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Somewhere to be permanent for a minute: Time and space perceptions of older adult men experiencing chronic homelessness in Detroit

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Abstract

Within the landscape of postwar era Detroit, space is vast, but places are hard to find. As people tumble down the side of Maslow's pyramid into abject homelessness, they attempt to anchor themselves in locations that suspend the otherwise situational free fall. This article analyzes how time and space are perceived by people experiencing chronic homelessness and how those individual perceptions are informed by the *objective time and space* urban environment. We conducted our community-based participatory research into the experiences of chronic homelessness both from perspectives of chronically homeless older adult men and from front-line service providers. Themes that emerged are as follows: (1) temporary permanence, (2) permanent temporariness, and (3) lostness. The article concludes with policy implications regarding the procedures for measuring the extent of homelessness and the needs of those who live it.

Keywords

Homelessness; human geography; qualitative; space; time; urban

Introduction

Perceptions of experiences of homelessness come from multiple vantage points, from the persons encountering acute and repeated instances of lack of shelter, the front-line practitioners who serve this population, and others who interact with this population with a glance of an eye and sometimes an offering of spare change. Views of homelessness are locally based and subjective depending on history, life circumstances, and physical environment. Physical environment includes geographical contexts of time and space. In this article, we show how these perceptions are grounded in terms of time and space, utilizing a human geographical framework. This framework complicates practice and policy outcomes that do not consider a local context.

Background

Extent of chronic homelessness

Every 2 years for four hours in the middle of the, forecasted to be, coldest night in late January, cities across the United States of America tally their homeless people. A congressional mandate for a report on the extent of homelessness nationwide triggered the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to require each city that receives federal funding for homeless services to conduct a biennial quantification of homelessness within their jurisdiction. This single-night snapshot, termed the “point-in-time count,” has since been ritual for the last decade. Most recently, in 2016, HUD reported to Congress that 564,708 people are homeless nationwide (HUD, 2015a). Between 10:00 P.M. on January 27 and 2:00 A.M. on January 28, in 2016, Detroit conducted its ground-level enumeration of homeless people within its boundary. The record of that brief moment informed the total reported by the Homeless Action Network of Detroit (HAND) to HUD as 16,040 homeless people within the city limits (HAND, 2016a). Chronically homeless people, whose homelessness is most severe and for whom the limited resource of a housing intervention would be targeted, totaled 2,107, a 36% decrease since the previous year (HAND, 2016b).

Quantification of chronic homelessness

The definition of who is homeless determines who will be enumerated and who will receive housing (Peressini, McDonald, & Hulchanski, 1995). Chronically homeless people are prioritized for housing due in part to their exponentially higher vulnerability to morbidity and mortality, provided that they remain homeless. Owing to the need for housing for this population being greater than the supply, in December of 2015, HUD proposed a new definition of chronic homelessness meant to increase the identification of chronically homeless people toward assuring that housing be targeted to them. The final rule on HUD’s proposal, as recorded in the Federal Register (2015b), defines a chronically homeless individual as a homeless individual with a disability who:

- i. Lives in a place not meant for human habitation, a safe haven, or in an emergency shelter; and
- ii. Has been homeless and living as described in paragraph (1)(i) of this definition continuously for at least 12 months or on at least four separate occasions in the last 3 years, as long as the combined occasions equal at least 12 months and each break in homelessness separating the occasions included at least 7 consecutive nights of not living as described in paragraph (1)(i). (p. 75804)

However, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), in its amended blueprint on preventing and ending homelessness for both the public and private sectors, stated that people experiencing chronic homelessness may not be enumerated through point-in-time count methodology alone (2015). The USICH requires that communities consider other essential sources of data that are critical to understanding the “complete picture” of homelessness, especially chronic and unsheltered homelessness, datasets such as HUD’s Annualized Data from Homeless Management Information Systems Reports (HMIS), and

the Census Bureau's American Housing Survey regarding worst case housing needs (2017). Additionally, HUD recognizes that enumeration of people into these core datasets has its limitations, especially in communities where coverage across the entire community's landscape is problematic, and accordingly recommends surveys, including in-depth, interview-based surveys, in order to understand subpopulations of people experiencing homelessness (2012). Byrne and Culhane concluded that half of the number of chronically homeless people would no longer be chronically homeless upon implementation of HUD's final rule (2015). Concern over the incomplete picture of chronic homelessness determined by policy-maker definitions has been raised (Cloke, Milbourne, & Widdowfield, 2001; Olufemi, 2002), and researchers have insisted that the extent and need of homeless and subpopulations of homeless people could be better understood by way of including definitions and explanations generated by the people having those experiences (Somerville, 1992; Springer, 2000). In Detroit, it has been noted that we have either allowed homeless people to vanish "into thin air" (Goodspeed, 2004, p. 46) or neglected to make an accounting of them altogether (OIG, 2015, p. 3–4).

Character of chronic homelessness

Chronically homeless people must survive the elements of living unsheltered, often on the streets, in abandoned buildings, houses, or cars, or in emergency shelters and warming centers (Nooe & Patterson, 2010). Fundamentally, the phenomenon of homelessness begins with losing a home. Further, while being housed is a legal definition, an objective category with clearly defined parameters, being home is a subjective feeling, conjured in us by all manner of belongings and artifacts (Kaplan, 2008), safeties and securities, social relationships and events (Watson, 1984), and emotions and memories (Gurney, 1996; Jedlowski, 2001), that all sum up, for each unique individual, the truth of what it means to have a home. Even though it is understood that a home is more than just a quantifiable space (see Springer, 2000)'s discussion of "houselessness," we have yet to use abductive reasoning to measure status and trends in homelessness and continue to make it requisite that homeless people meet our uncontextualized metrics of homelessness, which are unreal to the meaning of individual homelessness (Jocoy, 2013; Olufemi, 2002). In this article, we capture the lived experience of homelessness and we offer this article's analysis of interview data through a human geography framework as a counter to this critique.

Theoretical framework

Human geography and chronic homelessness

In *Dimensions of Human Behavior, Person, and Environment*, Elizabeth Hutchinson's most recent edition (2015) reminds us that all human behavior occurs in a physical environment. The National Alliance to End Homelessness recognizes differences in homelessness in different geographies, as outlined in their Geography of Homelessness report (2009) and researchers have concluded that attention to differential geographies is essential to understanding subpopulations of homelessness (Cloke et al., 2001; DeVerteuil, May, & Mahs, 2009; Lawrence, 1995; Parr, Stevenson, Fyfe, & Woolnough, 2015). Accordingly, researchers have recently applied a human geographical approach to begin to add to the homelessness literature in the areas of risk assessment (Reilly, 1994), social networks (Rowe

& Wolch, 1990), perceptions of time and space (Van Doorn, 2010), and an integrated multidisciplinary model to further research in this special area (Williams & Sheehan, 2015). To accommodate the themes of time and space that emerged from our data, we similarly applied a time–space geography theoretical framework. First discovered by Torsten Hägerstrand (1970, 1975) and later elucidated by Parkes and Thrift (1975; Thrift, 1977a), this time–space geographical approach was used in understanding the physical environment—time and space dimensions—prevalent throughout our data. Chronic homelessness is defined, in policy and thus in practice, by precise parameters of objective units of time and space that are applied to all geographies across the nation even though it is understood that times and spaces are not uniform. The National Alliance to End Homelessness (2009) delineates between five geographic typologies: urban, rural, urban–rural mix, mostly urban, and mostly rural with the prevalent geography of homelessness being urban (76.82%).

In this Detroit-based study, we present a finite focus on the subjective units of time and space, those parameters that objectively define their homelessness, as perceived by people experiencing chronic homelessness within their own urban space–time environment (Hägerstrand, 1972), thus being able to reveal differences between subjective and objective time and space (Kellerman, 1989), speak to the “true value” of homelessness being a state of constant flux (Agans et al., 2014) and assure that “the golden needle—the individual—is not lost in a statistical haystack.” (Parkes & Thrift, 1975, p. 446).

The research question guiding this article:

How are time and space subjectively perceived by older adult African American men experiencing chronic homelessness within Detroit’s geography?

Methods

Design

Our study was initiated by a practitioner, who approached the researchers, interested in better understanding the phenomenon of chronic homelessness in Detroit. Utilizing a community-based participatory research approach to integrate practitioner knowledge and connections with the study population and researcher’s methodological expertise, a collaborative investigation was formed. The members of the research team co-wrote a grant to fund our pilot study. Following receipt of the funding, the members of the research team collaborated to create a semi-structured interview guide to gain perspectives on men’s experiences of homelessness and homeless recovery service providers’ perspectives on their clients’ experiences of homelessness. The semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A) was developed using the statewide, multicomponent, evidenced-based assessment SPDAT (Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool) manual (OrgCode, Inc., 2015) as a foundation. Questions regarding the local social environment were included. A semi-structured interview guide was developed for service provider interviews to draw on the experiences of local agency workers (Cloke et al., 2001), and the input of those who have recovered from homelessness to address the risk that their important understandings, essential to addressing the obscurity of homelessness, was included (Norman & Pauly, 2013).

Recruitment

The research team provided orientation to the collaborating agency's homeless recovery service staff at a staff meeting, inviting the staff members to approach a member of the research team, an MSW graduate research assistant, to arrange an interview. The research team was aware that one research team member was a supervisor in the collaborating agency and the research team purposely did not have that team member know who had arranged for and/or completed an interview. Staff were also informed that their participation status in the study would not be shared with that research team member. Staff were also invited to refer clients who fit our study criteria to the research team, who were then recruited by an MSW graduate research assistant.

Sample

The results of this pilot study are drawn from qualitative interviews with primary participants: older adult males experiencing chronic homelessness ($n = 5$) and homeless recovery service providers with a minimum of 5 years of experience at the collaborating agency ($n = 5$). The primary participants ranged in age from 47 to 55 and met older adult study criterion, as the older adult age range begins at 45 due to chronically homeless people having an average life expectancy between the ages of 42 and 52 (Adams, Rosenheck, Gee, Seibyl, & Kushel, 2007; O'Connell, 2005). All men were African-American. Of the five service providers, interviewed of the eight eligible, three were case managers and two were peer support specialists. Case managers primarily assist clients in the process of applying to permanent supportive housing. Peer support specialists are individuals who have experienced homelessness and have since become housed again who, through their first-hand experience, assist clients in navigating the homeless recovery services system toward accessing permanent supportive housing. Additionally, three of the service providers were female, and two were male, with two service providers being Caucasian and three being African-American. The study participants reflect the population employed and served at the collaborating agency. During our study time frame, the agency served 882 people, predominantly men (61%), African-American (89%), and chronically homeless (55%) of the population. Thus, our sample aimed to understand the perspectives of African-American men experiencing chronic homelessness in Detroit.

These study participation criteria, as well as the selection of the study site, were purposive to maximize the understanding of the phenomenon of inquiry (Morse, 1994). Creswell (1998) recommends interviews with up to ten people in phenomenological research as long as the goal is not to generalize, but to maximize the understanding of the phenomenon utilizing a sample in which the sampling strategy purposively selects "information rich" (Patton, 1990, p. 169) sources of data. Boyd (2001) confirms a sample of two to ten research subjects is sufficient to reach saturation in this way. Thus, our sample is in line with these sampling logics of qualitative inquiry.

Data collection

Data were collected between September 2014 and August 2015, after receiving approval by Wayne State University's IRB. A member of the research team conducted the ten interviews. Duration of the interviews ranged between forty minutes and one hour and forty-five

minutes. Interviews were recorded with participants' permission and were conducted in a private office at the collaborating agency. Each was given US \$30 at the end of the interview to compensate them for their time; one primary participant declined monetary compensation.

Data analysis

There were two approaches to data analysis. For the service provider interviews, only two of the three members of the research team listened to the original interview recordings to avoid the third member (a clinical supervisor at the collaborating agency) identifying those service providers who participated in the research project in adherence with the NASW Code of Ethics, Section 3.01(c) (2008). The remaining two researchers independently reviewed the interview recordings and coded the interviews to identify key themes. After independently reviewing the data, all three researchers met together to discuss the key themes that emerged. Essential quotes identified by the researchers were transcribed. For the data collected from the men experiencing homelessness, the same reservations about involving the clinical supervisor did not apply. These interviews were transcribed by a graduate student in social work. In phase one of the data analysis, the research team invited this student and an MSW intern posted with the principal investigator to review the transcripts and contribute to the content analysis. After in-depth, repeated reviewing of transcripts where each person generated their own themes with data to support the themes, the research team and students compared themes and decided on overarching themes applicable to practitioners and researchers.

A secondary data analysis was necessary due to new meanings that emerged, including meanings of time and space, from the data. This was conducted in phase two of data analysis by the first author who has an extensive history of working with people experiencing chronic homelessness in Detroit. In phase two, Groenewald's (2004) five-step phenomenological data analysis methodology was used: (1) Data reduction was performed to maintain, rather than remove, the lived context of the phenomenon under inquiry. This was achieved by listening to the tape recordings as a whole repeatedly to better attune the researcher to the information shared by the participant and the manner in which the participant shared their experience of chronic homelessness, allowing the here-and-now dimensions of the interview to inform the content of the data. (2) Initial coding was conducted thereafter to identify units of meaning within the data. The codes were informed by the literal content shared, the amount of times meaning was shared, and the manner in which the meaning was shared, specifically by way of the intonation of the participant's voice. Colloquial data were defined primarily by making use of the crowd-sourced Urban Dictionary. (3) Once units of meaning were extracted from the data, redundant codes were delineated as nonredundant codes in cases of seemingly similar codes that had different meaning contextually. The initial code list was then rigorously examined throughout the data and clustered together within the holistic context of the data to form themes that expressed the essence of the clusters. Appropriate meaning of the themes was maintained by allowing for a natural overlap of meaning, inherent in the human experience. (4) Each theme was then summarized by use of quotations from each interview within a holistic context. (5) General themes from all interviews informed a composite summary. Names of study participants throughout this article are pseudonyms.

Findings

We have identified local subjective perceptions of time and space among older adult men experiencing chronic homelessness and present them within the following themes: (1) temporary permanence (2) permanent temporariness, and (3) lostness.

Temporary permanence

Staying

The formal time and space of Detroit were planned for its peak of 1.85 million residents, inhabiting the city's 545,000 units, at 99.2% occupancy. Detroit's inequitable resource environment earned housing the term, "Detroit's time bomb" (Velie, 1946), the explosion of which has left as much as 60% of Detroit's parcels with housing units either vacant or destroyed, with a population density as low as 7.5% per acre among those parcels. Detroit's "space" has now vastly exceeded its "places." The definition of chronic homelessness requires that people have no place to reside that is meant for human habitation and, for an extended period of time, that they be without a place continuously or, at the very least, for long durations. Is this a realistic requirement of chronically homeless people? Hägerstrand (1972) asserts that everybody has to be somewhere and that periods of nonexistence are not possible. Thrift furthers this with the assumption that every living being resolves the problem of "finding or creating small pockets in space-time with enough local order to allow the individual to exist" (1977c, p. 446). Time is needed to create places out of spaces; where time and space are scarce resources, what we found is that all of the men in our study, when recalling the histories of their housing situations, consistently referred to "staying" rather than "living" in places in which they resided. Peter delineated the difference between staying and living for the interviewer as he shared his twenty-five-year history of homelessness,

Actually before I was homeless I was living with (my grandmother). I moved with her in the 8th grade and I finished school out in her neighborhood. So that was the first time I *lived* with her. As far as when I lived with her for the first time of being *homeless*, it was 1988. So I was staying with her. You know, I mean, so it was like on and off. Show up to the shelter, back to her. Like that.

Our study participants did experience periods in their housing histories, however, early on or brief, that they defined as housed. These periods of housing were self-excluded by the participants when sharing their histories of chronic homelessness. They define the character of their homelessness as consecutive as well as "off and on." This seeming contradiction should not be understood as indicative of poor historians, as the quality of "off and on" is shared exclusively in reference to "staying" for temporary periods of time, ranging from a couple of hours to longer, and tenuous, indefinite periods. A state that might be mistaken as episodic is instead being recounted as a state of consistent flux in which change is, at least, a presumption and, at most, a given. Adam has never lived in housing of his own, and when asked whom he has *lived* with, he offers a sober response that underscores the lack of notable living spaces characteristic of chronic homelessness,

On and off the streets mostly. On and off the street. I didn't really have too many friends. When my, um, (parents died), I hung around my friends and stayed out. Stayed out with them all the time. Stayed around, you know.

Moving

It is also expected that "pauses in movement" have been of long enough duration that spaces have the ability to become places and thus meet the chronic homelessness definition criteria as such. Answering the question "where have you been over the past year" may be an easy one to answer for those who fully participate socioeconomically as both their stations and the limits of the stations remain more stable over time. If asked about your whereabouts within the last fifty-two weeks, you would at least be able to broadly conclude that you were "at work" during business hours, "at home" during evening hours, "at school" during course hours, etc., and, for the most part, which routes you had taken to each of those. The men in our study spoke of routes that were hardly linear, more so a tangled ball of yarn thread. Their lives were marked with torturous movement, John shares,

Bunch of moving around, you know, back and forth: here and there, there, there.
Not able to stay, not able to stay, you know, never stable.

Spatially, meeting survival needs restricted the movement of chronically homeless people either to essential resource locations: either restricting them to encampments, fortified with necessary resources, that operate as bases of operation or restricting them to a tortuous web of places where resources could be gathered in a piecemeal manner. The latter of those two paths consequently results in transient patterns rich with motion. Peter described his initial experience with losing his home and the continued experience of that loss,

Yeah, we had to move around. I was used to moving around. I still move around a lot now. You know I get up and go. You know, I get a bus card and just go different places. So, yeah, you have to move around. 'Cause see when you are homeless you have to move from one place to another. You have to mo-oove. You have to move so I'm used to walking.

Based on an assumption that people experiencing unsheltered homelessness have no bases of operation, social service programs become mobile and attempt to match the patterns of chronically homeless movement, leaving service recipients to become accustomed to the social service programs' time geographic patterns (e.g., rotating shelters, mobile food programs, unadvertised outreach schedules), rather than the other way around. Adam described accessing services offered in this way,

Go to, um, place to place to eat. So you find places. Following like, the program, you follow around the program and you end up eatin' something. So that's how you really get along.

Permanent temporariness

In a Detroit minute

Time and space are finite resources. Then, men in our study spoke about objectively long-duration periods of time as though the durations of those periods had compressed down into

shorter durations. When asked how long he had been experiencing homelessness, John put it this way,

I can't remember the exact amount of time, it's been a little while. Not too long. The last ten (years). 'Cause, yeah 'cause the amount of time seem like it just ran together.

Service providers interviewed also shared that objectively long periods of time are individually perceived as brief periods of time within the context of chronic homelessness. Michael, a peer support specialist, reflected back on their experience of chronic homelessness,

Once you get that stuff restored it feels so good. Like, you know if it's lost, I remember times losing my ID and once I finally found a place, a shelter, somewhere I knew was gonna be permanent for a minute, then I would restore my items and keep 'em.

The "Detroit minute" expressed by this participant, is not uncommonly used in Detroit's vernacular culture. The appearance of this local time perception so different than the dominant concept of a minute could be a renewed conceptualization of a local measurement of time formed by the "radical unevenness" (May & Thrift, 2001, p. 5) between the subjective and objective time and space of Detroit's current urban social context.

Creating the "here" to get "there"

An individual's reach in time-space is limited by the objective time-space environment; the men in our study sought to expand their reach by way of locating bases of operation, however, temporary. Detroit offers emergency shelter in various locations and at ninety-day intervals. Bill described the "hopping" from one to another after timing-out of each successively, "Been in all the shelters. Done the shelter circuit. Been in 'em all around the city of Detroit."

Others find public spaces with cyclical time constraints that are more predictable. Peter located his base of operation on the streets,

I learned another way of, um, living as far as being homeless. I would be outside but I would go behind the um, (clicking fingers), [name of building]. In the wintertime, they had, well they got this big vent on the wall and it would blow warm air and I did that for a couple of years and it was warm. You had to get up in the morning but we would just go up to the church.

Still others find untimed spaces as frontiers of opportunity. In Detroit, vacant housing units serve as "abandoniums"; Adam shared his decision to settle such a space as a way to escape having to go from "place to place,"

But you try to go you know you try to build you little, um, build you a little home someplace, you know, move in a little vacant building or something. Yeah, work it out. If I gotta go someplace here and there, gotta try to get um, get in a position to go places you know? Like that.

Standin' on shaky ground

The men in our study spoke about the fluctuating nature of their objective locations. Adam could not even mark a time in his history when he was housed, describing his housing history as, "Ain't been. Ain't had no steady place. Being here and there, running in it." Generational family housing instability was a common theme expressed by our study participants. Often, "host-bases" are able to come by, but are as often as tenuous a situation as the home-bases that the men had lost to begin with. John described the capacity limits he experienced when he first became homeless and throughout his homelessness,

So they try to get it to where it could be with a family, and then but there was just too many of us. So they separated us and a lot of us was put at homes and things like that. You know it seemed like every couple of years or so, you know, I was over this person place and you know, it seem like "You not gonna be there this year you know, you're gonna be with your auntie over there." Yeah, and, you know, "You're not going to be there too long, you're going to be with this auntie over there."

Even when host-bases were more permanent locations, the constraints of those spaces limited access to the men in our study. Bill shared a work-around to this blocked access,

Only time I couldn't go back, like when I was gettin' drunk I couldn't come in the house. So (my mother) would make me sleep in my stepfather's van that was parked on the side of our house. And she come wake me up early in the morning.

The capacity of family and friends to provide a space for these men seemed to mirror the capacity limits of institutional host-bases. Peter reflected on institutional time and space limits he experienced,

And it was like they, you know, it was overnight, all twenty-four hours, but then they wouldn't let you just sit in there. They would let you sit so many hours then you have to leave and wait in the doorway. And it was in the wintertime, I remember. And, you know, you would be in this doorway where only about five people can fit.

Peter reminded that the situation at this walk-in center has changed because, "It isn't there where it is now." This cryptic explanation has at its foundation a structural explication of the constant flux of time and space at the socioeconomic level.

Lostness

Now you see it, now you don't

Planning for the use of social time and space as resources takes place at the superstructure, built environment, and activity system levels. As mentioned above, Parkes and Thrift (1975) offer frameworks for understanding urban time and space. Urban Big Time (UBT) is defined as time and space structured at the macro level (e.g., in excess of a duration of one year). Individual changes in time and space, known as Urban Small Time (UST), naturally occur in society wherever and whenever within UBT. The difference between objective UBT and subjective UST informs the "degree of reality" attached to the formal time and space

planned for. Parkes and Thrift speak to the ongoing process of urban renewal and how the mistiming of spaces may also occur and contraction then results, when expansion was sought (1975, p. 658). Observation of the time and space resource fabric of postwar Detroit certainly gives one a feeling of unreality (see also Thomas Sugrue's account of driving through his family's Detroit neighborhoods in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (2005)). The plans of the progressive era collapsed into deindustrialization, taking aspects of Detroit's time and space fabric with it. Those aspects "cannot be identified at a single point in time" (Parkes & Thrift, 1975, p. 658) and yet, questions are asked of the chronically homeless at point-in-time counts, aimed at gathering the status and trends of homelessness. The men in our study informed us that these aspects, which Parkes and Thrift term "subunits" change in a flash and the impact is extensive. Here's John describing the immediacy of his change in housing status,

Whenever it seems like we get stable like I said, okay well, "Boom!" Now we're movin' again. And then, we had been over in this neighborhood forever and now she wants to move wa-aay over to the west side.

... and the extent of that change:

We was wa-aay over here on (name of street) and she wants to go wa-aay back over here on (name of street). You know, I mean umpteen miles away!

Adam shared the "shock" of losing his parents and his home, and the shockwave that is still radiating out,

Then from there, then from that I just hit the streets. You know, from there everything just went downhill. I never got back up. You know, after what happened, I never got back up.

Bill captured the moment with a sonic interpretation,

And the time came and it was like, (makes a cutting sound) "You out of here buddy."

As did John, when asked if he had ever been in a stable housing situation,

It seemed like that, that no never, you know stop happening. You know. It seemed like whatever I do sometimes, somethin' pop up (snaps fingers) for me to, um, do something quickly, quickly about it or somethin' else you know gonna come up, you know, behind you. And you don't know the situation because that's how, you know, sometimes you know it occurred, you know, come along, it be good and sometime, most of the time it just be that bad part.

We found that these extreme phase shifts were not isolated to the family activity system, but present throughout social activity systems in the lives of these men, from Bill gaining "permanent supportive housing" through a homeless and housing service provider that could end at any minute, to John being unable to complete his project of attaining a high school diploma, the path to take to do so sounding reminiscent of one escaping a lava flow.

Stranger in a strange land

The men in our study expressed disorientation to objective time and space. All of the men provided a foundational understanding toward an underpinning of this finding; each described their experience of chronic homelessness as being one of alienation from others, being on “one’s own.” Thrift concludes that those who are unable to perceive what their relation in time and space is to others are those who will become mentally disturbed, disconnect from the “cement which binds them to society” (1977b, p. 83). Individual time and space distortions have been noted among the homeless population (Bodner, 2012; Cooper, 2015, Van Doorn, 2010). John shared this about one of his many relocations while homeless,

I just changed everything. I mean, like I said I didn’t even know the neighborhood. I didn’t know the street. I couldn’t get from that side of town back to where I was at. ‘Cause I didn’t know nothin’ about that. I was born and raised east all my life. You know, when she made a move I’m like, “Where the hell are we?” This is another city. You know? This ain’t me! I was just practically lost.

Just as John expressed such sincere difficulty in conceptualizing himself outside of his familiar geography, Adam, inversely, expressed a lack of conceptualization of a family member outside of his geography,

I got one more (sister). But she live, you could say that one don’t even ... that one doesn’t exist. ‘Cause she lives out in (name of city). Way back that way. So, she don’t really um, she don’t really exist, you know, hard to keep, hard to get in touch with her.

Being “practically lost,” as John put it, was expressed by both Bill and Peter as a dangerous orientation to either a past or an alternate geography, respectively. Bill shared,

Try not too much, you know, wonder on it, or, think about it. ‘Cause I’ll get lost. Then it push me back from what I’m trying to do. Think about it. Cry about it. Laugh about it. Keep it movin’.

Peter indicated that operating outside of the time and space of the homeless and housing service delivery system would nullify his housing intervention,

At first when I signed up they told me what to do and they said, “Don’t get lost.” I remember it was the winter and then I didn’t follow up, but then the next time they talked to me I followed up and I got very serious. And I did what I had to do.

For those who are not in line with societal time, their housing interventions may be in question.

Discussion

Our findings contribute to the knowledge base about homelessness, particularly chronic homelessness because they are the most vulnerable to policy-informed definitions of homelessness, while least likely to have their voices considered in the determination of that definition (Del Casino & Jocoy, 2008). In regard to human behavior in the social environment, Hutchinson writes that social work has included the “physical environment” in

its practice definition of the “social environment,” which has left the physical environment “ignored” since Jane Addams, hindering multidisciplinary studies that would be conducted by social workers and geographers alike (p. 464).

The USICH recognizes the challenges of using only core sets of data to achieve the goal of ending chronic homelessness (2016a) and promising practices of including qualitative data in the form of in-depth interviews have been subsequently presented for youth and veteran subpopulations (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2014; USICH, 2016b). Further, while there has been a call to include qualitative in-depth interviews with the chronically homeless subpopulation as part of a PIT count practice (The Hindsight Group, 2008), integration of qualitative data remains lacking and we are left with the current situation where, every 2 years for four hours in the middle of the, forecasted to be, coldest night in late January, cities tally their homeless people and surveyors ask them if they meet HUD’s definition of chronic homelessness. Chronic homelessness, as measured by the national policy-informed parameters of the revised definition of chronic homelessness, decreased by 36% in Detroit over the course of 2015 (HAND, 2016a). Is this value a true decrease? Methodological changes excluded Detroit from the list of largest declines in HUD’s Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (2015a). While we see our study as contributing to nuanced understanding in light of Detroit’s exclusion, funding limited our population of focus for our pilot study. Though the demographic criteria for our sample was appropriate as compared to the proportion of cases experiencing the phenomenon at the collaborating agency, our purposive sample was limited to critical cases experiencing the phenomenon under inquiry.

We continue to ask whether practitioners and policy-makers are informed enough by the people themselves to ask the right questions in order to achieve a more complete picture on the ground? In addition, we advocate for planners to use multiple sources of data, including qualitative interviews, which are being used to plan for services for other vulnerable populations of people experiencing homelessness. Similar to our study, participants in Van Doorn’s study shared the “misty interval” given in response to requests to retrieve the chronological order of events, one woman said, “I keep telling them: ‘I have no sense of time from the years I walked the streets,’ and they won’t believe me.” (p. 236). Since the fall of 2015, housing resources in Detroit have been desperately limited. As of early 2016, intensive housing interventions for chronically homeless people are not available. When housing does become available, and chronically homeless people are pulled from the waiting list, they will be subject to redefinition and must, at a moment’s notice, measure up to the time and space parameters of the new definition of chronic homelessness in order to receive a housing intervention. When that moment comes, the time–space divide may count them out.

Conclusion

This work has illuminated the utility of applying a human geographical framework to understand the challenges of temporary permanence, permanent temporariness, and lostness of persons experiencing homelessness. Future research should apply this framework to companion studies exploring the experiences of women, persons of various races and

ethnicities. In addition, more research based on differential geographical sites, where homelessness occurs, such as rural, suburban, and urban are warranted. This framework offers particular examples of homelessness grounded in urban contexts in a postindustrial, rust belt city undergoing rapid transformation. The application of this framework to understand local contexts of homelessness can inform practitioners, provider networks offering a continuum of care, and policy-makers.

Appendix A

Surviving in Detroit: Men Experiencing Homelessness Due to the Death of a Parent

Primary Participant Interview Guide for semi-structured interviews with primary participants

Note: The instrument will be piloted to assess the amount of time required to complete the interview. If necessary, modification will be made if the interview time is too long.

(Family of topics to be discussed during interviews with primary participants)

Background Questions

1. Are you currently experiencing homelessness?
 - a. If you are currently experiencing homelessness, is this your first experience of homelessness?
 - b. Before experiencing homelessness, were you living with a parent/guardian or other relative who passed away and their passing was a factor in your experiencing homelessness?
 - c. How important is it to you to have housing again?
 - d. How confident are you that you could have housing again?
 - e. Are you working with any social service agencies to obtain housing?

Looking Back: Retrospective on Housing History and Homelessness

A. Housing History

1. Can you give me a brief overview of your housing history?
 - a. How many homes have you lived in?
 - b. When did you first have keys to your own home/apartment? What was that experience like? How did it make you feel?
 - i. If no—How does it make you feel?
2. When is the last time you had keys to your own home/apartment?
3. What led to you living with your parent/guardian/family member?

B. Economic Context: Assets/Finances/Uncertainty

1. Can you give me a brief overview of your education history?
2. Can you give me a brief overview of your employment history?
3. Have you received any job training? Can you tell me more about that experience?
Can you describe your experience of finding and keeping a job?
4. How has employment/unemployment affected your housing?

C. Support Network Members

1. Who do you consider to be part of your family? What kind of a relationship do you have with your family members now?
2. What kind of a relationship did you have with your family when you were living with them? What kind of support did you receive from your family members (financial, emotional, physical, medical, housing, etc.)? What kind of support did you give to your family members? Where there changes in support around the time you experienced homelessness?
3. Who do you consider to be your close friends? What kind of a relationship do you have with your friends now?
4. What kind of a relationship did you have with your friends before experiencing homelessness? What kind of support did you receive from your friends (financial, emotional, physical, medical, housing, etc.)?
5. Did you have any interaction with social services before you experienced homelessness?
6. What do you think could have been done to prevent your experience of homelessness? What might you have done? What might family members have done? What might friends have done? What might social service professionals have done?

D. Talk/Conversations

1. With whom have you been talking about your homelessness?
2. Have you found it difficult to talk about this with your family? Your friends? Others? Why?
3. Had you had any difficulty talking about your homelessness with professionals? Why or why not?

E. Health status

Physical Health

1. Do you deal with any physical health issues?
 - a. If yes, what issues do you deal with?
2. Have you sought medical attention for your physical health issues?

- a. What kind of setting do you receive attention in (primary care physician's office, emergency room, Street Medicine, etc.)
3. Did you deal with these physical health issues before your experience of homelessness?
 - a. How have your physical health issues been impacted by homelessness?

Mental Health

1. Do you deal with any mental health issues?
 - a. If yes, what issues do you deal with?
2. Have you sought professional attention for your mental health issues?
 - a. What kind of setting do you receive attention in?
 - b. What type of professional do you receive attention from (ex. psychiatrist, social worker, doctor, etc.)?
3. Did you deal with these mental health issues before your experience of homelessness?
 - a. How have your mental health issues been impacted by homelessness?

F. Survival in Detroit

1. How have you been able to access necessities such as:
 - a. Food
 - b. Shelter
 - c. Medical treatment
 - d. Income
 - e. Other necessities
2. How has your life changed since you began experiencing homelessness?
3. Can you tell me about your survival skills? What skills do you have that help you survive on the streets? What challenges do you encounter? How have you overcome challenges? Are there challenges you have not been able to overcome?
4. How do you think your life will be different one year from now?
5. How long have you lived in Detroit?
6. Do you think Detroit has changed since you've lived here? Can you describe some of the changes?
7. How do you see your life being affected by the changes in Detroit?

G. Other supports

1. Who are the people who support you now?

2. Who were the people who supported you in the past, but no longer support you or are unable to support you?
3. Who are the social service agencies that support you now?
4. Who are the social service agencies who supported you in the past, but no longer support you or are unable to support you?

H. Open-ended question

1. (1) Is there anything else you think is important for me to know that I haven't asked you about?

Thanks so much for your participation today.

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