

22 Governing the Streets: The Legal, Social and Moral Regulation of Homeless Youth

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Legal responses to urban homelessness sometimes referred to as the “criminalization of homelessness” have become more common over the last two decades. In Canada, provinces like Ontario have enacted laws that enable police to issue tickets to those who panhandle or beg in public places. In cities like Toronto the number of tickets issued under the Ontario Safe Streets Act to homeless people continues to rise (O’Grady et al., 2011). Similar law based approaches have also been deployed in Montreal (Sylvestre, 2010) and the United Kingdom (Gordon, 2004). In Canada in particular, increasing strain on the social safety net has led to further reliance on private sector agencies to provide basic necessities such as shelter, food and health services to the homeless population. At the same time, more pressure has been placed on all members of society to be responsible citizens who are accountable for all their actions, particularly when it comes to maintaining employment and managing personal finances. While these changes have been felt across society, one of the groups most affected have been the homeless, specifically young people who are homeless. As this chapter will reveal, changes in social and economic policies, which include reduced social support, increased individual responsibility and an overall intolerance for crime and disorder, have altered the way homelessness is viewed, linking it to a new set of problems. This in turn has shaped current responses to youth homelessness. In this chapter it will be argued that while homeless youth have received increased attention from law enforcement, they have also been subject to other forms of regulation that attempt to reinforce socially and economically

responsible behaviour. Here, it will be demonstrated how interaction with shelter workers and hostel staff helps to control the behaviour of homeless youth and reinforces social and economic responsibility as well as independence.

This chapter is organized into three parts. The first section discusses how changes in political and economic strategies (described below as neo-liberalism) have altered the availability of social services and placed more emphasis on a type of citizenship that encourages responsible behaviour in all aspects of life. This section will also touch on how public spaces have become increasingly regulated and less tolerant of disorder. This section will provide an overview of the concept of “governmentality”,¹ a theoretical framework helpful in explaining why services for homeless youth have become almost the sole responsibility of the non-profit sector and why homelessness has come to be seen as a form of disorder. The second part of this chapter explores the various ways in which youth homelessness is viewed as “problematic” and how current responses are formed in reaction to these perceived problems. This section examines the range of responses to youth homelessness that on one hand punish youth who occupy public spaces (through enforcement of the Ontario Safe Streets Act), and on the other hand seek to transform youth into economically responsible citizens (through interaction with shelters and other services for homeless youth). The final section of this chapter explores the broader implications of the present political and economic climate and its impact on youth homelessness. It is argued that current responses to youth homelessness further reinforce the idea that homelessness is an individualized problem, ignoring the structural factors like the short-comings of foster care services and transitional housing programs and overall high rates of poverty that continue to contribute to youth homelessness. While the focus of this chapter is on the experiences of youth, many of the control techniques discussed also affect the broader homeless population.

Being a Responsible Citizen and Living in a Safe City

The changes in political and economic thinking often described as “neo-liberalism”² have re-structured government at all levels. By reducing its involvement in the regulation of the economy and by moving away from the social welfare model in which society as a whole is responsible for caring for vulnerable citizens

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1. A theoretical concept used to describe the way modern governments rule a given society. Governmentality refers the process where government attempts to align the conduct of citizens with the goals of government not through direct coercion but rather through voluntary compliance.
 2. A concept used to describe the political and economic changes that have occurred since the early 1970's characterized by the de-regulation of the global economy, privatization and increased individualism.

(those who are poor, disabled, etc.), government involvement in many sectors of society has reduced significantly since the 1970's. This has contributed to a rise in flexible or unstable forms of employment, such as part time and contract work, and higher rates of unemployment in North America (Crawford, 2003; Lippmann, 2008). At the same time, significant cutbacks have been made to education, health care and anti-poverty programs (Broad & Anthony, 1999; Crawford, 2003) as federal and local governments passed services off to the non-profit sector (May et al., 2005). This corresponded with employment insurance becoming more difficult to access in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom (Broad & Hunter, 2009; Pierson, 2007). For young people especially, this led to a rise in urban unemployment (Hasluck, 1987; Young, 1999). As research suggests, exclusion from formal employment has contributed to a rise in informal economic activities, including panhandling and squeegee cleaning (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Karabanow et al., 2002). While these changes have had major effects on the entire population, changes in how citizenship is defined and how the use of public spaces is viewed have been most damaging to homeless youth.

On an individual level, what has been described above as "neo-liberalism" has had a major influence on how citizenship is defined. Neo-liberal models of citizenship put a great deal of emphasis on individual responsibility and self-discipline and encourage people to contribute to the economy by both working and consuming goods (Dean, 1999; O'Malley, 1992). While the belief that all citizens have rights is not ignored (see Heater, 2004), neo-liberal forms of citizenship insist that individuals have "no rights without responsibility" (Giddens, 1998:65). This has been referred to as active citizenship (Dean, 1999). In this view, all individuals within society are expected to actively protect themselves against the risks of criminal victimization, poverty and even more personal characteristics like low self-esteem (O'Malley, 1992). While encouraging responsible behaviour, this way of thinking about citizenship also emphasizes the defense of traditional institutions, like the family (Giddens, 1998; Dean, 1999). At a community level, active citizenship has led to the idea of active communities. An active community, as a collective group of active citizens, promotes high standards of socially acceptable behaviour in order to ensure social order and guard against disorder. As Rocco (2007) suggests, the active community becomes an environment that is heavily self-controlled and self-policed. Although government involvement in various sectors of society has lessened from the 1970's onward, it should be noted that neo-liberalism has also influenced social and legal policies geared towards regulating and disciplining the poor (Peck & Tickell, 2002). The enactment of the Ontario Safe Streets Act speaks to this point.

The political and economic changes described above as "neo-liberalism" have sharpened the division between those who are viewed as members of society and those

who are not. Those who are unable to effectively stay in control of their own lives are now faced with a growing sense of resentment (Young, 1999). This has created a divide between “active citizens,” and “target populations” (Dean, 1999:167), a concept that is highly damaging for at risk street youth (Farrugia, 2011).

This social divide can also be found in the way cities have been re-built in order to draw more consumers into shopping and tourist districts while excluding the homeless from public space. At the core of city re-development is a movement that promotes consumer activities like shopping and tourism and works to maintain security and safety. Here, modern cities (like Toronto), work towards the goal of encouraging business and economic growth while promoting safety (Davis, 1990; Fitzpatrick & LeGory, 2000). Hannigan (1998) perhaps best captures this in his description of the “Fantasy City”, a place that is aesthetically pleasing and appealing to middle class consumers, an almost mirror image of a modern day amusement park. Importantly, this appeal to middle-class consumers expands beyond shopping and tourism, as major cities across North America have experienced a rise in middle class families returning from the suburbs to live in the city. As Blomley (2004) has noted, this has had a moralizing effect on public space. In other words, as more families call the city home, forms of physical disorder, like graffiti or litter, and social disorder, like homelessness, become less tolerated.

Understanding Neo-liberal Governments

Michel Foucault’s (1991) concept of governmentality is helpful in understanding how current responses to youth homelessness take shape. For governmentality scholars, the goal of government is to shape the behaviour of individuals so that they will adopt the values of conventional society (Foucault, 1991; Rose & Miller, 1992). This imposes moral standards and social norms on individual conduct, specifically in relation to economic participation. For example, individuals work and contribute to the economy not because they are forced to, but because they have come to see this as an important part of their lives and the right thing to do. However, with the privatization of social services, government as a centre of authority has been replaced by a “complex assemblage of diverse forces” that respond to the problems of modern day society (Rose & Miller, 1992). Here, governments have passed over some of their authority to organizations that operate within the community and respond to the social problems that emerge in our society. For the present analysis, these “government authorities” might include the volunteers, social workers and experts, such as health professionals who offer frontline services to homeless youth.

Under these conditions, the central aim of government is to ensure that individuals are hard working and self-governing (Kelly, 2006). Self-governing individu-

als are able to take care of themselves without relying on others. These individuals are able to hold a steady job, are forward-thinking in managing their finances and live responsible lifestyles. As noted throughout the governmentality literature, attempting to shape individuals in this manner is what makes governing so problematic. As governmentality theorists have suggested, the role of governmental authorities (shelter staff for example) is not to provide charity handouts to needy individuals, but instead to empower and enable those who are “down-and-out” to take control of their own lives (Donzelot, 1979). Experts have not stopped providing aid, but instead use it as a platform to provide a “legitimate moral influence” (Donzelot, 1979). Here, shelter for the night is accompanied by a reminder that living on the streets goes against the norms and values of conventional forms of living. As further discussions will suggest, this perspective believes that what some individuals need is a “social vaccine”, something that empowers one to live responsibly and take control of one’s life, helping to guard against the ills of crime and welfare dependency (Cruikshank, 1996).

Evidence of this approach is seen in the 1960’s war on poverty, which worked under the assumption that “the powerlessness of the poor, not the actions of the powerful, was the root cause of their poverty” (Cruikshank, 1993). Cruikshank (1996) warns that not all individuals in society respond equally to this form of “social vaccination” or more generally to approaches dependent on self-governance. Therefore, current forms of government strike a balance between self-governance and discipline (law enforcement). As discussions of the current responses to youth homelessness will reveal, the encouragement of self-governance does not exclude the use of more disciplinary approaches.

The “Problematic Nature” of Youth Homelessness

Youth homelessness is undeniably problematic. However, exactly what makes youth homelessness so problematic has become less clearly agreed upon as political and economic policies (neo-liberalism) have led to increasing intolerance towards homeless youth. In an attempt to add clarity to this debate it is worth examining the context in which youth homelessness takes place.

The Real Problem: A Population in Need

While many forms of homelessness exist, the present analysis will focus on homeless youth who live primarily on the streets. Studying this portion of the homeless population is strategic as the visibly homeless (or urban homeless) are most likely to use front line services like shelters, drop-in centers and hostels. As suggested by O’Reilly-Fleming (1993), there is really no way of measuring the urban homeless population. In Canada it has been estimated

that roughly 65,000 youth experience homelessness or live in a shelter during the course of the year (Evenson & Barr, 2009).

Understanding Youth Homelessness

To truly understand homelessness, one must understand that not having a home is more than just a matter of lacking shelter. Homelessness is a blow to emotional well-being (O'Reilly-Fleming, 1993). To have a home provides social empowerment because it indicates security, belonging, and participation in society (Hartman, 2000).

There is some debate about what causes and maintains high levels of homelessness in today's society. For some, homelessness is a result of individual flaws. While understanding youth homelessness through a personal fault approach has become less common (Karabanow, 2004), issues of substance abuse, alcoholism, mental illness and lack of work ethic ("laziness") are still commonly seen as causes of homelessness (Main, 1998). Research has indicated that drug use does contribute to youth leaving home, but that drug use is also influenced by parents' habits (Baron, 1999). Having parents with drug and alcohol problems, combined with general family conflict and violence in the form of physical and sexual abuse, puts youth at much higher risks of homelessness (Broadhead-Fearn & White, 2006).

Others suggest that urban homelessness is a result of structural causes like unemployment, poverty and the overall economy, while at the same time occasionally questioning large-scale social policies that shape social services like foster care. Hartman (2000) suggests that on the extreme end of poverty, many have difficulty finding work that pays a living wage. O'Reilly-Fleming (1993) suggests that unemployment, particularly for individuals with fewer skills (like youth), can cause homelessness. Research on the structural causes of youth homelessness has also shed light on failures at an institutional level, including the problems youth experience moving from foster care to transitional housing and other more independent forms of living (Brown & Wilderson, 2010; Rashid, 2012).

Life on the Streets

For youth who call the streets home, everyday survival becomes a major challenge. Amidst the chaos of street life, access to food becomes increasingly difficult (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002). Besides a lack of nutrition, homeless youth become increasingly vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases and victimization (Christiani et al., 2008). In addition, finding and maintaining paid employment becomes one of the most difficult challenges (specifically for youth). As Gaetz and O'Grady (2002) suggest, homeless youth primarily resort to money making

strategies that take place in the informal economy and include short-term or odd jobs, including squeegeeing, panhandling and small scale crime. While homelessness in general and its links to the informal economy are by no means new, in the past several decades these activities have become increasingly unwelcome in both Canada and the United Kingdom (Parnaby, 2003; O'Grady et al., 2011; Fitzpatrick & Kennedy, 2001). Broadly speaking, there is a movement in society that has categorized visibly homeless individuals, who resort to public forms of begging and panhandling, as "urban undesirables" (White & Sutton, 1995).

The New Problem: A Population in Need of Regulation

Over the past two decades there has been a growing intolerance for activities that do not contribute to the formal economy or that are perceived as being dangerous and therefore damaging to the local economy.³ This in turn, has increasingly led homeless youth and the homeless population in general to be perceived as problematic. Although many of these so called "problems" relate to the literature reviewed above (for example, homelessness as a result of individual flaws), neo-liberal thinking has defined homelessness as a certain set of problems that in turn relate to specific solutions. This way of thinking sees homelessness as a spatial problem, a problem of social disorder, a family problem, and a citizenship problem.

Homelessness is a spatial problem. As municipal governments attempt to promote the growth and prosperity of local economies, the physical presence of homeless individuals (young or old) has become increasingly problematic. From an economic perspective, begging has negative effects on local businesses and harms the growth of the local economy (Smith, 2005). As the continued growth of the economy has become top priority, space within major cities has become increasingly privatized and unwelcoming to homeless individuals. As Blomley (2004) explains, the spaces in and around shopping malls, street corners and public parks have become increasingly regulated by private property rights and municipal governments who claim ownership as a way of ensuring public safety. For homeless youth, the division between public and private space is often blurred. While research has suggested that youth's street survival strategies often involve the "privatizing" of space (for example, seeking shelter in a public door way) (Wardhaugh, 2000), this form of privatization is only temporary. Importantly, how public and private spaces are used within modern cities also affects how and where services are offered to the homeless population. In accordance with the view that homelessness is a spatial problem, authorities continue to use municipal zone by-laws to locate homeless shelters

3. Parnaby's (2003) analysis of the events that contributed to the passing of the Ontario Safe Streets Act provides a strong example of how those who "squeegee" were labeled as dangerous to both public safety and the formal economy.

outside of areas where homeless individuals would come into contact with residents of the communities (Kuzmak & Muller, 2010).

Closely linked to the idea that homelessness is a spatial problem is the idea that *homelessness is a disorder problem*. Due to a belief that small scale displays of immoral behaviour, like public drinking and loitering, have the potential to escalate into more serious offences (like crime), visible forms of homelessness have now been lumped together under the loosely defined label of disorder (Wacquant, 2009). In Ontario specifically, the passing of the 1999 Safe Streets Act validates this point. As suggested by Parnaby (2003), in cities like Toronto, the fight against squeegeeing was framed as a fight against public forms of disorder. This mentality that “punishes the poor” for being visibly homeless is also evident in American cities, where urban renewal projects in San Francisco, for example, led to widespread police campaigns aimed at eliminating the nuisance of homelessness (Gowan, 2010).

However, as much as homelessness has undoubtedly been problematic in terms of space and disorder, under the present political climate, homelessness has come primarily to signify the breakdown of the family.

Homelessness is a family problem. As already noted, neo-liberals put a great deal of emphasis on family. The traditional family is seen as a “functional necessity for social order,” while other forms of living are associated with social decay (Giddens, 1998:12). Simply put, the family unit helps guard against both social and economic “problems.” From this perspective, strong families make strong communities, which contribute to strong economies. However, this mindset also means that not belonging to a family and having a weaker connection to the community and the economy poses a problem to social order (Donzelot, 1979). Under this mindset, homeless individuals not only fail to contribute to social and economic life, they actually disturb it (Donzelot, 1979). Donzelot’s commentary on homelessness sheds light on the problematic nature of life without a home, which represents a disconnection from greater society and perhaps more threatening, a retreat from the responsible self-governing form of citizenship described above.

Whether viewed as a spatial issue, an issue of disorder or signifying the breakdown of the family, for neoliberal governments, *homelessness is, fundamentally, a citizenship problem*. On a very basic level, urban homelessness comes into conflict with definitions of citizenship that see economic participation as the benchmark. In this sense, since they are economically dependent and/or do not contribute to the economy, homeless individuals are not seen as full citizens (Arnold, 2004). Couple this with the concept of active citizenship that demands morally responsible behaviour and financial independence, and it is easy to see how homeless individuals, especially youth, fall short of the mark.

Current Responses to Youth Homelessness

Disciplining Disorder – Punitive Responses

While the majority of this section will be devoted to current responses to youth homelessness that centre on social and moral regulation, law enforcement plays an important part in the regulation of homeless youth and deserves attention. While law and order responses to youth and adult homelessness have become more common in the present day, punitive responses have a long history. Historical examples, like Britain's Vagrancy Act (which is still enforced), confirm this (Gordon, 2004).

The late 1990s saw the introduction of the Ontario Safe Streets Act, which mostly targeted “squeegeeing” in large cities like Toronto. Squeegeeing, once seen as part of the cultural fabric of the city, instead became an eyesore that tarnished the image of the city (O’Grady et al., 1998). The Safe Streets Act more broadly targeted aggressive solicitation (which includes squeegeeing and some panhandling) in various public spaces including city streets, sidewalks, parks, bus stops and around bank machines (Ontario Safe Streets Act, 1999). Violations of the Act resulted in fines and even imprisonment for multiple offenders (Ontario Safe Streets Act, 1999). Most alarming is the rate at which the Safe Streets Act is enforced. The Toronto Police gave out just over 700 tickets in the year 2000, a number that increased to 3,646 in 2005 and an astonishing 15,244 in 2010 (O’Grady et al., 2011). While a majority of SSA tickets are issued to the adult homeless population, research indicates that homeless youth remain in regular contact with the police, who more often use other laws, like municipal bylaws, when ticketing youth for things like drinking in public or hanging around with friends (O’Grady et al., 2011). Using similar policing strategies, the number of statements of offences (a form of ticket issued under municipal law in Quebec) issued to homeless individuals in Montreal from 1995-2004 has increased 500% (Sylvestre, 2010). This trend can also be found in Canadian cities like Winnipeg and Vancouver that use a range of legal tools to ban visible forms of begging in malls, bus stops and bank entrances (Murphy, 2000). Similar approaches have been adopted in the United States. In Fort Lauderdale there are by-laws banning begging on beaches; New York has banned begging in the subway and Chicago has gone so far as to ban homeless individuals from the airport (Murphy, 2000). This intolerance of the visibly homeless is also taking place in the United Kingdom. When policy initiatives failed to network service providers and make shelters more accessible for London’s urban homeless population, police reacted with “massive clearance campaigns” arresting homeless individuals under Britain’s Vagrancy Act (May et al., 2005). Although these punitive approaches target not just youth but the broader homeless population, these trends do shed light on the growing intolerance of visible forms of disorder. Importantly, as youth homelessness continues to be por-

trayed as a spatial and disorder problem these punitive responses have increased. However, they only represent part of a larger pattern of government action.

Homeless Shelters: The Platform of Legitimate Moral Influence

Homeless shelters emerged in the 1980s as a temporary response to homelessness, but have now become a permanent service (Hartnett & Harding, 2005). Although shelters are a refuge from the harsh reality of street life, they are also a place of regulation and perhaps more importantly, a starting point for transition. Research suggests that “shelters for street kids are more likely than shelters for homeless adults to define their mission not simply as providing temporary shelter but as changing kids’ lives” (Karabanow & Rains, 1997:301). Empowerment, encouragement and guidance towards the type of active citizenship described above now accompany a warm bed. As services provided to homeless youth have increasingly become the responsibility of the private sector, the staff working in these shelters are now part of a long history of experts and professional reformers who attempt to resolve “problems” associated with homelessness (Lyon-Callo, 2004).

Shelter Functions: Sovereignty and Discipline

As the primary response to homelessness, homeless shelters function in many ways like a micro version of society (Lyon-Callo 2004). Much like contemporary society, shelters operate by striking a balance between self-governance approaches (encouraging youth to follow rules) and discipline. Most shelters blend formal rules and regulations with informal policies and practices (Hartnett & Harding, 2005). Although governments have distanced themselves from direct involvement in frontline service provisions, they still have an influence on policy as they are often the primary funder (Bridgman, 2003; Friedman, 1994).

In terms of function, as already mentioned, shelters play a double role, on one hand providing immediate shelter while on the other assisting homeless youth to become self-supporting and self-disciplined individuals. Ultimately, shelters provide a positive moral influence while providing essential services. In a practical sense, shelters address the aspects of youth homelessness that neo-liberal thinkers consider problematic. Therefore, shelters direct their services towards reshaping youth based on certain definitions of active citizenship, while also getting youth off the streets (homelessness as a spatial problem) and helping them resolve family conflict (homelessness as a family problem).

Intake Regulation

Although shelters use specific tactics like daily routines and evening curfews to

help homeless individuals regain independent living, they also use strategic, yet less formal measures that regulate the behaviour of homeless individuals before they even step foot in a shelter. For starters, homeless individuals must arrive at the shelter already showing self-disciplinary and self-responsible behaviour. To be more specific, drunkenness is largely prohibited in shelters and is one of the main reasons that people are turned away (Lyon-Callo, 2004). While youth shelters like Vancouver's Covenant House have an "open intake" policy, youth who arrive under the influence of alcohol or drugs are not allowed in (Covenant House, 2012). Although some specialized adult shelters in Canada have adopted harm reduction strategies allowing controlled alcohol consumption (Podymow et al., 2006), drinking or drunkenness is widely prohibited in most shelters, especially those geared towards youth. As Lyon-Callo (2004) further elaborates, drinking even small amounts is considered a sign that homeless individuals lack the basic amount of self-discipline needed for an extended stay at a shelter. While these policies ensure the safety of shelter guests and staff, they also demonstrate the importance of the responsible behaviour valued by neo-liberal thinking.

Responsible Behaviour

Homeless shelters, while providing a degree of safety, also provide resources that enhance a youth's ability to be self-governing and responsible. As research on adult shelters suggests, homeless individuals, once admitted to a shelter, are subject to in-depth interviews allowing staff to assess not what the shelter can do for the individuals but rather what the individuals need to do for themselves (Lyon-Callo, 2004). The goal of these interviews is to map out the skills and the moral mindset that homeless individuals will need to return to citizenship, hold meaningful employment and make good financial decisions (Desjarlais, 1997). Similarly, youth shelters, like Toronto's Covenant House, use individualized "discharge plans" focused on financial support, housing, finding work and pursuing education (Karabanow & Rains, 1997). Located throughout the United States, Father Flanagan Boys Homes develop individualized treatment plans focusing on the development of social skills in an attempt to change youth's behaviour (Teare et al., 1994). Although skill-building can lead to positive outcomes among homeless youth (Broadhead-Fearn & White, 2006), individualized plans can also reinforce the idea that homelessness is a result of personal flaws (Lyon-Callo, 2004).

As suggested by Marvasti (2002), shelters consciously make the time spent in a shelter morally charged. Many homeless shelters throughout the United States have embraced the idea of replacing "rules" with "codes of conduct" (Marvasti, 2002). Although the difference between rules and codes of conduct is minimal, the codes of conduct do "encourage them (homeless) to be aware of how their personal behaviour affects their re-entry into the com-

munity as productive citizens” (Marvasti, 2002:622). Similarly, some youth shelters have moved towards a “positive points” system that rewards morally responsible behaviour, such as following instructions and accepting criticism (Teare et al., 1994). In turn, these “positive points” are linked to various privileges within the shelter. Closely related to Cruikshank’s notion of a “social vaccine”, rather than imposing rules, the methods used to help homeless youth regain their ability to be self-governing individuals encourage behaviours valued by society. In other areas, however, shelters also use discipline.

Discipline and Shelter

While self-discipline is without question strongly encouraged by shelter staff, it would be misleading to suggest that this is not accompanied by external discipline. For starters, the activities of shelter guests must be monitored to ensure compliance with the shelter’s code of conduct. Lyon-Callo (2004) suggests that informal surveillance is understood by both the guests and the shelter staff as the means of identifying those breaking the rules. More so than adult shelters, youth shelters often rely on structured and regulated schedules that include daily wake-up and curfew times (Teare et al., 1994). Karabanow and Rains’ (1997) interesting analysis of shelters also demonstrates how staff help shape the behaviour of youth by providing structure in their lives by caring for them. By emphasizing respectful and honest communication, rules can be implemented in a way that sends a clear message that structured routines, while regulating the behaviour of youth, are implemented because the shelter cares for the youth’s well-being. As noted by Karabanow and Rains, while working as “professional change agents,” staff at Toronto’s Covenant House often doubled as “substitute parents” while enforcing the strict rules of the shelter (1997:302). In this regard, I would argue that the main purpose of the shelter is therefore to change behaviour to fit with social norms, not through the constant enforcement of rules but rather through a combination of discipline and encouragement.

Discipline and Regulation Reconsidered

Without entering a whole new field of literature, it is important to acknowledge that homeless shelters have a function outside of encouraging responsible behaviour in youth. Although this chapter cannot offer a complete analysis of spatial regulation literature, it can be argued that shelters function to a certain extent as a centre of social control (Bridgman, 2003). Modern day shelters function on multiple levels, one of these levels being spatial control – keeping undesirables out of mainstream society (Desjarlais, 1997). This is supported by DeVerteuil (2006), who suggests that modern day shelters work as centres

of “poverty management”. It should be noted that my intentions here are not to take away from the argument that a shelter’s goal is to encourage responsible behaviour. However, acknowledging the multiple functions of homeless shelters further illustrates the influence of neo-liberal politics and the argument that homeless individuals have increasingly become a spatial problem.

Alternative Forms of Regulation

As one of the primary responses to homelessness, shelters play an important role in governing homeless youth and encouraging self-discipline and self-regulation. However, attempts to govern the homeless population extend beyond the shelter into more public areas. Although not targeting youth specifically, in one of the clearest examples of the active community mentality, the British government attempted to tackle urban homelessness by transforming the public’s understanding of the issue into something that needed to be addressed by the homeless themselves (May et al., 2005). At the forefront of this campaign, called “Change a Life,” citizens were encouraged to “divert giving” and “think twice” before giving money to people begging in the street and to instead contribute time or money to local charities (Fitzpatrick & Kennedy, 2001). In Canada, a similar program exists in Ottawa, where recycled parking meters renamed “charity meters” are strategically located in the downtown core, with the goal of encouraging people to donate to social services instead of giving their change to homeless individuals begging or panhandling (CBC, 2007).

Implications and Challenges

We move now to the implications of this research for those who work closely with homeless youth. Speaking in broad terms, the current political-economic environment described in this chapter has created a complicated and often contradictory web of responses to youth homelessness. As this chapter has suggested, shelters seek to empower homeless individuals to improve their social situation by providing them with the skills needed to live independently. However, disciplinary responses continue to exclude homeless individuals from society, sending a mixed message to both the homeless and members of the public in general. This relationship creates a social and political environment that is both confusing for the public and harmful to homeless individuals.

For the public, the lines between those in need of help and those who pose a threat to safety continue to be unclear. Public opinions towards the homeless have changed considerably over the last several years, allowing punitive responses to be introduced with little public outcry (Murphy, 2000). Part of this can be attributed to the media and to municipal governments, who have played a sig-

nificant role in stereotyping certain homeless subpopulations (like panhandlers) as dangerous and harmful to society (see Parnaby, 2003). These political actions only stigmatize the homeless population and further discourage their efforts to make meaningful changes in their lives (O'Reilly-Fleming, 1993).

Implications for Frontline Service Providers

As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, one of the ways that neo-liberal politics has affected services offered to the homeless population has been by shifting responsibility for frontline services to the private and non-profit sectors. While recent responses to homelessness have always been somewhat unorganized and disconnected (see, *Raising the Roof*, 2001), as government agencies become less involved in providing frontline aid, coordinating or streamlining services becomes even more difficult. In some cases, programs and practices that have proven successful fail to spread beyond the communities where they began (*Raising the Roof*, 2001). The reliance on the non-profit sector has also become an issue of geography. The services available to homeless youth especially are spread over miles and miles of city blocks. According to *Toronto's Guide to Homeless Services*, the city of Toronto has no "central hub" that offers a full range of services. At best, homeless individuals may spend night after night, day after day travelling from one place to another in order to receive the services they need. While tackling issues of geography can be difficult, what this reinforces is the importance of open dialogue between service providers so that successful practices are shared and providers can offer multiple services in a single location. In many ways this is already taking place. However, as the task of offering services to the youth homeless population continues to fall to non-profit organizations, communication will be all the more important.

As this chapter has suggested, wide-scale changes to how citizenship is defined have put an increasing emphasis on individualism and demanded that all members of society act in a manner that is both socially and economically responsible. While the primary goal of many youth shelters is to provide shelter, this is often accompanied by promotion of economic and social responsibility. This raises important questions. Specifically, how can shelter staff and administrators continue to help youth without contributing to the neo-liberal idea that homelessness is primarily a personal deficit or problem? Furthermore, in what ways can service providers offer their services to youth while also challenging local and state governments to do their part in addressing the structural causes of homelessness?

Although a significant amount of research on youth homelessness exists, research on shelters for youth is not as plentiful. Studies on the influence of neo-liberal politics on shelter governance are even less plentiful. Nevertheless,

the research that does exist offers valuable advice on how service providers can avoid supporting the individualistic ideology of neo-liberalism. While it is not always easy, one of the most important things shelter staff and administration can do is to focus their attention on establishing environments that encourage self-empowerment and not self-blame among the homeless (Lyon-Callo, 2004). Shelters need to avoid “treating deviancy” and focus on empowering homeless individuals to make smart choices that encourage healthy lifestyles not centered only on employment. In this sense, responsibility is not completely removed from the individual, but the self-blame often associated with the stigma many youth feel is avoided.

Addressing Structural Inequality

For many of those who work in frontline services for youth, ending homelessness is not only a job, but also a passion. In this regard many staff and administrators are also advocates. How then can this activism be mobilized to address the structural causes of homelessness? As established above, governments at all levels continue to pass off many areas of service provision to the private or non-profit sector. In one sense, this has made it difficult to coordinate services to the homeless population. However, this has given more power to the local agencies that are now the experts when it comes to defining needs and establishing priorities. In the context of this chapter, what this means is, now more than ever, frontline agencies are in a position to advocate against the structural inequality that plays such a massive role in causing and maintaining high levels of homelessness amongst youth. In many ways this advocacy is already taking place, especially within the Canadian context. Numerous agencies are now becoming a part of the public dialogue drawing attention to issues of unemployment and poverty, as well as the shortcomings of foster care services and transitional housing programs that have long been associated with homelessness in general. As those who study the political and economic changes of the last several decades have noted, the retreat of government involvement in service provision and the move towards a model of citizenship that encourages financial independence above all else has certainly not happened without resistance. Building on what has been discussed above, with the proper communication, local knowledge can be put to use and positive change can happen.

Conclusions

Although homelessness is not a new phenomenon, changes in political and economic thinking, described here as neo-liberalism, have associated homelessness with a new set of problems. In times where earning and spending money has become a growing sign of citizenship in countries like Canada, the

homeless have become further stigmatized and marginalized (Arnold, 2004). By failing to address the structural causes of homelessness, shelters and front line workers only serve as an emergency response to the problem, not a solution. If the ultimate goal is to end youth homelessness, then the structural factors that continue to foster high rates of homelessness amongst youth must be acknowledged. In addressing issues of poverty, unemployment and the lack of affordable housing and by continuing to draw attention to the unjust enforcement of laws that only punish the poor, meaningful change is possible.

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