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Surviving the forest: ethnography of new haven's tent city

Andrew Udelsman

Professor of Sociology and Research Affiliate

Yale University, Cowles Foundation for Research in Economics, is a mathematical sociologist interested in developing new mathematical phenomenology for complex social structures and processes

USA

Email: andy@udelsman.law

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Abstract

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, 3.5 million Americans experience homelessness in any given year. Because it is notoriously difficult to count homeless individuals, this number is a gross estimation, but one conclusion should be clear: homelessness remains a persistent reality in the United States. Thus, is comes as no surprise that the phenomenon is well documented in sociological literature. Eliot Liebow's Tell Them Who I Am and Anderson and Snow's Down on Their Luck are two particularly striking examples. However, the majority of this literature focuses on homeless individuals that reside in shelters. While such individuals constitute the majority of America's homeless, there is also a considerable, though largely unknown, population of people living independently in squatter communities. With the onset of the 2007 recession, a few news media reports have appeared focusing on the growth of Tent Cities around the country. A recent MSNBC article ("In Hard Times, Tent Cities Rise Across the Country") declares: "From Seattle to Athens, GA, homeless advocacy groups and city agencies are reporting the most visible rise in homeless encampments in a generation." Though these communities are gaining recognition in the media, they have been the subject of strikingly little sociological literature. While every community is undoubtedly unique, I hope that this ethnography will shed some light on the condition of life within such encampments.

Citation

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Introduction

Tent City was a loose community of formerly homeless individuals that took up residence in one of New Haven's parks. They were a unique group of people who, for various reasons, were unable to maintain a more conventional lifestyle. Faced with the prospect of long-term homelessness, they set up tents in this forest and withdrew from the lifestyle of mainstream society. In this paper, I investigate the forces that led them to Tent City, how they survived in the forest, and factors that prevented them from leaving. Though all Tent City residents were evicted in August 2010, I have opted to

keep this paper in the present tense in order to portray more accurately life within this community.

Locations

Tent City is a secluded community located in a state park on the outskirts of New Haven. Although relatively small, the park is large enough to be truly cut off from the urban environment. It is heavily forested, and boasts a beautiful network of streams, a river, turkeys, and countless birds, squirrels, and other woodland creatures that only Ma (see below) could accurately identify. It also harbors a network of campsites that between 15-50 people call home [2]. The name "Tent City" is somewhat of a misnomer—Tent Suburbs would be more accurate. Instead of one central location, there are at least 7 different campsites, ranging from one to five tents each.

Subjects

The majority of my time was spent at one campsite. Headed by Ro, it also consisted of Ma, Wanda, Ty, Jo, Elaine, and a few other guests that occasionally spent the night. I also had a few in-depth conversations at Celia's campsite, located across the river. The individuals at the other campsites were always friendly with me, but they were somewhat distrustful of my project and did not wish to form a major part of it. I have done my best to respect their privacy and never quote them in this paper. Therefore, while the total Tent City population hovered around 20 during this study, I only formed a trusting relationship with ten individuals.

The residents of Tent City are all middle-aged--- that is, between 30 and 60 years old. They have been living there for varying lengths of time, ranging from a few months to over three years (see table 1). Some individuals, such as Ro, Celia, Beth, and L.A. have spent years sleeping in their respective tents. Others tend to come and go from Tent City, occasionally spending nights at the nearby C Shelter and other locations. They are ethnically diverse—of the ten people I got to know, 6 are considered to be White, 3 are Black, and 1 is Hispanic. Many live as couples in romantic relationships sharing the same tent. For all of these individuals, Tent City constitutes the closest semblance of a home.

Methodology

Due to the highly sensitive nature of this project, I deemed ethnography to be the most appropriate method of investigation. In collecting data, I have relied almost exclusively on the method of "naturalistic fieldwork" (Anderson and Allard 2005) as taught by Robert Park, Howard Becker, David Matza, and Elijah Anderson.

This methodology stresses the importance of developing a close relationship with one's subjects so that the researcher/subject relationship can be transcended. While this type of ethnography may be criticized for its inherent subjectivity, its primary advantage lies in its ability to access detailed, accurate information that would be impossible to obtain through surveys or interviews. For example, the question "Why do you live in Tent City?" may be difficult to answer in a survey.

Table 1: People of Tent City

Individual	Length of Stay in Tent City
Elaine	3 months, intermittently
Jo	3 months
Annie	4 months
Ty	7 months, intermittently
Ma	7 months
Randa	2 years, intermittently
Ro	2 years
L.A.	3 years
Beth	3.5 years
Celia	3.5 years

Trust is a key element of any ethnography, both between subjects and researcher and between the ethnographer and reader. In order to build a relationship with my subjects, I spent many hours with them in the forest, sitting over a fire, gathering wood, and occasionally performing other minor chores at the campsites. I did not use a tape recorder and I rarely took notes at the actual research site, preferring instead to type

them up as soon as I returned home. Over the course of this project, I developed friendships with people in Tent City, and they were generally very willing to answer my many questions. In order to protect their identities, I have used pseudonyms throughout this paper.

Why Not the Shelters?

For the vast majority of New Haven's homeless that cannot afford an apartment and have not yet been admitted to a transitional housing program, the best recourse is the Emergency Shelters that admit anyone on a nightly basis. They vary in quality, but all offer a shower, at least one meal, and a place to sleep (though not necessarily a bed). This is an attractive option for most unsheltered homeless, but for a variety of reasons, Tent City residents have opted to forego shelter life.

The two main reasons Tent City residents gave for wanting to avoid overnight shelters were 1) a lack of freedom and 2) an aversion to other guests. In order to gain insight into shelter life and an understanding of these responses, I spent a considerable amount of time in New Haven's three largest emergency shelters.

Lack of Freedom and mobility

A common complaint of the shelters is the many rules that limit one's mobility. As a total institution (Goffman 1961), the shelters closely regulate the actions of their guests. The rules governing B Shelter are shown in Figure 2. Failure to abide by these rules results in Disciplinary Discharge: expulsion from the shelter for a given number of days. The three New Haven shelters vary in strictness, with the C Shelter being the most stringent, and the Overflow Shelter being most lenient. However, they all deny

Figure 2: Rules and Regulations at the B Shelter

Shelter rules and Regulations	10. Guest will not be allowed up front with- out being fully clothed
1. Guest will be searched before admittance	11. Smoke breaks will be every hour on the hour
2. All guests must register and shower every night	12. If you come here intoxicated, you will not be permitted in
3. All guests musts have a private and con- fidential interview with case manager and get an action plan	13. No alcohol, illegal drugs, or weapons allowed
4. Register between 4:00 until 11:00	14. All guests must depart by way of front entrance by 7:45
5. Lights out at 10:00	15. No clothes are to be left on bed, under mattress, or under beds
6. No phone calls permitted or received. (we will not give out any information to anyone inquiring about your stay here)	16. Smoking permitted in designated areas only
7. Open packs of cigarettes will be searched	17. One bag per person
8. Food brought from the outside will be checked. We cannot store food for guest	18. If client does not obtain a case manager in 30 days they will be dismissed for 90 days—per length of stay
9. Food to be eaten only in the food service and dining area	19. If client is not working on action plan with case management, client can be dismissed for 90 days—per length of stay contract

Source: Sign above water fountain in the dining area, as transcribed by author.

Readmission to anyone who leaves the shelter after registration[3]. In effect, this means that if someone enters the shelter at 4:00 PM to guarantee access to a bed, he cannot leave until 7:30 the following morning. This rule, more than any other, was bemoaned by Tent City residents: *"What kind of grown man wants to go to a shelter at 4:30?"*

In addition, a myriad of other rules can make the shelters seem like a prison. Guests' activities in the shelters are carefully monitored, and their movements must follow a detailed schedule. At the Overflow Shelter,

[3] This rule is designed to prevent guests from leaving the shelter to consume drugs or alcohol.

I was admonished multiple times for wearing a hat[4]. At the B Shelter, men are only allowed in the common room at certain times. At all the shelters, guests can only step outside for a few minutes during designated smoke breaks.

There are cumbersome registration processes and strict 'lights out' policies. Accordingly, people at Tent City complain that the shelters make them feel confined. Ro expressed this sentiment most clearly: *"When I stay there, I look around and I feel like I'm in a warehouse. They're warehousing me! It's a warehouse for people who don't have homes."*
By comparison, life in the forest becomes liberating. All of the people who live in Tent City told me that they prefer the forest because it is more peaceful, and they feel free to act as they choose. Beth says that she loves living next to the water, and Ma enjoys living among the forest animals.

Aversion to Other Guests

Many Tent City residents spoke of an aversion to "drama" caused by other guests. Nearly everyone agreed that many of the guests at the shelters are thieves, drug addicts, and drug dealers. After telling Ma that I was doing research at the B Shelter, she told me: *"Ya know, to get that place, you really gotta stay overnight. But it's dangerous—you might get in a fight. There's a lot of street people there."* John agreed: *"The times I slept there I slept clutching all my stuff with a blanket on top."*
Indeed, nearly every man I talked to in the shelter warned me of excessive theft. While eating, one man told me a story of how someone stole his keys: *"They can't even use the keys--- why would they steal them?"* The man next to him provided another example: *"One night, I was sleeping*[4]. This rule exists because headwear can make it difficult to identify individuals. At the Overflow Shelter, there are cameras on the ceilings that are used to determine who is responsible for thefts and violence. *in bed and somebody stole the blanket off me while I was asleep! I woke up shivering!"* I received similar advice from other clients-- many sleep wearing their clothes in order to prevent theft during the night. One of the administrators at the shelter explained his interpretation of the cause of this theft: *"Nobody in here cares about his fellow man."* Despite these constant warnings of theft, I did not encounter any problems during visits to B shelter. This can partially be explained by the fact that I never spent the night---according to the guests, the majority of thefts occur early in the morning when most people are asleep.
While most Tent City residents agreed that the Overflow shelter and C shelter were safer, they still all expressed a deep distrust of the other guests. For most, this distrust was rooted in the perception that theft was rampant, but others criticized the other guests' sexual orientations: *"The people... there's too much drama. There's a lotta lesbians and they don't even hide it!"* Similarly, Ma once told me about how Ty felt uncomfortable at the shelters because men were engaging in sexual acts in the showers.
Though I only spent a few days in the shelters, I saw no instances of theft or overt sexual activity. While they probably occur, they seem considerably less common than Tent City people expressed. How can we interpret this discrepancy? On the one hand, this condemnation of the other guests may be a form of associational distancing (Snow and Anderson 1993), a method of managing negative stigma:

Since a claim to a particular self is partly contingent on the imputed social identities of the person's associates, one way people can substantiate that claim when their associates are negatively evaluated is to distance themselves from those associates (p. 215).

Because homeless people are often "negatively evaluated," i.e., stigmatized, they often try to find ways of negating this stigma. One way of doing so is to set oneself apart from the other stigmatized individuals. In this case, Ma, Jo, Elaine, and Ty are distancing themselves from the other homeless people at the shelters, who they claim to be thieves, drug users, and homosexuals. This allows them to counter society's negative assessment of them. It enables them to say "Yes, we are homeless, but we are not like those homeless people."
On the other hand, many Tent City residents simply don't like to be surrounded by many people. Wanda often explained to me that when there are too many people around, she gets anxious and hears voices. Jo explained that he can never relax at the shelters: *"There are too many people, and sometimes I'll sit in a chair and somebody will come up and say 'That's my chair.'"* Celia voiced a similar complaint: *"OK, here's the thing about the shelters: I have a short temper, and at [the C Shelter] there is always drama, there's always somebody yelling at you! They have no respect! Like it's time to go to bed, and then somebody turns on the lights! I don't like that!"*
Based on my experiences at the shelters, this claustrophobic reaction is entirely understandable. In a room of 150 people, privacy does not exist. Constant interaction with other guests can get extremely frustrating, especially when conflicts occur due to limited resources.
After experiencing both Tent City and the shelters, I have come to view Tent City residents' decision to move out in to the forest as completely rational. While some people enjoy the constant presence of many people, others prefer to have more privacy and quiet. Tent City people are not crazy; they are merely the latter type of person, and due to their economic constraints, they were unable to afford a quiet apartment of their own.
Their best option was to set up tents and move into the forest.

Life in Tent City

At this point, I have explained why Tent City residents choose to sleep in the forest instead of the shelters. However, this does not explain why they had to make this difficult choice in the first place: why were they unable to afford a more conventional home? While a comprehensive analysis of the many factors that lead to homelessness is beyond the purview of this manuscript, I address the two most common factors as voiced by Tent City residents: substance abuse and unemployment.

Substance Abuse

In 1991, the Cuomo Commision took random urine samples from people staying in general-purpose shelters in New York City. Sixty-six percent tested positive for cocaine (Jencks 1994: 42). Around the same time in New Haven, nearly 70 percent of guests at emergency shelters reported substance abuse as a problem in their lives (Hartwell 2008: 80). Every person I talked to in Tent City admitted to having had problems with drugs or alcohol at one point in their lives.

Based on this strong correlation, it is tempting to assume that substance abuse leads to homelessness. Indeed, this view is often expressed in popular discourse—in a recent article about Tent City in the *New Haven Independent* many of the readers' comments were along these lines: *"Everyone out in the woods is on drugs! I really feel like this would be the best DON'T DO DRUGS message to youth, you'll end up a beaver trapper in the Yukon"* (Tuhus 2009),

Homeless advocates are quick to note that "correlation does not equal causation," and argue that the relationship between homelessness and drug use is more complex. Since crack is often easily available near places where homeless people congregate, it could be that homelessness is the cause, rather than a symptom, of crack use (Jencks 1994: 43). In this scenario, we imagine an individual who recently lost his job, got kicked out of his apartment, and decides to spend a night in a big-city shelter. Once there, he becomes acquainted with crack users who convince him to take part in their destructive habit. As the drug offers him a temporary escape from his troubles, he becomes a habitual user and eventually becomes addicted.

Which story is more convincing? Is drug addiction leading to homelessness, or is homelessness leading to drug addiction? My ethnographic study has yielded mixed results. Nearly every person I met in Tent City described him/herself as a recovering addict, and many attribute their homelessness to their previous drug addictions. Celia provides one such example: "I was addicted, you understand? But I've been clean for 4 months." She blames her addiction to heroin for her current situation. She is proud that she has been clean for so long, and hopeful that her life will improve now that she is overcoming her addiction.

Celia's heroin addiction was somewhat different from that of other Tent City residents for whom crack was the problem. Though a hit of crack only costs a few dollars, its highly addictive nature and fleeting effects mean that it can take an incredible toll on one's finances. Ty and Ma once explained to me how one crack binge could leave them broke overnight[5]. For this reason, among others, most people at Tent City are trying to abstain from drugs. Ro, Ma, Wanda, Ty, and Celia have all told me with pride that they are "recovering addicts," and think that becoming permanently clean is the first step to improving their situations. In fact, it is partly for this reason that Ma avoids the shelters. At the shelters, the temptation and constant presence of drug users make it very difficult to stay clean. Ro, Ty, and Wanda all confirmed this statement.

Thus, my data could be used to support both causal relationships. On the one hand, some Tent City residents self-reported that drugs were the primary cause of their condition. Others implied that, because of the constant presence and availability of crack, homelessness actually caused their addiction.

Rather than choose a side, I would argue that both drug addiction and homelessness are symptoms of an underlying problem. Whenever I asked Tent City residents when they use crack, they responded that they tended to relapse after a stressful or depressing event. One such example was when Ty was unexpectedly admitted into a rehabilitation program, leaving Ma on her own: "I relapsed 'cuz of that. I didn't have a chance to kiss him goodbye or anything. They just took him away!" Among Tent City residents I found a common consensus that people revert to abusing substances out of weakness. Ty once explained to me why he thinks people use crack: "Cuz they are depressed." According to my subjects, people do not smoke crack out of isolation, but as a response or escape from difficult situations in their lives.

Here we see a spiraling effect: people turn to drug use as a cure for depression during difficult times. But minutes after the drug-induced high, the user finds him in an even lower low, for which the easiest cure is another hit. Yet the more one smokes, the more depressed he becomes, and a growing part of his resources are spent procuring more drugs. In this way, drug addiction may act as the final push that causes an at-risk person to become homeless. But drug abuse in itself did not lead people to Tent City--- it was more often the combination of drug use and long-term unemployment.

Unemployment

According to New Haven's 2009 survey, only 14% of New Haven's homeless were currently working (CCEH.org). "Rent Problems" was the number one reason given for respondents leaving their last place of residence. The relationship between homelessness and unemployment seems clear: without employment, at risk individuals are unable to pay rent and are forced to give up their apartments.
Of the people I met at Tent City, Jo was the only one who was formally employed, selling newspapers on the street. He wakes up at 4:00
AM, collects the papers from his boss, and goes to his assigned location. This is usually near a stoplight next to a busy road. He waits until the light turns red and then walks up and down the line of cars, stopping when someone opens their window to buy a paper. He remains on location from 6:30 AM to 3:00 PM every day.

This work is neither easy nor lucrative. He makes 35 cents for every paper he sells, except on Sundays when he makes 55 cents. However, weekdays are actually better, because often people will give him a dollar for the 75 cent paper, so he gets to keep the extra quarter, bringing his profit up to 60 cents. The number of papers he sells depends greatly on where he is assigned on a given day. At a good location, he can expect to make $10-$20 over the course of his eight hour day. On other days, however, he is less fortunate:
Jo: One day my boss gives me 30 papers for free because he is trying to build up the location. He tells me to go there and sell what I can.
30 papers for free? I knew something was up. So I go to the spot, and the light turns red, and then next thing I know, it turns green! I had nothing to do, so just for fun I counted how long it stayed red: 15 seconds! How can I sell papers in 15 seconds? Andrew: Wow, so did you sell any?
Jo: HELL no!

On such days, Jo returns home to his tent with less than $10 profit the entire day. On days when it is cold, raining, or snowing, his job can be downright miserable.
Thus, the first thing to note is that Jo's work ethic is alive and well—he works long hours for very little reward. He told me that *"It's not the best job,"* but he is happy to be working rather than panhandling or stealing. In this way, he was slowly saving up money until he was arrested for an outstanding warrant in late November.
Why did Jo work at such an unrewarding job? Why aren't other Tent City residents employed? Why don't they apply for jobs? These questions can largely be answered by considering New Haven's high unemployment rate and the homeless' lack of social capital.

Stigma

The homeless has always been a stigmatized population, but Tent
City residents seem to be even more heavily stigmatized. During my first day at Tent City, Ma and I were walking along the road when a policeman approached us. He was in the area investigating a car nearby that had been broken into. When Ma revealed that she lived in Tent City, he became hostile, asking us if we had anything to do with the crime. Ma acted very friendly and open, and the cop gradually replaced his hostile attitude with a patronizing one. At one point, Ma asked if he had ever been to Tent City. He looked at me and smiled as he answered: *"No, I've never gone down there. I'm afraid to go down there."* This policeman was not alone in fearing Tent City people. Wanda told me how people she met at the church looked down on her when she revealed that she lived in the forest. *"They pull their children away from me! Everyone thinks that, since we live out here, we must be animals."* Ro described similar situations in which people berated him for his unconventional lifestyle.
This stigma can certainly make acquiring a job more difficult. First, Tent City residents face difficulties when filling out application forms. Under "Address," they are unable to put "Tent City" as their place of residence. In addition, despite the fact that some Tent City residents have no criminal record (and those that do are predominately nonviolent, drug-related offenses), there is a general consensus that Tent City people are dangerous. I heard this sentiment expressed by policemen, citizens that live near the forest, homeless men in the shelters, and my colleagues at the university. Because people know so little about these individuals, they tend to assume the worst. In this light, it is no wonder that Tent City residents are seldom recruited by employers.

Alternative Employment

With little prospect of securing a formal job, Tent City residents must find alternative sources of income. While some occasionally receive money from the state, they all engage in various types of work to support themselves. One such activity is panhandling. Ty, Ma, Ro, and Wanda all depend on panhandling as a primary source of income. They have explained to me that panhandling is more complicated than it looks, and there are various ways of going about it:

Ma & Ty's campsite

Ty: The money he makes, Ro could have been out of Tent City a month after he came.
Andrew: Why?

Ty: Because of the way he panhandles! Andrew: You don't panhandle?
Ty: I panhandle, but not like him! Ma: TY's no good...
Ty: I never make money panhandling... the other day I did really good, I made 7 dollars the whole day.
Andrew: So what does Ro do that's different? Ty: It's the sign!
Andrew: Why don't you make a sign? Ty: I don't ROLL like that.
Ma: We HUSTLE, we go up to people and ask them.

Different people seem to have varying success at panhandling. Ty and Ma criticize Ro's form of panhandling in which he stands next to a busy road and holds a sign that says *"Homeless and hungry."* Their criticism seems to be that Ro is not working hard enough. Using a sign is too easy--- Ma and Ty seem to think that a panhandler needs to hustle in order to do the job right. However, their form of panhandling seems to be much less effective if on a good day Ty is only able to earn $7.

Again, we see a form of the American work ethic alive and well in Tent City. While most people tend to consider panhandlers as lazy free- riders, Tent City residents view it as a difficult form of labor. It is physically and mentally taxing to stand on the side of the road for hours, breathing car exhaust and taking insults from unsympathetic people.

Another popular source of income is the collection of empty cans. In Connecticut, beverage consumers are charged a 5 cents deposit on each can or bottle. They can earn back this deposit by bringing the container to a redemption center, but most people forego this small reward because it is easier to dispose of the cans elsewhere.

These empty containers have the potential to be a source of income: by collecting a sufficient number of cans and bringing them to the redemption center, one can make a few dollars. Twenty cans equates to $1, 100 cans are worth $5. Celia and Beth frequently make money in this manner. The advantage of "canning" is that it is viewed as an honest form of income, in contrast to panhandling. However, it is somewhat dirty since many of the cans are not completely empty, and is extremely time consuming considering the miniscule profit. In addition, it can be stigmatizing, as people often look down upon people sifting through trash for cans.

A final source of income I noticed at Tent City was door-to-door salesmanship. On one occasion, Ma and Ty found a used toolkit on the side of the road. I walked with them as they carried the toolkit to the main road and attempted to sell it to various businesses. As we approached a car repair shop, Ma took the toolkit and approached some men talking outside the garage. After a brief conversation, she returned to us, saying *"They won't buy it for $20. Im not selling it for less than $20!"* They then continued onward to the next business, also without success. In situations such as these, the last resort is always the pawnshop, which will likely offer them a few dollars for the toolkit.

Though these three sources of income (panhandling, canning, finding-and-selling) are not considered formal employment, they generate some income and require a significant amount of time and effort. Anderson and Snow call these sources of income "shadow work":

The general tendency is that the longer the homeless are on the streets and the more they drive into the world of the outsider, the less salient wage labor becomes as a mode of subsistence for them and the more prominent become one or more forms of shadow work (p. 169).

In this way, shadow work gradually takes the place of formal wage labor as the dominant source of income. Contrary to popular depictions of the lazy homeless, Snow and Anderson adamantly argue that this substitution is not the result of a decline in work ethic:

It is not a decline in work orientation per se that accounts for the greater prominence of shadow work among outsiders, but a change in orientation from the world of regular work to the world of shadow work. Most outsiders retain the incentive to work—they have no choice if they are to survive—but it is directed to a different order of work (p. 169).

Snow and Anderson are spot on in this argument. The shift away from formal employment is not the result of a decline in the work ethic: it is a rational response to a system that fails to provide these individuals with jobs. Celia's prospects of finding a job in 2010 are sufficiently low such that picking up cans all day and redeeming them for 5 cents a piece is a more economically efficient use of her time than job searching would be. In sum, Tent City people are not unemployed because they lack the willingness or ability to work—the main thing they lack is opportunity.

Unfortunately, the skills one learns while engaged in shadow work are not easily transferable to a formal job. Panhandling can rarely be listed as "relevant work experience." Anderson and Snow are correct in surmising that the longer an individual remains homeless, the more likely he is to depend on these sources of income. As he becomes more efficient in this type of work, he becomes increasingly reliant on it, and less likely to seek or obtain formal employment. In this way, life in Tent City tends to propagate itself. While writing about *Skid Row* (1968), Samuel Wallace noted that:

From the point of view of responsible society, the skid rower has become desocialized. From the point of view of skid

row society he has become socialized and acculturated. It is in this phase that the individual may be publicly labeled a deviant through arrest, sentence, and incarceration (p. 100).
A similar process occurs in Tent City. As individuals become integrated into Tent City, their ties within that community become stronger while their ties with "normal" society disintegrate. This makes life in Tent City more manageable, but decreases one's chances of leaving.

Inability to Save Money

I have often been surprised by Tent City residents' inability to save money. Many residents wake up in the morning without a dollar to their name. Because they make very little income, they have learned to be extremely frugal--- Ro and Wanda once explained to me how to get from New Haven to Hartford for under $5 by using a variety of bus transfers.
However, on the few occasions that Ro, Elaine, Ma, or Ty do find themselves with an excess of money, they seem to spend it immediately. For example, Ma and Ty save a few dollars everyday so that, once a month, they can afford to rent a hotel room in which to shower, clean, and relax.
Another example of seemingly irrational spending is on cigarettes. I have often been amazed by the amount of money that Tent City residents, and the homeless in general, spend on cigarettes. Considering the astronomical price of cigarettes (around $7.50 a pack and constantly rising), it is astounding that people with such a small income maintain the habit.
In fact, however, everyone I met in Tent City routinely smokes cigarettes, as do most of the men I met in the shelters. Ma has spent hours panhandling on the street, only to acquire enough money to buy a $7.50 pack of cigarettes. The link between smoking and poverty has been well established, but I have been unable to find a convincing argument for why this occurs. In "Poverty and Smoking," the authors lay out five different hypotheses to explain the high rate of smoking among impoverished individuals. Of these, the only convincing argument is the third: "The adoption of smoking may be a replacement reward, as smoking is often described as one of the few things a poor person can do for himself" (Bobak et al. 2000: 57). According to this argument, a high rate of smoking among the homeless occurs because it is one of their only sources of pleasure. The same logic can be applied to Ma and Ty's monthly hotel vacations: these vacations are some of the few material comforts that they are able to enjoy.
Whatever the reason, few people at Tent City are able to save money. Without money, they will never be able to find conventional housing. However, because of stigma and daily difficulties associated with living in the forest, they are largely unable to find employment until they leave Tent City. This puts them in a double-bind: one needs a job to get conventional housing, but one needs conventional housing to get a job. What is the way out? How can the cycle be broken?
There seem to be two possibilities. Celia and Beth are attempting one: stay clean from drugs and apply for state-assisted housing. They applied a few months ago, and Celia is confident that they will soon be offered a home at an affordable cost. Once they are living in a secure environment, they will be better able to find and hold jobs, eventually becoming financially independent. Unfortunately, this plan of action hinges on state-funded housing assistance, of which there is a relatively low supply. They have yet to hear back from the housing authority.
Jo was pursuing another path out of Tent City. Before he got rearrested for an outstanding warrant, he was slowly saving up money from his job as a newspaper salesman. Since he was only making around
$10 - $20 a day, it would have taken painfully long to save enough money to afford a conventional home, but he seemed to be on the right track. The advantage of this path is that it does not rely on state assistance. The disadvantage is that it may be unrealistic to expect to be able to climb out of poverty through such a low-paying job. For his part, Jo seemed to be succeeding until his unexpected reencounter with the police.

Conclusion

In this ethnography, I have attempted to answer the deceptively simple question: "Why do people live in Tent City?" I found that, in most cases, the combination of drug abuse and long-term unemployment led them to become homeless, and a desire for freedom and solitude led them to prefer the cold forest over the crowded shelters. Finally, I looked at some of the endogenous characteristics of life at Tent City in order to explain why it is so difficult for them to improve their circumstances.
In August 2010, all residents of New Haven's Tent City were evicted by New Haven and West Haven police. Many of the residents were strongly opposed to this turn of events, but were unable to counter charges from outsiders that theirs was a dangerous and harmful community. A similar dismantling occurred in 2008 in Waterbury, CT, when a city crew dismantled a community of tents and shacks that provided shelter for 17 men (Burnell 2008). The same occurred in a squatter community in Toronto, Canada (Bishop-Stall 2004). Sacramento, CA, responded similarly with respect to its 150 member strong Tent City (Hurt 2009).
It is easy to imagine why homeless encampments retain such a negative image in mainstream society. However,

over the course of this study, I have come to view New Haven's Tent City as a generally positive force in its former residents' lives. The shelters are not suitable for everyone, and Tent City residents had valid reasons for building their own homes in the forest. Furthermore, considering that the shelters were already operating at maximum capacity, dismantling Tent City could not have made the situation any better. In the future, I would implore city officials to closely examine the condition of people living in similar communities. Many of these people live in homeless encampments because it is their best (or only) option--- eviction only exacerbates the problem of homelessness.
Until we can actually help Tent City residents, we should consider following
Ro's advice: *"I wish they would just leave me alone."* A home in the forest is better than no home at all.

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