

# **How the Housed View the Homeless: A Study of the 2002 Controversy in Lethbridge**

---

**Catherine Kingfisher, PhD.**  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Lethbridge

## Contents

<b><u>Summary and Recommendations</u></b> -----	<b>3</b>
<b><u>Some Notes on Learning About “Us”</u></b> -----	<b>5</b>
<b><u>Methods</u></b> -----	<b>6</b>
<b><u>Research Questions</u></b> -----	<b>7</b>
<b><u>Context and Controversy</u></b> -----	<b>8</b>
<u>Homeless Shelter Debate</u> -----	8
<u>Poverty and Homelessness</u> -----	8
<u>Economic Gap</u> -----	8
<b><u>Do the Homeless Actually Exist?</u></b> -----	<b>9</b>
<u>Are Street People Truly Homeless?</u> -----	9
<u>Perceptions of Lethbridge as a Community</u> -----	9
<u>The Reserve</u> -----	9
<b><u>Who are the Homeless?</u></b> -----	<b>11</b>
<u>Competing Discourses of Homelessness</u> -----	11
<u>Official Discourse</u> -----	11
<u>Unofficial Discourse</u> -----	11
<u>Deployment of the Discourses</u> -----	11
<u>Complexity of the Discourses</u> -----	12
<b><u>Visibility of the Homeless</u></b> -----	<b>13</b>
<u>Reasons</u> -----	13
<u>Natives Versus Non-Natives in Lethbridge</u> -----	13
<u>Relative Invisibility of Other Homeless</u> -----	13
<u>Appropriate Uses of Time and Space</u> -----	13
<u>Gender Roles and Identities</u> -----	15
<u>Visibility of the Homeless: Summing Up</u> -----	15
<b><u>City Council Hearings</u></b> -----	<b>17</b>
<u>Producing a Gender and Race “Default Setting”</u> -----	17
<u>Public Hearing Setup and Format</u> -----	17
<u>Patterns in Naming the Homeless</u> -----	17
<u>Fear of the Homeless and Indirect Reference</u> -----	19
<u>Indirect Racialization of the Homeless</u> -----	20
<u>Destructuring and Individualizing Homelessness</u> -----	21
<u>Medicalizing the Homeless</u> -----	23
<u>Convergence Among Varied Groups</u> -----	23
<b><u>Fear and Loathing in Lethbridge</u></b> -----	<b>25</b>
<b><u>From Visibility to Invisibility (or Proper Visibility)</u></b> -----	<b>27</b>
<u>Removing and Transforming the Homeless</u> -----	27
<u>Approaches to Transition</u> -----	28
<u>The Homeless as “Negative Influences”</u> -----	28
<u>Shelter Zones</u> -----	28
<u>Focus on Humanity</u> -----	29
<b><u>Discussion and Conclusions</u></b> -----	<b>31</b>

<a href="#">Individualization, Reprivatization, and the Reproduction of Marginalization</a>	31
<a href="#">Structural Phenomena</a>	33
<a href="#">Issues to Note for Policy Makers</a>	33
<a href="#">References</a>	35

## Executive Summary

This report is based on research conducted on the controversy regarding homelessness in Lethbridge in 2002. The report focuses on three phenomena:

- debates concerning the actual existence of homelessness in Lethbridge
- ideas of who the homeless are and of how they became homeless
- discussions of how to best meet the needs of the homeless.

The research has four **key findings**:

1. In Lethbridge, overwhelming emphasis was placed on a specific group of homeless: addicted Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> men. The high visibility of addicted Aboriginal men was the outcome of cultural norms regarding space, place, and gender.
2. The group, however, was rarely spoken of directly, but rather served as an unmarked (or unspoken) category of the homeless. Discussions of explicitly Native issues related to homelessness were more often than not avoided.
3. Analyses of the causes homelessness and the needs of the homeless in Lethbridge emphasized individualized and medicalized causes and needs, and thus remedies, rather than structural causes and remedies.
4. Emphasis in Lethbridge was placed on containing and reforming the homeless so that they could be integrated into mainstream society.

This study was not intended to produce specific policy recommendations, but rather to explore how the housed think about the homeless, and how this thinking might influence or relate to current policy. I have expertise in neither policy analysis nor policy construction *per se*, but rather in analyzing the *cultural contexts* of particular policy orientations. I see my role as providing information that policy makers can then use as they see fit.

Nevertheless, this study has pointed to three issues that policy makers could keep in mind as they think about how to address the needs of the homeless in Lethbridge.

**(1) There is sensitivity about race and racism in Lethbridge that might be best addressed head on.** If there is a perception that most of the homeless are Native addicted men (and I believe this study shows that that is the popular perception) then arguments about the diversity of the homeless population will not suffice, especially if they bypass, however inadvertently, discussion of patterns in homelessness that do play out along ethnic lines. These patterns need to be addressed openly and publicly.

If the perception of the homeless as addicted Native men is false, then we need to look at how it is produced and interfere in that production. If it is true, then we need to deal with what produces the pattern. Frank and open discussion about the history of race relations in Lethbridge, coupled with anti-racist public education, might be a good place to start.

**(2) There is a fear of the poor in Lethbridge that might also best be addressed head on.** In the same way that racism might need to be addressed head-on, so our fear

---

<sup>1</sup> Persons of Aboriginal descent may be referred to as First Nations, Aboriginal, or Native. I use these terms interchangeably, with a preference for Native, which reflects local usage among both Natives and non-Natives.

of other differences might need to be addressed directly. Paradoxically, among the people most feared in Western society are the poor (the least powerful, most vulnerable members of society), likely because they remind us that our society is not perfect and that we, too, might fall on hard times. Removing certain types of persons from our sight will only serve to increase this fear and homogenize society at the very time that we are beginning to recognize and value diversity.

**(3) While current programs for assisting homeless persons to get off the streets are both necessary and laudable, efforts *also* need to be made to address structural issues.** Social Housing In Action (SHIA) is clearly addressing structural issues in its work to increase the numbers of affordable housing units in Lethbridge, and this work *must* continue, as lack of affordable housing is one of the most important structural issues at work in homelessness.

However, other structural issues also need to be addressed, most notably unemployment and institutional racism. The pitfalls of reducing homelessness to a property of individuals as opposed to a property of social systems must be avoided, or attempts to eradicate homelessness will not succeed.

## Some Notes on Learning About “Us”

This study focuses on “us” as opposed to “them.” While most research on homelessness concentrates on the homeless themselves – who they are, why they are homeless, what their experiences are, and what they need – this research concentrates on the *housed*. It emphasizes what the housed (including policy makers, social service providers, advocates for the homeless, and local business owners) think about the homeless and, in particular, on how the housed construct the homeless as specific kinds of persons with specific needs.

The choice of where and with whom to conduct research reflects how dominant society constructs the homeless and homelessness, and how these constructions inform proposed solutions to the problem. Accordingly, I highlight the perspectives and actions of those whose views have an influence on the context within which homeless people in Lethbridge live and on the kinds of services to which they will or will not have access.

While an analysis of “us” as opposed to “them” may make some readers uncomfortable, it also provides an opportunity for “us” to reflect on the impact of our thinking (and especially our assumptions) on the well-being of the homeless.

Given the unorthodox nature of this study it is important to stress the following points:

- Criticisms raised in this report are not meant to detract from the outstanding efforts made by individuals and organizations in Lethbridge dedicated to eradicating homelessness and promoting social justice.
- There are a variety of views and perspectives on homelessness among the housed in Lethbridge, and this report cannot represent all of them.
- Although I quote and paraphrase *individuals* in this report, it is crucial that readers interpret the views and perspectives as reflecting *social patterns*— sets of beliefs and practices that may be historically well-established, commonsensical, and/or taken-for-granted, and that are shared among a social group. In this view, social problems or racism reside in social systems, not in individuals.

## Methods

The following discussion is based on four months of ethnographic research undertaken during the height of the controversy over the closing of Streets Alive, the opening (and closing) of a drop-in center, and the decision regarding the location for a new shelter.

There were three main research methods:

- (1) Participant observation in City Council meetings and public hearings (including the collection of video recordings of two public hearings)
- (2) 28 interviews with members of City Council, City Administration, SHIA, homeless advocates and business owners
- (3) The collection of City and media documents

The two social groups represented in this study are: (1) the business owners, homeless advocates, and concerned citizens who participated in the public hearings; and (2) the decision-makers (whether employed by the City or involved in SHIA) who made up the majority of my interviewees. These two groups overlap somewhat, insofar as SHIA membership included homeless advocates, social services personnel, and business owners.

Given the need to maintain confidentiality, I do not provide any direct quotes from interviewees in this report. Instead, I provide summaries and paraphrases worded in such a way as to preclude any possibility of identification. This is a necessary precaution in a city of this size and in relation to such a contentious issue.

Since public hearings are a matter of public record, I treat the data from the hearings differently. Here I do use direct quotes, although I do not provide the names of speakers, but only their gender, ethnicity, and social location (e.g., homeless advocate, business owner, social service provider, community member).

My analysis focuses on video recordings of two public hearings and audio recordings of interviews. I indexed the recordings, and then chose segments to transcribe based on importance to participants (indicated by, for example, emphatic delivery or repetition) and emergent themes. I then analyzed the transcripts in relation to two specific themes that surface repeatedly in the data: personhood and space. By *personhood*, I mean ideas of what it means to be a full-fledged adult. And by *space* I mean the ways in which either problems or their solutions are *located* in particular *places* (the shelter, the park, downtown, etc.).

## Research Questions

Emphasizing in my analysis how the processes of the debate provided the opportunity for citizens of Lethbridge to construct the homeless and homelessness in particular ways, I explore three key questions:

- (1) Do we have homeless people in Lethbridge?
- (2) If so, who are they?
- (3) How do we respond to them?

## Context and Controversy

### Homeless Shelter Debate

In the spring and summer of 2002, the citizens of Lethbridge faced a crisis when the city's only homeless shelter, Streets Alive, was closed for health reasons and decisions had to be made regarding the location of a new shelter and a temporary drop-in center. Debates raged in the local paper, among small-business owners, among Aldermen and City administrators, and among members of community and church groups. At issue was whether facilities to serve the homeless should be located in the "downtown core" (consisting of Galt Gardens and approximately six city blocks of small shops and cafés), or on its margins.

### Poverty and Homelessness

This debate occurred in a context of increasing poverty and homelessness in Lethbridge – a pattern that seems to be occurring in Canada in general (Begin et al. 1999, Bunting and Filion 2000, Lee and Engler 2000). Although the average household income in Lethbridge in 2002-03 was \$45,544, only slightly below the national average of \$48,552, and while by some measures the economic situation in Lethbridge has been improving<sup>2</sup> by other measures all is not well for all segments of the population.

For instance, the percentage of total income coming from government transfer payments has increased from 12.2% (1991 census) to 13.1% (1996 census), despite the fact that the percentage of income from employment has remained relatively stable and that provincial reforms have made access to transfer payments more difficult.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, of 24,500 private households in Lethbridge in 2001-2, 1,880 subsisted on under \$10,000 annual income. With one-bedroom apartment rentals averaging \$525 in 2002 (an increase of \$75 per month from 1997) even those living under \$20,000 would be hard pressed to make ends meet. Moreover, apartment vacancy rates dropped from 2.8% in 1996 to .6% in 2000 (Social Housing in Action 2001). In 2001, with 19% of the population living in poverty, there were 956 people on waiting lists for affordable housing, and 504 people were turned away from shelters for lack of space (ibid.).

### Economic Gap

Finally, and perhaps most staggering, is the economic gap between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. The median total income of persons 15 years and older on the Blood reserve is \$7,772, compared to \$23,025 for the province, while the average income on the reserve is \$17,544, compared to \$32,603 for the province (Statistics Canada 2001 Community Profiles).

On the Peigan reserve 31.3% of income comes from government transfers; on the Blood reserve the figure is 35.9%, and in Lethbridge 31.3% (ibid.). A recent study on poverty in mid-sized cities in Alberta found that Natives are twice as likely to live in poverty than non-Natives (Lee and Engler 2000:8).

---

<sup>2</sup> Unemployment, for instance, has decreased significantly over the past decade, from 7% in 1994 to 3.9% in 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Alberta began welfare state restructuring in 1993, at which time large-scale efforts were made to move people off the welfare rolls and into employment. Benefit levels were reduced; support for rental deposits, telephone connection, and various health services were reduced or cut; and home visits (spot checks of eligibility) were increased.

## Do the Homeless Actually Exist?

### Are Street People Truly Homeless?

In their discussion of efforts to count the numbers of homeless in Canada and the U.S., Peressini and McDonald (2000:527) argue that definitions of homelessness are statements on “whose social conditions and circumstances are worthy of public attention and redress, and whose are not.”

The question then becomes *under what circumstances do we recognize phenomena, and how do we see or construct such phenomena?* In Lethbridge, part of the controversy regarding homelessness had to do with the question of whether the street population was “truly” homeless, or if the problem lay elsewhere.

Half of the people with whom I spoke<sup>4</sup> felt that a number of the patrons of Streets Alive were not truly homeless because they had houses on the reserve or in town. Among those who expressed this view, the prevailing opinion was that the so-called homeless used Streets Alive as a place to “crash” while on drinking binges.

In terms of policy implications, the claim that there are no “truly” homeless in Lethbridge can be read as an attempt to reduce outlays by using a deserving/ undeserving dichotomy, with its accompanying implications for targeting. It can also be read at a social level as an effort to avoid “seeing” homelessness.

If the street population has access to housing, then Lethbridge does not have a problem with homelessness. Instead, the problem is with (Aboriginal) street people, which reflects other issues besides lack of affordable housing, such as a lack of transportation to and from the reserve or, more critically, a failure on the part of the Blackfoot community to practice *kimmapiiyipitssini* (habitual-kindness, taking care of oneself and one’s family).

### Perceptions of Lethbridge as a Community

“Not seeing” homelessness also reflects perceptions of the nature of Lethbridge as a community. One person I interviewed, for instance, claimed that because Lethbridge is a “community” and communities by definition take care of their own, therefore there are no “real” homeless in Lethbridge. Such a not-having-any-problems-with-homelessness status asserts something about the (idealized) fundamental characteristics of Lethbridge. It is, in this formulation, a small-town, tight-knit, wholesome community that cares for its members and is inhabited by self-sufficient and caring people. These characteristics, in turn, position Lethbridge in opposition to large urban centres such as Calgary, with its plethora of big-city problems. This portrayal was, however, considered problematic by some, who felt that Lethbridge was “pretending” to be a much smaller place than it is.

In addition, the claim that those who are truly homeless are only a fraction of the street population (another common claim) minimizes structural determinants. Rather than attributing cause to economic shifts or institutional racism or particular historical relations, for instance, cause is reduced to private, individual problems that reflect individual deficiencies or problematic life trajectories. Cure is, accordingly, reduced to individual change.

### The Reserve

Significantly, every respondent who challenged the existence of homelessness in Lethbridge referred, either explicitly or implicitly, to the reserve. Such references

---

<sup>4</sup> 14—four Native and 10 non-Native.

indicate that speakers are assuming, rather than arguing, that street people are Aboriginal.

Moreover, if most or all street people have homes on the reserve, then any structural causes of problems that *are* recognized are located elsewhere: on the reserve and in the Native community in general, as opposed to in town or in the non-Native community.<sup>5</sup>

The problem, then, is effectively moved onto dysfunctional individuals or a dysfunctional community that occupies its own geographical space, well outside of town. If, as Hopper (2003:45) claims, the Bowery (skid row) in New York functioned in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as “the urban equivalent of a reservation,” the effect here was an intention to put the problem back from whence it allegedly came—the reserve.

---

<sup>5</sup> Although clearly in the minority, three interviewees pointed to the state of housing on the reserve, referring to overcrowding and the logistical and financial difficulties of structural maintenance in out of the way places. As Daly (1996:139) points out in reference to Canada in general, “the incidence of overcrowding in Native settlements is about twenty times greater than in non-Native communities. Nearly half of Native housing requires major repair, compared to only 6.7 percent of the general housing stock. About 38 per cent of Native homes lack running water, indoor toilets, baths, or showers.” Poor housing on reserves, along with racism, and substance and sexual abuse, were key risk factors for homelessness identified by Beavis et al. (1997) in their study of Aboriginals and homelessness (see also Donahue, Este and Miller 2002).

## Who are the Homeless?

### Competing Discourses of Homelessness

In addition to debates concerning the existence of actual homelessness, there was tension in Lethbridge between two competing discourses of homelessness:

- (1) **Official discourse**—by the City and its associates in public contexts. The official discourse emphasized racial, gender, and age diversity among the homeless.
- (2) **Unofficial discourse**—by some business owners and community members in public contexts; and also in private contexts by almost everybody. The unofficial discourse emphasized the homeless as a group of adult, primarily male, Aboriginal addicts.

### Official Discourse

Officially, the claim was that the homeless are a diverse group, whose various members show different circumstances and needs. This is in keeping with what Peressini and McDonald (2000:526) refer to as the “new breed of definitions” of homelessness. The key assertion of the official discourse is that the homeless include not only adult male Aboriginal addicts, but also: male and female, Native and non-Native, elderly, poor single mothers, abused youth, transients, unemployed, post-release offenders, and persons suffering from mental illness or physical disabilities.

In keeping with this official discourse, there was significant local publicity for a comparative study of homelessness in Lethbridge and Calgary that focused on diversity among the homeless, with particular emphasis on immigrants, refugees, and youth (Donahue, Este and Miller 2002). The authors of that report argue that in both towns “it is no longer possible to articulate a single silhouette of the homeless, but rather a diversity of profiles is needed” (ibid.:7).

### Unofficial Discourse

This discourse contrasted sharply with an unofficial discourse that asserted that the homeless problem in Lethbridge is a problem with homeless Aboriginal addicted men. Significantly, this discourse was used publicly by not only those community members willing to withstand the condemnation of their compatriots on the grounds of racism, but by almost everyone I interviewed. As a general pattern, as interviews progressed, even those who started out with the diversity argument ended up focusing on addicted Aboriginal men. That is, what began as a discussion about the diverse experiences and needs of the heterogeneous homeless population in Lethbridge became, in the end, a discussion of the need to find a productive way of dealing with the Native addicted men occupying the downtown core.

### Deployment of the Discourses

The deployment of these two discourses varied in two ways. First, it varied according to the *social location of the speaker*—those associated with social services or the site selection committee, or employed by the City, versus business owners and other community members against locating the homeless shelter downtown. Second, the deployment of these discourses varied according to *context*. That is, public versus private, official versus unofficial conversation, or earlier versus later in an interview.

### Complexity of the Discourses

That the unofficial discourse was privately acknowledged by everyone with whom I spoke (as well as publicly asserted by some) reflects its status as a “default setting.” This indicates that, official rhetoric and empirical evidence to the contrary, the homeless in Lethbridge continue to be imagined as a unified category. Just as “welfare mom” in the U.S. is code for African-American inner-city unwed teenage mother, so “homeless” in Lethbridge is code for male Aboriginal addict.

However, it is not simply that there was an official discourse of diversity when everyone really believed “homelessness” in Lethbridge was an “Indian” problem. Significantly, the unofficial discourse was itself split into two.

On one side were those who felt that a focus on Aboriginality was the necessary response to an empirically verifiable deficiency among that population—indicating that if any problems with homelessness were structural in nature, they had to do with the structure of an inherently dysfunctional Aboriginal culture that produced dysfunctional individuals.

In contrast, and fewer in number, were those who felt that a focus on Aboriginality was the necessary response to an empirically verifiable racism seen to be rampant in Lethbridge. This view indicated that problems with homelessness were both personal and private *and* public and structural, in specific reference to dominant white culture and society.

Those in this latter group, who began our interviews with the diversity argument but ended up focusing on Native addicted men, were able to explain the phenomenon as one of visibility, reflecting an organization of space and sociality which highlighted addicted Native men and muted “other” homeless.

Therefore, while the default setting was the same for both groups (homeless = adult male Aboriginal addict), the ideological and prescriptive uses to which the setting was put were multiple and varied.

## Visibility of the Homeless

### Reasons

If the homeless are a diverse group (as is claimed by the City and in the social science literature in general) then the question becomes, why is it that addicted Aboriginal men are so conspicuous in Lethbridge? My analysis points to four phenomena that combined to produce this prominence:

- (1) The presence of Natives versus non-Natives in Lethbridge.
- (2) The relative invisibility of other homeless in town.
- (3) Dominant notions of the appropriate uses of time and space and the reflection of these in the built environment.
- (4) Dominant notions of gender roles and identities.

### Natives Versus Non-Natives in Lethbridge

A number of interviewees pointed out that, despite the opening of the borders between town and reserve in the 1960s (when Natives no longer required a pass to leave the reserve), Lethbridge remains a *de facto* segregated town. Natives continue to be barred (albeit informally) from particular spaces and statuses. For example, several interviewees noted that Aboriginals have difficulty securing housing in Lethbridge; once a landlord discovers that their potential tenant is Native, so the story goes, they claim that the property has already been rented out.

Interviewees also pointed to the low numbers of Aboriginals in paid employment in Lethbridge. The lack of a clear Native presence in other sectors thus makes the race/ethnicity<sup>6</sup> of the homeless occupying the “downtown core” all the more salient.

### Relative Invisibility of Other Homeless

In addition to the minimal presence of visibly First Nations persons who are not “street people,” homeless Native *women* and *non-Native* homeless are also less present in public spaces in town. There are two other homeless shelters in Lethbridge, both serving women, yet the patrons of these shelters are not perceived as public nuisances, and the shelters themselves barely register as matters of public concern. Those doubled-up in apartments or couch surfing are similarly invisible. Finally, different approaches to sociality among Native homeless (who several interviewees observed tend to move in groups) versus non-Native homeless (who tend to move as individuals) may serve to underscore the visibility of the former.

### Appropriate Uses of Time and Space

The prominence of Aboriginal addicted men in the downtown core is also an artifact of how non-Natives use time and space, which in turn is reflected in the organization of the physical environment. The violation of norms regarding the appropriate uses of time and space entails the violation of norms of comportment and of basic notions of what it is to be a proper, responsible, adult person.

---

<sup>6</sup> Buchignani (2002:9) points out that, “[S]ince World War II both Canadians and their governments have preferred to frame inter-group relations in terms of ethnicity (that is to say, in terms of perceived cultural differences and attendant identities) – even when they do have clear racial dimensions....With the priority which Canadians currently place on ethnicity typically comes an assumption of mutability: whether or not the perceived ‘ethnic’ differences of others are thought desirable, they are believed to be cultural things which can be altered by the efforts of those who practice them.” I use the term race here to index both ethnicity as a cultural phenomenon and race as a socially constructed biological phenomenon.

Baroe's *Indian and White* (1975), which explores relations between Cree and Non-Natives in a southwestern Canadian prairie town, provides some insights relevant to Lethbridge in this regard. In *Short Grass*, Baroe states, "the idea of constant toil as the sole honorable means to success—the familiar Protestant Ethic—is widely shared and explicitly verbalized" (1975:95), as it is in much of the Canadian prairies. Natives in *Short Grass*, who, like in Lethbridge, congregate in groups for long periods, violate this ethic. In reference to non-Native views of Natives "hanging out" in town, Baroe (ibid.:102) points out that:

It appears to be a widespread and general rule in Western society that one should not only be engaged in some legitimately identifiable activity when in the presence of others, but should also demonstrate an involvement in some situation at all times, even if this is merely journeying somewhere or awaiting something....a person whose involvements and intentions are not apparent is always suspect.

Appearing to have *something legitimate to do* is key. Natives "hanging out" in Galt Gardens break tacit rules of performing one's "business," and thus of industry, self-reliance, and responsibility. Drinking Natives further violate notions of thrift. In addition, panhandling violates norms of privacy and personal space. Residents in Lethbridge are offended when approached on the street for money, and often describe this behavior as "aggressive."

Street space in Lethbridge, then, is not used as a "hangout," but as a conduit for people "going somewhere." In contrast to larger urban centres, Lethbridge is not known for having large crowds on the street, thus rendering Aboriginals who are "standing around" all the more noticeable. While Susser (1996) notes that the homeless in New York City repopulate coveted niches at night when everyone else goes home, in Lethbridge the homeless fail to wait until nightfall.

Closely related to local conventions regarding space are those regarding the appropriate places for particular behaviors. Bodily elimination and sex, for instance, are locally regarded as "private" activities, conducted away from the hearing and sight of potential spectators. Less obvious is consumption and socializing. Eating (or drinking), when not conducted in the home, is properly conducted in public spaces marked off for those specific purposes (restaurants, picnic areas). Likewise with socializing.

This particular group of homeless is engaging in private activities in public spaces—congregating in the local park (as opposed to a living room) for long stretches of time with seemingly no business; drinking in the park (rather than in a bar); urinating or defecating in the back doorways to businesses (as opposed to in a toilet); and engaging in sex in a parking lot (as opposed to at least in a car or hotel room, let alone a proper bedroom). This is unacceptable human behavior by dominant local cultural standards, and it increased the visibility of these men dramatically.

The distinction between proper and improper conduct was marked in Lethbridge by references to "positive" versus "negative" users of the downtown core. Interviewees spoke in this regard of the need to create "positive" activities and events in such places as Galt Gardens in order to attract "positive" users (e.g., families), and dilute "negative" users (e.g., the homeless).

This distinction between "positive" and "negative" users/uses of space was also reflected in the built environment. In contrast with other parks in town, for instance, Galt Gardens has no public toilets. They existed at one point but then were removed because they were misused as places to sleep and do drugs. Nor are homeless Natives welcome just across the street from Galt Gardens in Park Place mall, where space is organized to encourage specific practices of consumption. Three interviewees told me stories of seeing Natives

being kicked out of the mall. Two of them told these stories while lamenting the lack of public washrooms in town. The built environment, then, is such that the homeless are forced to engage in certain private activities in locally inappropriate public spaces. Perceptions, however, do not focus on the organization of space, but rather on some purported characteristics of the homeless themselves.

### Gender Roles and Identities

In addition to violating public/private distinctions and norms regarding industriousness and thrift, addicted Aboriginal men also violate gender norms. It is worth noting in this regard that the “feminization of poverty” refers not only to an exponential rise in the numbers of poor women, but also to a characterization of the poor, as a category, as “feminine,” and as suffering from the “feminine” attributes of irrationality, need, lack, and so on (Smith 1990; see Kingfisher 2002 for further discussion).

At one level, then, homeless Aboriginal men in Lethbridge are *feminized*, taking on exaggerated characteristics of need and dependency, while being dissociated from more positive “feminine” characteristics, such as nurturance. What seems to be accentuated here is an *infantilized dependent* femininity – a complete and total inability to care for oneself. This incapacity, however, is not just distasteful; it is also threatening, and what makes it threatening is that the individuals in question are men, not women or children.

At the same time that they represent a feminized dependence, homeless Aboriginal addicted men are also *hypermasculinized*, taking on exaggerated characteristics of threatening aggression, without the positive “male” attribute of provider. Passaro’s (1996:1-2) insights into the gender status of homeless men in New York are instructive here:

Homeless street people are...in gender crisis. For homeless men, this crisis usually relates to the culturally contradictory position they occupy – they are viewed both as hypermasculinized and emasculated. These men appear to be independent of the control of women, family, and society, and thus they are considered dangerous, violent, and aggressive. If they are “nonwhite,” racism reinforces and exaggerates these fears. Accompanying these hypermasculinized images are emasculated ones – homeless men are failed *men*, in traditional gender terms, because they are dependent and unable to support themselves (emphasis in original).

These men, then, display the most negative characteristics of each gender simultaneously; they are aggressive, threatening, *and* dependent.

### Visibility of the Homeless: Summing Up

In sum, the prominence of homeless Aboriginal addicted men is an artifact of particular social, material, and ideological processes, rather than of characteristics inherent to the male Native street population itself. First, Aboriginals have been historically barred from certain places and activities, and are still barred, albeit informally, from particular spaces and statuses in town. Historically, this restriction *from* certain places reflects efforts to restrict Natives *to* certain places (e.g., reserves, residential schools). This has contributed to a relatively small Aboriginal presence in Lethbridge, underscoring the visibility of Native street people, who, I have suggested, are compelled to be on the street, and are forced to engage in private behaviors in public places, thus offending the sensibilities of passers-by. In addition, dominant norms of comportment and gender roles are such that homeless addicted Aboriginal men inevitably fall short.

Given this prominence, it is interesting that the equivalence of the homeless with Native addicted men was rarely stated explicitly. This was, I argue, because: (1) the equivalence was assumed, or taken-for-granted; and (2) people did not want to appear racist.

I therefore turn now to a discussion of how the default setting (or unmarked categorization) of homeless = Aboriginal addicted men operated in the context of public hearings.

## City Council Hearings

### Producing a Gender and Race “Default Setting”

In a discussion of race and gender in a meeting of the Board of Regents of the University of California, West and Fenstermaker (2002) point out that, with one exception, the only speakers who verbally identified their race and gender were women and non-white men. Such indication, or *marking*, points to the existence of an *unmarked category* to which the marking relates – in this case, the unmarked category of *white male*. (For instance, we will refer to an *Asian woman doctor*, unless the doctor is white and male, in which case the only required term is *doctor*.)

A similar pattern emerged in the Lethbridge City Council hearings on homelessness; in this case, however, the only homeless whose gender or race was marked were those who were female and non-Native. Thus the unmarked category was *Aboriginal male*, who, as the analysis below indicates, is always also addicted.

### Public Hearing Setup and Format

The two public hearings in question occurred on April 15 and July 29 of 2002. Aside from the City Councillors and Administrators who participated as interlocutors or facilitators of the hearing process, 25 members of the public spoke at the first hearing, and 39 persons spoke at the second. The hearings all took place in City Council Chambers, a room which holds 114 audience seats arranged to face a room-length semicircular desk at which members of City Council sit, each with their own microphone. At the open end of the semi-circle, in front of the audience and facing the Aldermen, is a podium with a microphone, at which members of the public wishing to address Council stand. Speakers approach the podium one at a time, identify themselves, and then speak for a maximum of five minutes (although this maximum is not strictly enforced).

The April 15 hearing was formally planned; thus those wishing to speak had to notify Council in advance and were called to the podium in turn. The issue at this particular hearing was the location of a site for a new shelter. The July 29 hearing, in contrast, was spontaneous, occurring during that segment of regular City Council meetings referred to as Meeting With Citizens, Without Formal Notice. In this case, speakers had to monitor their own approaches to the podium. At issue on this occasion was the location of a drop-in center for the homeless in the “downtown core” in response to the emergency closure of Streets Alive. The site for the location of a new shelter, left undetermined at the April 15 hearing, was also at issue.

The majority of speakers at the hearings were business owners and those who work with the homeless, either in a professional capacity or as volunteers. The absence of the homeless themselves was striking, if not surprising: of 63 members of the public who spoke at the two hearings, only two identified themselves as recently or currently homeless. Although all members of the public, including the homeless, were invited to participate in these public discussions, clearly what was happening at the hearings was not an engagement with the homeless, but one about them.

### Patterns in Naming the Homeless

Several patterns in practices of naming the homeless and the causes of homelessness emerged in the course of my analysis. Those who did not refer to the homeless as specifically white or as women were not referring to a generic homeless person who shared with other such persons only the situation of being homeless. Rather, they were referring to a *specific* homeless person, an adult male Aboriginal. In other words, the default setting of homeless = addicted Native man was produced by explicitly marking the

gender and race of those who were either female or white, and by omitting explicit references to Native men.

In the following exchange, for instance, Susan Hill (SH), from a local social services organization, criticizes Streets Alive for its inability to meet the needs of homeless women and children (note that C refers to one of the City Councillors):

SH: We would never refer a...mother with children to [Streets Alive], it's not conducive to...children, it's barely conducive to women and we certainly wouldn't refer children over there

C: Okay and you think you might...to this new shelter?

SH: If it has safe, separate...accommodation so that the women and children can be kept safe. If you're in an environment where there's people under the influence and people who have other issues you don't wanna put women and children at risk, and we would only refer them there if the shelter has a separate, safe accommodation for the women and children. (15 April)

Earlier in her testimony, Ms. Hill had stated "There is a definite need for an emergency shelter that can remember all the forgotten faces, including women and children and families. The new shelter has to be a site for this population as well." A similar form of gender marking occurred at the July 29 hearing, when the owner of a downtown boutique pointed out that, "We have single mothers coming in [to the store] that can't stay with their husbands at the same shelter...and these are people who are really homeless, it has nothing to do with race or even if they're addicts or anything, it has to do with they're down and out and they need a hand" (white female business owner, July 29). Both of these examples may be read as challenges to a default setting of homeless = addicted Native man by means of placing women at the center. These challenges, moreover, bring to the forefront the existence of the taken-for-granted categorization of the homeless as Native addicted men.

In addition to the distinction between marked (female) as opposed to unmarked (male) gender was that between marked (white) as opposed to unmarked (Native) race/ethnicity. In one case, a speaker protested against the program planning of the new shelter (which would be run by Sik-oo-kotok Friendship Society and have programs in Native spirituality, etc.), because services would be geared narrowly to Natives only:

I have one concern about this whole thing and that one concern is, it's all set up for the Aboriginals and I know that in the Soup Kitchen when you get 140 people you only get 40 or 50 Aboriginals, if there's 60 or 70 you get 35. So I know there's a whole lot of people out there aren't Aboriginals, and...while I have nothing against Aboriginals practicing what they do, but I don't see very little in here [gesturing to shelter proposal documents] for people that are homeless that aren't Aboriginals, and that is my concern (white male community member, April 15).

This concern was shared by several other speakers, and seemed to be directed against the use of taxpayers' monies to serve "special interest" groups. In another instance, a homeless advocate pointed out that, "the street folks, predominantly Aboriginals, but also white, have no place to sleep" (white male, July 29). In yet another instance, a speaker argued, "We are facing more economic hard times, we are seeing more and more young, white males utilizing... [the shelter] because employment is drying up, benefits are not available to them" (white male homeless advocate, July 29). In these cases of racial marking, the pattern was to point out that the homeless were not *only* Aboriginal, but *also* white. Without that assertion, *all* the homeless were assumed to be Native.

The marking of (female) gender and (white) race, when coupled with the overwhelming tendency to refer *indirectly* to the homeless as Native addicted men (see following two sections), can be read as simultaneously serving to move away from and reinforce the default setting. Several examples of such indirect reference will serve to illustrate the point.

### Fear of the Homeless and Indirect Reference

One of the key themes running through the debate about the location of the new shelter was fear—specifically, fear of being approached for money, or of being threatened with assault. As the excerpts below indicate, this fear was not a response to *any* homeless person, but to a *specific kind* of homeless person. This specific kind of homeless person, however, was usually left unnamed. All the speakers in the excerpts are white business owners or managers:

Many of the people that work for me...do work in the evenings and are very concerned about being there, some people by themselves in the evenings...and that type of thing of course [having a homeless shelter nearby] will be a very scary situation (male, April 15).

Now, I can assure you that several times a week, I phone 911, because my staff is threatened. Several times a week I phone 911, because my parking lot is inundated with people drinking and using my parking lot for a bathroom. And I'm fearful myself of going out there and basically suggesting or...asking or begging or whatever route I may take, to ask these people, to go elsewhere or – what do you say, what do you do? It's a difficult, difficult situation (male, July 29).

We have customers who have come into our businesses, they've looked outside and they have seen, various groups of people hanging around outside, they're afraid to leave, they wait until it's safe to go. How can we encourage new customers to come into a business when it's not safe to come in or to leave? (female, July 29).

I have an obligation to my staff to protect them...whether it be I increase my staff, put male presence in my store, however I approach this situation, all I know is it's gonna cost me more money to operate my business (male, July 29).

The very first day we opened the store, the first thing I did was call the cops, because drunken homeless people came into the store and were threatening to kill us with a knife [skip segment...] We all know that there are a lot of violent people out there, violent drunk and high people, and that scares me because what is a big concern for me is the safety of the kids who work for me. My store is open until four in the morning. Half of the kids who work for me are girls and are nineteen –twenty years old. I don't know what I'll do the day I get a phone call at three in the morning and something has happened to the kids (female, July 29).

While street persons (and, in particular, Native men who appeared to be under the influence of alcohol or other drugs) did occasionally approach passersby for money, the fear of assault had little basis in reality.

I was unable to find any reported instances of actual physical attacks by the homeless on passersby in either the local paper or among my acquaintances who frequent the “downtown core.” The reference in excerpt #5 to an actual instance of threatened violence was the exception that proved the rule.

Taken as a whole, the threat appears to have been more social than physical, having to do with violations of norms regarding the proper expression of personhood and sociality. The threat was nevertheless experienced as real, and it did have real material implications, in particular for small business owners whose economic well-being was being put at risk insofar as the presence of this particular group of homeless repelled potential customers. As one business owner pointed out at the July 29 hearing, in 2001 23 downtown businesses had either relocated or failed.

My interest here, however, is not in the validity or lack thereof of this fear, but in the constructed object of such fear. Clearly, in the above excerpts, the speakers are not referring to elderly homeless; nor are they referring to homeless mothers and their young children. The subtext of excerpts 4 and 5 is that women and youth are the ones in need of protection; and the reference to a “male presence” in the store (example 4) indicates that the speaker is referring specifically to female staff who are in need of protection. The reference to “girls” in excerpt 5 is particularly telling, invoking the adult male “violent, drunk, and high people” who are a threat to them. Again, the fear and safety issues – if not the decency issues associated with bodily elimination in public – are related, always indirectly, to a specific population that is comprised of men, who are inebriated and, I would argue, Native. On no occasion were the marked categories of female or non-Native homeless coupled with references to fear; homeless women and white men were simply not considered threatening. Indeed, as Sara Hill indicates in her testimony above, women who are homeless are not only not threatening, but, in fact, are in need of protection from the inebriated men who are. White men falling on hard times also needed some sort of protection:

I’m wondering if there’s someone that came from Newfoundland or Nova Scotia or New Brunswick because he...wanted a better life to raise his young family, and he needed a shelter to stay in until he could get his feet on the ground. Is this [new] shelter going to be the place he can go to, or will he be woken up at one o’clock and then two o’clock and four o’clock by people coming in and out plastered out of their gourd creating a lot of confusion (white male community member, July 29).

### **Indirect Racialization of the Homeless**

Although clearly invoking a deserving/undeserving distinction related to the work ethic, this distinction made by the above speaker is also, in this context, clearly race-based. The following racialization of the homeless, produced by a speaker commenting on the long history of this problem in Lethbridge, is even more striking in its direct indirectness:

But I can remember in Lethbridge in the park before they allowed ’em to go into...the beer parlors and...their favourite drink here – and you could see their bottles lined up in the park – was...basically lemon extract, that was their favourite drink (white male community member, April 15)

The phrase, “before they allowed ’em to go into the beer parlors,” is a clear reference to Aboriginals, who were not permitted to leave the reserves without a pass or enter bars until the 1960s. Not only is the reference to Aboriginality clear, however indirect, but the connection between Native status and alcoholism (which, in other instances, is extended to cover various forms of addiction) is also obvious.

Frequency counts of references to the homeless at the hearings further reinforce this interpretation of indirectness in relation to race:

- During the April 15<sup>th</sup> hearing, the homeless were referred to 780 times, by means of 102 referents.
- Of these referents the most common were *the homeless* (66 times), *people* (73 times), *them* (49 times) and *they* (140 times).
- The referents *Aboriginal*, *Indian*, *Native*, *Native men*, *my people* and *our people* (the latter two used by First Nations speakers) were used 14 times.
- Similarly, at the July 29 hearings, the homeless were referred to 330 times, by means of 100 referents.
- The most common referents on this occasion were *they* (56 times), *people* (37 times), *them* (26 times), *homeless* (30 times), and *these/those people* (22 times).
- The referents *Aboriginal*, *Native*, and *our people* were used a total of 5 times.

Rather than indicating a lack of racial categorization, such absences indicate the opposite: an extreme racial categorization so taken-for-granted that it could be left unsaid.

As the excerpts above indicate, the population in question was clearly First Nations and male. Race and gender, then, although explicitly named only in negative (non-Native, female) instances, were constantly referenced. Alcoholism and other drug addictions were also repeatedly referred to, albeit at a secondary level. **If the default category of the homeless is Native male, the default setting of Native male is addict.** This points to a specifically class-inflected construction of Aboriginality. The population of Lethbridge that is First Nations, while small (less than 3%), is surely not comprised completely of male alcoholic street people, despite the fact that over 30% of the income received by Natives resident in town comes from government transfers (Statistics Canada 2001 Community Profiles) – which means that close to 70% of income is generated from employment.

The homeless Native male addict, then, represents and embodies a particular kind of Nativeness. However, insofar as this remains unspoken, there is a danger of generalizing across class categories, such that all Natives (and not just those who are poor, homeless, or otherwise down-and-out) are tarnished by a stereotype that is asserted through silence.

### Destructuring and Individualizing Homelessness

In some cases, however, the Native status of the homeless was explicitly noted. These explicit markings usually took the form of attempts to explain, rather than take for granted, why so many homeless were Native. At the July 29 hearing, for instance, one speaker made specific, if indirect, reference to racism:

I wanna remind everyone again that our city is adjacent to the largest native land reserve in Canada, and that the Aboriginal people, the First Nations people, were actually here before us. It's also important to notice that everybody that's on the Council here is white, and that there is no one actually speaking here today for the people who were actually here first [skip one minute....]. So is there any way – I don't have the answer – is there a way though, that we can have business men and women do well and thrive downtown and at the same time recognize that the Aboriginal people struggle, they're dispossessed many of them, and they're in the city and they were here first (white male homeless advocate, July 29).

This statement— along with the references to single mothers falling on hard times and young white males showing up at the shelter because employment has dried up, both mentioned above – was the closest anyone at the hearings got to a structural analysis. These were the exceptions.

Largely, the hearings accomplished a *destruction* of homelessness, by which I mean a devolution of the causes of homelessness to the individual level. This devolution was a key (albeit probably unintentional) feature of the official diversity discourse of homelessness. At the beginning of the April 15 hearing, for instance, there was a presentation on, among other things, the causes of homelessness. These causes, provided on a PowerPoint slide, were as follows:

- Physical/Mental Illness and Disabilities.
- Unemployment.
- Addictions.
- Broken Relationships.
- Post release offenders.
- Grief and loss.
- Inability to access affordable housing.

Five of the seven causes are individual in nature. The remaining two—unemployment and lack of affordable housing—may be read as pointing to structural issues. However, in the case of housing, the cause was not stated as *lack of* affordable housing, but as *inability to access* affordable housing. While the first is clearly structural in nature, the latter is not necessarily so. Similarly, the reference to *unemployment*, when put in the context of various discussions both in and out of the hearings regarding life and job skills training for the homeless, can as easily refer the *unemployability* of the homeless as it can to unemployment as a structural phenomenon.

What this PowerPoint slide reflects is an emphasis on immediate, precipitating causes of homelessness. Considered as such, the portrayal is accurate. But it would be even more accurate if it included long-term structural factors that produce the conditions of possibility for the immediate, precipitating causes: *why* do grief and loss lead to homelessness, *why* does a broken relationship result in homelessness? (Just by way of comparison, in Samoa, for instance, there is no such thing as homelessness: mental illness, economic hard times, grief and loss, and so on, are all accommodated within local village structures.)

This devolution of the causes of homelessness to the individual level was mirrored in the statements of many of the participants at the hearings. That this was largely unchallenged shows that it was a default setting of what causes homelessness: individual pathology. In this case, however, the default setting was not taken-for-granted and enacted via omission, but was explicitly chosen as such. Several examples will serve to illustrate this process.

At the April 15 hearing, a speaker in support of a resource centre mentioned the “range of problems” that the homeless might be struggling with. His list was restricted to individual issues, such as “addiction problems, mental health problems, health problems, and so on” (April 15). No reference was made to the societal contexts of such problems. Similarly, a defender of Streets Alive responded to complaints that the shelter itself produced negative behaviour on the part of its patrons by arguing that:

The safety issues are not caused because Streets Alive is there, the safety issues are caused because there are a group of people who are

dysfunctional, who are vulnerable. They're a group of people who have been raped as early as nine years old, or eight, or four by uncles, by fathers – boys and girls who are now adults. They are people who have been abandoned by families. They are people who have been cast aside by society as a whole (white male homeless advocate, July 29).

Later in his testimony this speaker invoked the City's term *hard-to-serve*, which he, like the City, took to refer to "the addict, the individual who does not want to make a lifestyle change" (July 29). The next speaker engaged in a similar kind of individualization and medicalization of the homeless when he spoke out against soft love of the homeless in favour of tough love:

I'm disappointed when...people wave the banner of Christianity to say that, you know, that we have to baby sit someone who's chosen to stay in their addiction, if somebody chooses to stay in their addictions they're gonna stay there as long as they're enabled to stay there, and they'll continue and we will be continuing to allow them to destroy themselves and everything around them, their families, the community around them, as long as they stay in those addictions (white male community member).

Finally, a formerly homeless person used a similar model to explain his own behavioural history:

It is true that it is your choice to get out of the life you lead....you know, it is your choice, truly, if you want to remain in this addiction and stuff like that (white male community member, July 29).

### Medicalizing the Homeless

The individualization of homelessness drew heavily on medical and mental health discourses. Addictions figured prominently in both interviews and City Council hearings – sometimes referred to directly ("addictions," "intoxication," "drinking"), and other times indirectly ("hard to serve," "negative users"). Mental health issues were referred to somewhat less frequently, via references to a general dysfunctionality which could have been caused by childhood neglect or abuse and which was or was not related to addictions.

Closely associated with references to addictions and addiction-related behaviours were references to the brain damage inflicted on the homeless in utero by their addicted mothers. **It is worth noting in this regard that not only did *Native* mean *addict*, but *addict* also meant *Native*.** The connection was sometimes made directly (by, for example, citing high rates of FAS on the reserve), but more often than not it was assumed rather than explicitly stated. It was the combination of *inebriation* with *male Native* status that produced the threat presented by the homeless so frequently imagined and referred to.

### Convergence Among Varied Groups

Dominating the hearings, the individualization and medicalization of the homeless was asserted by businesspersons, experts (e.g., addictions counsellors), homeless advocates, and City employees alike. There was a convergence, then, among those who held differing interests, ranging from business persons who perceived their livelihoods to be threatened by the individuals who loitered in front of their shops, to addictions counsellors who were confronted with alcoholics on a daily basis, to church ministers who worked to ease the suffering of the individuals who came to them for help.

That constituencies with such varied interests and experience with the homeless might converge in relation to individualized and medicalized causes of (and cures for)

homelessness is, perhaps, indicative of the general trend towards individualization characteristic of our current society (Rose 1996, 1998), as well as of a sense that the larger structural issues at work (unemployment, histories of racism) are too big to deal with.

## Fear and Loathing in Lethbridge

“We need to reclaim Galt Gardens. We need to reclaim our downtown.”

Statements such as the above, made at the July 29 public hearing on the drop-in centre, clearly indicate that the presence of Aboriginal street people in the “downtown core” was seen as an invasion, or occupation. The public response to this “occupation” was fear. Two sets of excerpts from the public hearing serve to illustrate this point. The first are from the testimony of the owner of women’s clothing stores in the “downtown core”:

Now both of these businesses involve *ladies* coming and going. And we hear many, many complaints from our customers [who are] *continually frightened*, due to the fact that there are people *loitering* in front of stores, and this happens frequently. We’ve had...homeless come into our stores...we all too often have to call 911 as well. It seems to be getting out of hand (white female, 7/29/02; emphasis added).

...*they* [the homeless] *don’t have to be right beside us*, when we are trying to... run a business and have customers come and go and *children come and go safely* (ibid.; emphasis added).

The owner of a boutique and set of apartments located close to the former Streets Alive produced the second excerpts:

You almost have to lie to the tenants and the customers: “don’t worry about it, it’s safe down here, come on, come on in.” Like, my staff aren’t only customer service reps, they are policemen, they are ambulance people, they are everything. Like, we see it all down here.... Man, like, we lose tenants and customers over *noise*, vandalism, break-ins, um, their *fear of people in the street* (white female, 7/29/02; emphasis added).

I really think putting it [the drop-in centre] on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue is going to hurt the walk by traffic immensely...*No one is going to want to walk down 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue* (ibid., emphasis added).

There are a number of interesting things going on in these excerpts. First, while both women repeatedly refer to issues of fear and safety, the fear is expressed not only in relation to vandalism and break-ins, but also to *noise*, *people in the street*, and *loitering* – i.e., to the simple *presence* of the homeless. Further, both women recount calling 911 when a homeless person *entered their stores*, despite the fact that both are open to the public. Finally, this fear is experienced by or on behalf of women (“ladies”) and children, who are constructed as vulnerable and in need of protection from hypermasculinized Aboriginal homeless men. The issue is clearly one of protecting business from the harm caused by the aesthetic offence of homelessness.

The “alien, embarrassing, disturbing presence” (Hopper 2003:127) of the homeless thus threatens the everyday conduct of business, notions of community and sociality and, by extension, ideas of what it means to be a person. While homeless Native addicted men are clearly human beings, they are not fully adult by prairie/rugged individual standards. As Hopper (1988:164) observes, “the homeless poor are considered to be both different and strange.”

Aboriginal addicted homeless men in Lethbridge are different and strange because they are considered to have different thinking patterns from the rest of us, be they drug induced in utero, resulting in Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), or ex utero, through addictions, or both. One homeless advocate had this to say at a public hearing:

Our experience is [that] 60% of the street population is either addicted, FAS, mentally ill, or a combination of all things. This group has a set of behaviors and because they're brain-injured and addicted the behavior patterns create social problems. They hang out in large groups, they have fixed patterns of travel and movement. They are poor at social interaction. Because they are brain-injured, however, they can't change these behaviors. If we believe we can change these behaviors we are mistaken. What we are dealing with, with a percentage of our street population, are *adult children*. They're six year olds. But they won't get any better than a six year old, they're learning impaired (white male homeless advocate, April 15; emphasis added).

As "less-persons," the homeless threaten "more" or "full" persons. They challenge the assumption that it is in our nature to be particular kinds of men and women and to organize our communities to reflect this human nature.

In debating the nature, characteristics, and personhood of the homeless, participants work to assert and reinforce certain assumptions about the nature, characteristics, and personhood of the housed. "When something is firmly classed as anomalous," Douglas (1966:47) points out, "the outline of the set in which it is not a member is clarified."

## From Visibility to Invisibility (or Proper Visibility)

### Removing and Transforming the Homeless

Having located Native addicted homeless men outside of the social order, citizens of Lethbridge were left with two options: keep them out, or alter them so that they can fit in (Smith 1990; see also Douglas 1966). What emerged in Lethbridge was a combination of these responses, that is, temporary removal for the purposes of reformation.

That the homeless needed to be transformed was taken as a given. Although a number of respondents referred to the “lifestyle choices” of the “hard to serve,” there was an underlying assumption that people who made such “choices” were unhappy, and that they needed help to rise up to a more complete, adequate, and self-fulfilling personhood. This was to be the goal of the new shelter, a goal that required a specific location away from the downtown core. Accordingly, the site selected for the new shelter was located six blocks – a considerable symbolic distance – from the core.

Discussions of the need for a specific space of transformation were often couched in reference to the need for “dignity” and “privacy” among the homeless themselves. The argument was also made that removal was important to housed Natives. With one exception, the latter argument was proffered by non-Natives only, who seemed to read the behaviour of any Aboriginal as “representative” of the entire group.

While some, most notably the operators of the Streets Alive, resisted the placement of the new shelter outside of the downtown core, others argued that the distance from downtown was negligible. But the extremes of the debate are telling. At one end is a speaker’s claim that:

I am frightened that we are trying to take an identifiable people, group, and push them into an area, like the Jewish ghettos in Warsaw or the black townships of Soweto or the reserves of this country where at one time you needed permission to be off of it and if you were found off of it you were jailed. How does that integrate a group of people into a society? (white male homeless advocate, 7/29/02).

At the other extreme is the assertion that “we” (ordinary, normal citizens) must “reclaim” the downtown core. The phrase “downtown core,” is clearly metaphorical and symbolic as well as literal. Its specific physical parameters mark the symbolic “core” of the City’s identity and the core is at the center of its self-constitution as a community. Its being located in this particular space doubled the challenge that Aboriginal homeless men presented to normative notions of personhood and community. In addition, then, to the clearly articulated notion that the presence of the homeless is “bad for business” is the less articulated notion that the presence of the homeless in the downtown core is bad for the “community.”

The most extreme construction of a rehabilitation zone I encountered was the proposal that the shelter be built 40 km out of town and that the homeless be transported and forced to remain there until they’ve been “recivilized”. This thinking mirrors that which informed the establishment of the reserve system in Canada (Carter 1990, Miller 2000), conjuring similar images of containment.

As with the reserve system, containment refers to removal. The threat presented by the presence of less-persons in the downtown core can be contained by removing them. And as with the residential schooling system, containment is about channelling and discipline. Interviewees spoke in this regard of the need to move people *through* a shelter program and then back out *into* society. Thus the homeless were sometimes referred to as “people in transition.”

## Approaches to Transition

In keeping with the double valence of containment, approaches to “transition” ranged from love to tough love, both of which nevertheless entailed physical removal to protect the homeless from “negative influences,” such as bars.<sup>7</sup>

The proposal to locate the shelter 40km out of town (never, to my knowledge, expressed outside the context of a confidential interview) is perhaps most representative of the “tough love” approach, but there were milder versions of it as well. In support of the new shelter site, one respondent noted that it was just far enough from the downtown core as to make “life just not quite so easy” for its denizens, a “not quite so easy” that was considered positively therapeutic as it could potentially instil a sense of labor and self-discipline as good. This reflected a particular approach to empowerment—get rid of that “free lunch” to encourage people to learn how to make their own lunches.

Others portrayed this process of transition as more nurturing, consisting of a menu of therapeutic interventions from which the homeless could choose, ranging from addictions counselling to medical care to life skills training. The approach here was one of opportunity—“invite” the homeless and give them various “options” to improve their lives.

## The Homeless as “Negative Influences”

A key argument for placing the shelter on the outskirts of the downtown core was that it would help the homeless distance themselves from the more negative influences. Significantly, such “negative influences” were seen to include not only opportunities to procure alcohol or other drugs, but also *other homeless individuals* with bad habits, such as drinking or panhandling – a clear invocation of a deserving/undeserving binary.<sup>8</sup>

This designation of the homeless as “negative influences” on each other led to a second level of compartmentalization and containment. Not only were the homeless as a group to be evicted from the downtown core, but they were to be segregated amongst themselves.

In contrast to the spatial organization of Streets Alive, in which there was one communal space shared by all residents, program planning for the new shelter highlighted divisions within the shelter itself. These divisions were designed to compartmentalize and separate individuals who were “negative” influences from those who were vulnerable to being negatively influenced. The most obvious separation was between the intoxicated and the sober, taking the form of segregation between “wet” and “dry” beds, a separation informed by the “shelterization thesis” (Hopper 2003:49), which claims that the homeless eventually settle “into the stuporous regimen of the shelter in the constant company of lost men.” Segregation could prevent this from happening to those who had the potential to successfully move through the shelter and out into society.

## Shelter Zones

Management plans for the new shelter also called for separating women and men. There was a clear feeling among those concerned with shelter management that women did not

---

<sup>7</sup> Although the new shelter site is, ironically, right across the street from a bar, it is a white-dominated sports bar and thus was not considered by SHIA to be a “negative influence” of sufficient import to cancel out of the benefits of the chosen site. This is a telling illustration of how segregation operates in Lethbridge.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, those who are “deserving” are those who are not to blame for their own homelessness; they are passive victims of circumstances out of their control. This is in direct contrast to what the “undeserving” homeless are accused of – being out of control, and lacking agency.

frequent Streets Alive because they were afraid of the men there. Similar points were made about the need to establish separate spaces for “families,” i.e., women with children. This point of view underscores the threatening nature of homeless men and their status as free-floaters, outside any kind of normative social grouping (Passaro 1996).

Finally, program plans for the new shelter called for a separation between sleeping areas and the program area, where residents would learn the life skills necessary to their reintroduction into society. Significantly, this program area was referred to as the “transition zone,” invoking images of movement and change.

Rather than congregate in unruly groups in the downtown core, then, Native homeless addicts would move through the different spaces of the shelter that represented stages of transformation or development as individuals. From the “wet” zones, those who had the self-motivation to improve could move to “dry” zones (those who came into the shelter “dry” were already a step ahead); and from there, they could move into the “transition zone” at the opposite end of the building.

As with the segregation between “wet” and “dry” and men and women, movement from one zone to the next was in need of constant monitoring. Accordingly, in all zones, residents would be subject to the surveillance of security personnel who were located strategically so they could observe all activities in the building.

These divisions in the shelter encouraged the homeless to be seen as individuals. On the down side, such individuation potentially undermines the informal social support networks that make it possible for the homeless to survive in the first place (Wolch 1995). As viewed by program planners and homeless advocates, however, such individuation was overwhelmingly positive, giving those on the very margins of society “the capacity of individuals to exercise authority over themselves” (Rose 1998:63).

### **Focus on Humanity**

The zone of transformation created by shelter location and architectural and program planning was thus about producing a possibility for the homeless to realize their own humanity – a humanity that, in our current privatized society, is about a “freely” exercised responsibility, self-sufficiency, and autonomy.

“Freedom” and “choice” were, of course, constructed in very specific ways by the advocates of personal transformation. It was about giving up the so-called freedom of the streets for the freedom that comes from self-sufficiency, a freedom that allows one to buy a latte, or to pay the rent. The project of producing particular kinds of people (hard-working, self-sufficient, able to participate in consumer society) benefits not only those people so produced, but also the wider community, and (market) society in general. There is congruence between what is good for the homeless and what is good for the “rest of us.” In this sense, there develops simultaneous “effectiveness for the regulator and happiness for the regulated” (Rose 1998:122).

It is important to recognize that the focus on transforming the homeless into proper social beings not only recapitulates assimilationist policies or ideas of rugged individualism but also invokes discourses of community and care.

In this sense, the transformative goals of the new shelter clearly reflect an assertion of a shared humanity and an invitation to participate in it wholly. Certainly, this would be the interpretation of those who supported the new shelter and who wanted everyone to participate in a healthy community.

Clearly, then, there were counter-discourses to the constructions of homeless Native addicted men as alien beings who needed to be simply evicted from the social order,

discourses that focused on their humanity, and on helping them to achieve more productive, happier lives.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The unmarked category of the homeless as addicted Aboriginal men, and the individualizing and medicalizing of homelessness were produced by specific practices of naming and silence.

In the case of naming, the unmarked category of homeless as addicted Native men was produced by explicitly stating (marking) the female and non-Native status of those who did not fit into the category. The reluctance to explicitly reference the unmarked category—the silences concerning Native, male, and addicted status—may reflect (and serve to establish) its taken-for-granted status. Simultaneously, however, it may also be seen to reflect a desire by some members of the public to avoid the invocation of racist stereotypes or accusations of racism. Although some people did specify the Native status of the homeless, such specifications were rare. Thus the combination of explicit naming and explicit omission or silence produced the unmarked category.

The deconstruction of homelessness, in contrast, was accomplished via the explicit naming of individualized causes, many of which were medicalized (e.g., addictions), coupled with an erasure of, or silence about, structural contexts or causes.

There were some clearly progressive intentions at work. As stated at the beginning of this report, there are many people and organizations in Lethbridge passionately devoted to addressing homelessness and to helping the homeless to find a “place” in society. There has been no shortage of good intentions. In this sense, the official discourse of diversity represented a clear attempt to move beyond racist stereotyping.

In a town with a history of racism, to de-race (diversify) the homeless is also to provide them with “human” status in a context in which Aboriginals have been historically denied such status in both direct and subtle ways. Diversification also neutralizes the contentiousness of race so that people from dominant groups can engage in the issue without feeling “guilty” or “responsible.” Explicit marking of female and white homelessness may also represent an attempt to bring people “in,” to get them to support proposed programs because they no longer served “special interests” or catered “just” to Natives.

Nor are individualized theories of homelessness all equal in terms of personal responsibility, particularly when they draw on medicalized phenomena (Lyon-Callo 2000, Neale 1997:49). The emphasis on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome by some speakers at the City Council hearings, for example, works to construct the homeless as victims, rather than as agents of their own problems. Addiction straddles a middle ground, raising issues of personal choice and questions about the “choices” available to addicted persons.

In all cases, however, the individuals in question have a responsibility to make the most of themselves, and in very few of the cases are the historical, political, and economic conditions that produce the possibility (or likelihood) of addiction considered (Lyon-Callo 2000).

What is problematic, then, is not the good or bad intentions informing the processes described here, but the contexts and forms in which such intentions are asserted, along with their unintended consequences.

### Individualization, Reprivatization, and the Reproduction of Marginalization

The production of an *unmarked* categorization of the homeless as Native addicted men generates a particular set of problems.

- First, the de-racing of the homeless in public, official discourses of diversity prompts a move away from structure in general and a specific move away from potentially racist structures, enacting in their place an individualization at the level of explanation and remedy. If homelessness is not about race, then we are not responsible as a community for perpetuating or alleviating racism. To admit to racism is to admit to our collusion in creating hardship for some and to admit that “we” benefit from a hierarchically organized society. This flies in the face of both traditional rugged individual and current approaches to understanding the relationship between the individual and social patterns (see Kingfisher 2002). In keeping with these constructions, our responsibility is to provide the homeless with the means to improve their lot.

Such mechanisms do not require “us” to reshape our behaviour or social, economic, or political practices. Rather, they place responsibility for change onto “them” (Lyon-Callo 2000). The more “neutral” focus on individual characteristics and problems (addiction, the inability to defer gratification, lack of a work ethic) as key causative agents allows for and produces a concealing. This concealing devolves responsibility to the homeless and leads in a particular policy direction—one that promotes individual, therapeutic interventions designed to invite, prompt, or coerce individuals to work on and transform themselves (Rose 1996, 1998). Shifts in political economy (deindustrialization, trade liberalization, globalization) that may have particular raced (and/or gendered) impacts are brushed aside.

This is not to argue that there is no place for individualized, therapeutic intervention for those homeless who suffer from addictions (regardless of whether such addictions are a cause or effect of homelessness) but to call attention to the processes involved in translating needs into administratable form (Fraser 1989). This is not simply a technological matter, but a fundamentally cultural one having to do with definitions of situations, values, norms, and power structures. It is also to call attention to the shortcoming of individualized, therapeutic intervention in the absence of structural analysis and intervention. Ideally, both should occur simultaneously.

- Second, individualization and medicalization are forms of re-privatization, of de-politicization. In this case, reprivatization is a deliberate strategy of those who do not want to recognize the public, political nature of a need. It is also the inadvertent outcome of a diversity discourse produced by those with the best possible intentions.<sup>9</sup>

However strategic they may be in interrupting the reproduction of racist stereotypes, assertions of diversity are assertions of individuality. We are left with old people and young people, women and men, alcoholics and sober people, people who have fallen on hard times, people who don’t have a well-formed work ethic, people who suffer from mental illness or developmental disabilities, and so on. The only thing they have in common is being homeless and, given that each situation is unique, each solution must therefore be unique. Each individual must be helped to cope with his or her particular problem. While the groupness of the homeless remains, it is not a useful groupness, because it is abstracted from political, economic, and social context, isolated from the conditions that produce the possibility for homelessness occur in all its varieties.

---

<sup>9</sup> Acharya (1996:133) makes a similar point about multiculturalism, which, in certain contexts, does not include First Nations people, rendering them “invisible as a collectivity.”

- Finally, in the absence of *direct, explicit, public* discussion of *Native men* who are *addicted and homeless* (discussion which some speakers attempted to raise, but with little success) the marking of female and non-Native homeless solidifies the racist nature of the unmarked category and drives its assumptions underground—having, perhaps, the opposite effect of what may be intended.

The absence of such direct discussion, of efforts to move the unmarked category into a marked space, thereby challenging its assumptions and exposing its constructed nature, also narrows the range of interlocutors. To strategically deploy a discourse of diversity to encourage people to engage because *their* interests (*their* people) are at stake is to engage a particular audience—white, housed members of dominant society.

Those homeless, if any, invited into the discussion will be the “deserving” homeless, the displaced white men with strong work ethics and women with children who people the marked categories. The most marginalized, the members of the unmarked category, will remain marginalized, and thus the problem in which the architects of the diversity argument were attempting to intervene will be recapitulated. And in neither case will there be a movement beyond engagement with stereotypes towards engagement with actual people who are homeless, or with the real phenomena that cause homelessness.

### Structural Phenomena

On the other hand, if the homeless are *marked* as predominantly Native addicted men, a number of structural implications emerge. One can, for instance, begin to look at homelessness as *patterned*, as having to do with a particular *group* of people who are situated (historically, culturally, or institutionally) in particular ways.

Analysis thus turns to *structural* phenomena that produce the conditions for the emergence, in this case, of addictions and homelessness. This, in turn, can stimulate discussion of policy remedies that will address structural contexts and the individual needs of those whose situations reflect those contexts.

### Issues to Note for Policy Makers

This study was not intended to produce specific policy recommendations, but rather to explore how the housed think about the homeless, and how this thinking might influence or relate to current policy. I have expertise in neither policy analysis nor policy construction *per se*, but rather in analyzing the *cultural contexts* of particular policy orientations. I see my role as providing information that policy makers can then use as they see fit.

Nevertheless, this study has pointed to three issues that policy makers could keep in mind as they think about how to address the needs of the homeless in Lethbridge.

**(1) There is sensitivity about race and racism in Lethbridge that might be best addressed head on.** If there is a perception that most of the homeless are Native addicted men (and I believe this study shows that that is the popular perception) then arguments about the diversity of the homeless population will not suffice, especially if they bypass, however inadvertently, discussion of patterns in homelessness that do play out along ethnic lines. These patterns need to be addressed openly and publicly.

If the perception of the homeless as addicted Native men is false, then we need to look at how it is produced and interfere in that production. If it is true, then we need to deal with what produces the pattern. Frank and open discussion about the history of race relations in Lethbridge, coupled with anti-racist public education, might be a good place to start.

**(2) There is a fear of the poor in Lethbridge that might also best be addressed head on.** In the same way that racism might need to be addressed head-on, so our fear of other differences might need to be addressed directly. Paradoxically, among the people most feared in Western society are the poor (the least powerful, most vulnerable members of society), likely because they remind us that our society is not perfect and that we, too, might fall on hard times. Removing certain types of persons from our sight will only serve to increase this fear and homogenize society at the very time that we are beginning to recognize and value diversity.

**(3) While current programs for assisting homeless persons to get off the streets are both necessary and laudable, efforts *also* need to be made to address structural issues.** Social Housing In Action (SHIA) is clearly addressing structural issues in its work to increase the numbers of affordable housing units in Lethbridge, and this work *must* continue, as lack of affordable housing is one of the most important structural issues at work in homelessness.

However, other structural issues also need to be addressed, most notably unemployment and institutional racism. The pitfalls of reducing homelessness to a property of individuals as opposed to a property of social systems must be avoided, or attempts to eradicate homelessness will not succeed.

## References

- Acharya, Manju Prava 1996 *Constructing Cultural Diversity: A Study of Framing Clients and Culture in a Community Health Centre*. Unpublished MA thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Lethbridge.
- Beavis, Mary Ann, et al. 1997 *Literature Review: Aboriginal Peoples and Homelessness*. Ottawa: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.
- Begin, Patricia, et al. 1999 *Homelessness*. Ottawa: Parliamentary Research Branch.
- Braroe, Niels Winther 1975 *Indian and White: Self-Image and Interaction in a Canadian Plains Community*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Buchignani, Norman 1992 Canada. In *Race and Ethnicity: An Anthropological Approach to the U.S. and the World*. Ray Scupin, ed. Prentice-Hall.
- Bunting, Trudi, and Pierre Filion, eds. 2000 *Canadian Cities in Transition: The Twenty-First Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carter, Sarah 1990 *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- City of Lethbridge 2001 *Lethbridge Community Profile 2000-2001*. Lethbridge: City of Lethbridge.
- City of Lethbridge 2002 *Lethbridge Community Profile 2001-2002*. Lethbridge: City of Lethbridge.
- City of Lethbridge 2003 *Lethbridge Community Profile 2002-2003*. Lethbridge: City of Lethbridge.
- Daly, Gerald P. 1996 *Homeless: Policies, Strategies, and Lives on the Street*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Douglas, Mary 1966 *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Donahue, Peter, David Este and Pam Miller 2002 *Diversity Among the Homeless and Those at Risk: Final Report*. Unpublished Manuscript.
- Fraser, Nancy 1989 *Struggle of Needs: Outline of a Socialist-Feminist Critical Theory of Late Capitalist Culture*. In *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hopper, Kim 1988 *More than Passing Strange: Homelessness and Mental Illness in New York*. *American Ethnologist* 15:155-67.
- Hopper, Kim 2003 *Reckoning with Homelessness*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.
- Kingfisher, Catherine, ed. 2002 *Western Welfare in Decline: Globalization and Women's Poverty*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lee, K.K., and C. Engler 2000 *A Profile of Poverty in Mid-Sized Alberta Cities*. Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development.
- Lyon-Callo, Vincent 2000 *Medicalizing Homelessness: The Production of Self-Blame and Self-Governing within Homeless Shelters*. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 14(3):328-345.

- Miller, James R. 2000 *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Neale, Joanne 1997 Homelessness and Theory Reconsidered. *Housing Studies* 12(1): 47-61.
- Passaro, Joanne 1996 *The Unequal Homeless: Men on the Streets, Women in Their Place*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Peressini, Tracy, and Lynn McDonald 2000 Urban Homelessness in Canada. In *Canadian Cities in Transition: The Twenty-First Century*. Trudi Bunting and Pierre Filion, eds. Pp. 525-543. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rose, Nikolas 1996 The Death of the Social? Refiguring the Territory of Government. *Economy and Society* 25(3):327-56.
- Rose, Nikolas 1998 *Inventing Ourselves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, Ruth L. 1990 Order and Disorder: The Naturalization of Poverty. *Cultural Critique* 14:209-29.
- Social Housing in Action 2001 Proceedings of Public Forum on Housing. Lethbridge: City of Lethbridge.
- Susser, Ida 1996 The Construction of Poverty and Homelessness in U.S. Cities. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25:411-35.
- Statistics Canada 2001 2001 Community Profiles: Blood 148. Available online at <http://www12.statcan.ca/English/profil01>.
- West, Candace, and Sarah Fenstermaker 2002 Accountability in Action: The Accomplishment of Gender, Race, and Class in a Meeting of the University of California Board of Regents. *Discourse & Society* 13(4):537-562.
- Wolch, Jennifer R. 1995 Inside/Outside: The Dialectics of Homelessness. In *Populations at Risk in America: Vulnerable Groups at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. George J. Demko and Michael C. Jackson. Westview.