and disfranchise certain groups. It is not a coincidence that African Americans are far more likely than their white counterparts to be poor and homeless.[3] Conceptually, we most often define individual identity by group membership and the contrast between our groups and those of others. Homelessness is not purely an economic disadvantage but also a stigmatized social identity that is given meaning according to its conceptual distance from "the norm."

In contrast to this atomistic view, which sees groups in rather rigid ways, we could have a dynamic vision of society in general and homelessness in particular. This vision might suggest our interrelatedness, the insufficiency of "us" and "them." In some very large cities, real estate demands force proximity of the rich and poor and shrink this social distance, but generally our relationship to those who are homeless is broken, partly because we fail to recognize our coexistence.[4] Where we do engage homelessness, we mostly sit passively by and allow service providers and government programs to represent "us," the normal, legitimate community. Not surprisingly, we often are unsuccessful in resolving any issues, either for those who are homeless or society at large.

This book will explore the relationship between the "us" and "them." We focus both on legal institutions and homeless-service providers as the arms of society that most actively engage homelessness, paying particular attention to differences between those who live on the streets and those who utilize shelters and service programs. Those individuals who are street homeless often reject what is being made available by the social service system. Alternatively, we also might say that service institutions have proved incapable of reaching this group in a meaningful way. Either way, those on the street highlight not only the overall failure of our society to provide for the poor but also the failures of specific institutions charged with that task. The former leaves us with the suggestion that we ought to provide more services to those who are poor and homeless, but the latter adds an important nuance that questions exactly

what kind of services we ought to offer and how we ought to organize the institutions that provide them.[5]

Project Background

Our roots in homeless research, or rather our lack thereof, warrant some explanation. We utilized a grounded research approach, meaning that we began with few preconceptions about homelessness and allowed insights to emerge from raw observations, as opposed to testing a priori hypotheses. Since neither of the authors had any prior research experience in homelessness, or much prior academic interest in it for that matter, this method was as much necessity as choice. In fact, we began this research when teaching a sociology of film course, where we had hoped to organize the class around making a documentary film. We picked homelessness as the topic for that film because other faculty in our department had done homeless research, and we thought they could provide our initial interviews and then put us in touch with all the right people in the community. We laugh about it now, more than four years later, but at the time we anticipated finishing the project by the end of the sixteen-week semester.

We imagine our field research began like countless other projects. For their varied epistemological dispositions, ethnographers surely all share a common prearrival anxiety. By definition, the researcher is not "one of them," and this usually is an uncomfortable situation. We had several false starts before finally making it out to the streets, using weather and various other excuses for repeatedly putting the initial visit off another few days. The day of our first visit a thousand things ran through our heads and occupied our conversation as we left to go "make contact." Would two white, middle-class academics be accepted by a group of poor, mostly black men? Would we be resented? Would we be safe?

As we were getting into the car for our first field excursion, a man approached us who appeared to be homeless and somewhat intoxicated. He did not speak coherently, but extended his hand to greet Wasserman. As they shook hands, he moved in as if he was going to give Wasserman a hug. Wasserman instinctively stiffened his arm to block the attempt, and the irony of the moment became crystal clear. The idea that we were going out to look for people who were homeless, to make contact with them, like it was some sort of trip, was absurd. We were not leaving our world to visit theirs. The "us" and "them" dichotomy that permeates

culture and even research on homelessness was for us a casualty of a simple early awakening: people who are homeless are everywhere.

When we arrived that first day at Catchout Corner, a locally famous gathering spot for people who are homeless, we had no idea what to expect, no idea what we were going to say, and certainly no idea that four years later we would still be making these trips. Catchout essentially is a vacant lot that serves as the venue for dozens of men who are poor, most of whom are homeless, waiting for random jobs that pay under the table. The lot was empty that day because of the rain, but four or five men were gathered under the train viaduct just a few yards away. Clair explained to them who we were and what we were doing there. His explanation was as good as it could have been, but by traditional research standards we did not really *know* what we were doing there.

We knew that we were trying to make a short documentary film on homelessness as a class project. We knew that the service providers and researchers we already had interviewed could not explain why someone would live under a bridge rather than in a shelter, and we knew that lots of people—a seemingly increasing number—were living that way. Also, we knew there had to be a reason. And mostly, we knew that we were disillusioned with "experts"; we both deeply believed that if you want to know about someone, you should start by talking *with* them, not talking about them. "What do you want to know?" the men asked. "We just want to know what your life is like." It was the best we could do. We had only one specific question: why did they not go to the shelters? Other than that, we just kind of wanted to know it all.

Keeping our visit short, we stayed just long enough for them to tell us that they felt a "peace of mind" on the streets—a relaxing mental state that comes with no responsibility or social constraints—and that they hated the shelters because they were dirty, unsafe, confining, and degrading. We asked if we could come back and talk to them, and they said that Sunday afternoons would be a good time because that was when a lot of folks gathered to socialize. Although our first visit was brief, we learned a lot. We learned that the service providers' conception of those on the street did not mesh with our impressions of what they themselves were saying. We learned that there was a wealth of knowledge on the street that had escaped most of society, even the experts running social services, and that these men could teach it to us if they wanted. We learned that this was not going to be any small-scale class project. And we learned that by default we would be doing grounded theory, not because we particularly were philosophically disposed to the

technique, but because we were completely ignorant of the subject and felt like the street, as opposed to the academic literature, was the right place to begin to educate ourselves.

In other words, we did not learn much about those who are street homeless on that first trip, but we learned a great deal about ourselves (and the experts we already had contacted). We became aware that we knew almost nothing about the lives of those people, and even on that first day, we learned that the next several years of our lives would be spent trying to whittle away at that ignorance.

Over the four years we actively conducted fieldwork, we met hundreds of people. As we became increasingly integrated into settings like Catchout Corner, we gained a reputation that often preceded us. Eventually, introducing ourselves to strangers on the street often would elicit something like, "Oh yeah, I heard about you guys." True to the method, we allowed our observations and what our participants said to direct the course of our research. This led to all sorts of experiences we never anticipated. After being invited into private camps, we spent consecutive nights on the streets. We interviewed police officers and graffiti artists, who, because of their "professions," have contact with those on the street. We ate at soup kitchens and "street meals" and stayed in a shelter anonymously. We conducted formal interviews and raw observation. We crawled under viaducts and over laid-up train cars, climbed chain-linked fences, sat in plush chairs at the city council, in the pews of inner-city churches, and on the sidewalks of inner-city streets. This book is the integration and analysis of all of those experiences.

Homelessness in American Culture: Some Foundational Generalizations

The tradition of rugged American individualism can easily be located at the heart of our political and economic institutions. Drawing on political theorists such as John Locke and economists such as Adam Smith, US culture has a long history of believing in the power of the individual to define his or her own social position. Popular icons such as Horatio Alger portray the ideal that anyone who works hard enough will be successful, a supposition that predicates the "American dream" itself. But caught between the American dream and a much different reality is the problem of homelessness.

The gap between aspiration and achievement betrays a complex and contradictory social structure. This social structure produces misery as

much out of its ideals as the materialistic barriers to achieving them; it is a misery as much embodied by institutions as enacted by them. US capitalism is characterized not just by the *existence* of competition but also by the *belief* in competition as a mechanism for social progress. Moreover, in order to define success, the system must believe in and rely on poverty as a natural and just state, as an outgrowth of corrupt individuals, that is to say those who are lazy and deviant. Poverty is US capitalism's grand punishment and a threat that is supposed to motivate citizens to participate and to succeed. As such, the privilege of wealth is considered nothing more than one's just reward for properly cultivated motivation and thus not really a privilege at all, but an ex post facto right.

Every day we live out this vision, seeing such a system as reality itself, stripped of any human design. We ignore the way in which social structure both constrains to produce poverty and enables to produce wealth. Without recognition of these processes, which are external to the individual, we are left only with the conceptualization of poverty and homelessness as natural law and a just state of affairs. Kenneth Kyle makes this point, writing:

> Some people assume that in the natural order of things, individual merit underlies personal achievement. … One can speak of the deserving and the undeserving in absolute terms. When used as a filter for viewing individual fortune and achievement, those individuals who are more successful (certainly the "homed") are more valued than those who are less successful—clearly the homeless. The presentation of such dichotomous relationships without explaining the underlying moves making these dichotomies possible bolsters an unproblematic view of these and similar social relations.[6]

Poverty and wealth operate materially as punishment and reward in the US capitalist system, but the punishment paradigm extends far beyond the economic sphere, pervading politics and culture and often characterizing social relationships, including society's relationship to those who are homeless. Local governments jail those who are homeless, religion threatens damnation, and service providers often require submission to treatment programs in exchange for the reward of food and shelter.[7] As a society, how we deal with those who are homeless typically wavers between subtle paternalism and heavy-handed authoritarianism. Since this fails to respect the fundamental humanity of people who are homeless, the way we interact with them individually tends only to replicate essential features of the structural oppression that predicates their suffering in the first place.

We founded this project on the rejection of homelessness as a justi-fied outcome of natural law and suggest that a cultural belief in the necessity of poverty and deprivation partly generates those conditions. While we do not have a deterministic view of social structure per se, the hegemonic forces backing this American ideology pervade even those who are harmed by it. That is to say, it oddly is the ideology of those who are poor as much as those who are wealthy.

While debunking the salience of the "us" and "them" dichotomy certainly is a valuable enterprise, it contains its own inherent dangers. Commonality with the disfranchised and "abnormal" is a recurring theme in sociology and anthropology. The thrust of much ethnographic research is that, in the end, socially distant groups often are not that different.[8] To be sure, debunking myths of difference with more robust depictions of the disfranchised is a worthy pursuit. But for all of its aiming at depth and "thick descriptions," the construction of ethnographic texts often mandates the transformation of individuals into characters and, even worse, into caricatures. That is, the complex and contradictory nature of real human beings often can become erroneously linear and consistent when ethnographic participants become ethnographic themes. While we offer similar abstractions, we hope to have left in tact as many realistic contradictions as possible. Still, the reader is well served by considering Loic Wacquant's warning about the "pitfalls of urban ethnography." Critiquing three ethnographies about people submerged in urban poverty, he writes:

> In all three studies, the inquiry substitutes a positive version of the same misshapen social figure it professes to knock down, even as it illumines a range of social relations, mechanisms, and meanings that cannot be subsumed under either variant, devilishly or saintly. But to counter the "official disparagement of 'street people'" … with their [B]yronic heroization by transmuting them into champions of middle class virtues and founts of decency under duress only replaces one stereotype with another.[9]

Whether or not the authors targeted fit Wacquant's assessment, the ulti-mate conclusion is important. Romanticized figures are no less dishon-est than villains. Besides that, we ought not attach too much value to ourselves, to assert that being "just like us" is an especially preferable way to be.[10] We will argue that just as we cannot counter the problemat-ic outcomes of structural inequality by reproducing those sorts of struc-tural inequalities in our political and economic systems, we also cannot do so by reproducing them symbolically in our rhetorical depictions.

The significance of homelessness as a social issue is difficult to overstate. In a broad sense, homelessness stands as a challenge to widely held beliefs about opportunity and success in the United States, and it highlights the importance of structural obstacles and inequality in our society. More practically, addressing homelessness is literally a matter of life and death, as it is associated with all sorts of health outcomes such as addiction, mental illness, chronic and acute disease, malnutrition, and violence. While much academic research has shown the need to focus on structural causes of homelessness, people who are homeless seem to be increasingly perceived and treated within a paradigm of individual sickness.[11] This individualist/structuralist tension has been fundamental in social science, though various disciplines have had little success in illuminating it to the culture, as betrayed by the ongoing individual-treatment approaches of homeless services. But also problematic is that the social sciences seem locked in this dichotomy to the extent that critique of the individualism within shelters deductively entails a structuralist opposition. We hope to show that it is a false choice and present some new ideas.

A Brief History of Homelessness in the United States

In their seminal work, David Snow and Leon Anderson note, "Homelessness in one form or another has existed throughout much of human history."[12] For our purposes here, we will identify shifts in the nature of homelessness in US history from the industrial to postindustrial eras, since these bear direct relation to the current population.[13] While brief, this account provides critical context to the nature and structure of contemporary homelessness, particularly in light of continuing stereotypes of those who are homeless as lazy alcoholics and skid row bums. It additionally provides a national backdrop to the more specific history of Birmingham, Alabama, where we conducted our research.

Just after the Civil War, the need to build railroads, clear forests, and mine coal created a job sector that was migratory in nature.[14] In this period, being a hobo was a glorified lifestyle, portrayed as adventurous; this was a generation of postagrarian cowboys roaming the wide-open spaces.[15] They would ride the rails from town to town, following labor opportunities. It was an exciting life, one that while certainly not encouraged by the establishment was most definitely the material of many childhood fantasies. But as this type of work vanished, the excit-

ing life of these wayfarers came to a halt. Beginning in the 1890s, economic recessions and shrinking job sectors led to new categories of non-working people who were homeless—tramps and bums.[16] With the loss of migratory work, largely unproblematic travelers became stagnant nuisances from the perspective of residents in the cities where they settled.[17]

While "poor laws" can be traced back to the Middle Ages, a particularly illustrative response to the increasingly static homeless population was a wave of vagrancy legislation beginning around 1881.[18] These laws made it illegal for "unsightly" people to be seen in public. Current conceptions of homelessness are most directly rooted in the negative attitudes that developed in this period, when homelessness transformed from a semilegitimate nomadic lifestyle to a public nuisance that offended the sensibilities of wealthier citizens.[19]

Throughout the twentieth century, the number of people who were homeless rose temporarily during the Depression, but otherwise remained relatively small. Furthermore, the growth of postwar suburbia meant that urban homelessness was relatively hidden. However, in the mid-1970s the number of manufacturing jobs sharply declined and inflation began to outstrip income growth. At the same time, we saw the closing of over 1.1 million single-room occupancy units.[20] Homelessness is strongly related to political and economic conditions and therefore has been increasingly experienced by families, women, and younger men.[21] A remnant of earlier times, the image of the older, alcoholic skid row bum is no longer accurate (if it ever was).

Beginning in the 1990s, urban redevelopment projects brought upper- and middle-class individuals back from the suburbs and into downtown areas where they are in close contact with those who are homeless.[22] This exacerbated already strained social relationships. In the wake of the postwar flight to the suburbs, downtown areas became nighttime ghost towns that hid those who were homeless. While this likely caused society to underestimate the seriousness of the problem, it also provided refuge to those on the street. The gentrification of city centers is forcing middle and upper classes to face homelessness in the areas where they now live. This may ultimately have positive effects (as suggested by the contact hypothesis), but it currently is stimulating a new wave of vagrancy legislation strikingly similar to the so-called ugly laws of the late 1800s.[23]

Ironically, while homelessness at this writing seems more related than ever to social structural conditions, perception and social responses

have remained rigidly individualistic. Those who are homeless are stigmatized as dangerous, mentally ill, drug addicts.[24] To be sure, children no longer dream of that life. Kim Hopper sums it up, stating that the annals of US homelessness are "a tangled tale of contempt, pity, and, curiously, blank disregard."[25]

Birmingham: An Archetype of Contemporary Homelessness

The city of Birmingham was a creation of US industrialization after the Civil War. It therefore embodies the significant broader historical aspects of homelessness in the United States. Birmingham predominantly is known as the location for some of the most violent civil rights confrontations of the 1960s. In fact, many know the city for little else. This weighs heavily on those who live there and particularly those leaders of business and local government wishing to draw in capital. For our purposes, Birmingham's social, political, and economic history, including its civil rights struggles, made it an archetype for the study of contemporary homelessness.

Prior to 1871, Birmingham was known as Elyton, at the time a town of little significance when compared with Montgomery and Mobile, Alabama. This was fortunate, since it was spared widespread attack by Union armies. After emerging relatively unscathed by the Civil War, Birmingham grew quickly. The convergence of train lines made the city an industrial hub, and it soon was nicknamed the "Magic City," because it developed so rapidly that it seemed to appear out of thin air.[26]

Unlike other areas of Alabama, particularly the southern part of the state known as the "Black Belt" for its rich soil, Birmingham was not ecologically well suited for the development of agriculture and had few of those famous southern plantations. Instead, the city's economic interests were squarely pinned to industrial production. As "Yankee" capital flooded into the city during Reconstruction, steel manufacturing generated an economic boom that cemented Birmingham as "the climax of a movement for economic modernization in Alabama."[27] During this period, Birmingham got its next nickname, "the Steel City."

While postwar industrial booms stimulated the economy, this ought not imply prosperity for the people of Birmingham. Industry ownership resided in the North and anti-union practices kept wages in the city comparatively low. In 1960, average per capita incomes in Birmingham were less than half that of other US cities of comparable size.[28] Moreover,

white workers disproportionately occupied higher-paying skilled manufacturing jobs, whereas African Americans largely were relegated to lower-paying, unskilled jobs.[29] Antagonism between these two groups also undermined attempts to organize unions.

Like many other manufacturing cities in the United States, growth slowed during the Depression, picked up again after World War II, and then began a more permanent decline in the early 1970s.[30] These transitions have contributed significantly to economic struggles, the city witnessing the erosion of manufacturing jobs and resulting declines in real wages. As of 2009 there is comparatively little manufacturing. Instead, the University of Alabama at Birmingham is the single largest economic force in the city and the second-largest employer in the state, next to the government itself.[31]

Prior to the civil rights movement, Birmingham had perhaps the most violently enforced segregated race structure in the entire country. While many people know about the famous and tragic Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, this only cemented another nickname for the city, "Bombingham." In fact, there had been around fifty house bombings between 1947 and 1965 as the African American population outgrew the capacities of its neighborhoods and began to move closer to white areas.[32] Other classic images of fire hoses and police dogs turned loose on mostly young civil rights activists continue to haunt the city. While legal segregation eroded with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, like much of the country, Birmingham remains largely segregated by race, though primarily as a function of poverty that continues to disproportionately affect African Americans, who are thus relegated to the oldest and most dilapidated sectors of the city.

Race relations in the city in the early 2000s likely were not much different from those anywhere else. Certainly racism still persists, as it does everywhere in the United States, but as intensely antagonistic toward civil rights as it was during the 1960s, there is evidence to suggest that Alabama generally and Birmingham in particular have come a long way. Although George Wallace stood in the doorway of the registrar's office at the University of Alabama in symbolic defiance of an order to desegregate the school, he won his final bid for governor of Alabama in 1982 with a vast majority of the African American vote.[33] In 1979, Birmingham elected its first African American mayor, which was indeed an achievement, though it likely had as much to do with white flight to the suburbs as it did with any real racial progress.[34] Racist demonstrations and outright attacks amounted to a pervasive fear campaign conducted with relative impunity until the 1960s. But in

1992, counterdemonstrations against a neo-Nazi march were so large that the parade route had to be completely fenced off and the comparatively small group of racist demonstrators had to be protected under armed guard from an enormous, angry, and multiracial mob.

The religious community has been a staple of Birmingham culture throughout its tumultuous history as both an organized institutional participant in the life of the city and a spiritual refuge.[35] The social activism of African American pastors during the civil rights movement too often was eclipsed by the celebrity of national figures, but religious leaders had been active in the civil rights movement in Birmingham before that movement really appeared there.[36] Fred Shuttlesworth, later a notable homeless activist in Cincinnati, for example, was beaten mercilessly by the Ku Klux Klan in 1957 for trying to enroll his children in an all-white school.[37] While African American churches were launching pads for the demonstrations of the 1960s, since then they have been much less active in social issues, and the white churches (as is the case elsewhere, there is ongoing de facto segregation in churches) mostly followed their parishioners to the suburbs. But though there is less practical engagement of social problems by the city's religious institutions, Birmingham still can be accurately described as an intensely religious place, and as in the past, religion is still a significant way of making sense of the world.[38]

In the years prior to his death in 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., prophetically noted the ongoing class struggles on the horizon. Influenced by more radical activists such as Stokely Carmichael and other members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), King had become persuaded that the legal equality achieved by the civil rights movement would be undermined by ongoing poverty, which would effectively prevent the integration of African Americans into the community. The Birmingham metropolitan area validates this worry. As with many other urban centers, the city of Birmingham witnessed dramatic declines in its population as its mostly white middle class moved to the suburbs.[39] According to census data, in 1960 there were nearly 341,000 people living within the city limits and 60 percent of them were white. As of this writing there are around 220,000 with about 75 percent being African American. More than one-quarter of the city's residents live below the poverty line compared with just 13 percent nationwide.

These transitions have been not only the latent byproduct of housing patterns but also were produced by decisions of those in the suburbs that have crippled Birmingham's economic viability. The city of Hoover, for example, formed its own separate school district and actively annexes

other wealthy areas in Jefferson County in frequently successful efforts to keep its tax revenue out of the city limits. While there is an active downtown redevelopment project that has been widely supported and is quickly revitalizing the city center, this has not returned prosperity to the people who remained downtown during the suburban flight southward, but rather pushed them into the older neighborhoods north of the city.

Constituent features of homelessness in the United States include the decline of manufacturing, the segregation of class and race both in past patterns of suburbanization and in the gentrification of redeveloping city centers, and the interplay of religious belief and social circumstance. This closely parallels the history of Birmingham and of countless other midsized US cities struggling to establish a new contemporary identity in the postmanufacturing economy.

Introducing Some Key Participants

No amount of writing can ever exhaust the true humanity and complex personality of an actual individual. At best our presentations can create characters that decently approximate the living persons they describe. In this section we present some of the major players in our research, people who will emerge in the discussions throughout this book. We offer these characterizations here nervously and hope to avoid caricaturizing the people described.

Lockett

On our first visits to Catchout, we were received with guarded hospitality. For some, this reserve dissipated faster than for others, and Lockett was one person who took to us rather quickly. In the early days, he was more willing than others to give us access, to show us around the places nestled seamlessly into the cityscape, the kinds of places you cannot see from your car.

Lockett was like that kid in school who could not be quiet—the one who, no matter the repercussions, just had to crack a joke for the approval of his peers. Ironically, his friendly nature got him in trouble with the others from time to time; we sensed that they saw it as careless. While most of them would eventually become as open as Lockett, early on they were doing their homework, studying us, probing about our lives, and looking for anything disingenuous. Being gregarious on the street was a good way to get taken advantage of, and the early pervasive

rumors that we were cops or profiteers were a shield intended to defend against that possibility. We had to prove ourselves.

Lockett had an emotional side as well, one he wisely kept hidden from the other guys on the Corner. But in private moments with us, he would erupt in an almost therapeutic exposition of things he normally held inside. He confessed the impact his mother's death had on him or regret for things he had done and "bad" habits he had developed. But these moments were largely eclipsed by a jolly personality with a dry sense of humor. "Professor! I got my papers today, I'm going to Iraq," he offered with a completely straight face. "Are you serious?" we asked. "Yeah, they're dropping me behind enemy lines. I'm a secret weapon," he said, holding it for a few seconds before he broke down laughing. "Don't film that, Jason—that's a lie!" he said to Wasserman who was taping the interview.

Like anyone else, Lockett was not uniformly jovial. At times he could be withdrawn and in a bad mood. He also experienced bouts of addiction, and his relatively kind demeanor translated into a great deal of control relinquished to the drug dealers who sometimes worked off the Corner. In one telling moment, early in our research, Lockett cornered Wasserman and pleaded for fifteen dollars. He claimed that if he did not get it, the dealers would think he was "a pussy." In the end, Wasserman did give him some money, though not without lingering questions of conscience about doing so. That darker moment also troubled Lockett's conscience. For the next two years, he continually reminded Wasserman that he still intended to pay him back the money. Despite seeming like something of a lost cause in certain moments, by the end of our research, Lockett was off the street, married, and working.

Hammer

If Lockett was the class clown, Hammer was the older kid who looked out for you. A former boxer who had logged twenty-three years in prison, he exuded the hardened qualities you might expect from someone at the intersection of the boxer and ex-convict demographics. Like many of the others we would meet, Hammer displayed an intelligence that had been severely underdeveloped by a lack of formal education, and he often was visibly frustrated by a vocabulary that could not keep pace with his thoughts.

Hammer warmed up to us on our first overnight excursion, after some drug dealers asked us to leave the Corner because they felt we

threatened their business. While we obliged by going to spend the night at a camp several blocks away, we made it a point to return to the Corner that night for a quick hello and spent the whole next day there. We felt like we had to show that we were not intimidated. Everyone later told us we gained respect by doing that, but it seemed particularly important to Hammer. Maybe this was a holdover from his prison days, where they say taking on a tough guy is one of the few ways to get respect. But from that moment on, Hammer was committed to us and to our research. The day after our altercation with the drug dealers, Hammer sat in the empty lot with us and expressed outright anger that we were asked to leave. "This is our corner. This ain't their corner. They go home at night! I'll take you to some spots that'll blow your fuckin' mind." "Wouldn't it be trouble if we went there?" we asked. "Not if you go with me. Ain't nobody fuckin' with me out here." His tone made this sound more like a demand than a prediction. After that day, with the former boxer in our corner, we had virtual carte blanche access to the area. The word was out that we were legitimate and anyone who did not believe that could take it up with Hammer. No one ever did.

Like Lockett, Hammer had bouts with addiction. But unlike the case with Lockett, Hammer's strong personality kept him from becoming an "errand boy" to the dealers. Still, when he was high, Hammer could be an intimidating figure. He was not directly threatening, but he would undertake long diatribes about demonic evil in the world. We later discuss this in the context of southern religion.

Motown

While Hammer and Lockett, in different ways, were extroverted, Motown had a subtle personality, but one that exuded class and self-respect. He was a tall man, something exaggerated by his good posture. Motown walked with a natural dignity characteristic of royalty, steady, upright, and slow, but with intent. His receding white hair was always neatly combed and while his hands and feet were tattered from a hard, physical life, they did not denigrate the elegance of his demeanor. While Motown was a fixture in those first months at Catchout, his calm nature in the midst of other demanding personalities pushed him to the periphery of our early focus. But as initial excitements wore off and we settled into the scene, our discussions with him gained depth.

Motown's disposition enabled him to recede into his own mind, and this was an asset on the street. "You gotta be a strong person out here. I seen the streets drive people crazy," he told us. One of his favorite methods

for staving off that insanity was music, hence his nickname. Motown always had a radio with him, and it became our custom to bring him batteries for it. In more social moments, he would serve as DJ for the group, playing old soul music and most often singing along. More privately, he would sit in a chair, playing his radio in what could best be described as meditation.

All of this is not to suggest that Motown was perpetually zenlike. He was capable of rising to the situation. You have to be tough at Catchout. Once, when personal issues kept us out of the field for a comparatively long period, it was Motown who met us at the car on our next arrival, demanding we explain ourselves. But once we did, Motown settled back into his usual character, with manners and dignity that belong at a catered affair instead of Catchout Corner.

Carnell

Carnell was a cut-up like Lockett, but while Lockett had an underlying sweetness to his character, there was something dark and caustic lurking in Carnell. One sensed an inner torment, but it was hard to put your finger on it. Sometimes he would engage us in good-natured and often thoughtful conversation. Other times he would barely acknowledge us or anyone else. A psychologist would probably diagnose him with a mood disorder, but in these down moments, he did not outright ignore his environment, he just disengaged from it. We had heard stories about Carnell's extremely violent temper and some bizarre past behavior that accompanied it. Legend had it, for example, that Carnell used to carry around a sword. While that would suggest a diagnosable psychological problem, over four years we never saw anything significantly abnormal, particularly considering his abnormal circumstances. When we asked Carnell about these stories, he would just smile and deflect the questions. He may have been embarrassed, but also it seemed that he knew the value of a tough reputation on the street. In some ways he perpetuated a dominant veneer, for example warning about how violent the streets could be, but for the most part, he was perfectly content to let legends lie.

Carnell was thoroughly cynical about our project and homelessness generally, and we had a hard time convincing him that our research had any worth at all. "There isn't anything to know about out here. It ain't nothing special. I mean it can be wild, but I don't understand what you want to know about." Despite the lack of value our research had in his eyes, he often made significant contributions to it, routinely giving us a

lot to think about. Leaving the Corner one day after a religious woman had shown up to preach to the group, we confessed to Carnell, "Man, that woman said some real bizarre stuff." He put us in check, "Different strokes for different folks. She tripped ya'll out, but ya'll trip me out. Know what I'm sayin'?"

Like Hammer, Carnell was intelligent, but he was more articulate and clever. We once observed him trying to convince another man that "black and white don't exist." While he did not have an academic vocabulary, as he talked, it was clear that his thoughts went beyond the I-don't-see-color cliché to a deeply philosophical, social constructionist view of race and ethnicity. "What color are you?" his debate partner challenged, "'cause I'm black." Carnell wouldn't budge, "There is no black; they made that shit up."

Big E

Big E was Carnell's cousin and was one of the more religious men at Catchout. Although a religious fatalism was widespread, Big E was particularly effusive about it. "What would it take to end homelessness?" we asked a group one time. "God's gonna have to come down and touch some hearts," Big E replied, rejecting other's suggestions about various public policy solutions. While we met him on our first visits to the Corner, by the time we officially ended our fieldwork, he had been one of the few to successfully utilize the shelter programs to get off the street.

While they were related, unlike Carnell, Big E showed a great deal of interest in our research. After several months he wanted to see the film and was concerned about how we might portray them. At the same time, he expressly appreciated our approach. For example, one of our standard interview questions was, "A lot of people think you guys are all just a bunch of no good bums. What do you think about that?" This may shock researchers who often treat participants with kid gloves, but in our estimation, there was no point in ignoring the obvious. Big E particularly seemed to appreciate that approach. After our first interview with him, he came over to us: "Hey, I liked the questions you asked me, man. You didn't beat around the bush about shit."

Potato Water and Matty

Though he would later move across town, we met Potato Water during one of our early visits to Catchout. His nickname was conferred because

of his love of cheap vodka. Like everyone else there, he seemed initially drawn to participating in our research because we were paying five bucks an interview (as we later discuss, we were quickly encouraged by those on the Corner themselves to abandon that practice), but Potato Water stood out for all sorts of reasons. He was the only white man around, a barrier he told us it had taken him three years to fully overcome. He was tall and lanky, with scraggly hair on his head and the kind of facial hair that results from neglect rather than design. But we got the impression that this would not be far-off his look if he was not living on the street. He had a classic southern populist demeanor, a cracker-barrel, commonsense approach to life. Potato Water had gone to college for three years and was an avid reader who nearly always had a book with him. He was an admitted alcoholic, but managed negative judgments about it by noting that he worked hard. "I'm an alcoholic, but I'm a functioning alcoholic," he put it. And like most of the others, he had not stayed in a shelter in over four years, "To me, [the shelter is] like a prison-type scene, man."

It was on our first overnight stay on the streets that we met Matty. We walked into the camp to find him relaxing on a bed, eating microwave popcorn, and watching television.[40] If it had not been for the fact that his space had no walls and an interstate overpass for a roof, it could have been any house in middle America. He was a highly organized person, as we would continue to learn over the next several years. That night we marveled at his folded laundry, neatly organized in a dresser near his bed, but we would learn this was not idiosyncratic.

In the early days of the project, we never imagined that we were building stable, longitudinal relationships, but nearly two years later, we found ourselves walking along the train tracks just east of downtown looking into the dense brush for signs of habitation. After the police scattered everyone from Catchout Corner in the fall of 2005, Potato Water and Matty's camp had been overrun with people that, not for the first time, had nowhere else to go. When this caused their highly organized living space to fall into disarray, Potato Water and Matty forged a new camp, secured with secrecy and the fact that it rested on an island where a north-south train line met an east-west track. The vague directions we were given left us hiking up and down the tracks and calling their names out into the woods, hoping for a response. We ran into several of their neighbors, others living on the street nearby, but perhaps because they were suspicious of us or because they did not want to anger Potato Water and Matty by divulging the location of their camp, they just vaguely pointed us down the line, "Over that way, somewhere." And maybe this

hunt seems like a telling of a chore, and an obstacle to our research, but scouring the unseen underbelly of the cityscape filled both of us with excitement and curiosity. It seemed to us that it was exactly what sociologists ought to be doing, getting their hands dirty and dodging the train yard bulls in the process.

Steve

Steve runs one of the most prominent shelters in the city. A tour of the crumbling building immediately validates the pleas of shelter directors for more funding. Steve reflected the standard view of homelessness as largely a function of addiction and mental illness, not so much in his rhetoric as the fact that his shelter was primarily focused on treating these. But Steve also possessed a reflexive capacity that made him sensitive to, if not critical of, such an approach. Held back from a revolutionary change partly by his board of directors, partly by funding, and partly by statistics that suggest that addiction and mental illness are in fact strongly correlated with homelessness (although causal inferences are questionable), Steve nonetheless was willing to consider criticisms of the service industry. Further, he demonstrated an understanding of social structural influences that often are overlooked in the individualized treatment paradigm of the shelter. During a city-wide service provider meeting, other shelter directors responded very defensively to a critical remark. True to his character, Steve stood out among the group, "We've been doing some things for a long time, and there's a good reason for some of those, but I think we should all step back and think about ways we can improve the things we do." While most shelter directors would issue categorical statements about controversial propositions like wet shelters, which allow drinking alcohol, Steve's opinions, even when definitively oppositional, were always couched in sincere considerations such as, "Well, I have mixed feelings about that."

Another clear contrast to some of the other service industry workers was the geniune emotion that Steve would display. Many of his shelter director peers understandably had become desensitized through constant contact with homelessness or had been promoted to positions that facilitated detachment. Like everyone else, Steve was a professional who could rattle off research and detail policy issues, but he consistently grounded what he said in real examples. When he did, we sensed a personal pain revealed in reflective pauses where he struggled to explain the inhumanity he dealt with everyday.

Lawton

We had made the rounds of local homeless-service providers and gotten
mostly the "standard company line" about homelessness and funding
needs from them. With little variation, they were all "on-message." But
in what was comparatively daring and conspiratorial, a couple of them
suggested in hushed tones that we talk to Lawton, a local pastor and
advocate for the homeless. Steve, for example, made a characteristic,
self-reflexive admission, "He can say things I can't."

From what we had seen, faith-based services in our city tended to be
the harshest and most judgmental of those who were homeless (see
Chapter 10), so we were skeptical when we met Lawton at his church.
When he arrived, the white-haired man in his sixties, wearing plain blue
Dickies work pants and a plain white shirt, got out of his pickup truck
and threw open the industrial garage door entrance on the front of the
church. "This is the world's largest church door," he chuckled, "'cause
everyone's welcome; we don't have any criteria."

Lawton has a calm and pleasant way about him, which did nothing
to prepare us for the radical things he would say. Without relinquishing
a bit of his ingrained kindness, he decried the local and federal govern-
ment and the inhumane negligence of the upper and middle classes,
unconscious of their privilege:

> The quality of life offenses [that the city is trying to pass] are a sign
> of our sickness. You see, a human being's appearance or possessions
> should not offend you. You should be able to know and relate to
> their character; there are many homeless people who have great
> character. So that is a sign of our sickness; so they want to try to use
> violence to force the homeless outside of [the city] boundaries.

Lawton is a deeply religious man, unwavering in his faith and with
convictions about social injustice that in his estimation were warranted
directly by biblical wisdom. But he also had what we call in the acade-
my a robust "sociological imagination." Through his spiritual prism he
noted connections between national and local politics.

> George Bush is very embarrassed today because of the United
> States' moral failure to care for prisoners of war [at Abu Ghraib].
> And God is not happy about that. God is not happy about that.
> The Birmingham City Council and the mayor of the city of
> Birmingham, if they continue in the direction they are going, are

going to have photos and pictures and suffering and pain and abuse and violence that is going to embarrass Birmingham again [like it did during the civil rights movement] because we do not know God in this city. We don't know how to relate to the poor, we don't know how to care for the poor, we don't know how to build justice, we don't know how to establish transportation, we don't know how to build housing, we don't know how to care for communities, we don't know how to care for our children, and all [the city officials] are hyped up about is getting rid of some people who are suffering tremendously. And it is wrong. And I will continue to say it's wrong.

In a climate where homeless services revolved around the individual's admission of their personal pathologies, either real or those designed to appease the service provider, Lawton stayed resolutely focused on social structural issues. And while a macrolevel vision, particularly as sociology has it, usually means distancing oneself from the immediate suffering of individuals, Lawton's compassion and anger about systemic issues was unaltered as he worked tirelessly with the real individuals swept up in that system. Friedrich Schiller once wrote:

Cherish triumphant truth in the modest sanctuary of your heart; give it an incarnate form through beauty, that it may not only be in the understanding that does homage to it, but that feeling may lovingly grasp its appearance. And that you may not by any chance take from external reality the model which you yourself ought to furnish, do not venture into its dangerous society before you are assured in your own heart that you have a good escort furnished by ideal nature. Live with your age, but be not its creation; labor for your contemporaries, but do for them what they need, and not what they praise. Without having shared their faults, share their punishment with a noble resignation, and bend under the yoke which they find it as painful to dispense with as to bear.[41]

The radicalism of Lawton's politics matched equally by kindness of his demeanor is the quintessential expression of this difficult challenge that Schiller lays before us.

Chapter Descriptions

Our work is presented here in eleven chapters. In Chapter 2 we discuss the process of starting our research and gaining access to a highly distrustful population. We also describe our analytic methods and wrestle

with some ethical questions concerning research in general and ethno-graphies like ours in particular.

Chapters 3 through 7 concern mainly those who are homeless. In Chapter 3 we attempt to define those who are homeless in general and those who are street homeless in particular. As the street homeless popu-lation is heterogeneous in all sorts of ways, explicating exactly who the street homeless are as a salient group is no small task. Our participants are all individuals held together in a group by particular circumstances. Moreover, whether someone is street homeless often depends on what point he or she is at in his or her life. Since our research lasted more than four years, the status of some of our contacts changed. Some of our participants started out on the street and then went through shelter pro-grams. Some have stayed in housing; some have ended up back on the Corner. Others made it off the streets without services. But most have stayed on the streets the whole time.

Chapter 4 examines causes of homelessness as debated in the litera-ture and then also based on our observations in the field. Primarily this discussion concerns the extent to which homelessness is the result of individual behaviors such as drinking and drug use or mental illness, or structural conditions such as increasing economic inequality.

In Chapter 5 we discuss the organization of street homeless commu-nities. This includes how they maintain relationships with one another and with mainstream society.

Chapter 6 turns from organization and relationships toward attitudes and values. Here are examined the dispositions of those on the street toward homelessness itself, as well as toward politics, social issues, and religion.

Chapter 7 considers issues of identity on the street and the way that self is protected and asserted throughout the course of being "down and out." Those who are street homeless often have strikingly resilient per-sonalities and creative spirits that allow them to manage a host of hard-ships that most of us will never face. This is not to say they all are romantic figures, but rather to note the existence of such characteristics that counter the pervasive opposite stereotype that they all are dysfunc-tional, dependent, and deplorable.

Chapters 8 through 10 examine various groups involved with the homeless in different ways. As homelessness is routinely described as a social problem, service programs are postured as solutions, either explicitly or by implication. Our study suggests that these solutions fre-quently contain their own problematic features that often work at cross-purposes even with their own goals of getting those who are homeless

off the street. In Chapter 8 we examine the way that businesses and government work together to legislate against those who are homeless, particularly by managing city space and increasingly shrinking the public sphere, both physically and conceptually. The former includes legislation and policies that ban those who are homeless from public spaces. The latter concerns redefining questions of "who counts" as a citizen.

In Chapter 9 we examine social services that purportedly aim at getting those who are homeless off the streets. These can be seen as a kinder alternative in contrast to the harsh demeanor of business and government, but shelter programs make problematic assumptions and judgments that often ostracize a salient portion of the homeless population, those who stay on the street. We flesh out these features of the dominant model of service provision.

In Chapter 10 we examine religious approaches to homelessness. Church groups are very active in providing services at a variety of levels of organization, from running full-fledged shelters to providing meals out of the backs of their cars. Still, discussions of the ways that religious groups interact with those who are homeless are largely absent from the literature. We find that religious groups approach homelessness in a variety of ways, but that these generally parallel the heavy-handed authoritarianism of government or the paternalistic charity of social service programs.

In Chapter 11 we conclude by offering, not solutions on how to end homelessness, but rather insights about how to begin to think about it in new ways. Rather than working toward an oversimplified clarity on the subject, we choose to acknowledge its complexity and diversity and suggest that we can begin to approach homelessness as a concept and those individuals who are homeless only by finding our way to a new concept of individuality, new models of organization, and a new sense of the appropriate character of our social relationships. All of these are examined through the concept of friendship, something we all know, but which unfortunately rarely informs our conscious thinking about social relationships, particularly in matters of public policy.

Notes

1. Wagner notes in *Checkerboard Square* that the notion of a "work ethic" serves to maintain lower-class productivity while the wealthy are conspicuously focused on leisure.

2. Kyle, *Contextualizing Homelessness*.

3. See, for example, Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship and Identity*.

4. See Lee et al., "Revisiting the Contact Hypothesis," suggesting that increased contact diminishes stigmas of those who are homeless.

5. See Culhane, "The Quandaries of Shelter Reform," for a related discussion.

6. Kyle, *Contextualizing Homelessness*, p. 27.

7. See Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship and Identity*; Lyon-Callo, *Inequality, Poverty, and Neoliberal Governance*; and Mathieu, "The Medicalization of Homelessness and the Theater of Repression."

8. Wacquant, "Scrutinizing the Street"; see, for example, Anderson, *Code of the Street*; Duneier, *Sidewalk*; Newman, *No Shame in My Game*.

9. Wacquant, "Scrutinizing the Street," p. 1520.

10. Burt, *Over the Edge,* suggests the similarity is exaggerated at best, based on the various ways in which those who are homeless tend to be deviant and on homelessness itself as a non-normative experience.

11. Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship and Identity*; Hopper, *Reckoning with the Homeless*; Lyon-Callo, "Medicalizing Homelessness"; Lyon-Callo, *Inequality, Poverty, and Neoliberal Governance*.

12. Snow and Anderson, *Down on Their Luck*, p. 7.

13. More detailed historical treatments can be found in Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship and Identity*; Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*; Failer, *Who Qualifies for Rights*; Feldman, *Citizens Without Shelter*; Hopper, *Reckoning with the Homeless*; Kusmer, *Down and Out on the Road*; and Kyle, *Contextualizing Homelessness*.

14. Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship and Identity*; Axelson and Dail, "The Changing Character of Homelessness in the United States"; Kusmer, *Down and Out on the Road*.

15. Anderson, *The Hobo*; Axelson and Dail, "The Changing Character of Homelessness in the United States"; Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*.

16. Axelson and Dail, "The Changing Character of Homelessness in the United States"; Rossi, *Down and Out in America*; Snow and Anderson, *Down on Their Luck*.

17. Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship and Identity*; Axelson and Dail, "The Changing Character of Homelessness in the United States"; Snow and Anderson, *Down on Their Luck*.

18. Axelson and Dail, "The Changing Character of Homelessness in the United States"; Phelan et al., "The Stigma of Homelessness"; Rossi, *Down and Out in America*; Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*.

19. Axelson and Dail, "The Changing Character of Homelessness in the United States"; Rossi, *Down and Out in America*; Snow and Anderson, *Down on Their Luck*.

20. Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship and Identity;* Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City*; Mathieu, "The Medicalization of Homelessness and the Theater of Repression"; Mossman, "Deinstitutionalization, Homelessness, and the Myth of Psychiatric Abandonment."

21. Axelson and Dail, "The Changing Character of Homelessness in the United States"; Nunez and Fox, "A Snapshot of Family Homelessness Across America"; Rossi, *Down and Out in America*; Shlay and Rossi point out, in "Social Science Research and Contemporary Studies of Homelessness," that there is still a preponderance of single males despite increasing rates among other groups.

22. Bickford, "Constructing Inequality"; Gibson, *Securing the Spectacular City*; Mathieu, "The Medicalization of Homelessness and the Theater of Repression"; Waldron, "Homelessness and Community."

23. See Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*; Kusmer notes in *Down and Out on the Road* that the workfare policies of Mayor Rudy Giuliani in New York City mirrored the work penalties attached to vagrancy convictions in the 1800s.

24. See, for example, Failer, *Who Qualifies for Rights*?; Feldman, *Citizens Without Shelter*; Hopper, *Reckoning with the Homeless*; Lyon-Callo, "Medicalizing Homelessness"; Lyon-Callo, *Inequality, Poverty, and Neoliberal Governance*; Mathieu, "The Medicalization of Homelessness and the Theater of Repression"; Snow et al., "The Myth of Pervasive Mental Illness Among the Homeless."

25. Hopper, *Reckoning with the Homeless*, p. 26.

26. See www.birminghamal.gov, retrieved May 11, 2009.

27. McKiven, Jr., *Iron and Steel*, p. 8.

28. LaMonte, *Politics and Welfare in Birmingham, 1900–1975*.

29. McKiven, Jr., *Iron and Steel*.

30. See Scribner, *Renewing Birmingham*.

31. See McWilliams, *New Lights in the Valley*.

32. Eskew, *But for Birmingham*.

33. Lesher, *George Wallace*.

34. Franklin, *Back to Birmingham*.

35. Fallin, Jr., *The African American Church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1815–1963*.

36. Ibid.; also Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out*.

37. Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out*.

38. Fallin, Jr., *The African American Church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1815–1963*.

39. Scribner, *Renewing Birmingham*.

40. The owner of the stone company that bordered their camp under the interstate had run an extension cord out to them, giving them electricity.

41. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.