

Homeless Lives in New Zealand: the case of central Auckland

Shiloh Groot², Darrin Hodgetts², Kerry Chamberlain³, Alan Radley⁴, Linda Nikora², Otilie Stolte², and Eci Nabalarua⁵

²University of Waikato, New Zealand; ³Massey University, New Zealand; ⁴Loughborough University, UK; ⁵University of the South Pacific, Fiji

Homelessness is a pressing and increasingly visible concern in New Zealand. Many people sleeping rough are male and of Maori or Pacific descent. This research focuses on understanding the nature of resilience through the lived experiences of homeless people. To gain insights into cultures of homelessness, a qualitative case study research design was used to engage six homeless people who took part in a series of interviews and photo-production exercises. Participants are of Maori, Pacific Island, and Pakeha ethnic backgrounds. It therefore may become important to document how homeless people see themselves in relation to their communities of origin and the wider public.

This research on 'Homeless lives in New Zealand: The case of central Auckland' is part of a larger Marsden funded research project being conducted in collaboration with homeless people, the Maori and Psychology Research Unit, three city councils and non-government organizations. This paper will focus on the first author's research thus far for the partial requirements of a Doctoral degree.

Literature review

Homelessness is a pressing societal concern in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Kearns, 1995; Peace & Kell, 2001; O'Brien & de Hann, 2002). As with many social issues those from economically, ethnically and socially marginalized backgrounds are over represented (Bang, 1998; McIntosh, 2005; Tois, 2005). Recent research shows that the majority of people sleeping rough in Auckland are male and of Maori or Polynesian decent (Gravitas Research and Strategy Ltd., 2005). Homeless people are sicker and die quicker (Lewis, Andersen, & Gelberg, 2003; Quine, Kendig, Russel, & Touchard, 2004), experience a sense of dispossession, insecurity and cultural dislocation (Dordick, 1997; Cattell, 2001; Rollins, Saris, & Johnston-Robledo, 2001; McIntosh, 2005) are 34 times more likely to commit suicide, and 150 times more likely to be assaulted fatally (Shaw, Dorling, & Smith, 1999).

A lack of housing may very well be a fundamental aspect of homelessness; however, it is important to note that there is much more to it than this (Morrell-Bellai, Goering, & Boydell, 2000). Little is known about the daily practices and relationships among homeless people, and between homeless people and the public (Paradise, & Cauce, 2002; Quine, Kendig, Russel, & Touchard, 2004). If researchers are to understand barriers to re-housing and why some homeless people are reluctant to leave a life of transience, or why some return to the streets even after re-settlement it is necessary to describe the processes of homelessness.

Research that focuses on pathways to homelessness documents how it often stems from vulnerability to poverty intensified by a combination of traumatic life events such as family deaths, abuse, relationship breakdowns, mental illness, substance abuse, and job loss (Morrell-Bellai, Goering, & Boydell, 2000; Toohey, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004). Pathways into homelessness can be gradual whereby a person 'uses up' their social networks by relying heavily on friends and family for support and a sofa for the night, and will eventually 'wear out their welcome' (Morrell-Bellai, Goering, & Boydell, 2000; Toohey, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004). Once a person is homeless, personal vulnerability issues intensify the situation so that they can become stranded.

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Violence in the homes and communities of origin of homeless people has been well documented (Toro, 2007). Substance abuse is common in the families of origin, as well as among the homeless population itself. This appears to be especially true of single homeless men (Toro, 2007). Whilst a history of substance abuse may put one at risk for becoming homeless, it has also been suggested that, once homeless, one may take drugs and alcohol to temporarily alleviate the hardships of being homeless. Criminal behaviour has often been associated with the homeless. However, Toro (2007) notes that only about a quarter to one third have a serious criminal history. Many homeless people, it would seem, get arrested for victimless crimes due to their homeless lifestyle (e.g., through panhandling, public drunkenness, squatting in abandoned buildings).

There does not appear to be any single pathway into homelessness and, as such, the way back into mainstream society varies between people. There are often difficulties in maintaining re-settlement for homeless people, resulting in their return to street life. Interventions are needed to rebuild ties with family and friends, establish new contacts, and address local public opposition to locating services.

A site for the research

As the size of Auckland City grows so too does the homeless population. Across all developed nations, the highest concentrations of homeless people tend to be found in the largest urban settings and they tend to be segregated to some of the poorest areas (Toro, 2007). Work has been underway since late 2004 to respond to issues of homelessness in Auckland (Gravitas Research and Strategy Ltd., 2005). There has been increasing concern expressed by visitors, businesses' and residents about the growing visibility of homeless people in the CBD and the effect that this is having on perceptions of safety and overall amenity.

The most visible group to the public is known as 'rough sleepers', those sleeping on the streets. There is something like 180 to 300 rough sleepers in Auckland (Gravitas Research and Strategy Ltd., 2005). The New Zealand Living Standards report released in July 2006 by the Ministry of

Development (Auckland City Mission, 2006) highlighted the increasing numbers of Aucklanders on low incomes living in poverty. Income levels are unable to contend with increasing costs of rates, rent, transport, food and utilities. Many on benefits and low incomes are living in severe hardship and have to make do without the basic necessities (Auckland City Mission, 2006).

Central Auckland is more than a physical setting: it is an 'appropriate' location featured in media framings of homelessness and the cultivation of public expectations (Cooper; 2001). When New Zealanders think of homelessness we often think of such central business districts and images of begging on Queen Street that have populated media reports for almost a century, comprising part of our shared cultural heritage.

This research is being conducted in collaboration with service providers to ensure findings are relevant to the needs of homeless people. The Anglican Auckland City Mission was established in 1920, under the leadership of Rev Calder (Ball, 1997). It has since grown into one of the most prominent providers of charitable aid in Auckland. The role of the mission has been to provide advocacy and social and health services for marginalized people in the Auckland region (Auckland City Mission, 2006). Core services include providing food for families and individuals, an extensive range of programmes for the homeless and supporting people to overcome addictions (Auckland City Mission, 2006).

An Advisory Group, made up of agency representatives and homeless people, has been established. Recruitment of participants has been made possible through Auckland's City Mission involvement as an agency representative on the project. This enables us to work with experienced community workers in a manner sensitive to the situations and needs of participants

The Auckland City Mission's Inner City Drop-In Centre provides a place of social contact where the homeless can be warm, eat and drink, acquire basic toiletry items, see a doctor for free every Tuesday, make telephone calls and talk to others (Auckland City Mission, 2006).

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Strengths based considerations

Homeless people are not only burdened with issues of daily survival, violence and social ostracism, but loneliness, depression, and fear are not uncommon as well (Rokach, 2003). Rokach (2004) has suggested that one needs to adapt to homelessness, using the notion of 'career'. As a career, daily survival of the homeless requires focus on food, clothing and personal hygiene. As the duration of homelessness increases, daily routines develop and adaptation to street life progresses. To develop skills, homeless communities collectively negotiate anti-stigma strategies through building strategic alliances most likely to engender effective action (Campbell & Deacon, 2006; Radley, Hodgetts, Cullen; 2005).

This research focuses on understanding the nature of resilience through the lived experiences of homeless people. The importance of resilience as a factor in enabling people to survive and adapt to adverse circumstances has been acknowledged in psychological research (Merritt, 2003). Herein lies the problem in conceptualizing resilience as it is often described as a phenomenon pertaining to individuals when it frequently occurs through social interactions. Through the accounts of homeless participants it is made clear that homeless people also seek friendship, support and community. Critics have argued that research has tended to focus more on the individual characteristics of homeless people, thus detracting attention from the multi-layered factors which lead to homelessness and risk-taking a victim-blaming approach (Christian, 2003).

Rather than approaching marginalized groups as the passive victims of oppression and social inequalities, the focus shifts to 'cultures of resistance' or the strategies through which homeless people work to construct alternative meanings and ways of being. A strong sense of resilience is clearly interwoven into homeless people's stories; they have developed strengths, skills, and resources through their integration into the homeless community. It is necessary to research resilience at a communal level as it occurs somewhere and often in recital with the aspirations and efforts of others.

In this PhD research resilience is conceptualized as a practice and not just an abstract psychological

construct. This takes a strength-based approach to health and well-being as opposed to the more traditional deficit focused position (Merritt, 2003). However, whilst homeless people may not be the passive victims of their circumstances their survival comes at a cost, as previous research has shown homeless people are sicker and die quicker. This perspective reaches beyond defining homeless people as both deviant (and need to be coerced) or socially excluded (and need to be re-skilled) (Radley, Hodgetts, & Cullen, 2005).

Methodology

To gain insights into cultures of homelessness, the information gathered from six homeless participants in a series of case studies was used. Participants were engaged through a series of interviews and photo-production exercises. Each case study will be analysed separately then compared as they relate to each other. Participants are from Maori, Pacific Island and Pakeha ethnic backgrounds. Frame (2002) talks about how the arithmetic of cultures is one plus one equals three. The two encountering cultures remain (although mutually influenced) but a third and new culture also gradually appears alongside them (Frame, 2002). In the context of homelessness it becomes necessary to document how homeless people see themselves in relation to their cultures of origin and their homeless cultures or identities. Maori and Pacific Islander peoples are over-represented in this group and therefore any approach working with providers to inform services can have a bearing on Maori and Pacific Island peoples. The concerns of Maori and Pacific Island peoples are one driving force for this project, which is why it is conducted under the direction of the Maori and Psychology Research Unit. The success of services for, and public responses to, homelessness requires Maori and Pacific researchers who are equipped to work with agencies and to produce workable action plans. It will also enable us to develop dialogue across ethnic groups about an issue affecting lower socio-economic status people in general.

Participants have been selected because their transitions to the street and in some cases from the street are interesting, they are creative and resilient, they exemplify ethnic and gender differences and similarities, their history of homelessness is rich and

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in-depth, and all participants are articulate and able to capture a structure of strong feeling. The analysis is not restricted to the individual as each case summarizes the broader social category of 'homeless people', and provides a deeper understanding into lives lived on the street and beyond.

Case study example: Peter

In this section the photographs and accounts provided by one particular participant are analysed in the format of a case study. Peter is a Pakeha male in his late thirties, so here I am looking at Pakeha from a Maori perspective. Peter has been successful in making his life on the street in many ways, but he has also attempted to move on. At the time of the interview, Peter had been living on the streets in Auckland for a period of two years. Peter's interviews are both an honest account of his alcoholism and an insight into begging as a way of life. Peter has participated in three separate photo-interviews. His photos mark his transitions into Detox, supportive housing and finally back onto the streets. In his first set of photos he visualised his activities as a homeless person. The places he slept, going through ashtrays and bins, the Auckland City Mission, and begging and car window washing. In his second set of photos he was attempting to leave the streets and visualised his past on the street and his continued ties to the street through his friendships and begging activities. In the third set of photos Peter had returned to the streets and this was a visual diary of a typical day on the street for him.

Through his friendships with other homeless people he has learnt to window wash and begs using signs, a kind of informal apprenticeship. Rather than attempt to pass as an ordinary citizen, he frequented public spaces to beg for money where he would exploit his homeless situation. In order to be successful at begging, Peter employed a number of strategies so as to appeal to the public's expectations of what a deserving homeless person should look like. This involves appealing to the public's sympathy in a way that is both humorous and unique.



Figure 1. Peter begging outside a fast food store.

Peter: My signs are a wee bit different. They're things like, 'Ninjas abducted family, need money for kung fu lessons,' and uh what else is it... I'm on e-bay for them apparently; quite a few people come past and recognise me ... another one is, 'I'm starving and so is the idiot holding me,' um 'Aliens abducted family, need money to build spaceship,' and things like this... it's all money-makers. Well it is for me.

Interviewer: Why do you put that spin on it?

Peter: Because they're different, they're different, and people actually come past and see them and it gives them a giggle. You know, instead of just the normal homeless bullshit that everyone's used to.

Begging strategies

There is often a fundamental humiliation at being a homeless person, particularly for a man in a society where men are judged by their social standing and economic success. For Peter the creative signs and humour associated with begging can be read as a means of dismissing or disguising the humiliation often associated with begging. Daily survival is not a simple routine but a matter requiring constant hard work.

Peter is strategic in his placement of self in the street in terms of locale and time so as to maximize his income. His work on the street is planned in detail and based on considerable thought and insight into the behaviour and patterns of the public. This requires a detailed knowledge of the routines,

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pathways and patterns of the public in and through the city.

In his interview Peter spoke about how he would beg in groups, participate in drinking schools; sleep in groups and how his adaptation to street life was made possible through his friendships with other homeless people. Although Peter is pictured begging alone there are other homeless people positioned all along Queen Street, whom keep an eye out for each other. Being part of a community provides Peter with protection not just from other homeless people but from the public as well.

Resilience as a site

Amongst Peter's photo sets there are often pictures of spaces that friends of Peter occupy. In these spaces Peter and his friends will get together and have barbeques, drink and socialise. Peter and his friends often go to local supermarkets and retrieve from the bins expired food and alcohol that has been discarded to fund such events. We are presented with an insight into his world, without reference to the activities that might otherwise define these spaces. These images are produced from a homeless person's perspective which deviates from public perception that sees drinking as simply a negative and disruptive activity engaged in by 'lonely old tramps'. These images symbolise the friendships, emotional support and enjoyment often experienced by homeless people, yet are missing from the academic literature. Images

taken in these locations provide insights into the practices through which homeless people construct themselves as social beings within specific spaces.

This examination of Peter's life opens a particular vantage point overlooking homelessness in Auckland, and invoking aspects of the function of the city and relations between its inhabitants. We see how a homeless man's life and his efforts to get by and survive take place within a maze of facilities, activities and intentions. From these we can detect a level of resilience in the face of disenfranchisement.

Conclusion

Understanding how homeless people live their lives will not prevent individuals from drifting into this situation. However, it can help researchers, policy makers and service providers conceptualise an action frame to interpret how these people survive, make decisions regarding change, their degree of engagement with street culture, and criteria for accepting offers of re-settlement. This requires us to address the fundamentally social nature of homelessness as much more than a housing issue. It will provide a greater appreciation of how homeless Maori, Pacific and Pakeha peoples position themselves in relation to their ethnic and cultural communities and society in general.

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