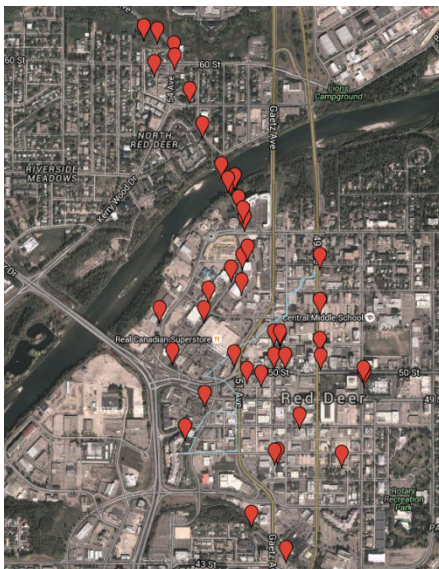




The Experience of Homelessness in Red Deer: An Ethnographic Perspective



A mixed method ethnography from the perspective of individuals experiencing homelessness in Red Deer.



Brendon Neilson PhD

Contents:

Contents:	2
Acknowledgements	4
Executive Summary	5
Introduction	7
Objectives	7
Research Questions	7
Key Concepts	8
Methodology	9
<i>Confidentiality</i>	11
Research Limitations and Biases	11
Context	12
Research Activities	14
<i>Public Observations</i>	14
<i>People</i>	15
<i>Patrick</i>	15
<i>Josh</i>	16
<i>A Group of Four</i>	17
<i>Cory</i>	18
<i>Places</i>	18
<i>Potter's Hands</i>	18
<i>The Block</i>	19
<i>NightReach</i>	20
<i>The Buffalo Apartments</i>	21
<i>McDonalds</i>	21
<i>Conclusions</i>	22
<i>Auto-Photography</i>	23
<i>Tracey</i>	26
<i>Derrick and Emily</i>	32
<i>Amy</i>	38
<i>Kelly</i>	43
<i>Joe</i>	45
<i>Conclusions</i>	48
<i>Walk-along Interviews</i>	49
<i>Daniel</i>	50
<i>Sheryl</i>	52
<i>Jonathan</i>	55
<i>Conclusions</i>	61
<i>Focus Group Discussions</i>	62
<i>Downtown Business Association</i>	62
<i>Community Stakeholders</i>	64
<i>Front Line</i>	66
<i>Support Service Providers</i>	67
<i>Government Systems</i>	69
<i>Summary and Overview</i>	71
Analysis and Reflections	72
<i>Language and Narrative</i>	73

<i>The 'Problem' of Homelessness</i>	75
<i>Mobility and Survival Routines</i>	76
<i>Efficiencies</i>	77
<i>Space</i>	77
<i>Enabling and Encouraging</i>	78
Recommendations	80
1. <i>Education:</i>	80
<i>Funder:</i>	81
<i>Funded Agencies:</i>	81
2. <i>Collaboration:</i>	82
<i>Community Stakeholders:</i>	82
<i>Policy Makers:</i>	82
3. <i>Proactive Outreach:</i>	83
<i>Housing:</i>	83
<i>Community:</i>	83
4. <i>Communal Engagement</i>	84
<i>Business community:</i>	84
<i>Religious community:</i>	85
Conclusion	85
Bibliography:	87

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Executive Summary

This research project was tasked with enabling an understanding of the experience of homelessness in Red Deer. Specifically, the primary goal of this project was to gain an understanding *from the perspective* of those individuals currently experiencing homelessness in Red Deer. As a part of this understanding, a desired outcome was an increased knowledge of the mobility and survival routines of the homeless population. An embodied and empathic awareness was employed as an interpretive approach to the data. Through this perspective various mechanisms and issues related to homelessness were investigated and analyzed.

The research project used a mixed method ethnographic approach which included four qualitative research activities: 1) Public observations; 2) Auto-photography; 3) Walk-along interviews; and, 4) Focus group discussions. The first three (observations, auto-photography, and walk-along interviews) included individuals experiencing homelessness in the summer of 2015. Participants were recruited through a purposive sampling that sought to find various live options of the experience of homelessness in Red Deer. Throughout the research a focus of attention was the nature and texture of the experience of homelessness, and the relationship between individuals experiencing homelessness to the social and physical environment.

The observations took place in public places and spaces where individuals experiencing homelessness were present. The reporting of these observations was done through narrative accounts of some of the people and places that are indicative of the observations.

The auto-photography project involved giving participants a disposable camera and having them take photos of the places and spaces they visited. A total of seven participants were recruited and five cameras were returned and developed successfully. In total, 98 images, were acquired, and three participants reconvened for follow-up interviews to provide context and lived meaning to their photos. This report includes the photos as well as the content from conversations and the follow-up interviews. A map of where the photos were taken offers further insight into the spaces these individuals occupied while participating in this photography project.

Three walk-along interviews were conducted with individuals who were experiencing homelessness. Each interview was mapped, and presented in narrative form. These interviews employed open-ended questioning to allow the perspective of the individual to emerge based on the interactions and events of the day.

There were also five focus group discussions with participants who represented various stakeholder groups within Red Deer who engage with individuals experiencing homelessness. The groups were organized around the types of engagement the participants have with individuals. These discussions were reported via the themes that emerged in each group. These key themes included systemic frustrations, the need for an increase in affordable appropriate housing, the need for a proactive approach, and the humanity of each individual.

The analysis and reflection upon the collected data yielded a focus on the role of language and narrative in shaping the understanding and experience individuals have in their environment. The way that a community languages and narrates an issue has significant implications for how experiences around that

issue will be engaged. The different ways of understanding homelessness has deep implications for how people experience it.

A reflection on the impulse to generalize experiences resulted in a brief treatment of communal and personal identity. A “problem-solution” model to homelessness is not the most effective considering the broader context of how concerns emerge within a community. An alternative model for consideration focuses on a communal identity that is accountable for the context it enables, and sees lack as a possibility for community rather than a problem to be solved.

Spaces are created through their use. Significantly, this is highlighted in how individuals experiencing homelessness create spaces by using them for various purposes. Space creation may be a more collaborative process and this must be considered moving forward. The notion of “choice” in relation to homelessness was also briefly considered.

It is acknowledged throughout that the current housing system in Red Deer is effectively getting individuals housed. There remain areas where improvements can be made, and the following recommendations were made:

1. Education: There is a need for the both general public, and stakeholders to be more informed about the experience of homelessness and the system of support services that are available in place in Red Deer.
2. Collaboration: As a central principle in the current five year plan to end homelessness, a renewed effort to collaborate amongst all stakeholders is crucial for many barriers to be diminished for individuals experiencing homelessness.
3. Proactive Outreach: There are many individuals who for various reasons would not seek out available housing supports. A proactive relational outreach that is regularly engaging with the street involved and homeless population would aim to reach those individuals who are most in need of housing supports. An alternative outreach initiative is also recommended to act as a conduit between the street involved population and other community stakeholders.
4. Communal Engagement: The community must be increasingly involved in engaging with individuals experiencing homelessness to provide a sense of belonging within the community. Two groups in particular are highlighted as having significant potential for promoting this engagement. The business community should be engaged as potential social entrepreneurs who could invest in the social wellbeing of the community while operating a sustainable business through social enterprise. The religious community should be engaged to develop a way of aligning the social justice concerns present within these traditions with strategies and initiatives relating to homelessness.

These recommendations were made in light of the research methodology used, and the understanding of homelessness in Red Deer that was acquired. The purpose of this research project was not simply to gather information, but to come to an understanding, and as such, this understanding requires a response. Achieving the plan to end homelessness by 2018 is possible, but it requires a renewed effort from all members of the Red Deer community.

Introduction

Most of the data that has been collected in Red Deer in regards to homelessness has been to understand the demographics and enumeration of this population. These approaches, however, give little information and understanding of what the nature and texture of homelessness is from the perspective of those actually experiencing it. Accordingly, this research is aimed at understanding the relational dynamics between those who are experiencing homelessness and the physical and social environment of Red Deer. In most cases the people in this population are sleeping in places that are not designed for sustained human habitation. The City of Red Deer is employing a prevention model to achieve their goal of ending homelessness, and is engaged in a rigorous implementation of a housing first philosophy. As such, this research will direct and inform the mechanisms and goals moving into the final three years of the current plan to end homelessness. Specifically, this research will directly inform how we achieve Goal #4 in EveryOne's Home: Red Deer's Five Year Plan to End Homelessness 2014-2018: "Ensure Red Deerians who are chronically and episodically homeless have access to housing supports that will slow the progression or mitigate the negative effects from being homeless for extended periods of time" (10).

Objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

- An increased understanding of the nature and texture of homelessness within Red Deer.
- An increased understanding of the survival and mobility routines of this population.
- An increased understanding of the services used and the system interaction patterns of this population.
- An increased understanding of the barriers that keep people experiencing homelessness from utilizing the housing first systems.
- Discovering the gaps (and efficiencies) in service implementation and current housing mechanisms.
- Alternative ways of improving the current policies and services.
- Contextual understanding of the influences that enable continued homelessness.

Research Questions

What is the homeless experience like in Red Deer?

What are the survival and mobility routines of this population?

How does this population relate to the physical and social environment of Red Deer?

What available services are used, and unused?

What are the mechanisms that enable/disable the movement from living outside to living in a home?

Key Concepts

In seeking to view the experience of being homeless in Red Deer from within, there are a number of underlying concepts that shape and inform the theoretical presuppositions in designing this research project and its subsequent analysis.

Homelessness : The term *homeless* describes a wide range of circumstances around housing. As such, The City of Red Deer has followed the Canadian Homeless Research Network's "Canadian Definition of Homelessness" which employs a four part typology:

- 1) Unsheltered: This includes people who lack housing and are not accessing emergency shelters or accommodation, except during extreme weather conditions. In most cases, people are staying in places that are not designed for or fit for human habitation.
- 2) Emergency Sheltered: This refers to people who, because they cannot secure permanent housing, are accessing emergency shelter and system supports, generally provided at no cost or minimal cost to the user. Such accommodation represents a stop-gap institutional response to homelessness provided by government, non-profit, faith based organizations and/or volunteers.
- 3) Provisionally Accommodated: This describes situations in which people, who are technically homeless and without permanent shelter, access accommodation that offers no prospect of permanence. Those who are provisionally accommodated may be accessing temporary housing provided by government or the non-profit sector, or may have independently made arrangements for short-term accommodation.
- 4) At Risk of Homelessness: Although not technically homeless, this includes individuals or families whose current housing situations are dangerously lacking security or stability, and so are considered to be at risk of homelessness. They are living in housing that is intended for permanent human habitation, and could potentially be permanent (as opposed to those who are provisionally accommodated). However, as a result of external hardship, poverty, personal crisis, discrimination, a lack of other available and affordable housing, insecurity of tenure and / or the inappropriateness of their current housing (which may be overcrowded or does not meet public health and safety standards) residents may be "at risk" of homelessness.

For the purpose of this research, two additional terms supplement the understanding of homelessness:

Chronic homelessness : Those who have either been continuously homeless for a year or more, or have had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. In order to be considered chronically homeless, a person must have been sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation and/or in an emergency homeless shelter.

Episodic homelessness : A person who is homeless for less than a year and has fewer than four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.

Housing First: The underlying approach that adequate housing is a right of all people, and that people are stabilized through proper housing. The Alberta Housing First approach includes:

- 1) Moving people into affordable and safe housing directly from streets and shelters, without preconditions of treatment acceptance or compliance.
- 2) Contracting a service provider to make robust support services available to the client.
- 3) Embracing a harm reduction approach to addictions rather than mandating abstinence. At the same time, the provider must be prepared to support client commitments to recovery.
- 4) Ensuring continued tenancy that is dependent on fulfilling a landlord-tenant agreement; clients have protection under the law.
- 5) Establishing the long-range goal of moving clients toward the highest level of self-reliance possible: support services are not intended to continue indefinitely.

There are two additional concepts that are vital to the methodological approach displayed in this research.

Embodiment : The body is a unifying human attribute. It acts as the medium for all experience, and filters and determines how people think, and feel about their world. While this may seem apparent it has more recently been an emphasized feature in academic inquiry. As a key concept to this research, this manifests as a purposeful attempt to acknowledge the distinct way of thinking that emerges from experiencing homelessness in Red Deer.

Relationship : Relationships are not only useful to understand how people engage with each other, but how a person engages the world around them. Throughout a lifetime a person develops complex relationships with language, personal and cultural histories, trauma, social forces and pressures, ideological impulses and so on. All of these relationships inform and shape the understanding and experience of the present. Looking through a relational lens to see how people come to engage the world, enables a holistic understanding of the complexity of their situations.

An understanding of the embodied experience of people who are experiencing homelessness, including the complex relationships they have with their social and physical environment in Red Deer, will allow the objectives of this research project to be achieved.

Methodology

In forming the methodological approach for this study it was important that, in light of our goals, this research be: contextual (about the specific social and physical world of Red Deer, AB) and empathic (giving priority to the experience and perspective of the homeless). Employing a mixed method ethnographic approach enabled the types of data we desire to answer our research questions, and achieve the goals for this project.

In recruiting participants we used the method of purposive sampling: In light of the demographic information collected through the point in time counts, and the recent warming center data, a purposive sample of participants seeks to reflect a sample that is indicative of a broad range of situations that exist within this community. While not seeking a large number of people in our sample, this methodological approach seeks to have representation of various situations we know exist, and to get an idea of lived options of homelessness in Red Deer. With the limited timeline available for the data collection our purposive sample was restricted in number.

The five methods we employed are as follows:

- 1) Focus Group Discussions : Five focus group discussions were conducted. The participants were selected as representatives of organizations that interact with people who are experiencing homelessness in one of the following ways: Front line outreach/intake workers (both housing and other support services); Community stakeholder organizations (including food provision); Support service providers (including medical, housing, and employment supports); Members of the Downtown Business Association; and Government systems that provide aid and supports. An open-ended discussion method was used to gather opinions on the barriers and mechanisms that both prevent and enable people from finding housing. This method will provide data on the social and system interactions with homeless people from the experiences of the people who interact with them on a daily basis, and insights into how current housing mechanisms may be improved. The people in these groups are the key informants in the current social infrastructure who engage in daily interactions with the people who are experiencing homelessness.
- 2) Auto-photography Exercise: Participants were asked to take photos of the places and spaces that are visited and occupied in their day as a way of seeing the city from their perspective. Once the photos were developed a follow-up interview with the participant photographer was arranged to explain and describe the photos. This method will provide data on where the participants go in a usual day, and as such, will be useful for understanding both mobility and survival patterns.
- 3) Walk-along Interviews: Open ended interviews were conducted while accompanying a person throughout their regular daily activities. The questions will relate to the encounters with the physical and social make-up of the day. This will enable the gathering of sensory and embodied data as to the daily activities of a given participant as well as detailed observation of interactions with other people and social structures. Various practices, habits and interactions will be noted. This method provided first hand data on what the experience of homelessness is like in Red Deer. The mobility, survival, and social patterns were observed, and relational knowledge into these individuals' lives were gained.
- 4) Public Observation: Informal (open-ended) social and physical observations of the patterns and actions of the homeless, service providers, and system structures that occur in on a daily basis. This will reveal the shape and texture of the encounters homeless people are having with the physical and social structures. This will provide data into relational and environmental dynamics, and witness the mechanisms that enable survival and sustain a particular way of life within Red Deer.

5) Literature Review: This includes a survey and assessment of the relevant literature for this type of project including previous research, and policies that are in place in Red Deer. This will provide contextual information to our findings and inform the analysis.

Confidentiality

All participants were ensured that their identity would be kept confidential, and that no identifying information would be used in reporting the results of this research. The participants in the Focus Group Discussions were given informed consent forms to sign and participants for the Walk-along interviews and the Photography project went through a verbal informed consent checklist. Pseudonyms were created for the participants and the true identity is known only to the researcher.

This research project was designed in light of the “Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans,” and York University’s “Guidelines for Conducting Research with People who are Homeless.”¹ Prior to any data collection the research design and methodology underwent ethics review and approval with the Red Deer College Research Ethics Board, and received “Certification of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Human Subjects” on June 30, 2015.

Research Limitations and Biases

There were a number of possible limitations to this research. The foremost of which was the timeline. Due to the temporary nature of the research position, there was a limit on the number of participants (and therefore data), and time allotted for data analysis. The methodology was designed with this in mind to mitigate these limitations. Through seeking experiential data, the findings are valid to our goals regardless of the number of participants. This also did not allow for as thorough an engagement with the pertinent literature as would have been ideal.

Another limitation was the empathic or insider’s view we are hoping to grasp while being on the outside of this social group. As such, the research sought to allow the voice of the participant to speak as much as possible, while keeping the interpretive analysis as a secondary tool.

There is an underlying approach to homelessness within The City of Red Deer that affirms the housing first model. As such, this research is aimed at informing the most effective implementation of that model in this context. This has surely played an underlying role in the research process.

The academic background (Theology) and socio-cultural background of the researcher also predisposes a particular perspective. While acknowledging that no neutral point of view will ever be achieved, this research was conducted in a way to enable the perspective of the participants to be highlighted and the perspective of the researcher to be diminished.

¹ See, <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/Default/> and, <http://homelesshub.ca/resource/guidelines-conducting-research-people-who-are-homeless> .

Context

There were multiple factors at play in Red Deer in the summer of 2015 which must be considered as the context for this research project.

- 1) In the months leading to the summer, 2015, the economy was amidst a downturn. The price of oil dropped from \$615.02/M³ in August of 2014² to \$349.35/M³ in August of 2015.³ This drop in the oil prices has likely had a correlation to the unemployment rates which rose from 3.8% to 7.9% in Red Deer during this same time period.⁴ This rise was the most significant in Alberta over that time.

While it is difficult to state the direct results of the economics on the number of people experiencing homelessness in Red Deer, it is recognized that poverty, and often increased barriers to gain employment (addictions, and mental illness) is a contributing factor to homelessness.

- 2) An additional circumstance that took place from June-July 2015 was the take down of a “Tent City” located between the Northbound and Southbound directions of the QE2 highway, just North of Gasoline Alley. This encampment was visible from the highway, and received public attention in the press. Alberta transportation and the RCMP were concerned about the safety in the area and arranged to have the residents move on, and have the space cleaned up. Central Alberta AIDS Network Society were engaged to clean up the site. The residents were made aware of the current housing system in Red Deer, but CAANS believes most of them have moved on to other green spaces within the City of Red Deer.⁵ CAANS estimates that there were 10 people living in the site.
- 3) Another issue that was unfolding over the summer months was the search for a new site for a temporary winter daytime warming centre. Berachah’s Place, a day time drop in facility, closed in October 2014.⁶ There was a temporary warming centre established as a short term measure in November 2014, in collaboration with Safe Harbour Society (operator), and the Seventh Day Adventist Center (location 5014-49 St). This warming centre was in operation from November 2014 to April 2015. A program evaluation was done by the Social Planning Department of The City of Red Deer. The resulting report, “Winter Warming Centre November 2014 – April 2015 Program Evaluation Report” then informed the process of looking for a site that would function more effectively as a service from the perspective of those providing the support service and utilizing these supports.⁷

² This is for Light Crude Oil. See “Information Letter 2014-25” http://www.energy.alberta.ca/Oil/pdfs/IL2014-August_2014.pdf accessed September 22, 2015.

³ See http://www.energy.alberta.ca/Oil/pdfs/IL2015-August_2015.pdf accessed September 22, 2015.

⁴ See, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/lfs05f-eng.htm> accessed Sept 21, 2015.

⁵ Central Alberta AIDS Network Society, “Tent City Report” July 2015, 1.

⁶ Note that this is the first summer that this service has not been available since 2008.

⁷ “Winter Warming Centre November 2014-April 2015 Program Evaluation Report” Social Planning Document, The City of Red Deer.

City Council was tasked with finding a new site that would satisfy the requirements and also align with the community plan to end homelessness.⁸ Two sites were brought before council in the summer of 2015. 4934 – 54 Avenue was proposed and a public hearing was held on the required bylaw amendment for this site on August 17, 2015. Council debated and decided that this site was not the best site for this use and declined to amend the land use bylaw. Alternatively, 5256-53 Avenue (which had the proper zoning requirements) was brought to council with a development permit to purchase modular units to function as a warming centre space from November to April over the next winters. In both cases a letter was sent to the business and landowners in a radius of 100 meters from the proposed site. These letters provide a snapshot of the sense and thinking of the residents and business owners in this area, in regards to the perceptions and issues around homelessness in Red Deer. Highlighting a few of these letters will provide an idea of the social setting regarding homelessness in Red Deer at the time of this research project.

A majority of the letters received were in opposition to the proposed sites. Rationale cited for people opposed to having a warming centre close to their property include include: perceptions of safety (including the presence of intoxicated persons, drug debris, and criminal activity), fear of a decrease in property value, and potential stigmatizing of the area, including concerns over the long term vision for the Railyards area were all common responses. There seemed to be an underlying assumption being made by many of the letter's authors about the connection between crime and housing.

Many of the letters indicated a lack of understanding around the barriers that people who are experiencing homelessness face including the difficulties in navigating the support services available in the community, and an incomplete picture of what supports are available in the City. One interesting note is how "the problem" of homelessness is understood and described. One concerned owner wrote that his tenants have "endured a seemingly endless series of ridiculous behaviour of sleeping under our trees or on the grass, shooting up behind the building, fornicating, defecating and urinating all around the property."⁹ He goes on to state that all these things they "should be doing in their own homes if they had one." He voices his frustrations with what seems to him like Red Deer's "frivolous and short sighted attempts to deal with the symptoms of homelessness rather than the cause."¹⁰

Another letter written by a neighbor of the first proposed site states, "I truly believe that a warming centre accommodates a lifestyle for those non taxpaying citizens that choose to be homeless. We are not helping the overall situation for those that have no choice and are addicted to drugs or alcohol. They do not qualify as citizens as they have no address, pay no tax

⁸See <http://www.reddeer.ca/about-red-deer/social-well-being-and-community-initiatives/housing-and-homelessness/plans-and-reports-on-housing-and-homelessness/everyones-home---5-year-plan-to-end-homelessness/>

⁹ Letter to Council received July 17, 2015. Letters to Council are available in the Council package for August 17 2015 and September 21, 2015.

¹⁰ Ibid.

and cannot be called on for support.”¹¹ While not all the letters were written with such strong opposition the safety and well-being of the people with whom the authors are concerned is the primary message. These letters reveal that the perception is that there is more homelessness and more visible “problems” that are related to homelessness. One author writes that, “Homelessness is out of control and getting worse instead of better. Our downtown is becoming a scary, scary, place! All the revitalization in the world is not going to change that.”¹²

These letters provide a manifestation of the current mind set and some of the perceptions and thoughts around homelessness in Red Deer in the summer of 2015.

Council has been aware of this concern for some time and has established a Community Safety Ad Hoc Committee which has recently conducted a survey to address the safety perceptions and concern of the community.

It is noted that this is the first summer since Berachah’s Place has closed, which means that people who are homeless and street-involved do not have a day-time space available in the summer months. This would likely have had the visible effect of having an increased number of folks sharing public and private spaces during the day.

- 4) A final consideration regarding the context of this research is the community plan to end homelessness. In 2005 Red Deer established the Mayor’s Task Force on Ending Homelessness with Mayor Flewwelling as leader. In 2008 Red Deer began working on its ten year plan, and produced a vision and Framework on Ending Homelessness by 2018. This plan focused on “upstream” and “downstream” prevention. In 2009 Red Deer launched “Everyone’s Home: Red Deer’s 5 year Plan Towards Ending Homelessness”. This was the first stage of the 10 year plan. The second stage of the plan was published in 2014 as “Everyone’s Home: Red Deer’s Plan to End Homelessness (2014-2018).”¹³ The summer of 2015 is in the final three years of this 10 year plan, and certain members of the public, those involved in providing support services, and people working at the policy level are aware of this timeline.

Research Activities

This section provides reporting of the research activities that made up this ethnographic study. It will describe how the activities were conducted, and report on the data collected.

Public Observations

Observations were done in public places around the downtown and at support service locations. These observations and the informal conversations therein were key in providing experiential knowledge of the homeless population, and the cultural and personal milieu that makes up the lives of those who are experiencing homelessness in Red Deer.

¹¹ Letter to Mayor Veer and Council received July 30, 2015.

¹² Letter to council received September 17, 2015.

¹³ See, “Everyone’s Home: Red Deer’s Plan to End Homelessness (2014-2018)” <http://www.reddeer.ca/about-red-deer/social-well-being-and-community-initiatives/housing-and-homelessness/plans-and-reports-on-housing-and-homelessness/everyones-home---5-year-plan-to-end-homelessness/> .

The observations naturally evolved from intentionally observing and seeking understanding about basic things to more opportunities to speak with key informants and groups. As a part of these observations I was open with my intentions as a researcher for The City of Red Deer. While there were few people who were not directly supportive of my presence, for the most part people were pleased to hear that this research was taking place, and happy to participate.

One of the goals of this research was to understand better the mobility patterns of people experiencing homelessness in Red Deer. While there is no single mobility route shared by everyone in this population, there are certain times and places that act as gatherings where the probability of locating a person are increased. The meal schedule provides insight into when some of these gatherings takes place. Potters Hands, Loaves and Fishes, and the Seventh Day Adventist Community Center provide meals with capacity for many from this community to gather. These gatherings proved vital for locating and recruiting participants, and were common locations for these observations.

A few narrative accounts of people stand out as embodying lived situations in Red Deer. I have chosen to report my observations via narratives for two reasons: First speaking in generalizations about homelessness and the people that are experiencing it easily leads to assumptions and often misunderstandings being fostered; second is the intent to be faithful to the people I have met and to the situations that they find themselves in.

As much as possible this research aims to let the people who are experiencing homelessness share what it is like for them to live in Red Deer. As such, although they did not participate in an interview or an explicit research activity, they knew what my research was about and were open with me about their experience. These people acted as my “key informants” in allowing me to gain an understanding of what their experiences of homelessness are like. In reporting these observations, I have chosen to include my voice because of the importance of my personal involvement (conversationally and physically) in the data collection process.

People

Patrick

I met Patrick initially while visiting a bottle depot. I sat with him while we waited for the depot to open. He had a shopping cart full with garbage bags strapped to the sides. It was 2-3 days of work for him, and he estimated it would be worth \$100-\$120. Patrick told me he usually stays at Mats (the ‘wet’ shelter operated by Safe Harbour Society), and that works out fine for him. He doesn’t always collect bottles, but only when he needs a bit extra. He is not on income supports or AISH and says he is crafty and that he depends on his wits to get by. Patrick used to live in Ontario, but has been in Red Deer since the late 1990’s. Patrick told me how he used to be housed, and that he was tortured by anxiety over maintaining his housing and paying rent. He used to sell weed out of his apartment and once had police take \$500 cash from him. This experience and doubtless many others have led him to be very skeptical and wary of people in authority.

Patrick used to volunteer at Berachah’s Place and thinks that a volunteer run facility has more intrinsic goodness than a paid and staff run facility. He thinks that as soon as someone is being paid to help, they assume the right to tell people what to do, and take on a superior attitude. Patrick is very informed on

issues surrounding the council deciding on a new site for a winter warming centre. He voiced his opinion that council was too strict with their bylaw amendments, and that a new site should include showers, laundry and storage. No available storage for people to put their belongings in the day is seen by Patrick as a major barrier to people getting a job, or being able to do other productive things in the day. If a person is carrying their belongings in a number of bags and cannot leave them for risk of theft, the perceptual barriers of others, in general, and a potential employer, in particular, has the potential to be a significant impediment.

Patrick has one duffle bag which he carries with him with his personal belongings. While at Mats, he locks the bag so that the main compartment is secured. Theft at Mats is a common occurrence and Patrick has been disappointed with how the staff there reacts to it. Beyond the snoring and the flatulence, he jokes, Mats is a fine place to stay with a few friends and generally supportive staff. He did let me know that with the high turnover in staff, and having inexperienced people working, increases the frequency of theft.

The Public Library downtown provides Patrick with a space to read and recharge his phone.

Patrick tried once a few years ago to access housing supports, but did not find the process congenial and did not attend the meetings that were scheduled for him. He has not been approached since then to begin the process of accessing housing supports through the Red Deer housing team, and it does not seem to be a high priority for him.

Josh

Josh has been staying at People's Place shelter for most of this summer. He had to leave his job, and could not maintain his housing, when his addiction (drugs and gambling) and his work could not co-exist. Staying at Peoples Place is sufficient for the time being, but the coming winter is quite a concern. Josh is on medical EI while his ankle heals, but that income support will end shortly. Finding housing is a priority, but Josh knew that his SPADT (Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool) score was not very high, and was told that he might not qualify. This does not bother Josh as much as one might expect, as he recognizes that there are other people experiencing homelessness who are more in need of housing than he is. His case-worker is from Safe Harbour Society but he has had contact with the Native Friendship Society who directed him back to his case-worker for help with housing.

He believes that the primary thing that is keeping him in homelessness is lack of income. He has shifted his focus to finding work first, and then trying to find housing on his own instead of using the system to support his housing. The challenge is finding work that will guarantee an income that will be able to ensure the ability to afford an apartment. He was working with the Red Deer Aboriginal Employment Services and was hopeful for a six-month employment program but this fell through at the end of August. It is events like these, which Josh says make homelessness so hard. Disappointments have much more significant effects on survival as well as on mental health. Struggling with depression and recovery from addictions is a difficult place from which to find stability.

As a part of the recovery process Josh (who immigrated to Canada, and is now a Canadian citizen) mentions that connecting to his spirituality has been helpful. He achieved this through participation in the aboriginal ceremonies and eventually through participation in a Christian community. Josh does not

feel powerless in regard to drug use, but does have fears of relapsing into gambling. He is hoping to find work shortly, and hopes to rent a room in a shared accommodation before the winter comes.

He told me about how he has been trying to focus on self-development instead of comparing himself to his friends. He brings up the shame and embarrassment of having people know that he has fallen on hard times. Recently, he ran into a friend from an old job and he felt pressure to say he was doing fine, instead of being honest about his situation. He confessed a fear of being judged or being stigmatized as an addict or as homeless. He is aware of the lack of understanding and acceptance of the homeless as a group and the barriers people face in accessing stable housing.

A Group of Four

I had the opportunity to sit with a group of four aboriginal men who were drinking Listerine one morning. I had met them before, and they accepted me sitting with them easily. They were considerate and conversational while passing around their bottle. One of them wanted me to drink with them, while the others protested. "Don't get into this stuff" one of them told me. They stay at Mats mainly, and were heading towards the day support program operated by Safe Harbour Society when I left them.

One of the men indicated that there is less politics involved on the street. "We just talk about it," he said "and make decision." The next move is decided on a moment-by-moment basis without the pressure of long-term consequences. There was a sense that they had a pure kind of democracy without any leader or agenda. "We walk together." One of them told me about his companion. "We were in foster homes together when we were younger. He was there when I got stabbed, and I was there when he got stabbed." The stories they have and past events that they have experienced including violence, crime, and pain are carried by their scarred bodies and inform the way they speak about each other and themselves.

When the bottle was empty, two of them left to go buy another bottle at Superstore. Superstore took the bottles off the shelf, because of theft issues, but they can still get it by going up to the counter. Shortly after this the eldest man (Peter), who was the one who actually paid for the bottle, confided in me: "Do you know what it's like to let society down? To be weak when you're supposed to be strong?" I could not be sure if his statement was incited by his purchase, or by the fact that he has lost the ability to control his bladder and bowel causing him to soil his pants. "I failed already," he says at 9:30 am. He seems like the outsider of the group. Despite being the eldest, he is the "Indian" of the group. He is Sioux from North Dakota, while the others are Cree. Peter wonders aloud what it will be like when he has to take off his urine soaked shoes at day supports.

Another day, approximately a week later, Peter tells me with pride about his former career raising bucking bulls for the rodeo. He speaks with accomplishment about the building projects he has assisted on around the city. His marriage ended after many years and his children and grandchildren are rarely seen. Peter quite obviously has a sadness about him. He tells me that being this old on the streets you see a lot of pain and see a lot of death.

One observation I made from various conversations over the summer is the apparent social hierarchy based on the use of substances. Drinking mouthwash seems to be consistently regarded as the lowest. The health of these men is not good, and two have been hospitalized this summer. There is a different

sort of thinking among these men. A short-sighted set of priorities dictate their actions. One of them did have some AISH forms to fill out, to ensure some steady income, but the sense was that they live moment by moment ensuring the priorities of their survival and addictions.

Cory

Cory has been homeless since a head injury in a hit and run accident made him unable to work. His case is before the courts, and he is hopeful for a financial settlement in the next few months. Cory spent most of the summer sleeping rough next to a building's outgoing air vent in the downtown. He was able to find a bike frame and enough parts to piece together a functional bike. He bikes around town and often panhandles for spare change. He goes to Potters, and the Seventh Day Adventist Community Center for meals, but often misses breakfast because he sleeps in.

Cory got back into the dope and is thinking about going into detox again. He recounted a conversation with an old colleague who he recently saw for the first time in months. His colleague asked him "is it (the dope) helping?" "Well, no, it's not helping" Cory confesses. He admitted that he wants to get back to work, and get stable again." Over the summer there has been a visible change in weight with Cory. The veins in his arms are very visible, and his face has become very thin. He acknowledged his weight loss, and said it is because of his very active lifestyle. "I go non-stop. And if I miss a meal it really shows."

In Cory's experience of homelessness there are three overlapping tiers: Those that are addicts, those that have a mental illness, and those who have experienced a trauma (i.e. injury or abuse). The data collected from the 2014 Point in Time count confirms Cory's analysis, with 66% of those counted having an addiction, and 50% having a mental health condition, to go along with a 39% of people with a physical disability of some kind.¹⁴

Cory sometimes utilizes the day support program available, and uses it to catch up on sleep. He hopes that his settlement will be finished before winter so he can get an apartment, but he acknowledged that he may have to go to a neurologist for more tests in order for the settlement to conclude. He has an email address which is his primary mode of communication and does not have a phone number. This has likely caused the settlement progress to be slower than it could have been. Cory agreed to participate in a walk along interview but his sporadic location combined with not having a consistent form of communication made it difficult to arrange and keep meeting times.

Places

As stated above there are key places and spaces that are high frequency locations for the street involved and homeless. These places served as key settings for observations and provided key insights into the use and function of key areas of the city in the lives of those experiencing homelessness.

Potter's Hands

Potter's Hands (4935-51st) provides breakfast from 6:00-7:30am Monday-Friday, and 9:00-11:00am on Saturdays. Lunch is offered on Mondays and supper on Tuesdays. Line of Hope is a grassroots organization that began last year and also hosts a meal at Potter's on Sunday evenings. Located on the

¹⁴ "Point in Time 2014 Homeless Count Report" Released February 5, 2015. See, <http://www.reddeer.ca/about-red-deer/social-well-being-and-community-initiatives/housing-and-homelessness/plans-and-reports-on-housing-and-homelessness/point-in-time-homeless-count/>

corner of 49 Ave (little Gaetz) and 51street, Potters Hands in the heart of Red Deer’s down town. This is one block away from “the block” (Gatez and Ross). Many people in the shelters start their day here when the shelter closes (7:00 AM at Peoples Place, 8:00 AM at Mats). Potters is a simple building with tables, washrooms, a kitchen and a piano. As a ministry they believe in “trying to express the Love of God ,“and to promoting the value of each person’s intrinsic value.¹⁵ These aims are pursued through meeting some very tangible needs in the community.

A crowd usually gathers on the sidewalk outside with people either smoking or waiting before or after the meal. People are thankful for the meal and the coffee, and the location acts as a meeting point for many. I could usually count on finding some of my participants to either arrange a time for a meeting, or check in to see how they were doing. The time of day the meal was hosted did have a large influence on the feel of the interactions. Breakfasts were much more quiet and subdued than either a lunch or a dinner. I had the experience of feeling like an outsider and even an intruder during breakfast, whereas during lunch and dinner I felt more like a participant. Sunday dinners with the Line of Hope were the largest gatherings I witnessed at Potter’s, while a Monday lunch was the smallest group. Line of Hope began because there was no regular evening meal on Sundays. They began serving meals by Loaves and Fishes, and then by Safe Harbour before arranging to serve at Potter’s Hands. In addition to a meal they provide clothes, a few groceries, and some basic medical and hygiene supplies. It gathers the largest crowd I was told by some of my informants because of the large meal provided, but also the other supplies available.

The Block

The intersection of Ross St and Gaetz Ave (little Gaetz) referred to “the Block” is a key intersection in the downtown. For both pedestrian and vehicle traffic this is a daily or multiple-times-a-day point of travel. There are benches to sit on in the North East and a nearby picnic table which act as natural lounging and gathering places. There are a handful of street-involved people who panhandle or request cigarettes in this area. While many would assume that these behaviors are linked with homelessness it is not necessarily the case. There are a few people who have stable housing in the Buffalo Apartments, who engage in these activities in this location. Spending time in this location affirms that there are no visible clues that reveal a person’s housing situation. I have heard Little Gaetz referred to as a “homelessness highway” as there are a handful of support service providers located along it in the downtown (CMHA, Potter’s Hands, CAANS).

It was here on “The Block” that I met Ben. Ben has been homeless since losing his job a few months back. He liked to hang out at the block in the hot summer days because of the shade created by the large tree above the bench. Ben would sleep sometimes outside and sometimes at Mats. He told me he would try to get work as a laborer with Diversified (staffing services) but was unsuccessful. We would chat about housing and homelessness in Red Deer, and he would bring up experiences from being homeless in Edmonton and the supports up there as being worth having a look at. He specifically brought up the 24/7 shelter as being very well done. He mentioned that finding work was easier in Edmonton, and that he may soon return there. Walking is his primary mode of transportation and he has walked to Edmonton and back previously. Ben seemed to focus on improving the emergency

¹⁵ <http://pottershandsministries.org> accessed September 27, 2015.

shelters available, and the ability to get work as the two things that would improve his situation. Over the time that I knew him he became more comfortable speaking with me about these issues, and he indicated he would participate in one of my research activities, but shortly after that he was no longer regularly at the block, and I was told that he had returned to Edmonton. I have seen him from afar a couple times since, but have not had the ability to be informed by him about how he is doing or if he has been able to access stable housing.

“The Block” is quite different at night. With many more people and businesses active during the day time, many homeless and street-involved people choose not to occupy the same spaces that they do at night. Due to safety precautions I did not perform many hours of observations after dark. I was able to go on a walk along with the NightReach team from Central Alberta AIDS Network Society on two occasions.

NightReach

CAANS was very accommodating with my research and allowed me to accompany them on two of their regular mobile outreach walks. NightReach is a mobile outreach and harm reduction support service who also offer seasonal clothing and occasional food donations. They operate 365 days a year. They walk primarily in the downtown but also provide supports to camps as well. NightReach provides “non-judgemental support and referrals for food, housing, health care, addictions, pregnancy, legal issues, employment, and bad dates to many street involved individuals.”¹⁶ The two walks I participated in were on August 5, and August 27. The NightReach team is easily identifiable by their large red backpacks which are full of their harm-reductions supplies. Both these nights were very informative and provided opportunity to observe the downtown at night.

The first thing that is noteworthy about these nights was the obvious rapport that has been built between NightReach and the street-involved population they support. People approach and speak freely about themselves and their situations. There is an obvious level of trust. The pattern or method of NightReach is to greet a person who approaches, and see if they need any supplies. The conversations vary depending on the person and their situation, and collect the person’s name and date of birth for their reporting. After the interaction is over, they keep a record of what supplies they took, and what other topics were discussed. The conversations I witnessed varied from mild joking and fun, to informing on additional support services available, to talking through difficult situations experienced by the client. While housing is not in the immediate mandate of CAANS, many of their clients are experiencing homelessness or unstable housing.

In July 2015 CAANS conducted an audit of their client index cards for housing status information. Of the 404 client cards processed, 49 were unsheltered, 17 were emergency sheltered, 54 were housed with support, and 84 were housed without supports, while 9 were living in a “Sex Work Agreement.”¹⁷ Additionally, 193 were unknown. This is the first time CAANS has conducted this type of audit and they hope to do so twice per year.

¹⁶ See, <http://caans.org/what-we-do/nightreach/>, accessed September 27, 2015.

¹⁷ “CAANS Harm Reduction Clients Shelter Audit” July 2015.

While housing is not a primary concern for CAANS they do want to see their clients be safe and housing helps with this. The staff was generally informed and able to provide people with the resources to find additional support services, but at times provided people with inaccurate information about the housing system. The staff displayed excellent skills and abilities in dealing with their clients, and provided them not only with supplies, but also support, encouragement and connection. One group of men was sitting having a drink and the NightReach staff brought out a foam ball and we had a little game of catch bringing a bit of light-hearted fun to their evening.

In addition to their outreach, the NightReach team checks sharps containers, and does needle debris pick up. Needle debris has received more attention in recent months, and the reasons behind the increase are not known for certain. An increase in the injection of stimulants, and a younger demographic of drug users are common opinions.

McDonalds, and the Buffalo Apartments, are regular stops along the NightReach walk, and clients are regularly met at these locations. Both are sites that came up extensively as locations of concern in our Focus Group discussions around homelessness in Red Deer.

In my assessment, NightReach provides a vital support service to the street-involved and homeless population in Red Deer. They not only provide supports and harm-reduction supplies, but do so via mobile outreach that physically meets people where they are. The act of walking the streets everyday mirrors their intention to be a consistent and constant presence in the lives of those who spend their evenings on the streets of Red Deer. While this is a method that ensures their support service is effectively utilized, it also serves a relational role as people who routinely connect with the street-involved population. Their emphasis on providing a non-judgemental service can at times act as a barrier to encouraging their clients to pursue long-term and sustainable wellbeing like housing.

The Buffalo Apartments

The Buffalo Apartments is a supportive housing first apartment building owned by Potter's Hands Housing, and operated by Canadian Mental Health Association in the downtown (5031 50 St). While the residents are housed, many remain street-involved and maintain relationships with people who are experiencing homelessness. The south of the building serves as a hangout for many street-involved, and is recognized as a safe place to hang-out. The Buffalo is an iconic building in Red Deer, yet there are many misconceptions and misunderstandings in the public dialogue regarding what it is, how it functions and who it serves. Over the summer the management of the Buffalo has voiced concerns over the congregations of folks in the back of the Buffalo. Guest management is a significant concern for many street involved individuals who are housed, and the congregation of people often exasperates this. The deaths of two tenants in late July had significant impact on the Buffalo community, and the street involved population.

McDonalds

The McDonalds in the downtown (49th St and 52 Ave) is another high volume location for the street-involved population in Red Deer. The affordable food, combined with a location that is en route to many support service providers and the River trails, makes McDonalds a convenient location for gathering.

McDonalds represents a location where the drug culture of Red Deer conflates with the street-involved, and homeless population. There have been multiple reports of drug use in the area surrounding McDonalds and the Heritage Village business area. I witnessed someone injecting while there one afternoon and am aware that people involved in the drug culture frequent this location. McDonalds has sharp containers located in their bathrooms, and received opposition from some of their customers when they decided to install them. The bathrooms are locked and are available upon request with proof of purchase at the restaurant.

One morning while checking out the McDonalds I overheard a staff member calling the police about someone “dealing drugs” outside. I noted that it was 8:50 AM at the time of the call. I decided to stay to observe what response would be made. The person in question left to go buy cigarettes and returned a short time later. A RCMP officer arrived at 9:20 AM and approached the man in question had a brief conversation, and asked the man to leave the property. The staff who had called came out and wanted to speak with the officer, they did so briefly and then the officer left. The officer was gone by 9:25 AM.

These are merely observation of one particular interaction, in what are hundreds of daily interactions the RCMP have with the public on a daily basis. I am not aware of what the officer’s previous interactions were with those businesses or individuals, or what was done before or after this particular morning.

In speaking with some RCMP officers over the summer, they receive a high number of calls each day, and suspicious activity and loitering do not require as urgent of a response as many other calls they receive. There is a CRU (Community Response Unit) who make downtown a priority and are involved in a proactive policing approach. There is a complex relationship between homelessness and crime, which is difficult to generalize. To the casual observer, the police interaction witnessed at McDonalds may not have appeared to “fix” the situation – which tends to be an expectation consistent with comments about police responses made during the focus group.¹⁸

Another aspect of many inter-related layers of homelessness in Red Deer is the perceptions and assumptions that are fostered in the community. Judgments based on the assumptions that someone is homeless mingle with safety concerns surrounding public intoxication, drug debris, and the discomfort of being faced with people asking for money all cause perceived notions to develop about the places and people who congregate there. McDonalds is one location where this occurs. One focus group participant confessed to choosing the drive-through over getting out of her vehicle due to her safety concerns of the people outside McDonalds.

Conclusions

The observations that took place from July to September enabled the researcher to learn how people who are experiencing homelessness are living and relating to Red Deer in both its physical and social realms. The relationships formed with people and the experience of places with them allowed a new understanding to be formed. These observations were intentionally not merely visual, but embraced the opportunity to allow the researcher’s body to be a tool of sensory observation. The current work in neurology and conceptual science reveals that human thinking is not merely a rational exercise, but is a

¹⁸ The Focus Groups will be covered below.

part of an embodied process that includes perception, emotion, and cognition.¹⁹ This embodied understanding allows more than the traditional data to be relevant to ethnographic observations. As such, although it is difficult to translate all of the sensory data into written form, it was important that these embodied experiences informed and formed the observations made.

Each of these people and the places they inhabit participate in the social and physical make up of Red Deer. The role they played as informants for this interview were central to its success. The observations provided many insights that could not have been gained in implementing other more formal research activities and were central to a successful outcome.

Auto-Photography

There were many reasons for including photographic images as data in our ethnography. Intentionally gathering data from the perspective (in a quite literal and visual use of the word) of people who are experiencing homelessness provides the ability to see the city through their eyes. The images visually represent a form of life that the participants are living within.²⁰ Places and spaces are constituted and re-constituted over time by the people and groups that use these spaces. In ethnography “place” is a vital concept that includes the context of the research, but also the space in which I live. The ethnographer Sarah Pink uses theorist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s term “emplaced” as acknowledging the being-in-the-world status.²¹ Pink claims the visual ethnographer is to take seriously the way that places are not static physical realities but are also events that combine time and space in the bodies of the people involved in those events. Pink argues that this means “the visual ethnographer is to understand this process, and in particular the roles of audio-visual experience and media in it.”²² Pink explains this process in four steps: “First we investigate how the participants in our research make place themselves; second we reflect on how we collaboratively make place with research participants through research practice; third we consider how in representing our research we reconstitute place; and finally we anticipate how audiences/readers of our work in turn create place as they follow and add to its narratives.”²³

The Auto-photography project enables an understanding of the mobility of some of the homeless population in Red Deer, and the ability to visualize how the city is navigated. By identifying the location of the photos, and indicating them on a map, we can also start to see trends in what places create a “strange map” of where homelessness in Red Deer takes place.²⁴ This type of map expresses the location of homelessness. Cloke, May, and Johnsen argue that “the spatialities of homelessness convey

¹⁹ See, Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Philosophy in the flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to western thought*. Basic books, 1999. Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The bodily basis of meaning, imagination, and reason*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

²⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein’s term “form of life” is intentionally used here to refer the visual and physical representations that images provide for people and give rise the fundamental questions they ask, and determines to a large extent how a person experiences the world. This includes the linguistic, communal, psychological, behavioral, perceptual, historical etc. of the context that shape reality.

²¹ Pink, Sarah. "Mobilising visual ethnography: Making routes, making place and making images." *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. Vol. 9. No. 3. 2008.

²² Pink, 2008.

²³ Pink, 2008.

²⁴ Cloke, Paul, Jon May, and Sarah Johnsen. "Performativity and Affect in the Homeless City." *Environment and Planning. D, Society and space* 26.2 (2008): 241-263.

political and social significance that transcends some of these other urban practices more obviously related to the politics of pleasure.”²⁵ These photos will allow us to see Red Deer through the eyes of those who use and thus create the city’s streets and parks.

A key aspect of this photography project is that it was entirely the photographers choice as to what pictures they took. In this way it was not in the control of the researcher, which is fitting with our initial aims of seeking the perspective of those who are actually experiencing homelessness. As Johnsen, May and Cloke argue in another article: “in contrast to many other visual research methods, when analysed qualitatively auto- photography brings the intentionality of the author to the fore – enabling presentation of spaces that are important to them, and explicitly providing room for accounts of whether they consider them to be dangerous, mundane, ‘homely’, therapeutic (or what- ever), without having content and meanings imposed by the researcher.”²⁶

The instructions given to the participants were:

“You will be given a disposable camera with 27 pictures available to take. You are asked to go about your day as you normally would, and simply take a photo of the spaces and places you go. This may include stores, service providers, parks, restaurants, hang-out spots etc. Please take the photo of a sign, or from far enough away that the place can be identified. Please avoid taking photos of people unless you have permission to take their photo (any photos with people in them will be unused or faces blurred out to ensure confidentiality). “

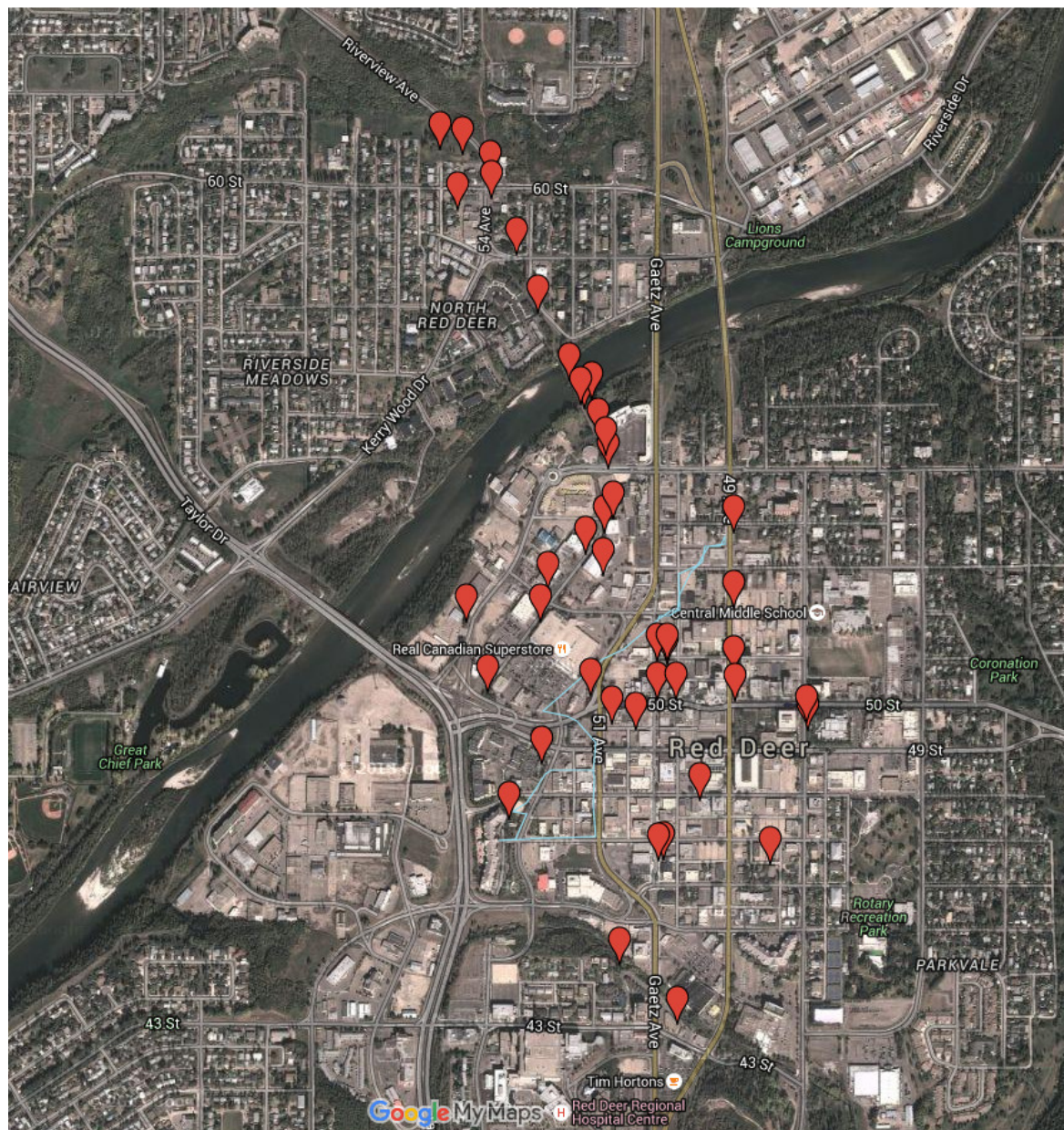
Participants were given the camera and asked to contact me when they were finished. There were seven participants who agreed to participate in this exercise. One person asked for another camera after some of her photos did not turn out as she’d wished. One participant wanted to participate by taking pictures with her cell phone, but did not finish the exercise. Two cameras were not returned. In the end there were five rolls of film developed, and three follow up interviews were conducted. Of the five sets of photos developed, three females, one male, and one couple (male and female) participated. The follow-up interviews were conducted with two females, and the male member of the couple. In total 98 images were collected and processed.

The map below (Fig 1.0) has indicators of the location of where the photos were taken. There are a few other photos both outside of this map (both to the north and the south). The vast majority of the photos were taken in the downtown area, and some indicators had multiple photos taken in the same location. The participants varied in the style, location, and content of their photos, and the participants voiced appreciation for the opportunity to share their experiences.

²⁵ Cloke, May, and Johnsen, 2008. 241.

²⁶ Johnsen, Sarah, Jon May, and Paul Cloke. "Imag (in) ing 'homeless places': using auto-photography to (re) examine the geographies of homelessness." *Area* 40.2 (2008): 194-207.

Fig. 1.0



The map (Fig 1.0) gives an insight into where in Red Deer people who were homelessness recognized as noteworthy locations. It does not include three photos which were taken outside of the displayed area.

The photography is reported as each participant presented in turn (with a few of their photos), including content from their follow-up interview. Only a selection of the photos have been chosen for inclusion in the report; they have been selected based on their significance and indicative value.

Tracey

Tracey is a 40-year-old female with a post-secondary qualification in business administration and technology support. She has lived in central Alberta her whole life, and was living in “tent city” (she referred to it as “the Compound”) prior to its take down and clean up. Tracey and her boyfriend have since found a place on private property and with the knowledge of the landowner have set up a campsite. As this site is located on the south side of Red Deer she does not come downtown very often or utilize many of the support services on a regular basis. She tries to go to the Line of Hope dinner on Sunday evenings at Potter’s Hands, noting that the bag lunch they provide is a nice feature. I met Tracey while visiting Turning Point (CAANS). They are her support service of choice if she needs something because of the “ease of the staff” and the non-judgmental approach to their work.

Tracey suffers from arthritis and lupus, which cause her chronic pain. She manages the pain with morphine. She is a recovering crack addict and has made progress in managing her addiction. Tracey uses a bike as her primary mode of transportation, and has no problem getting where she needs to go.

Fig. 2.0



In figure 2.0 one of the walls of Tracey’s camp is partially covered by branches. She and her partner have found a battery powered construction stereo for listening to music. Her partner takes pride in his construction abilities and is in the process of winterizing their camp. They do this by layering blankets and tarps over the walls and roof of their tent.

Fig. 2.1

Figure 2.1 is taken by Tracey from inside her tent. She explained that there is a partition wall, creating two rooms inside. They have ample space to live and be inside if the weather calls for it. They have walls around the camp to make a barrier for wind and animals, and have a separate tent for storage, with propane heaters for warmth. They cook with a small barbeque.

Fig. 2.2



Tracey's partner is an "organized hoarder" and has a large collection of bicycle parts to build and fix bikes. They also "go binning" both to find bottles for recycling, and also to find potentially useful items to fix up to use or sell. They frequent the landfill (Fig. 2.2) to find discarded items that have potential, and get "about 90 percent" of their items from there. This shows a generator which is quite valuable. They use kijiji (an online buy and sell site) to advertise items they fix and want to sell, and also look for odd jobs for cash. Neither of them receives income supports, and they rely on these other methods for money enough to survive. Figure 2.3 is a collection of things that Tracey's partner has gathered. Tracey also has a "buddy" that she visits occasionally for \$200 a night, which is an important source of income.

Fig. 2.3



One of the difficulties in living this way is the lack of access to laundry and showers. She does have some friends who allow her to shower at their place when she asks, but she said she does not usually do laundry. Instead, she will just discard items that are dirty, and get new clothes. These aspects of life are just normal at this point for someone who has been homeless for quite some time like Tracey has. Another constant feature of her experience of homelessness is theft. Tracey and her partner have “friends” who visit their camp when they are gone and take things from them. She mentions that stealing is like a game for many people. Someone steals from someone else, and this creates a need to replace that item and theft is usually the easiest option if the opportunity presents itself. This process continues and theft leads to theft and so on.

In speaking with the RCMP, this type of property crime is the majority of the criminal activity that is seen in regards to the street involved population. This is one example of where there is a conflict of narratives in the street involved community. On the one hand, people look out for one another, and are generous with what they have whether it is money, food, cigarettes, etc. On the other hand, you must “take care of your own stuff,” if you leave things unattended or in the care of someone else, it is your own fault and responsibility if it goes missing. This competition of narratives is an example of the complexity of survival instincts that plays out within the community of individuals experiencing homelessness.

Fig. 2.4



Figure 2.4 shows the inside of Tracey's tent, including a propane tank that they use for heating and cooking.

Fig2.5



Tracey's bicycle and bike trailer are pictured in Fig. 2.5. These bikes trailers are commonly used as transportation vehicles for possessions. In this case she is using it to collect and transport bottles to go to the depot. These bike trailers are very susceptible to theft and exchange hands very often.

In the follow up interview Tracey made it clear that although by "society's standards" she is homeless, she does not consider herself to be. "I am not homeless. I am houseless." Her home is her camp. She said they have made it their home, and they have the ability to do that. She acknowledges that it is her choice to live the way she does. She claims, "I am allowed to be different" and "have a place" that is outside of what is normally considered a home. She thinks the general perceptions of homelessness is that they are "scum" but that this judgment is based on very little experience with people who are experiencing homelessness.

Tracey is aware of the housing system of supports that are available and mentions that she has had a SPDAT done through CMHA (Canadian Mental Health Association).²⁷ Tracey was left with the impression following that process that she was not needy enough to qualify. She did not seem upset about this and recognized that there are people who probably need a place more than she does. She acknowledged that while there are options for folks trying to get housed there is a lack of availability in those options. She expressed the idea of maybe some transitional housing with or without supports where people

²⁷ The SPDAT (Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool) is used by the Red Deer Housing Team to prioritize the most acute needs for getting people housed.

could stay and lead a “normal life,” beyond just the change in housing status. Her idea of this involved a space with little requirements where she could stabilize her life to get some things in order like identification, healthcare, income supports and so on. So, while she claims that she is choosing to live in the way she does, she does not see herself having any other options to choose at the moment. “If I had another choice [she was referring to transitional type housing] I might choose that.”

The system for housing is very difficult according to Tracey. While there is supposed to be no requirement or expectation to gain access to housing supports, she still questions, “why on their terms and not on my terms?” From the beginning of the process there are requirements that are difficult for her to satisfy. She lists identification as a primary example. She doesn’t have ID and the little money she does have isn’t going to be spent on getting more, especially with all the theft that occurs.

Tracey is content with her housing situation at the moment and is not very worried about the winter coming. Her camp is home, and will remain so for the foreseeable future. The Landowner has not asked for anything in return from them and seems to be fine with their presence. She has not ruled out seeking housing support services in the future, but will remain “houseless” for the time being.

Derrick and Emily

Derrick and Emily have been homeless a number of times over the past 10 years. Derrick is a professional commercial and residential painter, and Emily has worked on and off in the food service and hospitality industry. They both have a history with substance abuse, and Derrick has struggled with compulsive gambling.

I met them at People’s Place shelter where they stayed for a few weeks. While they were waiting to get into People’s Place they slept outside in the park beside the shelter (Fig. 3.0). The two of them are very knowledgeable about the culture of the street involved in Red Deer and between them have a wide social network of people who have experienced homelessness. Their photos were thoughtfully taken showing their daily lives and highlighting many things that would not be thought of otherwise.

Fig 3.0



An example of the way they highlighted an aspect of their lives that would not normally be brought into direct consideration is shown by images Fig. 3.1 and 3.2. In Fig 3.1 the photo is of a paved path which is north of the train bridge. Derrick commented that he took the photo, which he called “the never-ending trail,” because a big part of the homeless experience involves walking. Derrick and Emily did have a car a few months ago before a couple events dictated that they sell it. He indicated that you are always walking from place to place. While they were staying at People’s Place he said that they would be crossing the train bridge probably 5-6 times a day--from People’s to Potter’s Hands, (Fig. 3.3) and back again.

Fig. 3.1



Fig 3.2



Figure 3.2 is a picture of Derrick and Emily's shoes. The importance of this photo may have been missed when initially looking at the photos, but in the follow-up interview Derrick highlighted this as a key photo. Having good footwear, and taking care of your feet is vital to having a sustainable life while experiencing homelessness. "Your feet take you everywhere" Derrick insisted. The "never ending trail" and the ability to get to meals, and other support services demand that your feet are in good working order.

Fig. 3.3



Derrick and Emily regularly have meals at Potter's Hand and Loaves & Fishes, and are grateful for the availability of meals in Red Deer. The availability of meals is common knowledge, and Derrick says, "if you go hungry in Red Deer you got a problem."

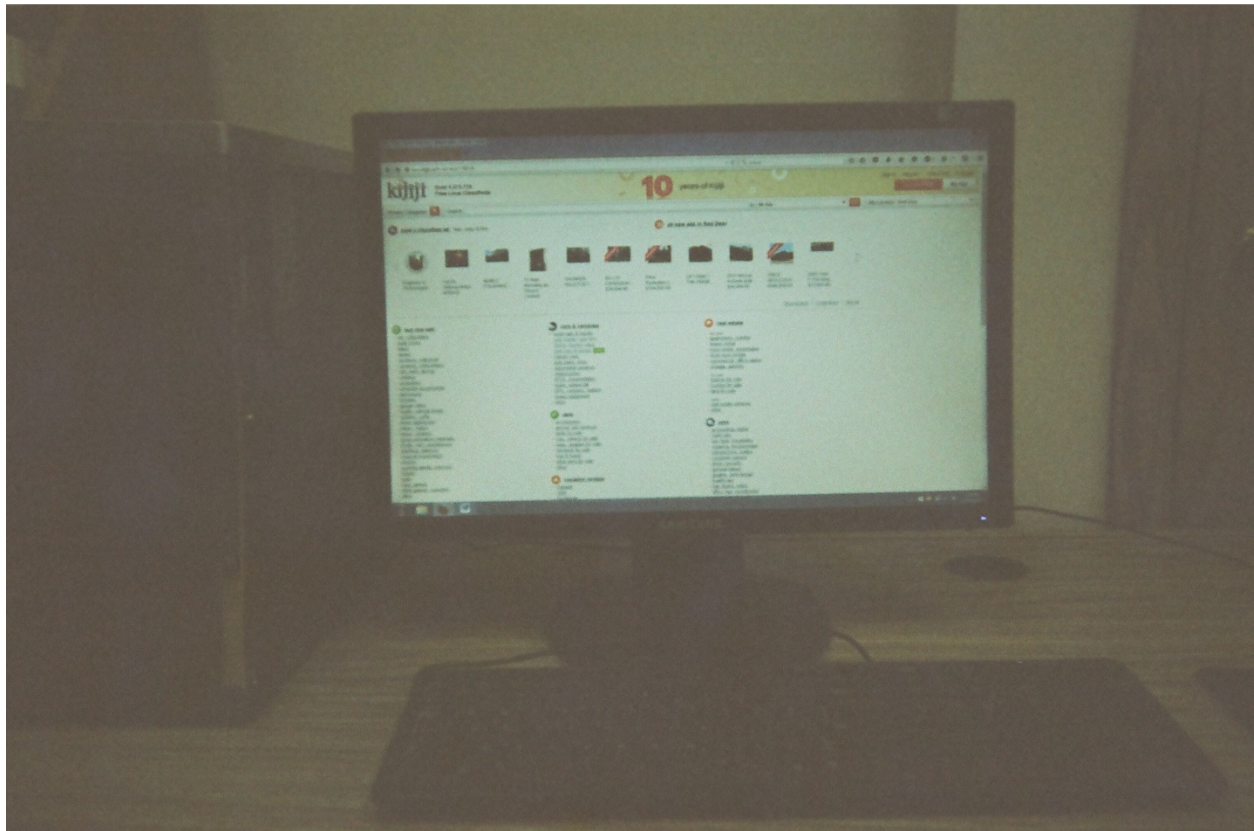
Emily uses the metaphor of a sandbox to understand the culture that exists in the street involved population. Everyone is in the sandbox, some play nice, and some do not. The sandbox represents all that is involved in survival and coping with the challenges of the social and survival dynamics that exist.

For Emily the challenge of managing life as a single mother with an addiction resulted in her children having to live with other family members. She has had difficulties holding down a job, but has recently started a job in the food service industry.

The temptations to cope with challenges involved in being homeless through drugs and alcohol are constant. One photo not presented here shows a liquor store, and Derrick mentions that while being temporary, this coping strategy is effective.

Derrick and Emily are not stagnant in their situation. They are both employable and in the time since they participated in this research they were able to get new jobs and find a place to live. They each meet with a case worker who is providing supports to help them maintain their housing. In the time they were in the process of finding work and a place they mentioned that finding a computer to access Kijiji was a daily routine. Figure 3.4 is representative of this routine. Here they are visiting the Red Deer Aboriginal Employment Services which worked great for them because it was not very busy and they were not limited in their access.

Fig. 3.4



They were well aware of the place and spaces downtown that serve as hang-outs or drinking spots. At different times in the past they have used many of these popular places themselves. “The Block” (corner of Ross and Gaetz Fig. 3.5) is one such place, which Derrick mentioned is “deadly at night.” He cited drugs and hookers as part of the reason why it is best to avoid this area at night.

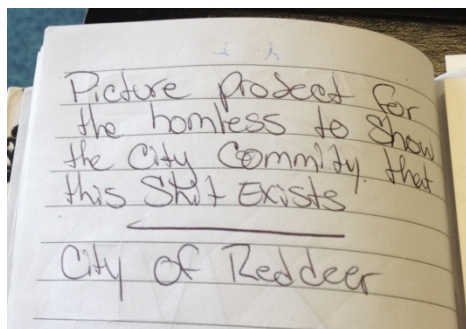
Another photo, not displayed, was one of an RCMP cruiser. Derrick mentioned that the relationship between the police and those experiencing homelessness is not positive. There is a feeling that due to the overlap with drugs and violence, people who may appear homeless, get a bad reputation. He said that when you are homeless you are “always looking over your shoulder. For some reason.” When you have a backpack on people assume you are up to something. He mentioned a time the week prior to our

conversation when he had been stopped and questioned by a peace officer while he was just looking in a tree area for something he had dropped.

Fig. 3.5



This couple has gone through a lot together, and have a relationship in which they help each other from falling. They are both hopeful that they will be able to maintain their housing this time round. They didn't agree that it was harder to navigate the system with being a couple. They had to sleep in separate beds at People's Place, but it was nothing that they weren't able to overcome. They had a confidence about being able to end their homelessness because they have gone through this before a few times. They seemed to feel like this was inconvenient and unfortunate but wasn't going to be a long-term issue for them. As mentioned, they were able to end their homelessness fairly quickly and are hopeful for the future.

AmyFig 4.0²⁸

Amy is a 22 year old female, with an opiate addiction (heroin and morphine). She grew up in a town in central Alberta and has lived in Red Deer for approximately three years. She was very happy to participate in the photography exercise and kept notes to correspond to each photo. Amy spends her time between downtown and the south side, and is quite mobile. She sleeps in different places, and sometimes in multiple places in a night if she gets kicked out of where she is (e.g. bank lobby, apartment building lobby).

Fig. 4.1



²⁸ These smaller photos (4.0, 4.4) were taken by the researcher of Amy's notebook.

Amy is a client at Turning Point (CAANS) seen in Figure 4.1 in the woman's program they have. The women's program aims to "create a safe and trusting environment to address the immediate needs of street-involved women."²⁹ CAANS is her support service provider of choice, and she wrote this note in reference to Fig. 4.1: " *Life changer/Saver* Without this place & the beautiful people that keep the place going I probably would either be dying of Aids/infection, be sick etc. They are my counselors and inspiration to do better. If I wasn't to be a part of this amazing needle exchange I would not be accepted for housing either! (Thanks)."

Many of the photos Amy captured were of places that were outside of public attention where in her words "people try to take cover to get high out of public view." The stigma around drug use is a reality that Amy deals with on a daily basis. Her struggle to find places and spaces that are private and not in plain view of the public, is a primary concern. In another note she has a photo of a woman who is sitting on a blanket, and Amy mentioned that she was just "trying to find a place to be without being bugged or getting asked to leave."

One place she goes is in the back of the Greyhound station (Fig. 4.2). She mentions this is a good place where no one bothers her, and she can charge her phone and get free wifi. There is also access to washrooms, and is located close to Tim Hortons, where she sometimes panhandles and gets food.

Fig 4.2



²⁹ See, <http://caans.org/what-we-do/women/> Accessed October 3, 2015.

Another thing that stands out from this photo is the amount that Amy has to carry around with her wherever she goes. She carries two backpacks (one on her back and one on her front, and a large shopping bag in her arm. She said that what people don't realize is how hard this wear and tear is on the backpacks, as the amount of use they get cause them to wear out very quickly. She has gone through multiple backpacks this summer.

Amy speaks very highly of her friends and the talents and skills that they have. In the photo below (Fig. 4.3) she captures her friend's talent of blowing glass. You can see he has a blow torch and heats up glass tubes to form them into pipes for smoking crack or meth. She praised his work as being very good, and thinks that he could probably make a career out of it.

Fig 4.3



The location of this photo (Fig 4.3) is discussed in her notes (Fig. 4.4). Again, the notion of finding a hidden place is a primary motivation, and her frustration in not having appropriate options shows. She is aware of the various options of income that would be available if she chose them (boosting, selling drugs, working the streets) but does not participate in these harmful activities. She does receive medical income support, but that will be expiring shortly. She has gone through the intake process with the Red Deer Housing Team, and has gone before the CAP (Coordinated Access and Placement) meeting. She is on the list to be placed in a housing program, but has not been matched with a program. Due to her SPDAT score (measures acuity), client choice (her housing preference), and the availability of spaces in the program that would best suit her needs, she has yet to be placed.

Fig 4.4

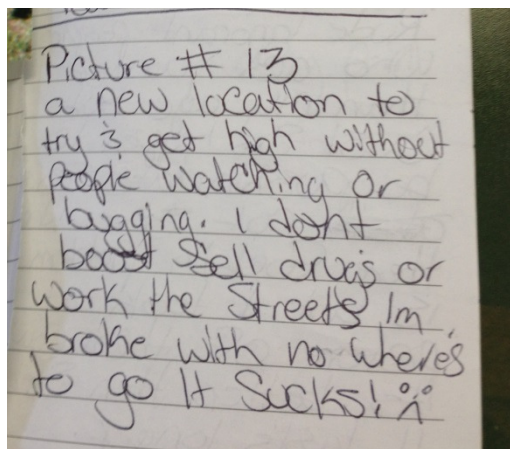


Fig. 4.5



In Figure 4.5 Gaetz Avenue IDA Pharmacy pharmacist Phil Drozd is standing outside his workplace.³⁰ Phil is an active proponent of harm reduction in the community and is a “great guy” according to Amy. Phil

³⁰ Phil agreed to have his photo published in this report.

runs an opiate program within his Pharmacy, a daily program designed to help individuals with an opiate addiction lower their dependence and do so in a safe and supervised manner. The pharmacy has received many complaints around needle debris in recent months and Amy reflects in her notes about the issues around needles:

“There have been complaints from home owners in the surrounding neighborhood towards the daily pickup people who go to the pharm due to some of those people injecting in public, leaving their gear/dirty rigs on the ground (or wherever these people got high) breaking into the apartment buildings simply to either do there down up in private and to have a nap (usually only and due to when it’s raining snowing or crappy weather outside) does the going inside part happen & is alot more common in the winter months. Regardless it’s still happening & because of those things it has caused alot of fighting chaos and angry homeowners.”

She continues her thoughts by considering the homeowners perspective: “lots of family's with little kids. Higher percentage risk than normal for getting Hep, AIDS, or a disease of some sort due to people leaving there dirty rigs behind.” Amy displays an awareness of the issue and the various aspects that have made needle debris a problem. People leaving their “dirty rigs” on the ground isn’t viewed favorably by Amy and she is a young user, which is one of the reasons often given for why there is an increase in needle debris.

Fig 4.6



Amy often visits the McDonald's on the south side and mentioned that sometimes the staff gives some food if they were otherwise going to have to throw it in the garbage. This location is open 24-hours-a-day, providing a warm space in the middle of the night if it is needed.

Sometimes she stays at Mats, but says that they only have four spaces for women, and the place is always full of drunk men. They are kind to her for the most part, but it is not her top choice for sleeping. Lately she has been sleeping in the lobby of an apartment building, and has had many of the tenants show her kindness. She mentioned one woman (a staff member) who allowed her to use her shower and do laundry. She enjoyed doing this photography project and was very disappointed that some of the photos that did not turn out. Amy survives with persistence and determination to keep going. She is hopeful that she will be placed in a housing program soon, and that she won't have to be homeless during the winter.

Kelly

Kelly is an aboriginal woman in her late thirties. She and her boyfriend took the photos of themselves and their friends over a period of a couple days. Unfortunately I was unable to connect with her to do a follow up interview. We had scheduled a follow-up interview several times, but we were unable to make it happen. She has an anxiety disorder and has been dealing with that. Kelly is an alcoholic and spends her days with other drinkers in the downtown.

Fig 5.0



Many of her photos included people who she was with during that time. Because of this most photos could not be used without revealing their identity. Her photos are very insightful and at times moving, due to the people pictured. A few of the photos reveal some of the places that are used by them for socializing and resting. Most of the photos are taken in the downtown area, and are in line with much of the mobility patterns that were witnessed in my observations.

In Figure 5.0 a friend of Kelly's is shown next to a tree in a small wooded area beside 54 Ave. In the background of the photo the store Fabricland can be seen. There were a number of photos taken in this location that shows its use as a gathering place for leisure and rest. Other locations featured in her photos are McDonalds (downtown location), beside Superstore, along Ross Street, and at Potter's hands (both the kitchen and the church).

The image in Fig. 5.1 shows a friend of Kelly's presumably sleeping under the clock at the corner of Ross St and 49 Avenue. A photo like this would benefit from additional context to hear what was happening and if that is where he stayed for the night, or just a short moment. When asked where they stay, Kelly would respond with "here and there" or "nowhere". I heard from a friend of hers that she did arrange some housing through one of the housing programs, but she did not confirm this to me.

Fig. 5.1



Shortly after she did the photography project her boyfriend left town. She admitted to me that she was sorry that she kept putting off our interview, but that she did not have the mental energy to re-visit the days and memories in the photos.

Kelly does use the meals that are provided in the community as key points that determine her mobility patterns. Figure 5.2 is of Potter's Hands kitchen. Located on 51 Street it provides a central location to access meals. As stated above, these meals act as a meeting place, and are integral to the rhythms of life

for many individuals. Kelly is a member of the downtown street involved population, and has people who look out for her wellbeing.

Fig. 5.2



Joe

I met Joe one day while visiting the shelter. He has immigrated to Canada from Eastern Africa, and has been homeless for most of the summer. He regularly goes to Diversified to get temporary work, but often there is no work available. Joe previously lived in Edmonton and said that it was easier to find work there, but he was hoping to stay in Red Deer. He was staying in the shelter when I met him, but was able to get housing a short while after he completed this project. I had scheduled a follow up interview with Joe multiple times but was unable to find a time that worked. He lost his phone over the course of the summer and this made the final connection more difficult.

Joe and I would meet at Loaves and Fishes, a support service he would use on a regular basis. Joe's photos were a very good representation of the mobility route between Loaves and Fishes and the downtown. There are also photos of the paths in the Pines area. Joe mentioned that he had a campsite in that area previously to staying in the shelter.

Fig. 6.0

Similar to Derrick and Emily who were staying in the shelter while they were doing the photography, the train bridge (Fig. 6.0) over the river is a key feature in Joe's photos. As a pedestrian and bicycle friendly bridge this is a key location for those traveling over the river. Joe also had a photo from underneath the bridge, which was unique in the photos collected.

Fig. 6.1 is located to the east of the Fabricland/Cannery building (53 Ave). This area is along the route from the bridge toward the downtown. Sharing 53 Ave is Safe Harbour Society including their Mats shelter and their detox program. They have noted an increase in this area as a hangout space and have seen increase in needle debris.

Fig 6.1



Fig 6.2



Joe was able to access housing over the summer. The photos he took provides insight into the daily walking routes, and also the distance covered on foot. His photos reveal both the urban and green space (Fig 6.3) that make up the spaces that Red Deer offers for discreet uses.

Joe took photos that were located the furthest North of the downtown. Figure 6.2 shows a sign indicating the trails in the Pines area of the Waskasoo Park. It would have been interesting to hear what this area was used for by Joe and his companions, but as he said he previously had a campsite in this area. The City Parks department does deal with moving people on from non-sanctioned camping in public parks on a daily basis.

Fig 6.3



Conclusions

The Auto-photography exercise succeeded in providing a visual glimpse into the lives of those experiencing homelessness. The places and spaces these folks captured are familiar and are shared by many in Red Deer daily. The photos give us an idea of how these spaces and places are used and therefore an understanding of the meaning that is made through how they function. For those who are experiencing homelessness, certain places are emphasized by their importance to enable essential survival functions. Shelter, meals, socializing etc. are vital to human existence, and in a position of lack, spaces not normally associated with such activities are pressed into service for them.

Insight into what uses the spaces in these photos are being used for enables an understanding of how these individuals are experiencing everyday life. The relationship to the physical infrastructure of the city provides these individuals with the raw data that they then interpret creatively to satisfy their

needs. One can imagine the different lenses with which someone would see physical spaces if they were looking for a place to sleep for a while, or a place to have some private space for a time.

The relationship also provided new insights into the intersection between the physical and the social world. The majority of the photos are in “safe” places socially, i.e. where the participants were outside of the mainstream enough to avoid unnecessary social judgement or interaction. In Amy’s photos and notes the theme of finding a place to not be bothered or to have some privacy was nearly constant. In many of the other photos the participants were in places that were consonant with the observations of where people who are experiencing homelessness tend to be. The mobility routes are not merely based on efficiently getting from point A to point B, but also take into consideration where they are accepted.

Some places provided an increased social pressure and barriers to inhabit while others are more acceptable, and do not insight interactions.

The auto-photography project, while being both time and resource intensive, proved to be invaluable in providing insight and visual references to what homelessness is like in Red Deer. While it was difficult to arrange follow-up interviews and to find people to have the camera’s returned, the participants seemed to enjoy the process, and to have contributed to enabling people to understand more how they experience living in Red Deer. This activity gave the participants an active voice in showing what their lives are like. The data collected from these photographs is truly from their perspective, and could not be determined by the researcher. In this way, this most clearly achieved our goal of hearing from the perspective of those actually experiencing homelessness.

Walk-along Interviews

As a further method of data-collection in line with seeking to understand the perspective of those who are experiencing homelessness walk-along interviews were arranged. Many people declined participation for various reasons, and with the time restrictions in place, only three were able to be completed. In each case there was a verbal informed consent checklist that was agreed upon by the participant prior to beginning the interview. The walk-along interviews lasted between 2.5 and 5 hours and took place where the participants had arranged me to meet them. The walk-along interviews consisted in accompanying participants on foot with their daily activities for the duration of the interview. Open-ended questions were asked to gather their perspective on the desired outcomes of this research.

As N. Sunderland et al. explore in their article “What does it feel like to live here? Exploring sensory ethnography as a collaborative methodology for investigating social determinants of health in place”, this type of interview allows the researcher to gather more data (sensory) from the interview than traditional interview method. They explain that methods that seek more sensory data are beneficial because they cross “more ‘modes’ of experience” and “provide a rich exploration of local experience.”³¹ They explain that walking is a preferred method for this type of data collections “because it gives the researcher more time to experience a range of sensory experiences that local residents are exposed to. This experience might include particular smells, atmospheres (for example, relaxed or stressful),

³¹ Sunderland, N., et al. "What does it feel like to live here? Exploring sensory ethnography as a collaborative methodology for investigating social determinants of health in place." *Health & place* 18.5 (2012): 1058.

amenities, and ways of interacting in spaces such as cafes, stations, or bus stops.”³² This type of interview is acknowledged by them as uniquely suited to study the interactions and relationships between humans and their environments. With this in mind this type of research activity is very apt for the outcomes we are seeking.

The walk-along interviews were mapped by the researcher after each was finished, and notes were taken throughout on the interviewer’s phone.

Daniel

I walked with Daniel from 11:00 AM to 3:00 PM on September 1, 2015. Daniel is a 54-year-old Caucasian male who has been experiencing homelessness sporadically since 2004. He has lived in Red Deer for 16 years, and prior to Red Deer he lived in Ontario.

I met Daniel by the Provincial Government Building on 51 Street. He had just come from meeting with Alberta Supports, where he was arranging to go to a treatment center for his addiction. He has been addicted to crack cocaine for a number of years and has had seasons of being clean throughout. He mentioned that boredom and lack of meaningful daily activity contribute to him relapsing. Daniel is divorced and has two children. He sees them occasionally and has a functional relationship with his ex-wife.

He is committed to not letting his children see him when he has been using or drinking, and this leads him to go either out of town, or far away from the downtown, where there would be increased chances he would be seen. He spent a couple weeks in detox at Safe Harbour Society which was good, but when his time was up, he was back to the same living arrangement and patterns. He mentioned that the wait times to get into treatment was so long, that he was likely going to relapse and have to go to detox again prior to going to a treatment facility in Calgary in mid-October.

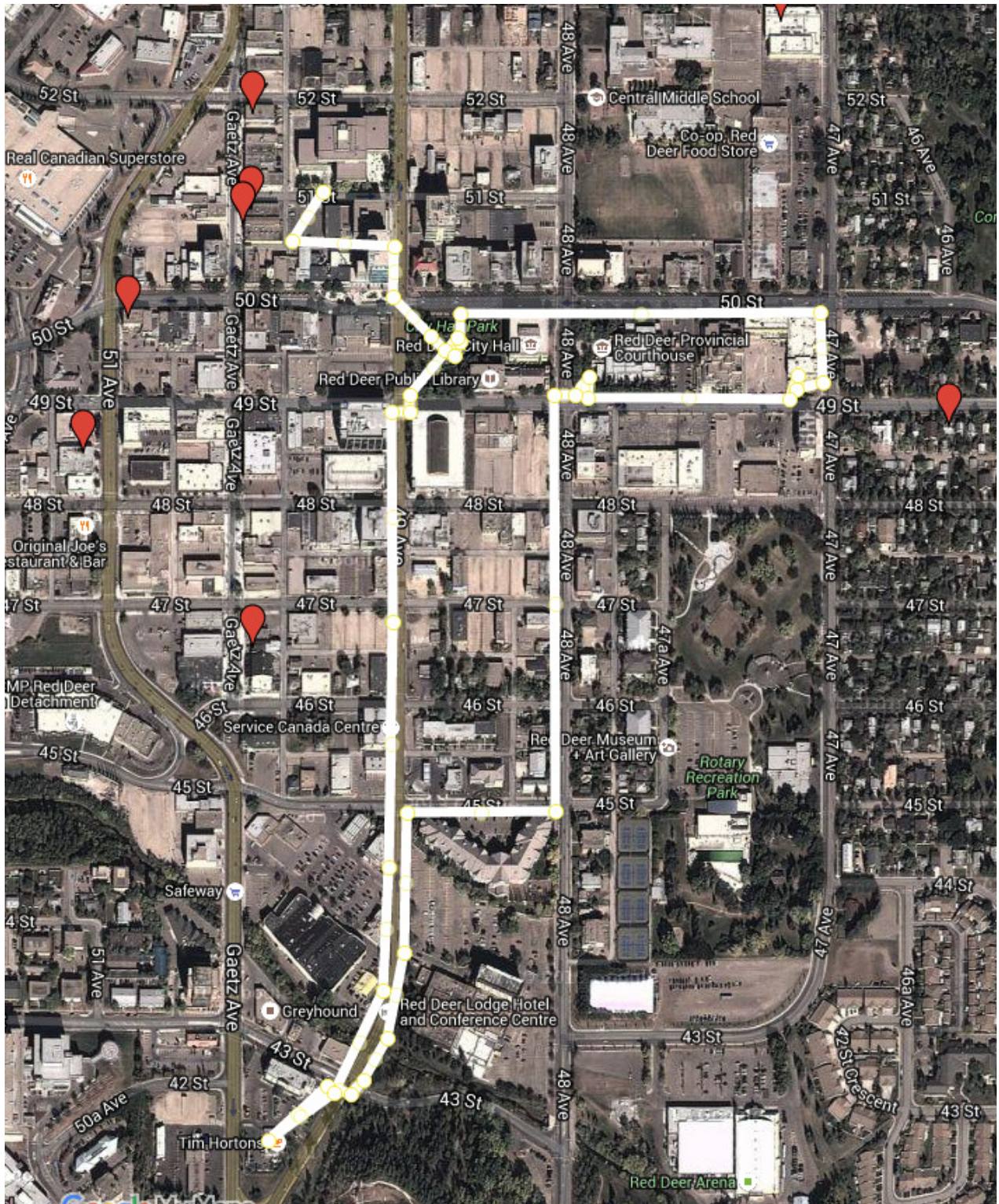
We walked to the City Hall Park and sat on a table and talked for a while. He mentioned that he has been staying at People’s Place shelter for most of the summer. He explained to me the differences between the systems of housing and social assistance in Alberta and Ontario, and seemed to think that Ontario offered slightly more than what Red Deer has. Daniel’s mobility patterns are fairly standard and he says he lives a boring life. He eats at the meals provided, and spends significant amount of time in the downtown library, (where he can use the computers and read), and the Jackpot Casino.

We left the park and walked east to go to the Casino where they have daily draws for a \$1000 prize. Anyone can enter this draw with proper ID, and is eligible to win if they are in the room. They have complimentary coffee and tea, and he says he often watches TV there. “They don’t seem to mind as long as you don’t bother anyone” he tells me. He figures that the lack of ID by many people is why more of the homeless population don’t use the casino as he does.

From the Casino we walked to the Courthouse where we sit on a ledge and he tells me more of his story. He used to work up north in the oil industry and had a good and steady income for many years. It was in this stage that his addiction became an issue. He would have time off enough to party and then clean up before he had to go back to his work camp in northern Alberta.

³² Sunderland et al. (2012): 1059.

Fig. 7.0³³



³³ Walk-along route with Jonathan. The indicators on the map are various support services.

Daniel has had a range of work experience from warehouse management, trades, factory work, to delivery driver. He has more recently worked as a driver for a not for profit organization in Red Deer, but they restructured and his position was terminated. He is very skeptical about how and why organizations let people go to serve their own interests. He cited that his benefits were about to start when his position was terminated. He has also worked for a temp agency but got frustrated with the corruption of the middle agency making much more than the laborers.

After losing one job a few years back Daniel was collecting EI for a period of time. Due to a clerical error he was given more money than he was due, and this lasted for months. He was unaware of this situation and it resulted in him owing thousands of dollars. He sought legal help to sort out this problem but was unsuccessful in getting the outcome he wished. This debt does not seem to concern him too much, as he says they can only take a certain percentage per month, and if he isn't working (he is currently unemployed) they cannot take any.

He thinks he would be a very good employee for many organizations and thinks that the younger generation of workers is not as capable as those with more experience. For him, a lack of an adequate income and stable job is what he attributes to his continued homelessness. He has a caseworker with Red Deer Housing Team, but plans to actively find a place are on hold until he is through his treatment. When he last lost his housing he was able to access a small storage unit in North Red Deer at a discounted price. He put most of his belongings and winter clothes in storage there. He has had trouble paying a couple months, but mentions that they have understood and he did pay them back eventually.

We then walked to Tim Hortons and he tells me that he would shoplift, steal and pick bottles to feed his addiction. He says that this is common behavior, and that he has never been caught. He is contemplating moving away from Red Deer because of many of the negative people and places that have kept in in a cycle of addiction. He has the desire to stay clean, and start fresh. This will be difficult, he thinks, in Red Deer. When he goes to treatment in October in Calgary, he will pursue connecting with their housing first program and hopefully have a fresh start in Calgary.

We end up back at City Hall Park, and run into a person Daniel used to know years ago. We talk for a little while longer, and then end our interview. Daniel is a friendly man with many stories from his years. He is comfortable in Red Deer, he knows the system of support providers well, and knows most folks in the street-involved community. He admitted that he will likely relapse again before going to treatment. "When there is nothing to do you fall back into old habits" he tells me. Although he has a general plan for the future he says that he tries to take one thing at a time. He acknowledges wanting to have everything sorted at once is "an addict mindset." He is focused on one step at a time, and is looking forward to his planned fresh start in the coming months.

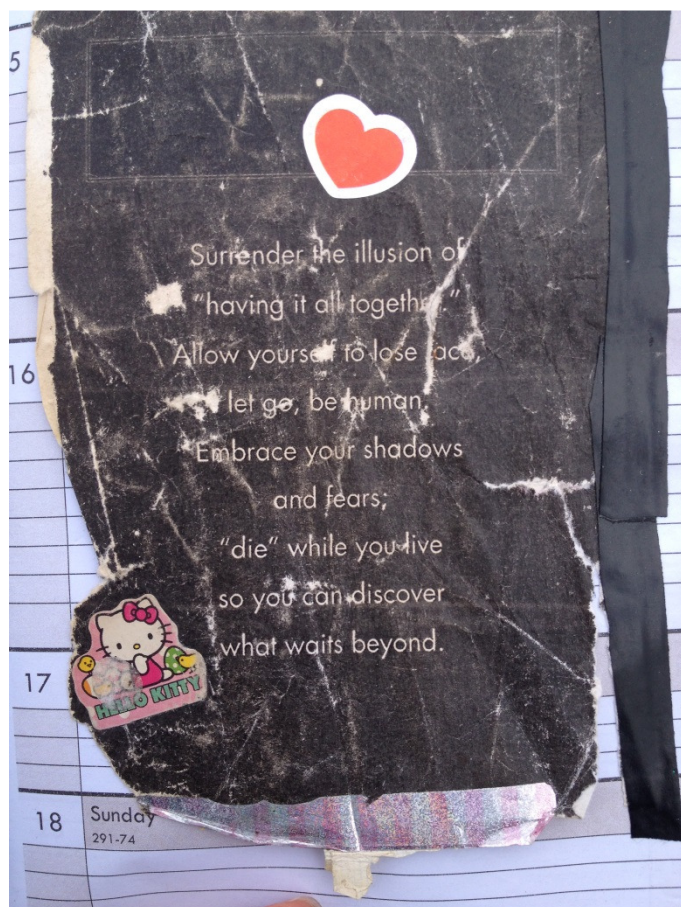
Sheryl

Sheryl is a 47-year-old Aboriginal woman who has lived in Red Deer since 1984. She has experienced homelessness on and off from 2002. She points to the death of her mother as a contributing factor to her becoming homeless. She has an addiction, and collects AISH. She often sleeps outside or couch surfs at a friend's place. The day I was with her (Monday September 14) she had not slept the night before and was noticeably agitated. We met at the Red Deer Native Friendship Society, where she goes often.

She prefers RDNFS to some of the other support service providers because they know her and it isn't very busy there. She made a phone call to a friend she was very worried about.

From RDNFS we walked to the spray park area (which was not operating) and she told me about her son who had taken his own life two years ago. She told me that he also was a drug user and that he had a mental illness. It was very close to the two year anniversary of his death, and she was only able to speak of him briefly before becoming emotional and wanting to change the subject. She showed me a page she has taped in her day planner (Fig. 8.0) that has helped her in dealing with the loss of her son. She mentioned that her depression is at times quite bad and that she tried to end her life a couple weeks ago. After sitting briefly at the edge of the spray park, she wanted to move on.

Fig. 8.0



We were close to the apartment building where her friend who she was calling from RDNFS lives, so we walked over and she called him on the intercom. It was busy, which assured her that he was there and that he was okay. After trying a couple more times we left. She told me of her addiction past, and that crack was her drug of choice for many years. She tries not to use, but usually still does. She mentioned having some pint (meth) in her possession at the time. She suffers from arthritis and is in pain regularly. She also mentions that she sells Percocet for extra cash to supplement her income.

She used to work as a prostitute, and one negative thing about being in the downtown is seeing people who remind her of that, or try to solicit from her still. She does not want to be reminded of this, but still

enjoys being in the downtown community. She has been around long enough that she knows everyone, and has a collection of names and numbers from throughout the years. She said that participating in the downtown community is itself like an addiction. “I miss the chaos” she says if she is away from the downtown for a while.

Fig. 8.1³⁴



³⁴ Walk-along route with Sheryl.

We walked back to RDNFS and met up with her boyfriend Tom. He is just newly homeless (within a couple weeks) and Sheryl is showing him the ropes. He tells me that it is a different world when you are homeless and that I should really spend a night outside to understand it. He has used more and different drugs in the two weeks being homeless than he would have ever considered before.

We walk together to the Superstore gas station, where Tom buys cigarettes. They want to have some beer, and so we continue on to the 49th Street Liquor Store. Tom purchases a 24 pack, and we go and sit in one of Sheryl's spots beside the MNP building on 53 Street. She smokes a little bit of marijuana while we talk. She likes to laugh and have a good time, and tries to not focus on the negativity that so easily comes to mind.

I ask Sheryl about housing and if she has a plan for the winter. She laughs and tells me that she doesn't think about the future. It is only a moment at a time. I asked her if she had a plan for that night, and she said no, but that they would be fine. She has the confidence and experience of many years of homelessness in Red Deer to come up with a suitable arrangement when she needs it. One place that she often stays is the Aladdin Motor Inn (7444 Gaetz Ave) where she says she can get a room for \$800 a week.

Before her son died she was able to access housing through the housing support system. She had a case worker through CMHA and she and her son, who was unwell, were able to access housing quite quickly. She thinks that now, however, she does not have as high needs and will probably not qualify for housing. She has not recently sought housing supports, and she does not seem like she will in the near future. She claims to know everyone who works in the support services in Red Deer, and knows where to go if she needs anything.

When I asked her about what she needs and what could maybe help her, she said that she would like a bit of acknowledgement from the general public and people in authority that "it is hard out here." She mentioned that a blanket, some mittens, and some hot cocoa, would go a long way to helping. It seemed like she was looking for an occasional reminder that she was not the problem. I didn't get the sense that she was merely looking for a hand-out, but rather a deeper acknowledgement of what someone who is experiencing homelessness has to deal with on a given day.

We ended our walk-along interview by a bench at the start of little Gaetz. When I ran in to Sheryl a couple of weeks following our walk-along, she mentioned that she had been able to stay clean for a period of time, and that she is doing quite well. She was still with Tom and they were seemed to be doing well.

Sheryl is someone who would likely score quite high on the SPDAT, due to her medical condition, addiction, and length of time she has been without a home. But due to her previous experiences, and what she believes about the housing system, is not in a position to seek out housing supports.

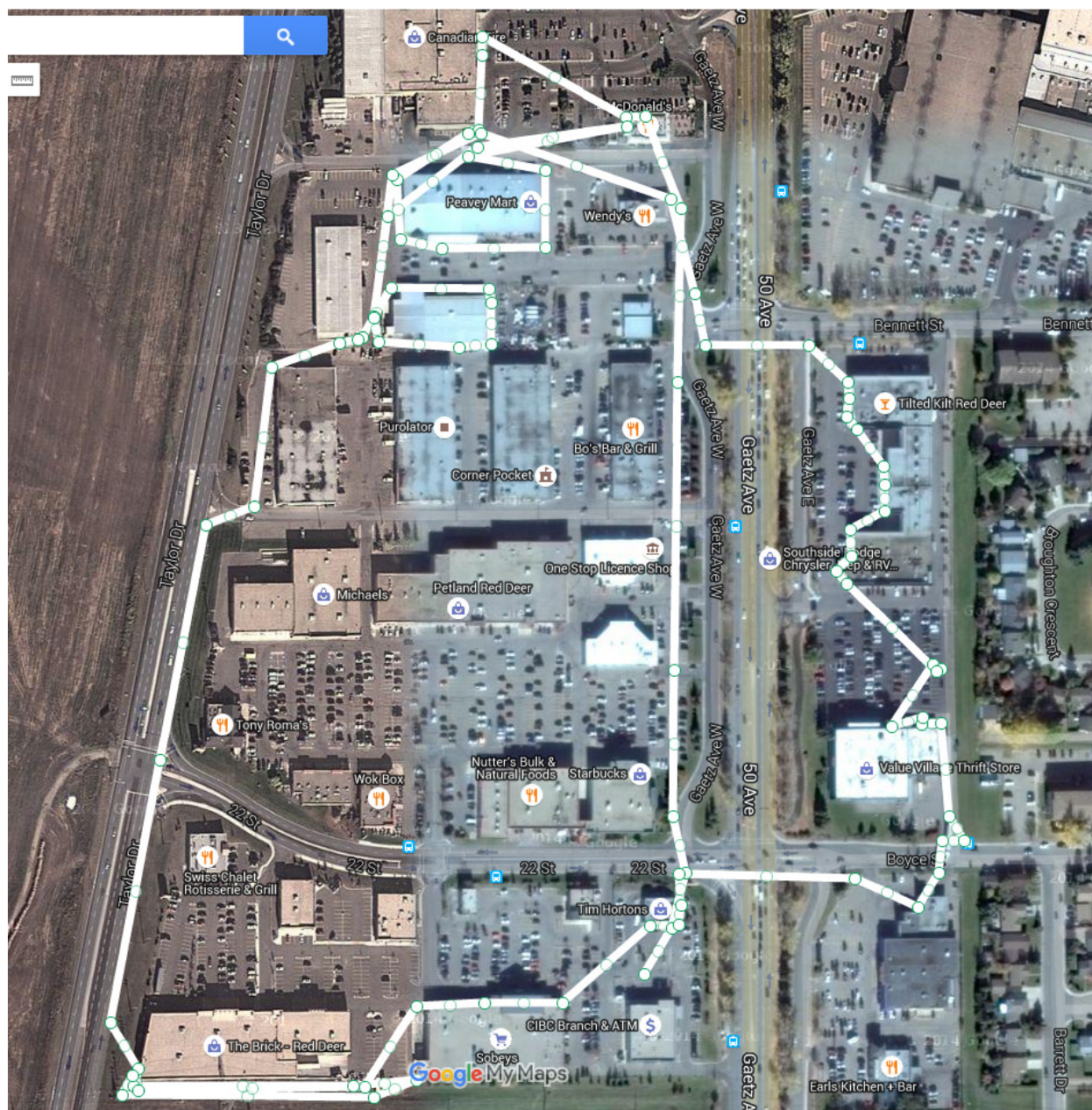
Jonathan

Jonathan is a Cree man in his mid 40's. He chooses to live on the Southside of Red Deer to avoid the drama of downtown. Most of the summer he slept in a sports field with no shelter. When it rained or got too cold he has a couple of apartments or bank lobbies he goes too. He prefers the south (he has

also lived in the downtown, and the north at other times) because he says the people are more kind and generous on the south side. Jonathan is a friendly man who uses kindness as a main strategy in panhandling and when asking for food when needed. His personal hygiene habits are difficult to maintain because of his lack of access to bathing facilities.

I met Jonathan downtown initially, but he says he only comes about once a week. He sometimes has meetings with a support service provider, and sometimes goes to Potter's Hands for a meal. The Southside area is where Jonathan goes about his regular routines.

I joined Jonathan in the parking lot of Tim Hortons (5111 22 St), at 7:00am on August 31. We walked to McDonalds (2502 50Ave) where he regularly gets coffee in the morning. He had a coffee card, which allowed him a free coffee, the customer service attendant took Jonathan's card, got his coffee and slipped the card underneath the receipt and passed it back to him, ensuring Jonathan could get another coffee when he needs it.

Fig 9.0³⁵

At McDonald's we met a friend of Jonathan's (Frank) who also is experiencing homelessness and chooses to stay on the south side. The morning is structured around waiting for 10AM, also known as "post-time." Post-time refers to when the Liquor stores open and they can start drinking. I went with Jonathan on a brief walk in front of Canadian Tire, and Peavey Mart, looking for bottles or cans to add to the bag of recycling to take to the depot when it opens. We found a few and head back to McDonald's where Jonathan got a refill of his coffee.

³⁵ Jonathan's walking route.

They read the newspaper as we wait for 8:30 when the bottle depot opens. Frank rolled a cigarette from butts he had picked and they went outside to smoke it. Jonathan's bag of recycling was taken from his hiding spot overnight and he was frustrated and disappointed about that because now he will not have enough to buy beer at "post-time". Theft of this kind is normal and is not entirely unexpected. They meet another man experiencing homelessness, who was riding a bike. He reminds Jonathan that they shared a bank entry way a few nights previous. Jonathan compliments his bike and the man offered to sell it to him for \$40.

Jonathan and Frank realized that 8:30 had passed and we headed over to the bottle depot (2410 50 Ave). There is a line-up of cars and we waited quite a while to get up to the window. Between Frank and Jonathan they get around \$8 which is enough to get some beer at 10:00. Eating did not seem to be a high priority on that day, and after redeeming their bottles we hangout next to a nearby building. By this time it was just after 9:00 and "the longest hour of the day" had begun. Frank told me that by the time 10:00 comes he will be shaking from alcohol withdrawal. Two others men join us there. One who has camped outside on the Southside for years, and another street-involved man who is couch-surfing.

Jonathan told them that he is developing an abscess in his mouth and is contemplating pulling out the tooth himself. They talked through some possible solutions and urge him to get it attended too because that can be very dangerous. He has lost his ID and his treaty card which would allow access to dental care, and his income support has run out. He is trying to get on medical income supports but has not been approved yet. They share stories of similar dental concerns and the difficulty of accessing some of the more subsidiary health services.

While he doesn't have many clothes or possessions, he does choose what he wears intentionally. He shows his shirt to one of the guys so they can read it (Fig.9.1).

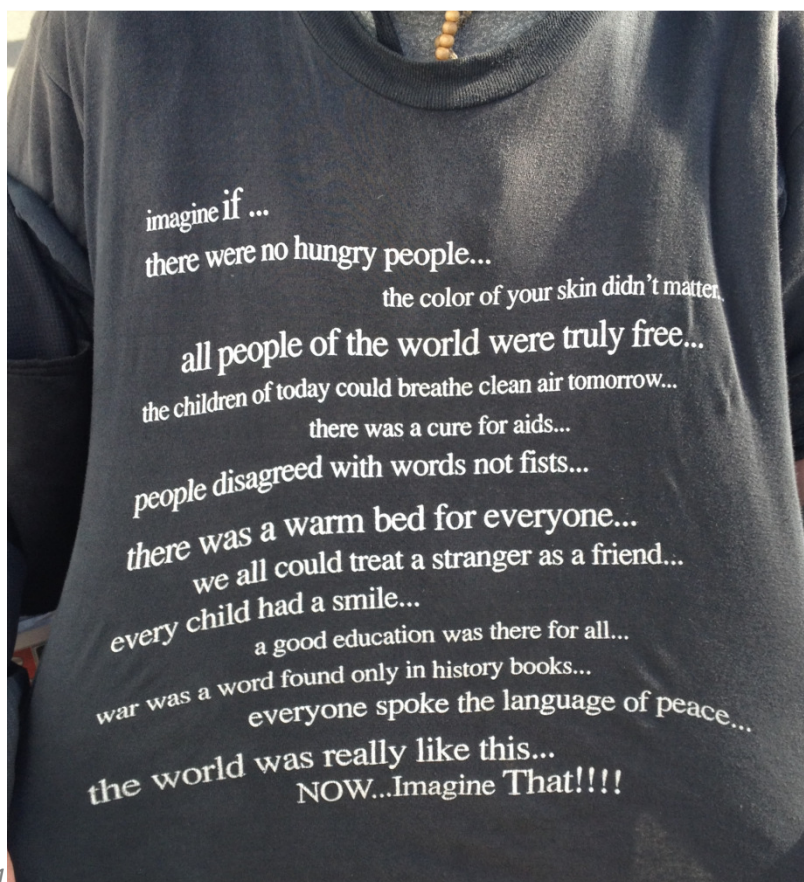


Fig 9.1

Jonathan said that he is “sick of being homeless” and that he wants a place of his own. He has had an alcohol addiction for years, and recalls his first drink as a child at age 6. Both his parents were alcoholics and he started drinking heavily in his teens. Jonathan served seven years in jail for Breaking and Entering. He says that he used to be more violent and angry, but has “chilled out” over time. He attributes this reality to age and learning hard lessons.

Alcohol is Jonathan’s only real problem, he told me. He doesn’t use drugs and has “virgin arms” indicating that he has never used intravenous drugs. When it was 10:00 the rest of the men went to the liquor store to get beer, and Jonathan and I walked to the Brick (5111 22 St). Jonathan has a little set up behind the brick, including some cardboard and a blanket (fig 9.2). He told me his cousin who is also currently experiencing homelessness was there recently too. We walked over to behind the Sobey’s and he shows me another person’s sleeping place and checked for some bottles in a couple dumpsters.

Fig. 9.2



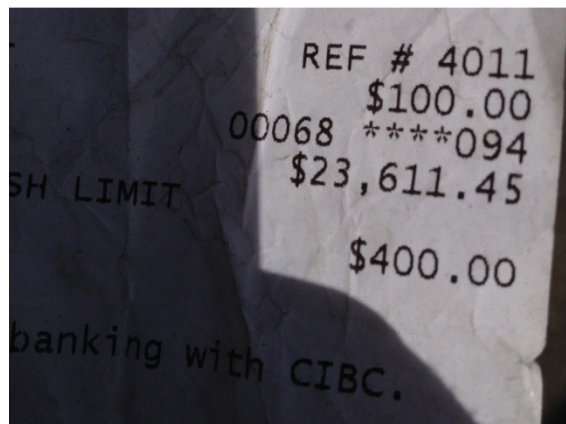
We headed back behind the brick (southwest corner) where there is an area that is shielded behind a berm and not visible from Taylor Drive and far from the front entrance. The other men join us and we sit on the ground and they share stories of recent days and of memories from the past. They all have stories from other places in Alberta, most having lived in both Edmonton and Calgary for a while. They share stories of the kindness of strangers and the how sometimes the random acts of kindness make all of the difference for them.

We stay long enough for the guys to have a couple of beers, and for the others share a couple with Jonathan, and then Jonathan was eager to start picking bottles. We walked behind the Brick to in front of Sobey's, over to Tim Horton's, across Gaetz to Mac's and then north along the shops there. Jonathan checked all the garbage cans and bins along the way, and disposes of bottles tops and other garbage. He said that this is a regular route and each person sort of respects the places that other's pick. We ran into a man who knew Jonathan and chatted with him for a while. He gave Jonathan a few apples and some words of encouragement before we went on our way.

We finished the route and were back at the bottle depot just before 12:00 noon. Jonathan takes out a ATM receipt from his pocket which he found the week before. He had taken it out about once an hour while I was with him. He was shocked at how a person could have \$23,611.45 in their account. There was an awe that was clear in him about how this could exist. He didn't say why he was still carrying it with him, or whether it was related to a feeling of hope or shame, or something else. This stayed with

me in the days following the interview. The financial gap that exists between someone like Jonathan and the income of an average working citizen in Red Deer is staggering.

Fig. 9.3



Jonathan had a meeting the day after our interview with a worker from Safe Harbour. He is interested in getting his own apartment through the Red Deer Housing Team, and has started the process. I found him a couple of weeks later and he has met with his case worker a couple of times, but has not been placed in a program yet. He is hoping to get something before the winter comes. Jonathan has a good routine with his group of Southside friends who look out for one another.

Conclusions

The walk-along interviews were an apt method to achieve our objectives. The hours spent with each participant allowed not only insight into their daily activities, but also the sensory data that they encounter as a part of their day. The mobility routes taken may not have been the route taken every day, but they are indicative of the places and routes that are a part of their regular lives. In each case the routes taken were familiar to the participants and reflected a regular feature of their lives.

Beyond these features of the data collected, an additional feature of this method was the ability to see the motivations and desires behind what dictates their mobility. For example, Jonathan's mobility routine is directly related to the ability to buy beer. His bottle collecting route, drinking spots, and pre-"post-time" routines are focused around the ability to buy beer at 10:00 and ensure that he (and his friends) are able to drink it in relative peace. In Daniel's case his motivations were more directed at trying to keep busy and not fall into boredom and bad habits.

Sheryl's motivations were more difficult to read, and her mobility was more impulsive than the others. As she said she takes the moments as they come with little thought about the future. Her immediate desires dictate her next steps.

While my walk-along with Daniel was limited in terms of interactions with other people, there were many places the he chose to spend time that enabled observations to be made about his interactions with the public. Sheryl's walk-along was interesting because Tom brought another perspective on the experience of homelessness that was quite different than hers. He was newly experiencing homelessness while she was very experienced and comfortable with her experience in homelessness.

Jonathan's walk-along involved much more interaction with friends and the dynamics shared amongst them was very interesting to observe. On the one hand they looked out for each other and shared their beer with Jonathan, but on the other hand there was an underlying priority of self. Jonathan secretly told me he would not be surprised if one of them was the person who stole the bottles he collected the previous day. He wasn't too upset about it, and acknowledged that if he found a bag of bottles, and wasn't sure who they belonged to he would take them.

Jonathan would smile and use polite language when interacting with people who might give him money. It was as if he had a mode of body language and matter of speaking when he would be getting ready to ask someone for money. He seemed to have a good success rate and many years of honing his technique.

One of the difficulties in reporting was due to some of the alternative sensory data. There are many smells and sights that cannot be transmitted via text. Alternatively, the non-verbal and emotional moments that informed my overall impressions and insights from the walk-along interviews were vital to the cooperative meaning that was made during the interviews.

Although there were only three walk-along interviews completed, the data collected was very meaningful in terms of the role it has played in helping to achieve an understanding of the experience of homelessness in Red Deer. The subsequent treatment of the Focus Group Discussions are used in relation to the previous data presented from the more firsthand perspective from those who are experiencing homelessness.

Focus Group Discussions

The Focus Group Discussions were a rich source of communal voices around the complex forces at play involving individual's experience of homelessness. There were five focus groups that were organized with participants who interact with people experiencing homelessness on a regular basis. Each group discussion will be treated in turn, before overall themes and insights are presented.

Each group was asked a similar set of open-ended questions around their experience with homelessness, the issues surrounding homelessness (including what the response has been and what has not been done), and the process of moving people into stable housing. Each group was asked to speak from their perspective in their roles but also to include their personal reflections.

Downtown Business Association

This focus group included members of the Downtown Business Association including business owners, managers, and members of the DBA staff. The insights from the business community in the downtown are vital to helping them thrive in their role. Hearing their perspective on these issues and the concerns they have as the downtown business community enabled a particular understanding of the frustrations around some of the social challenges that emerge from density of people who are experiencing homelessness being in the downtown.

Many of the participants shared that they were unaware of the congregation and the "problem" of homelessness in the downtown prior to them working in the area. The concerns around safety and feelings of insecurity when having street-involved people around (similar to the letters sent to Mayor

and Council) was another common topic. One business owner mentioned that “there is not an ID card” that indicates who is homeless and who is not.³⁶ He offered that one can assume that many of the people who loiter and spend their days in the downtown are at least unemployed.

The DBA gets many calls from member businesses around the “issues” they are having with the street-involved population. These issues range from cleanliness and hygiene concerns to needle debris, and folks loitering and making their employees and customers uncomfortable. There was a recognition that the frequency of these “issues” changes over time. While some people reported fewer incidents this summer, others reported a significant increase over previous summers. The mobility routines were acknowledged as influencing or compounding these issues. The location of support service providers, and the change in physical infrastructure (roads, and paths) among other things was indicated as likely factors in mobility.

One metaphor that emerged from the discussion is that of a house (and the function of different rooms within a house) as a way of understanding the homeless experience. It was shared that for a person who is experiencing homelessness, the street is their “living room.” The activities that someone with a living room would undertake in that space, (relaxing, conversing, having a drink etc.) have to be done elsewhere. Another participant took the metaphor further and argued that it is not only the “living room” but also the “kitchen,” the “bathroom,” and “bedroom.”

This metaphor played out in different ways. On the one hand, there was discomfort in the room with people using public and private outdoor spaces for uses commonly located in a home. This response included the desire for people to stop using these spaces for these activities. This was the response shared by a majority of the participants. The other response was to see these people as “neighbors” because of the physical proximity and desire to share the spaces around their business.

One noteworthy exception in the discussion was the participant who shared this later view. As a business owner he has increased engagement with the street-involved participation, and was the only member of the discussion who stated that he has seen a positive trend in dealing with the “issues” and “problems” that arose in the discussion. He claimed that they have trained their staff to be more tolerant and to understand that “everyone does have a name” and they try to learn and use people’s names as a practice of reception.

The challenges that come from being downtown, including the safety concerns involved with the street-involved population, is a significant contribution when it comes to a business deciding to stay in the downtown, or move elsewhere. There were two members of the discussion who have leases expiring in the near future. While they acknowledged there are benefits to being downtown, they voiced concerns that “social challenges” and safety concerns were a “net negative” against the downtown. Another participant has already sold her business in part due to the difficulties she perceived in being in her location.

³⁶ Words in quotations have been transcribed from the audio recording of the Focus Group Discussion.

The frustration of dealing with the “issues” that surfaced in the discussion was not only directed toward the street-involved population. There was also frustration about the perceived lack of response from police regarding calls that were made. One participant in the discussion mentioned she has seen a negative development in the street-involved people or “vagrants” as she called them. “They have the upper hand” she observed, and she noted that there is a boldness that has developed in the illegal activities around her property. Her opinion was that there is a lack of consequences being enforced, and that the RCMP does not share their concerns.

One gentleman shared his impression of the RCMP response over the nine years he has been in business in the downtown. Initially, he said, their response was “disbelief.” In other words they did not see there was a problem. Then there was a phase of time where the police responded very quickly to calls. He mentioned that while they could not always do something physical in the situation, they were usually quick to respond, and “their presence has weight.” Now, he says there is disbelief on the other side. Not disbelief that there is something happening, but disbelief that they are being asked to do something about the issues. He said that it seems like they (the Police) have not made the downtown a priority. He summed up this shift in saying that: “It went from: ‘there’s nothing wrong going on downtown’ to ‘we are very, very active in trying to show our presence downtown,’ to ‘we give up.’”

One practical issue that arose was the shortage of public toilets in the downtown. This was one thing that the group could see as having an immediate positive effect in limiting the demand on the available toilets and would disperse the mobility of people who access public toilet facilities.

A final topic that arose through the discussion was around perceptions. Several participants mentioned that “perception creates reality” or the equivalent. This was interesting for two reasons. Firstly, within the context of this particular group there is an extrinsic desire to increase commercial traffic in the downtown. As such, the perceptions of people who live outside the downtown and choose commercial options outside the downtown, matter a great deal. If people are avoiding downtown due to ideas and perceived safety concerns that have become part of the public dialogue, there are financial and professional implications. Secondly, while this is a legitimate concern for them, there were many misconceptions and perceptual inaccuracies presented in the discussion. For example, one participant proposed the idea of a shelter for the homeless, apparently unaware that there are two emergency shelters in close proximity to downtown. The need to address and engage with perceptions is an important take away from this discussion.

The members of the DBA in this discussion were united in their desire for an immediate response to address some of their concerns regarding safety and other issues involved in operating in the downtown.

Community Stakeholders

In this discussion participants were members of organizations in Red Deer who are involved in providing supports or services to the street-involved and homeless population, but are not directly involved in the housing system. The organizations that were invited included those involved in meal and clothing supports, as well as other outreach and charity organizations.

One of the major themes that emerged from this focus group was various frustrations that both they and the individuals that they support are facing. Two 'locations' seemed to be the source of many of the frustrations. The first 'location' of frustration that was brought up multiple times seemed to originate with the lack of communication and collaboration that exists between various organizations involved in working with individuals who are experiencing homelessness. The organizations present in this discussion were primarily community funded, and not directly involved in implementing the housing system or supports that many of the other organizations in Red Deer are involved in. There was one participant who indicated that they were told if they supported a client with housing who was already working with the Red Deer Housing Team, this would have negative implications for the client. There was also mixed messages around what best practice looks like in helping individuals. Some of the grassroots organizations in the discussion seeking to make a difference in the community do not have the experience of some of the other organizations in the community, have no natural collaborative outlet. This location of frustrations included simple things like misunderstandings of what current support services are, and questions around what the mandate and capacity is of each of these organizations. A related frustration to a lack of action, or at least a lack of knowledge around what actions and infrastructure has resulted from Red Deer's ten year plan to end homelessness. Many participants in the discussion agreed that they did not know what was being done, and therefore assumed nothing was happening.

The second 'location' of frustration would be the difficulties in navigating the system of supports that are needed for a client to successfully end their experience of homelessness. Between the provincial, and local programs that offer supports, there are many requirements to accessing income, medical, and housing supports, each with their own process. While there was a sense of acknowledgement that these processes are in place for a reason, the group acknowledged barriers. One gentleman expressed that if clients (many who have mental illness and/or addictions) did not have someone supporting them through the process there is a low probability of success. He continued on to say that this system which is aimed at helping people who truly need the assistance, is not very effective at helping them through it. He indicated a cycle (he was speaking about the income support process in this instance) wherein a person gets frustrated with the forms and process, which leads them to be angry and rude, which in turn makes the staff impatient and many barriers are created. Many people if they are unsuccessful will give up rather than seeking the assistance to achieve a successful application.

There were certain voices in this discussion who were primarily interested in meeting the needs of the homeless. This involved maintaining their dignity and rights to access food, the ability to stay warm, and access to basic hygiene materials. Providing people with help and assistance in maintaining their ability to sustain their lives and hope to encourage them is the role that a number of these organizations play. Many of the participants did not have extensive knowledge of the experience of homelessness or the street involved population in Red Deer until they began this work. Of the five groups we hosted, this group showed the most emotion when discussing the challenges that some of their clients face. There was a priority given to the connection with their clients who are experiencing homelessness, and providing them with a sense of relationship.

When the conversation turned to how the community of Red Deer is responding to homelessness and what is not being done, one focal response was noted. The suggestion of an "umbrella organization"

that could coordinate the “system” and make things easier for users to navigate was identified as a necessity. This impulse to ‘package services’ illustrated the frustrations of the group including the complexity of the system and the lack of collaboration within it. They presented the idea of a centrally located service where there is a coordinated “one stop shop” where one individual could get a meal and be offered services such as help accessing income supports or housing supports in a streamlined process. This would cut down on red tape and provide alternative services where people would be gathering naturally (because of the meals provided). “Let me get you something to eat, let me get you a place to sleep, laundry facility, storage facility, your counselors your therapists” etc. This was said in context of one participant thinking out loud about what a place like this could look like. The Michener Centre, and confusion around what it will be used for and possibility it represents, was also presented as a concern.

One last take away from this conversation was the need for a shift in mindset. Instead of having each agency or organization working on their own project with their own agendas, one participant suggested that there is a need for a shift toward the understanding that “We are all together in that same puzzle. We’re all working for the same client. We all have the same goal in place, so why not see it as one big team.” He suggested that by displaying a mindset of “I work for the client” rather than “I work for this organization,” has proved to be vital in some of the successes he has seen during his time assisting those experiencing homelessness in Red Deer.

Front Line

This focus group discussion consisted of people from organizations who work most directly with individuals who are experiencing homelessness in Red Deer. These front line workers are involved in outreach, intake, triage, and have daily encounters the street-involved and homeless population in Red Deer. This discussion was much more in touch with the concerns and barriers in the daily lives of people experiencing homelessness.

While not everyone in the discussion was involved in intentionally working toward housing, there was recognition that getting people housed is a major piece of the puzzle. One worker who has been in the field for approximately seven years, acknowledged that while housing is central in the successful outcomes of the housing program, in his experience it is “loneliness and isolation” that are root issues that many of the individuals are facing. Despite that fact that there is a community of street-involved people, it is not necessarily a community that fosters positive behaviors. In his view, having an emotional connection that is positive is vital to ensuring that an individual is successful in both accessing and also maintaining their housing.

Another prominent feature of this discussion was the emphasis on meaningful daily activities. Many of the individuals that are experiencing homelessness are unable to work, and even if they are able to get housed still do not have any way to “contribute” or even to use their time on something that allows them to participate in the community. Whether it is via the public recreation or through a type of drop-in center, there are financial and social barriers to engaging in public spaces and activities.

While frustrations with the system came up briefly, it was much less of a priority compared to some of the other focus group discussions. What did come up more often was the difficulty in finding appropriate housing for an affordable price, especially if a client wants to get out of the negative

community of which they have been a part. This problem is exasperated when dealing with mental health concerns or addictions. Most of the affordable housing units are downtown, which is also where most of the street-involved activity takes place. If an individual relies solely on income support for their income, their resources are extremely limited. As such, even though client choice is a key component to the housing first strategy, there are often not many options available to fit their preference. Some other practical barriers that arose were the requirements for getting housing, including references, coming up with additional funds for damage deposits, and agreeing to the requirements of a housing program.

When asked about the community response to homelessness, there was a general sense that the community does not engage with people who are experiencing homelessness. The experience of the participants through working with this population and through engagement with family and friends outside of their work, was that people are ignorant about homelessness in Red Deer, or if they are aware, they do not have any relationship or connections with someone who has or is experiencing homelessness.

In a similar vein to the comments that Daniel (page 46) mentioned above, there was common thinking in this discussion that in the absence of something to do, old habits are often the default behaviors. For example, one participant said it was a common experience to see someone very intoxicated and not functioning well at 8:00 AM when she arrives for work. If, she speculated, there was somewhere to go at that time, they may not choose to drink that early. The idea of social enterprise or the combination of providing a service to this population with a business approach of offering a good or service to the community also arose in response to this direction of conversation.

The idea of a drop-in center, which might include some of these features, was one suggestion that had traction with the group. But, as one participant highlighted, it cannot merely be just another space. There are already spaces and programs that are offered in the community, but many of the street-involved people do not feel that they belong in those places. It must be designed and staffed in a way that offers belonging. Related to the idea of belonging are additional barriers of facing what a participant labeled “self-abuse and shame.” The lack of confidence and knowledge of failure from society’s standards is something that weighs very heavily on many who are experiencing homelessness. The ability to have positive relationships in place that can begin to heal some of the damage and help to initiate some confidence was highlighted as a key feature of success. Perseverance in working with clients, and not giving up on them if they fail, was also cited as an essential attribute to getting people into stable housing.

Generally, this discussion focused on the qualitative aspects that are often overlooked when viewing the broad strategies and big picture approach to systemic processes. Relationships, collaboration, and connecting individuals to meaningful and supportive community are vital aspects that might help ensure that clients can find suitable housing, and be successful in maintaining their housing.

Support Service Providers

This focus group was with people who work in organizations that provide support services. The participants were mainly involved in programming and many were supervisors or managers of programs. This discussion was intentionally seeking insight from those not considered frontline staff, but who were more in tune with policies and practices within the sector. The support services that were

represented varied from employment, housing, medical, shelter, and harm reduction support services as well as some people who provide a wide array of supports.

The barriers and challenges involved (in getting individuals who are experiencing homelessness housed) presented by this group were more systemic and structural barriers compared to the 'front line' group. One participant who regularly engages with people just released from the criminal justice system brought up two common challenges that he commonly sees. The first is an issue with the release planning from these institutions which often do not include extensive planning around housing. Often inmates are released into a community that they do not know and are immediately faced with the experience of homelessness. The other challenge he sees is that often after many years in an institution his clients are more comfortable inside the institution, than out. The social pressures and complexities of our society are often such a barrier to people that they feel more comfortable, and even have a stronger sense of belonging inside the institution. In many cases this underlying feeling will lead some to re-offend.

One interesting topic that arose in the discussion surrounded the term 'homeless' and how it functions with service providers. For participants the word 'homeless' functions as a diagnosis. Use of the word in this sense suggests a "check box" that enables individuals experiencing homelessness to access supports. For others this was an unfair identification of that person. Instead, they would prefer to address the current need that an individual has, for example, the need for a place to sleep. There were many in the group who agreed that a more descriptive focus on what needs people possess at a given time would be beneficial, but the systemic requirement of accessing services, and the funding that accompanies that service, requires a category to be a fit. The larger awareness of funding issues and budgets and allocation of resources requires that reporting and statistics are utilized to help make effective decisions. A client may resist being called homeless, but if they are in need of a place to sleep, and a stable residence, then they need to be categorized as such to access a housing support. This complexity and tension between the human clients people are encountering and seeking to help, and the systemic requirements of categorizations and financial requirements, was very apparent in this discussion.

Another unique aspect of this discussion was the focus on housing stock, and landlord relationships. A significant barrier that many of the housing support services in Red Deer face is a lack of available and appropriate housing for their clients. Rent is very high in Red Deer, and landlords often prefer not to rent to someone who has not had success in maintaining housing. There are opportunities that would be financially secure for investors and landlords to engage in providing housing. One suggestion was to develop a business case to present to businesses and entrepreneurs in the city around how a proactive response to decreasing the barriers involved in ending an individual's homelessness and also prevent individuals from becoming homeless. Some individuals in the group felt that there is an opportunity from a business perspective to work toward ending homelessness.

Many clients on AISH have their rent taken out automatically which many landlords would find very attractive in a tenant. If there was a group of landlords who met (or a person who could engage in recruiting landlords) for this purpose (working with the housing first system), that would be beneficial for those providing housing supports. One participant offered that some communities have a social

enterprise organization who do this work of liaising with landlords and offer a property management company that specializes in housing first implementation.

The history and current state of NIMBY within Red Deer was acknowledged as a potential growth area. While it was acknowledged that Red Deer is a wealthy and generous community, people generally do not want to be faced with the difficulties that accompany the street-involved or homeless population. A lack of understanding and education were reasons given and potential fixes to the NIMBY perspective.

Government Systems

The final focus group discussion was with people who work within the governmental services that interact with individuals experiencing homelessness. Included in this group were people from Alberta Health Services, Alberta Works (human services), and the criminal justice system. They brought a wide range of experiences and concerns from years of working in their fields and from being members of the Red Deer Community. This discussion had participants who have been involved in the issues and responses to homelessness in Red Deer for many years, including some who were involved in early groups gathered to form the ten year plan to end homelessness. This group was able to see the 'big picture' issues involved in the mechanisms that both cause and alleviate many of the barriers that individuals face in entering or exiting homelessness.

Frustrations dominated this discussion. The complexity of the needs and barriers that individuals face were acknowledged, and the difficulty in helping a person access supports was viewed as increasing with each additional barrier. In most cases there is a different process and department or service for the different needs. A person with multiple acuties must go through multiple processes to access the services that are right for them. The people who are in most in need of support services often have the most difficulty accessing them. This was recognized as a systemic failure and challenge. It is often the people who are unable to navigate such a complex and time consuming process who give up and seek other ways to survive.

One comment from a woman who has both front line and management experience was that "when people are still trying to get out of homelessness, there is frustration and humiliation-- but when people stay in homelessness there is a lack of hope." She explains that this lack of hope is often why people will stay on the street and accept their current situation as the way their life is.

A disagreement that was interesting also emerged in this discussion around money. On one hand there was a participant who suggested that Red Deer has somehow been missed with funding and there is lack of funds available to develop the housing and other infrastructure to get people with complex needs housed. On the other hand, there was a woman who sees that there has been an influx of funding in the last number of years, but little to show for it. "We are making homelessness a big business in Red Deer," she stated. She figured that there was more management and "bureaucracy" and not enough actual solutions "affordable housing and practical supports" being implemented.

One man insightfully observed that people who are experiencing homelessness primarily have an ethic of survival. "If I was homeless," he said, "I would do everything in my power to survive." In regard to this he argued that a broader perspective on money and the costs associated with homelessness must be taken. Emergency services, the criminal justice system, the parks department, stores experiencing shop

lifting, and ultimately all tax payers, all bear the financial costs associated with the survival strategies sometimes employed by individuals experiencing homelessness. Unless there are results and outcomes from the services that are offered the final costs of homelessness will remain the same.

In light of these complexities and the layers of frustrations that occur as a response to navigating the support systems, there was a consensus that it must be a collaborative effort to help the individuals who are seeking it. It was acknowledged that there are a number of difficulties in seeking to collaborate on an individual's case. The first is that FOIP and information sharing policies restrict the ability to speak freely about a client in order to uphold their right to privacy. There continues to be some development in how to address information sharing in light of privacy policies and laws. One woman noted that over the last twenty years information sharing has improved drastically. Another gentleman stated that in many cases calling to acquire additional information about a client through the proper channels (and for the benefit of a client) is successful. As another participant acknowledged, "If the initiative to forge the relationship is not there, the coordinated service doesn't happen." As such the collaborative process is very dependent upon individual contacts and relationships. This highlights another difficulty: staff turnover.

Turnover with staff is a natural part of any organization. What is lost with an outgoing employee is not only their knowledge and experience of the job, but also their network of relationships and contacts. While often seen as a bonus or 'value added' asset, the relationship connections were acknowledged in this group as often making the difference in a client accessing supports. When an experienced staff leaves, the personal connections with the other agencies and system partners leave with them. One participant acknowledged that with the early implementation of the 10-year plan to end homelessness there were a number of "working groups" to inform and collaborate across the stakeholders. He provided the following example: he is working across provincial government departments to get a housing project for clients with complex needs (addictions and mental health) but there is not a natural outlet to inform the other stakeholders in Red Deer that these discussions are taking place.

This group was able to note that systems and budgets do not take into account the resiliency that is needed to navigate through the process to access the system of supports. Red Deer has a number of different agencies who operate with slightly different mandates. While this does enable choice and best fit for individuals it also fosters confusion and increased complexity. As one participant highlighted, the current systemic infrastructure around homelessness does not recognize the diminished capacity to be resilient in pursuit of these services by an individual experiencing homelessness. An increase in collaboration would help in this regard.

A final barrier to collaboration highlighted in the discussion was the silo effect of each agency and organization being controlled by their mandate and the policies that guide their tasks. One woman gave the example that she was the only person in her office to have first-hand connection with people experiencing homelessness. There are many levels of stakeholders involved in the social infrastructure in Red Deer addressing homelessness from front-line, to supervisors, managers, and directors. Her opinion is that all levels need to maintain direct connections to people who are experiencing homelessness to ensure that perspective is kept in pursuing the goal of ending homelessness.

A final insight from this group was the acknowledgement of the broader shift in how institutions like hospitals and correctional facilities are currently managed. These institutions have the same number of spaces and are experiencing greater demand. This results in pressures from decision makers to decrease the length of stay in hospital and rehabilitate offenders back into the community. Whereas in the past an individual would remain in the care of the institution, they are now being released, and often released into homelessness.

This group highlighted many of the complexities in operating within some large institutions and governmental systems. There were many frustrations around the systemic challenges that work to create barriers for individuals experiencing homelessness, and the agencies and organizations working to provide them support services. An explicit focus on collaboration emerged, and the group concluded that creativity and innovation are necessary to achieve the goal of ending homelessness by 2018.

Summary and Overview

Each focus group discussion brought beneficial insights into how the various groups of stakeholders in Red Deer are thinking about the state of the housing and support services infrastructure. Through the reporting of each discussion some initial themes were identified.

The presence of frustrations was ubiquitous, although the source of the frustrations differed in each group. The DBA group was frustrated about some of the behaviors and patterns of space sharing that happens in the downtown. The front line and governmental groups were frustrated about the challenges in actually seeing clients navigate and access the support services they needed. There were frustrations throughout the groups about the lack of affordable and appropriate options within the housing stock. There was also many frustrations stemming from a lack of awareness and knowledge of what is currently taking place among the various stakeholders concerning homelessness. Frustrations are indicative of opportunities and possibilities to revise the current landscape to enable efficiencies.

These focus group discussions involved many of the people who have direct daily encounters with people experiencing homelessness in Red Deer, and who possess a wide range of important skills and abilities toward ending homelessness. The awareness shared throughout the discussions was that while there are many good people doing good things, there are many areas that could be improved upon. The overwhelming consensus was the possibility that stakeholder groups, agencies, and organizations would function better together. This would then have a permeating effect on the ability of each of the organizations to achieve their outcomes.

Another theme that was present throughout was the need to be proactive instead of reactive in helping individuals and families experiencing homelessness, access housing. This emphasis included not only housing stock (which came up throughout) but also the ability to connect people to meaningful daily activity and a more permanent day-time space that would provide a positive community. The need for a physical location where collaboration between agencies and support service providers could work together for individuals was an idea that emerged often. In many cases this included an ideal situation of a “one stop shop” that would allow people to access a wide range of support services and connect with others.

While each discussion had its own feeling and although frustrations were a common topic of conversations there was a sense among the participants who were involved in the implementation of the housing first support services that people are getting housed successfully. There were many stories of individuals getting housed, and the mechanisms that were important in that process. The support services group stood out as being an encouraging example of how the current system does work to get people housed, albeit there are many challenges in each particular case. There were numerous acknowledgements that Red Deer is made up of caring and generous citizens who want to help. And while not being an opinion shared by all participants, it was acknowledged multiple times that The City of Red Deer does a good job at listening to the organizations and community members in working toward ending homelessness.

The focus group discussions offered a rounded perspective on many of the barriers and challenges intrinsic in ending homelessness in Red Deer. In contrast to the other data collection methods, these individuals were not experiencing homelessness, but these groups consisted of people who engage with homelessness on a daily basis. The discussions allowed insight from a broad spectrum of roles and services that make up much of the social infrastructure in Red Deer. While seeking to understand the relational dynamics that shape the texture of an individual's experience of homelessness, hearing from both sides of the relational space is essential. In this vein, a final theme prevalent throughout the discussion among people who engage relationally with the homeless population was that these individuals display kindness, generosity, perseverance and resilience despite the many barriers and challenges they face on a daily basis. Statements like, "They are humans" or "no different than you or I" and "there but by the grace of God go I" were made in every group, and there is this tacit acknowledgment that the individuals that are experiencing homelessness are not in and of themselves "the problem".

Analysis and Reflections

This research project was designed to capture a particular perspective. This was namely to give voice to those individuals in Red Deer who are currently experiencing homelessness. Through the ethnographic methods employed a perspective has emerged that allows a more detailed understanding of what homelessness in Red Deer involves. This report provides narrative and visual representation of actual individuals' experience of homelessness during the summer of 2015. As noted in the context section, there were many factors that shaped the period of time that the data for this research was collected. I have presented the data from the research activities in a way to allow a perspective from the homeless population to be passed on.

The understanding of this perspective is transferred to the reader partially through the ability to empathize with the individuals. Empathy, is not only the ability to acknowledge what another thinks and feels, but also to understand *how* they experience those things. Empathy is not displayed through emotion or cognitive exercise, but through action that comes as a response to an encounter. As with most things there is natural variance in the capacity for empathy. This report provides a perspective from the homeless population in Red Deer, achieving the goals of increasing the understanding of this population depends in part upon the response that is made.

In this section I will reflect upon the research processes and data collected to make some overall observations and provide a perspective on a few of the broad forces at play in the process of getting individuals in Red Deer off the street and into housing. These reflections are in light of the literature around homelessness, and through my personal experiences and reflections throughout the research process. They are shaped and informed by the research objectives we sought through this research which are:

- An increased understanding of the nature and texture of homelessness within Red Deer.
- An increased understanding of the survival and mobility routines of this population.
- An increased understanding of the services used and the system interaction patterns of this population.
- An increased understanding of the barriers that keep people experiencing homeless from utilizing the housing first systems.
- Discovering the gaps (and efficiencies) in service implementation and current housing mechanisms.
- Alternative ways of improving the current policies and services.
- Contextual understanding of the influences that enable continued homelessness.

Language and Narrative

There is a powerful urge to use language that simplifies and generalizes rather than highlights the complications and complexities of the experience of homelessness. This is not a new phenomenon nor is it unique to the support service and housing sector. It is in part due to the heritage of the modern industrial world and its pervasive influence upon systemic structures and concepts. Throughout the data collection, in both formal and informal settings language that simplifies and tries to paint broad strokes about who is homeless was the default. Each of these general statements has behind it a particular person in a located embodied situation, but it has since become separated from its physical and social setting.

This abstraction from physical and social environment is also a tendency of both the modern western world and the attempts of generations and thinkers of the past to master absolute truth in its pure rational state. These historical influences are here to stay; they operate on the pre-conscious level and have enabled countless benefits. Generalizing is effective for certain purposes, and in certain times. It would be very difficult to speak about anything without the use of concepts and categories that are formed through generalizing concepts and circumstances. Generalizations enable effective and efficient ways of communication. What happens over time, however, is the increasing separation from the particular to the general. Eventually the general terms become increasingly less descriptive of the particularities and no longer serve to effectively translate an accurate picture. This occurs in the realm of homelessness.

This very concept was highlighted in the support service providers' focus group discussion when they discussed the tensions between "diagnosis" and "need". While the diagnosis of 'homeless' seems to come with a wide range of mental pictures and understandings, the experience of being in need of a place to sleep is a particular situation that most have experienced at one time. While saying someone is homeless is much more inclusive than certain other categories from the past it still shares the underlying tendency to generalize. Some readers may think this type of analysis is merely semantics and not worthy of consideration, but there has been extensive research done exploring how language shapes our concepts and experiences.³⁷

Language has the power to shape our concepts and thereby shape our experiences in the world. Through the intentional use of particular language and metaphors the world is experienced in a particular way. Throughout this report it was an intentional choice to try, as much as possible, to refer to "a person or individual experiencing homelessness", rather than "homeless people", or "the homeless". The difference is that in the former homelessness is an experience that a person is encountering, and in the latter homeless is the identifying feature of the person or people.

On the street this language matters a great deal. In the process of building positive rapport and relationships it is not advisable to ask if a person is homeless. I watched and listened to individuals who were experiencing homelessness as they inquired as to where a person stays. "Where do you stay?" is a much more descriptive question rather than the much more personal and heavy question of "are you homeless?" The general and identifying language comes with much more social and emotional baggage around failure than does more particular and descriptive language.

Deeply connected to the language people use is the narrative that people participate within. Humans are distinctly narrative beings. We tell stories to entertain, to learn, to problem solve and to make decisions. People understand their identity through the role they play in the various narratives that make up their lives. Someone may play multiple roles at once and often switch between roles constantly. For example someone may be a mother, a wife, a daughter, a teacher, and a pianist. Each role is formed and shaped by a different narrative.

In the current context then, it would make a great deal of difference if "homeless" was one of the narrative roles a person saw themselves as playing, rather than homelessness being a feature of conflict and setting within a narrative role they play. The difference may seem negligible, but I would argue that there would be fewer barriers to getting housed in the later narrative structure (an experience of setting and conflict) rather than the former (the identifying characteristic).

To be clear, I am not proposing a systematic analysis and implementation of a narrative and linguistic approach to how people speak about homelessness in Red Deer. I am stating that there be an awareness and intentionality necessary in the language and narratives of the stakeholders (especially the support service providers) in getting individuals into stable and sustainable living situations.

³⁷ Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago press, 2008. This work launched a growing field of cognitive linguistics which is an interdisciplinary approach to understating the way the human brain and body work to form language and concepts.

Every individual experiencing homelessness has multiple stories about trauma from their past and difficult circumstances that they currently face. There is no homelessness in general. While there are some common features within the population of individuals experiencing homelessness (such as an increased prevalence of addictions and mental health concerns) the particulars of each situation must be acknowledged. The desire to speak in general terms about homelessness and the people that it involves, serves sometimes to allow for categories that will enable a support service to be able to “check a box.” It does not take into account the particularities of what their experience is.

The ‘Problem’ of Homelessness

Related to the previous section is how “the problem of homelessness” is apprehended. A common phrase that I encountered numerous times throughout the course of this research project was “the problem”. This was not stated by individuals who were experiencing homelessness or the stakeholders involved in supporting individuals toward housing, but from other citizens who I would encounter in or outside of work. Exploring how the term “problem” is used in this situation, would likely reveal a wide range of uses, which acknowledged the complexity of homelessness itself.

It has been my experience, however, that the “problem” tends not to involve or include the person speaking. What I mean by this is that whether it is internal or external to the person experiencing homelessness, it is seen as unique to “them” and does not involve or indicate anything about the speaker. In the present topic homelessness is something that has happened to those individuals and has nothing to do with the “us” involved in the conversation. This is in part as a result of the individualism within our culture. The tendency is to use individual attributes to primarily identify ourselves rather than communal or social attributes.

Related to this is the tendency to think in terms of problems and solutions on an issue by issue basis. This problem-solution tendency leads to a reactive and results focused approach which serves very well in many situations.³⁸ What this problem-solution approach does not do is look at the source and context through which the “problem” emerged. This allows for problems to be external to the identity of those working on resolving it, and enables the context which allowed the problem to continue unchanged.

If, however, the context and communal creation of the context is acknowledged, the problems become not something that has gone wrong with “them”, but something that has been allowed by “us”. A communal ownership for challenges that have emerged in our community requires the community to ask serious questions about our communal context and what it is about our identity that has allowed these issues to manifest? Communal engagement is a necessity in re-framing in this fashion. Rather than merely having more minds thinking about a solution to help “the problem ‘they’ have.” An engaged community involves increasing the accountability of the social realm.

A communal identity would much more readily see homelessness as perhaps the greatest potential area for communal growth, rather than a problem facing certain individuals. It also shifts the ownership and accountability of where the “problem” lies. It disperses accountability in a positive way away from the individuals who have a diminished capacity and back on the community. It also changes how individuals

³⁸ In this section I am indebted to Peter Block and his work *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers. 2009

would be seen and viewed. If “they” stop being labeled by the general population as “other” and begin to be understood as “one of us” then hospitality and acceptance are much more naturally displayed.

In Red Deer the downtown has been labeled by many as unsafe, and is a space unused by many. The linking of homelessness and safety concerns has been seen numerous times throughout the summer 2015 in the letters written to council regarding the proposed warming centre site and in the media. This has taken on the texture of a problem to be solved, rather than a possibility for community living. If the responsibility and accountability for what our community ‘is’ are able to be shared by all, the lived possibilities that could transform this reality becomes much more likely.

This shift cannot happen instantly, and will not happen merely based on a proposal in this report. It will only happen as a result of conversations about how we understand our identity and how we might be able to see that as citizens of Red Deer we have ownership in what our community is and what it will be in the future. As one front line worker stated in the focus group discussion, homelessness is not merely about shelter but about “loneliness and isolation” and a communal approach to the opportunities for increased community would address this feature of homelessness.

In this light one of the main hinges that determine whether a person is successful in accessing housing support, or choosing not to, is the relational ability of the staff with which they engage. Many individuals experiencing homelessness have relational barriers that require a particular set of relational abilities to engage. I have been told on multiple occasions that staff does not engage with certain people, even though they have been in a shelter or around services for numerous years. Relationship is a main mechanism that can either open or close doors for an individual deciding to seek supports. This is one area where constant pursuit of growth is necessary. As noted above, everyone has a particular set of pains and circumstances, and everyone needs to be understood. The temptation to generalize, even from a staff person who has worked in support services for many years, could shut the door on that person.

Issues such as the increasing amount of needle debris are considered one of the “problems” that needs solutions. Indeed there are many negative implications to having needle debris in the public. There exists in this issue significant potential for both understanding and action towards a more flourishing community. There is something in the current drug culture that has allowed the habit of leaving needles on the ground to be considered acceptable. This allows significant opportunity for growth and in culture change toward a more safe community. The example of Amy from the Auto-photography project shows that it is possible to be aware of the complexity of social and safety concerns while being a drug user and experiencing homelessness. Specifically, within this issue, there needs to be serious consideration of what the main influences are within drug culture in Red Deer, and approach this issue from within rather than seeking to enforce from the outside.

Mobility and Survival Routines

In light of the previous section, the mobility of the individuals who participated in the walk-along and auto-photography activities was mapped. These maps are not meant to be a general map, but an indication of lived experience. These are places that these specific individuals were while experiencing homelessness in the summer of 2015.

As previously stated, the meal schedule is a common place for a large congregation of street-involved individuals, but there are many reasons why people do or do not go to a meal on any particular day. An individual's mobility is determined partially by their source of income (if they have AISH or income supports, or collect bottles etc.), where they spend their nights (shelter, camping outdoors, or couch surfing etc.), and what communities they belong to (downtown street involved community, a drop-in space, etc.). The location of the support service providers also plays a role in mobility. The route across the river via the train bridge is a very common route, especially for those individuals who stay at People's place, or frequent Loaves and Fishes. There are a range of support service providers that are located downtown, and because of this, if a street involved individual is seeking one of these support service, they will be downtown.

It is worth noting that Red Deer is able to be navigated on foot or by bike. It does not take long to go from the downtown to either the north or the south side. During my observations it was common to see the same person throughout the city during the same day. In the walk-along interviews the participant's mobility was directed by distinct motivations. For Daniel, it was leisure and to pass the time (having already done his productive tasks in the morning); for Sheryl it was impulsive desires and the ability to meet them; and for Jonathan it was his routine to collect bottles and buy beer.

This affirms that, although there are places that many street-involved individuals have in common, there are not necessarily predictable routes or motivations to be in a particular place at a particular time.

Efficiencies

Throughout the summer of 2015 many of the people I encountered who were experiencing homelessness were able to begin the process for getting housed, or access housing. The system functions well for many individuals. While there seems to be confusion and misunderstanding by many folks on how the intake through to housing process works, people are able to progress through it. There is also quite a bit of confusion as to what "the list" is and how it works once you have gone through an intake process. Wait times vary depending upon the individual and availability, and many do not understand the process well. This is a potential area of growth within the current system.

While the system works well for those individuals who are able to schedule and successfully attend meetings with workers it was commonly stated (by people in the system) that having successful meetings is one of the greatest challenges. One way that the system may be reviewed is to look at how these meetings happen and if there is a better method that would increase the success rate.

Space

As indicated previously, space is not merely physical but also social. It is created through how it is used, and narrated over time. Many of the spaces in Red Deer that are used by and for the homeless population find new meaning as new uses emerge. As a feature of this research we sought to understand how people experiencing homelessness relate to the physical spaces in Red Deer. The ability to see a space for its potential rather than its design is an imaginative practice that many individuals who participated in this study possessed.

Through the auto-photography and walk-along interviews people displayed using spaces for the necessary daily activities. There was also quite a bit of social awareness in this practice. Choosing to

inhabit spaces may have been based on a lower amount of traffic, or safety or freedom from being harassed. This has a significant impact on mobility routes. Certain streets and properties have a greater acceptability for the presence of street-involved individuals, and therefore become higher traffic places.

The natural response from many business owners and community members has been to contact police or bylaws for violation of their space. Businesses have a priority to their customers, to ensure that they maintain a viable and comfortable space to use and operate within. The CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) is a good tool that is used in Red Deer for design space to limit criminal activities and encourage safety. What is still needed is a tool that increases the capacity for safe and productive social engagement that will allow the creation of spaces to be shared by all.³⁹

Enabling and Encouraging

There is an underlying present tension regarding the response that homelessness evokes. On one hand there is an impulse to ensure that the most vulnerable people in the community are afforded the dignity and right to access food and shelter. While this is a minimum support to maintain the vitality of individuals experiencing homelessness it is viewed by some as enabling these individuals to stay in homelessness.

On the other hand, there is a desire within the housing first approach to encourage people to pursue housing through the supports that are available to assist them with this. This encouragement could take on a positive or negative approach. On the positive side it shows how housing would alleviate many difficulties and improve quality of life. On the negative side it highlights the difficulties involved in experiencing homelessness or diminishing the ability to have a sustainable life while experiencing homelessness. The idea is to allow individuals who are experiencing homelessness to see the alternative (housing first) as significantly preferable to maintaining the status quo of their survival patterns.

There are various competing narratives in the community around these issues. Many believe that Red Deer has a surplus of support services that enable homelessness to flourish in this city. I have heard repeatedly that if you take away the supports, individuals will leave. While this does not seek to solve the underlying social issues involved, it is a “solution” to the perceived “problem”. As alluded to above, the possibility of engagement and pursuing the opportunity for increasing belonging in this community makes this “solution” seems unhelpful. As long as this approach does not lead to a “starve them away” approach, engagement about what other strategies (that do not infringe upon rights and dignity) may make the experience of homelessness less likely to be chosen as an option should be considered. This may involve a purposeful presentation of how the experience of lack may be overcome, or other ways of highlighting the difficulties involved in the experience of homelessness.

Another narrative is that of “choice”. This word is used by many in and around homelessness as a way to justify the current state of homelessness. Many argue that individuals “choose to be homeless” and accordingly are responsible for that choice. This is related to the way that people tend to conceptualize the nature of social problems discussed above i.e. “If it is their choice then it is their responsibility.” Interestingly, it is not only others who say that individuals are choosing to be homeless, as certain individuals themselves will identify that they choose to be homeless. Recall Tracey’s admission that she

³⁹ The second generation of CPTED does include more of these things.

chooses to live as she does. She admitted to not having other options to choose from, however, and was choosing what was available.

In light of the current issue of encouraging or enabling homelessness, 'choice' language can be used to highlight the alternative options that are available to encourage people to choose a stable housing option. While there are options for housing situations within the housing system there remains a lack of suitable and affordable housing in Red Deer. An increase in the housing stock therefore the housing options for both individuals seeking housing supports, and those individuals who choose to find housing independently is a crucial step in achieving the goal of ending homelessness. The Red Deer Housing Options Framework (May 2014) is a good indication of the current housing options in Red Deer.⁴⁰ Increasing the engagement and awareness of landlords in the community was one potential option for more effectively using the available housing stock to fit with the housing first strategy.

The underlying tensions within the experience of homelessness and the approaches of support services indicates the complexity with which the many social forces converge upon an individual. All of these forces, and countless others, work upon individuals in various ways. In light of this, the support services used, and patterns of engagement with the system of care available in Red Deer is not consistent. Personalities fit with certain service providers, and daily motivations and impulses change to direct behavior.

The barriers that face individuals experiencing homelessness are not consistent. They depend on the priority given to specific actions toward specific ends (e.g. the ability to get money to feed an addiction), and the severity of their health and wellbeing. Each individual has a different capacity to seek help on a need by need basis. While one person may find it easy to seek help for their addiction, they may find it more difficult to seek housing support. Each individual is living out a different narrative. These narratives direct and inform the motivations and actions of these individuals in different ways. While there are similarities, the particularity of each individual's barriers must be acknowledged to effectively have them overcome in a way that will lead to sustainable outcomes.

⁴⁰ See, <http://www.reddeer.ca/about-red-deer/social-well-being-and-community-initiatives/housing-and-homelessness/plans-and-reports-on-housing-and-homelessness/housing-options-framework/> Accessed September 17, 2015.

Recommendations

The recommendations for the mechanisms that may be revised in order to better achieve the goals present in the current plan to end homelessness in Red Deer, ("Everyone's Home: Red Deer's Five Year Plan to End Homelessness 2014-2018"), are based on the data and experiences that have formed this research. As an ethnographic study, this project has sought the perspective of those who are experiencing homelessness in Red Deer. Through the observations, auto-photography, and walk-along interviews direct encounters with individuals who are currently without stable accommodation throughout the city this perspective were engaged first hand. In the Focus Group Discussion the people and organizations who work most closely with people experiencing homelessness were asked to share their thoughts about homelessness, and what mechanisms have been effective in assisting getting people into suitable housing. Housing is one of the community goals in the Social Policy Framework which is the framework to support the implementation of City initiatives which have social effects.⁴¹ As stated there the goal is: "safe, accessible and affordable housing is available to all, and everyone is appropriately housed."⁴² As such, these recommendations are seen in the context of the guiding documents that The City of Red Deer uses in regards to housing and social policies and practices.

The following recommendations reflect the particular experiences and observations throughout the research activities in the summer of 2015. The recommendations that emerge focus on a proactive approach that aims to encourage a broader community accountability and responsibility for creating a future that works to enable flourishing of all members of the community.

1. Education:

Across the community, and throughout all levels of stakeholders there could be much more awareness and understanding about what the experience of homelessness involves and the programs and support services available in the community. A thorough educational infrastructure designed to address a wide range of subjects would achieve a wide range of preventative goals, as well as increase the awareness of community agencies and services. Educating the general public through schools, web based interactive tools, and published materials, might offer the community an awareness of the complexities that face someone experiencing homelessness, and the challenges in navigating the "safety net" of supports services available in the community. An educational initiative should include at least: a) An introduction of some of the common routes into homelessness; b) A number of prototype survival patterns of an individual experiencing homelessness; c) A brief history of the relationship the community of Red Deer has had with homelessness; d) An outline of the ten year plan to end homelessness and the current state of implementation of the plan; e) A description of how communal engagement is key to ending homelessness. Whether a tool, or a presentation that a person delivers, collaboration between the funder of this initiative and Red Deer Public Schools and Red Deer Catholic Regional Schools would be appropriate.

⁴¹ See, <http://www.reddeer.ca/city-government/plans-and-projects/ongoing-plans-and-projects/social-policy-framework/>.

⁴² Ibid.

While an effective education process must include multiple stakeholders, each level should be responsible for the implementation of a part.

Funder:

The management and distribution of provincial and federal funds is the responsibility of The City of Red Deer. The subsequent implementation and evaluation of the use of these funds within the housing first system of supports falls under the City's role. Accordingly, the development and implementation of a renewed strategy to educating the public about the outcomes and progress this system is within the mandate of this role.

The implementation of an educational program or presentation could help achieve multiple preventative goals and increase the capacity of the community for understanding and engaging individuals who are experiencing homelessness in Red Deer. As stated in the Everyone's Home plan, ending homelessness is a communal endeavor, and there are numerous ways that the community of Red Deer could and must assist if the goal of ending homelessness by 2018 is to be achieved.

An educational focus cannot be merely an initiative by one party involved in implementing a presentation or tool, but must include the stakeholder agencies and organizations making space for educating and encouraging communal engagement as a part of their program implementation and cultural ethos. A tool that could be administered in various contexts by various people would be ideal.

Funded Agencies:

The agencies and organizations involved in the housing first program implementation must also have an educational task within their mandate. They must educate their neighbors and businesses about what they do and who they support. This will not only inform, but if done correctly could assist in engaging the community in their vision and mission.

In addition to a community education emphasis, a priority on education for individuals experiencing homelessness is recommended. This should involve an overview of the Red Deer system of supports and a review of the housing first process, both to inform about navigating the system, but also to allow for misunderstandings to be corrected. The intentional connection of individuals with lived experience with homelessness who have successfully gone through the housing first program and have been successful in maintaining their housing should be a feature of this project. The most effective way to implement this should be up to the funded agencies, but it should include developing a way to diminish the misunderstandings that many individuals experiencing homelessness have about housing first.

An educational focus of this kind aligns with objective 2.1 in "Everyone's Home: Red Deer's Five Year Plan to End Homelessness 2014-2018." As stated in the plan objective 2.1 is to "improve community knowledge about root causes and impacts of homelessness on individuals and families in Red Deer."⁴³ This also aligns with two of the community goals outlined in the recently developed Social Policy Framework: community cohesion and engagement, and educational opportunity and attainment.⁴⁴

⁴³ "Everyone's Home: Red Deer's Five Year Plan to End Homelessness 2014-2018", 13.

⁴⁴ See, <http://www.reddeer.ca/city-government/plans-and-projects/ongoing-plans-and-projects/social-policy-framework/> .

Having such resonance with the existing guiding documents, a thorough educational approach should be a high priority moving forward.

2. Collaboration:

Collaboration was a main theme emerging from the focus groups, and is one area where potential growth could lead to significant improvement in how the housing system operates. Relational awareness and engagement across organizations and levels of the social infrastructure that enables people to move from unstable to stable and suitable housing, was identified as a main factor in overcoming many of the barriers that arise. Not only do relationships across the spectrum of supports enable more effective communication but also it diminishes--and in some cases demystifies--the misunderstandings that emerge from participating in some of the bureaucratic systemic processes that must be navigated. The knowledge that comes from having a network of people and agencies that work together for a client can make a difference between an individual accessing the support they need, or being directed much more effectively to the most suitable support for them. Two groups are key in allowing collaboration to be improved.

Community Stakeholders:

Throughout the focus groups, participants indicated they are open to an increased collaborative effort. This could be achieved in multiple ways, but the reasons for this and the outcome goals of collaborative sessions must be clear. As a main feature of the current five year plan, collaboration is already a central feature of Red Deer's housing system. All funded housing projects meet weekly at the CAP (Coordinated Access and Placement) to discuss cases and place individuals in the various housing programs that have spaces available. These collaborative efforts have increased the efficiency and effectiveness of housing placement in Red Deer. The next steps in collaboration are the bringing together of key stakeholders who represent important structures in the social infrastructure.

A re-visioning and implementation of the functional working groups that are a part of the current five-year plan could increase new collaboration.⁴⁵ A kind of vertical working group system that increases connection across the levels of key stakeholders would build a strong network of working relationships that would not only increase awareness about what is being done currently, but also allow new possibilities to emerge around next steps. Relationships were identified as being integral overcoming many barriers in the complex system of supports that are available in Red Deer. Increasing the connections both horizontally and vertically within the system will increase the efficiency of the system in relation to individuals experiencing homelessness. This should include not only those stakeholders involved in housing but across the system of supports that individuals experiencing homelessness utilize.

Policy Makers:

A collaborative ethos within the effort to end homelessness is not only required by the stakeholders involved in providing support services. At the policy level there needs to be an increased priority in working to revise policies that can enable a more integrated housing system. Policies should enable the mechanisms involved in implementing support services be more apt to individuals that have diminished capacity to access them. Policies must reflect the lived experience of the people they are aimed at

⁴⁵ "Everyone's Home: Red Deer's Five Year Plan to End Homelessness 2014-2018", 9.

serving, and as such the experience of homelessness must be considered in revising policies. Policy makers must consider that various systems are currently working against each other in respect to homelessness. Individuals in provincial or federal institutions are often released into homelessness directly. This is a gap that could be diminished or eradicated through revised policies that are coordinated around the needs of an individual, rather than the integrity of the mandates of different organizations.

Collaboration is mentioned as a “the foundation of all our efforts” in the current five year plan.⁴⁶ It also aligns with objective 4.2, to “leverage community partnerships to develop an effective and efficient coordinated system of care that appropriately houses chronically and episodically homeless individuals and provides them with the services they require.”⁴⁷ Improving the integration of support services and housing is a strategy identified toward achieving this outcome. Opportunities to increase the level of collaboration within the system remain prevalent and would increase the effectiveness of how effective individuals are in navigating it. Collaboration features are a vital part of the plan to end homelessness, and it must increase if the plan is to be achieved by 2018.

3. Proactive Outreach:

Throughout my time on the street, and while engaging with individuals experiencing homelessness, there were many people who experience success with the current system of intake into housing supports. These people who are aware of, and seek out support have come to the place where they want assistance in achieving their desired living situation. Many individuals, however, who would likely rank quite highly in terms of acuity measures, have not sought out the available housing supports.

Housing:

A proactive relational housing outreach that is more flexible and has a built-in ability to respond to the needs of clients would be more fitting to the desired outcomes of reaching those individuals who are most in need of housing. One of the most significant barriers to accessing the housing supports available, and one of the most significant frustrations from workers was the inability for clients to remember and attend meetings with their workers. A proactive model will hopefully minimize the frequency of missed meetings and increase the number of clients that are within the intake process.

Community:

In addition to an assertive housing intake, further community outreach is recommended. This outreach would be a person to work with and facilitate positive community between the street-involved community and the other stakeholders in the City. They would be a vessel of knowledge that could inform and advocate for people within the street-involved community and bridge the gap with stakeholders such as the DBA, Parks and Bylaws, and the RCMP. This type of outreach could connect people with groups and individuals who engage with positive meaningful daily activity and encourage relationships that lead to positive engagement.

An outreach position such as this could act as a hub of relationship between the various community stakeholders and the street-involved community. Admittedly this would be a difficult task to navigate,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 15.

and would require a specific and experienced skill set, but if done effectively this type of role could overcome many of the barriers that are experienced by the community in relation to the street-involved community. A role such as this would take pressure off the organizations that are spending significant time dealing with complaints and issues around the street-involved population (like the DBA and the Parks department) rather than on tasks more related to their mandate. A role such as this could act as a conduit of connection between members of the community that are seeking to connect with individuals experiencing homelessness.

While not directly implicated by the five-year plan, this recommendation works toward coordination and collaboration within the system. Additionally, the further community outreach recommended here would further the resilience and safety community goals found in the Social Policy Framework.⁴⁸ This relational model would increase the dialogue on a broader community level between the various stakeholders who are involved in some of the implications of having members of the community experiencing homelessness.

4. Communal Engagement

As stated above, communal engagement is recognized as a main feature of the guiding principles of the current five year plan to end homelessness. I have discussed issues around community engagement throughout the reflections, analysis and recommendations. A few recommendations for possible ways that the community could participate in to work toward ending homelessness will round out the recommendations from this report.

Business community:

Social Enterprise combines the desire to have positive social influence with a sustainable business model. There are significant opportunities around meaningful daily activity that could be included in a social enterprise. A business approach to social sustainability is an approach that has found success in many communities and the spaces and concerns in Red Deer combined with the knowledge of the business community could lead to a successful integration of social enterprise into the city. Social enterprise participates in the shift of seeing social “problems” as opportunities and designs a business plan around capitalizing on this opportunity while providing a positive influence on the community.

To begin, the business community would need to see this potential and realize the opportunities that are present. Social Enterprise Canada is an organization that helps educate and facilitate social enterprise, and the Trico charitable foundation has grants available in Alberta for social entrepreneurs.⁴⁹

There remains a significant gap in engaging the street-involved and homeless population in meaningful daily activities. Meaningful daily activity provides positive relational community for individual engagements and also occupies time toward positive ends, rather than having to face boredom and other negative influences. This is one area where social enterprise could help. Many individuals

⁴⁸ The resilience goal is stated as: “We are prepared to respond to and recover from crisis. Our vulnerability to hazards is reduced, and impacts of natural hazards, emergencies and crises on our lives are minimized.” The safety goal is stated as: “We live, work, learn and play in a safe and secure community and contribute to the actual and perceived safety and security of ourselves and others.” See, <http://www.reddeer.ca/city-government/plans-and-projects/ongoing-plans-and-projects/social-policy-framework/>.

⁴⁹ See, <http://www.socialenterprisecanada.ca/en> and, <http://tricofoundation.ca/>

experiencing homelessness have the desire and skills to work but have barriers that inhibit them from gaining employment. A social enterprise could engage this population as a potential workforce and provide meaningful daily activity to a segment of the population while achieving their business goals.

Another social enterprise potential highlighted through this research especially in the support service providers focus group discussion, was working with landlords. There are many opportunities for social enterprise to exist within the housing sector, potentially either through a property management company that specializes in housing first, or through a housing cooperative.

Religious community:

The religious community in Red Deer includes the majority of population. Of the over 88,000 people who participated in the 2011 National Household Survey, over 58,000 identified as being affiliated with a religion.⁵⁰ There is a vast network of religious organizations that are socially engaged and interested in the social concerns in our city. Many churches engage in supporting agencies and organizations that work with individuals experiencing homelessness and have an interest in engagement.

There remains significant potential for aligning the goals of the religious organizations and communities with the overall outcomes of moving individuals from the street to stable housing. There are surely opportunities for increased cooperation and collaboration with the religious organizations on achieving many of the social goals that the plan to end homelessness and the Social Pillar of The City of Red Deer. Religious organizations could play a key role in encouraging the communal engagement that will prove invaluable in ending homelessness in Red Deer.

As explained previously, there is significant potential in how the public dialogue is shaped around homelessness. To be able to shift from a “problem – solution” to an awareness of the opportunities that exist, would enable a much more fruitful engagement from the community. It would also lead to a more fruitful and long term approach to creating sustainable communal practices that will at once help alleviate and prevent homelessness. This approach to increasing the collaboration within the community aligns with the community cohesion and engagement goal within the Social Policy Framework which aims to have “strong personal, family, neighborhood and community connections, and are engaged in the community providing a sense of belonging and contributing to our quality of life.”⁵¹

Conclusion

This research offers a new understanding of the experience of homelessness in Red Deer. As much as possible the voice of those who were experiencing homelessness was given priority. While the limits of research did have an impact on the amount of data that was able to be collected, the data was rich in forming a perspective from the homeless population. The images and narratives of the individuals who

⁵⁰ See, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CMA&Code1=830&Data=Count&SearchText=Red%20Deer&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=48&A1=All&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1#tabs1> Accessed October 13, 2015.

⁵¹ See, <http://www.reddeer.ca/city-government/plans-and-projects/ongoing-plans-and-projects/social-policy-framework/>.

participated in this research tell the story of lived reality within Red Deer and the challenges involved in accessing housing.

This research should prove valuable to informing the community and stakeholders about these lived realities, and provide a perspective on possible improvements and initiatives that could be made. The recommendations made here are cohesive with the guiding documents that are in place, and should function as possible ways that mechanisms could be improved to get individuals experiencing homelessness into stable housing.

This report may function as an encounter wherein the lives and stories of members of the Red Deer community experiencing homelessness are made visible. As such, the response to the encounter will be a measure of the communal identity of Red Deer. If this project has succeeded in allowing the voice of these particular individuals to be heard, the response that is made should work toward allowing the present possibilities to be seen in a new light.

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