

The newly homeless and their first days on the streets

Dutch short paper, workshop 4, London

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Introduction

This paper presents some of the findings of a qualitative monitoring study conducted among the homeless and former homeless of Utrecht, the fourth largest city in the Netherlands. The researchers followed the lives and experiences of 64 homeless persons between 1994 and 2000, and a further twenty formerly homeless persons between 1997 and 2000 (Van Doorn, 2002). The respondents were interviewed at set intervals in order to reconstruct their life histories and to chart the changes that had taken place in their lives. Participative observation was also undertaken. Using the qualitative information thus collected, it became possible to chart the long-term development of homelessness: its beginning, continuation and termination. In doing so, the prospects and perspective for those currently homeless could be identified.

This paper focuses on the earliest stages in the development of homelessness, and specifically the moment at which the respondents – for the first time in their lives – found themselves without fixed abode and with no permanent roof over their heads. Particular attention is devoted to the first few days which the newly homeless spend on the streets, and the facilities which are available to them.

Section 1 provides an account of how the interviewees experienced their first days and nights on the streets. Section 2 briefly describes their introduction to the facilities for the homeless in Utrecht, while Section 3 outlines the practical and material consequences of becoming homeless. The psychological effects are described in Section 4, together with an account of the pretexts held and presented by respondents in an attempt to render their new situation acceptable. The final section offers a number of conclusions and recommendations for policy and interventions.

1. The first days on the streets

For almost all the homeless and formerly homeless persons interviewed, the loss of permanent accommodation and their arrival on the streets was a sudden, unexpected and often extremely traumatic experience. The first days and nights spent on the streets made a particularly lasting impression. This sudden change in fortunes represented a turning point in their lives. Even tens of years later, most can still remember what happened during this early phase and the effects they experienced. They could hardly have imagined beforehand that they would find themselves living on the streets, let alone that they would be able to survive doing so.

“Whenever I passed through the station or the shopping centre, I would look at those poor wretches and think, ‘that’s dreadful, that will never happen to me’. It is therefore an enormous blow when it does happen to you and you find yourself being pushed onto the fringes of society. Your whole existence is undermined, the ground wrenched from under your feet.” (Man, 63)

“My world was turned upside down. I had never imagined that it could happen to me. It is so humiliating to suddenly find yourself among the down-and-outs.” (Man, 42)

“It is like falling through the ice.” (Man, 43)

Respondents describe their view of the events which actually led to them becoming homeless using metaphors such as ‘like the ground being wrenched from under your feet’ or ‘like falling through the ice’. These comparisons refer to the ‘ground’ or ‘ice’ as the borderline which separates a settled existence from that of the indigent, or the floor which prevents people from ‘sinking’ into homelessness. This imaginary ground symbolizes an ingrained defence mechanism: a natural shock reaction to (the idea of) life on the streets. It is this mechanism which enables people to maintain the illusion that the world is a safe place for them to live in, and that they will never find themselves on the streets. The majority of the respondents had

previously fostered this very illusion. As soon as they did actually find themselves on the street, the illusion was shattered (cf. Kozol 1988, p. 102).

There are some exceptions to this general rule. In some cases, the loss of permanent accommodation and the progression into homelessness was not abrupt, but rather a gradual process which took place over a period. As stated elsewhere in this report, some respondents actually regarded homelessness as something of a 'blessed relief', perhaps having been living in complete social isolation. They actually preferred the street life to the hopeless situation in which they had previously found themselves. Their homelessness represented the enforced end to an impasse. It offered new opportunities to escape from the situation without perspective in which they – while they still had permanent accommodation – were trapped. However, the majority of the newly homeless are extremely perturbed and traumatized by their situation. They expend considerable effort in trying to rectify that situation and in attempting to re-establish themselves within mainstream society.

2. Introduction to the facilities

The respondents were living on the streets. That was a *fait accompli*. They had never learned what they should do in such a situation. Their previously acquired skills and knowledge were of little or no use, and there are no crash courses in 'street survival'. They were alone. Some had the address of a shelter in the big city – a paper referral from a social worker or other counsellor – and proceeded directly to the facility in question. Others, although aware of the existence of the shelters, attempted to postpone their first visit for as long as possible.

"I made my way to Hoog Catharijne [the shopping centre adjacent to Utrecht's Central Station] and bedded down in the furthest corner – as far as possible from the 'real' down-and-outs. I put off going to the official shelter for as long as I could. I found it so humiliating to have to sleep in one of those bunk beds, with some bloke in smelly socks snoring away underneath me. I only went to a shelter when I became ill. (Man, 42)

In fact, most newly homeless people do not know of the facilities available. They improvise and seek out their own solutions. Those who still have some financial resources – savings, a disability pension or income from a job – usually spend the first few weeks in hotels, boarding houses, youth hostels or campsites. They may even book several consecutive holidays until their money finally runs out. Others will sleep in a car or in a storeroom, camp out illegally or sleep rough until someone tells them about the facilities for the homeless: places that they can spend their days and nights. Eventually, all respondents were forced to seek out the shelters. Having requested help or advice from a church, the police, social workers, friends or passers-by, they were usually referred to one of the official facilities. Alternatively, when they made their first acquaintances among other homeless people, the latter would often show them the way to day centres, shelters and short-stay hostels.

"When I first arrived on the streets, I had no idea that shelters for the homeless actually existed. It was two weeks before I found out. I was sleeping in the park until one day I met a young man who was also homeless, and he showed me the way to the shelter." (Woman, 38)

"I had driven to the Netherlands and I slept in my car for the first few weeks. It was parked in the city and I kept getting parking fines. Eventually they totalled six thousand guilders. I had to go to the police station and the car was impounded. I spent one night in the cells and the next morning the police sent me to the shelter for the homeless." (Man, 37)

"When I left home, I had plenty of money. But after the third holiday and stays in several hotels, the end was in sight. Soon I had no money left at all. 'Oh shit,' I thought, 'what do I do now?' I called a telephone help line and they referred me to the shelter." (Man, 39)

Day centres, drop-in facilities and short-stay hostels or shelters offer the homeless the basic essentials of life. Here they can enjoy a sort of domestic atmosphere and 'wind down' a little. There are seats or a bunk bed for the night; there are toilets and showers and there may be some laundry facilities. There is usually a bar offering coffee tea and soup, and sometimes full meals. Visitors can talk to staff, request information and – ideally – arrange an interview with a social worker who may be on the premises or can be contacted elsewhere.

The day centres and shelters are, in principle, 'low-threshold': they are supposed to be readily accessible to all. However, most apply widely varying and (for the homeless themselves) very complex admission criteria and registration procedures. For example, some shelters in the city have various set times at which the homeless must apply for a place. Some require applicants to visit in person, others insist that the arrangements are made by phone. Some allow that a bed can be reserved for several consecutive nights, others do not (or impose special, stringent conditions.) The shelters also apply various systems of waiting lists, payment guarantees, referrals and vouchers, which once again have to be submitted at specific times of day, perhaps at an entirely different address. All in all, the homeless are required to have substantial organizational skills, presence of mind and the ability to plan ahead if they are to comply with all these conditions (cf. Deben *et al.* 1992).

For newcomers to the streets, acquiring all the necessary information can be a massive undertaking. The shelters themselves offer scant information about the services they provide. Until recently, they did very little in the way of public relations or promotion among the target group. There was simply no need, since they were always filled to capacity anyway. At most, there were a few dog-eared leaflets on various notice boards. The newcomers were expected to find out for themselves exactly what services and facilities were available. This situation changed in the late 1990s with the emergence of the street newspapers, in which there is a regular column with relevant information for the homeless: a list of the shelters, their addresses, opening times and admission criteria. In a number of cities, homeless persons are now offered a pocket-size guide containing similar information for a nominal charge.

For those newcomers who have never before been in contact with the homeless, the first visit to one of the facilities usually represents another traumatic experience. They find themselves faced with an entirely new and unfamiliar situation. This is succinctly described in the following passage from the book *De deftige zwerfer* ('The dapper tramp') by Jacob Sleutelberg, himself a former homeless person, in which the author remembers the impression that his first night in a shelter left upon him (Sleutelberg 1998, p. 46-47, here in translation).

The door of the large building in an unfamiliar part of The Hague was opened by a small, rather shabby young person who looked like a seventies throwback. His name was Adje. [...]

I was taken along bare corridors with faded lino on the floors, through a sort of maze, as if to make it clear that I would never find my way out on my own. Once you're in, you're in for keeps! Adje, who walked ahead of me, chatted cheerfully away and it was some time before I realized that he must admit new clients every day. I was bewildered, frightened and embarrassed. Not he. He was just doing his job. [...]

Voices and light filled a large room further inside the building. Here were three enormous tables. Most of the voices were emanating from a hyper-modern wide-screen television. This snake pit was peopled by my new family: the homeless, down-and-outs, drug addicts. And you can certainly tell. Every type that I would have once crossed the street to avoid was here. The tables were covered in half-eaten sandwiches, old newspapers, plastic cups, sleeping heads and the remains of dinner. My heart was pounding as I paused and looked into the room. No one looked up, no one reacted. I was afraid, more afraid than I had ever been in my life. I realized that this was my new existence and that somehow I would have to get used to it. I would have to adapt. [...]

I heard a muffled cry and just managed to make out my name. A towel and a white piece of cotton fabric were thrust into my hands. Upon unfolding, the cotton thing proved to be a nightshirt. 'Upstairs three!' barked my benefactor. Upstairs three what? What was that supposed to mean? What were the rules? What was I supposed to do – or not do? Crushed and humiliated, I continued to watch the sorry spectacle as it unfolded before me. One of the cave-dwellers approached me. I panicked. All my past manners and customs would be totally useless here. I pressed myself up against the wall in the hope of becoming invisible, but he continued to walk straight towards me with a strange smile on his lips. "So, you must be new here," he said in a friendly manner. "My name's Mario." I broke into a sweat. Just as you think you have reached the deepest point in your life, things just get worse. There I was, physically and mentally exhausted, in a frightening new environment full of new people, new rules, unfamiliar customs and an unknown future. So this is the gutter! A blaring television, too many people, too hot and far too smelly. And after just three minutes you find yourself threatened by the grinning face of one of your companions in misfortune."

The reception which newcomers can expect from a shelter varies. Generally, all homeless people should be able to expect the same treatment: the services are the same for everyone whether they have been on the streets for two days or are veterans on the homeless circuit. Everyone who comes through the doors is treated as a homeless person: their circumstances are regarded as a 'given'. There is little or no targeted identification of newcomers among the homeless at the shelter, whereupon they could be given the additional help they need. This is largely due to the shortage of personnel. The permanent staff have other things to do, and the volunteers are usually in attendance so infrequently that they would not be able to distinguish a newcomer from the 'regulars'. Even the registration system fails to identify newcomers automatically. The procedure is generally rather cursory and even where someone is identified as a first-time visitor, it is by no means certain that anything will be done with this information. Whether newcomers will be singled out among the other homeless visitors (and offered assistance in finding more permanent accommodation and in putting their lives back together) will largely depend on pure happenstance: perhaps the staff will have a few spare moments or will feel like a chat, or perhaps a social worker will happen to be on the premises at the time.

Day centres and shelters are primarily intended as short-term solutions for use only in an emergency. The length of a person's stay is restricted. Most night shelters operate a policy whereby homeless persons can spend only a limited number of nights each month.

"After a week in the shelter, I arrived back on the streets just as abruptly as before. I had been allowed to stay two nights longer than the rest because I was new. Then you're back outside and you have to start all over again: where do I go now?" (Man, 42)

Some homeless people solve this accommodation problem by doing the rounds of several shelters in various cities, thereby always having somewhere to sleep throughout the month. Even if they are assured of a bed at the same shelter for several consecutive nights, they will find themselves out on the streets in the morning and will have to wait until that evening until they can return. Most of day centres and night shelters are within walking distance of each other. People tend to move in groups between the various facilities, trying to fill in the time between the closing time of one and the opening time of the next. Often they will start queuing at the door long before the allotted hour. The newly homeless in particular experience this as stigmatizing. Moreover, people often push, shove and scuffle at the entrance to the oversubscribed shelters in order to be sure of a bed. The 'survival of the fittest' applies here. The newcomers and other less resilient types are likely to be the losers in this particular struggle.

Eventually, the tour of day centres and night shelters becomes daily routine. The homeless are constantly 'on the move'. They gradually acquire a mobile, itinerant lifestyle and 'roaming' becomes an ingrained habit. As a rule, the newly homeless attempt to resist this enforced mobility. They find it remarkably frustrating that they are unable to stay in one place for any reasonable length of time. The temporary nature of the facilities is at odds with their need for a more settled existence and the opportunity to review recent events and put their affairs in order. The hectic street life does nothing to help them deal with the recent setbacks that they have experienced. The loss of one's home is usually preceded by a period of chaos and emotional turmoil. Having been rendered homeless, they then find themselves in an even more stressful situation. They can become completely overwhelmed by the new situations which they face and by the daily trudge from one facility to another.

"Above all, I wanted a roof over my head, a place where I could gather my thoughts and take stock of what I wanted to do. That is impossible on the streets. The street life is purely a question of survival, of finding food and shelter. I also had to cope with my gambling addiction. It completely crushes you." (Man, 33)

3. Material and practical consequences

During their first few weeks on the streets, the respondents discovered just how far-reaching the consequences of losing one's home are. The loss of a permanent address may also entail the loss of one's job, income or social security benefits. Financial reserves are soon exhausted and new debts are incurred. They are cut off from their former social contacts and hence from the informal support network. They may gradually lose their personal possessions as well. Household contents are sold, put into storage or merely abandoned. Usually the newly homeless will take only a few personal items with some material, emotional or practical value with them onto the streets. These are quite likely to be stolen. The newcomers are frequent victims. They can offer rich pickings and the seasoned homeless regard them as easy prey. Many newcomers discover through bitter experience that it is safer not to carry valuable possessions or cash. Others are forced to convert their last few possessions into money in order to survive a few more days.

"When I first arrived on the streets I still owned a moped. That was stolen within a week. My passport was stolen. I was forced to sell a gold chain I had been given by my father. I lost my diaries. And you must never carry any money on you. There are plenty of people who will put a knife in your back for ten guilders." (Woman, 26)

"Then you see a new one coming in, with no idea about anything. The old-timers will make a bee-line for him to find out what there is to be had. Within minutes, the newcomers are shaken down and stripped bare of anything that can be sold or traded." (Man, 42)

In time, a newly homeless person's possessions will reduce in number. Even their shoes and the freshly laundered underwear they place on the radiators in the night shelters will find their way into other hands. The newly homeless face a problem when it comes to luggage. There are few secure storage facilities on the streets. Toting all your possessions around may enable you to keep a closer watch on them, but it is also impractical and dangerous, given the likelihood of being robbed. Moreover, carrying bags full of possessions around is itself stigmatizing, since one is more likely to be recognized as homeless. The amount of baggage will therefore reduce over time.

A further problem facing the homeless is that it is often difficult to observe the usual standards of personal hygiene. Very few public bathhouses remain in this day and age. A visit to the barber is expensive. For the homeless, shaving is often too much trouble; for practical reasons they allow their beards to grow and devote little or no attention to keeping them trimmed and tidy. Clothing is washed or replaced less frequently and the homeless person's limited wardrobe is unlikely to meet the demands of changing weather conditions.

"I have been wearing the same clothes for six days. That's not so bad in itself, but I do dislike having dirty underwear. Women can buy clean underwear from a vending machine, but no such amenities exist for the men." (Man, 41)

"The worst thing is the dirt that constantly surrounds you, the filth you have to sit in. I would like to spend the whole day under the shower." (Woman, 26)

Some newly homeless persons spend a large proportion of their income on visits to swimming baths and saunas. That is their way of countering the accumulating filth of the streets. It becomes ever more difficult to remain presentable. Slowly and insidiously, a metamorphosis takes place: their hair becomes longer and neglected, clothing becomes shabby, shoes are worn out. Most find this inescapable process of dishevelment to be extremely humiliating (cf. Orwell, 1983 p.105).

4. Psychological effects

The moment at which the respondents found themselves on the streets for the first time has a great impact on them. It represents a *caesura*, a violent break in their personal biography. As we have seen above, the arrival on the streets and the first encounter with the facilities for the homeless can have a very traumatic effect. The situation also has far-reaching psychological consequences.

As soon as the respondents found themselves on the streets, a process of depersonalization began. Goffman (1968) uses the term *mortification*. They become 'nameless'. The homeless generally know each other only by a first name, nickname or alias. In the larger shelters they are often no more than a number, their individuality lost to the mass anonymity of the irregular visitor group. They become administrative 'non-persons': they no longer have an address, receive no official post and, as previously noted, are likely to have lost their personal documents such as passport or driving licence. Those who have broken all ties with their former social environment by 'doing a moonlight flit' are sometimes simply presumed dead.

In addition, the homeless lose their personal history. Their situation entails an abrupt break from their former lives. The loss of their personal possessions represents the loss of any visible, tangible link with the past: they no longer have any demonstrable history in the form of photographs or keepsakes. The stories and memories attaching to such objects are also lost. The homeless lose all social identity as well as the social status which went with their 'former life'. That only a few weeks or months ago they were still 'respectable citizens' is no longer a matter of interest to anyone but themselves. In the shelters, they become part of the faceless crowd. Few enquiries will be made into their past. The homeless tend not to discuss their 'past lives' even with each other. They gradually lose sight of 'the story of me'.

Among the newly homeless, there is also a marked discrepancy between the view they hold of themselves and that held by others: the manner in which they are 'labelled'. The loss of one's home and the social environment which surrounds it also represents the loss of the many social roles that a person used to fulfil: partner, parent, employee, neighbour, member of the community, and so on. This array of social roles is now reduced to just one, and one having a particularly low social status: that of homeless person. Although others will now regard them as such, the impression that the people concerned hold of themselves is still that based on the former social identity and social roles. In other words, the inner view fails to correspond with the outer view. This gives rise to conflicts of identity and role (Goffman 1968). The newly homeless attempt to reduce the stress caused by these conflicting perspectives by means of three mental strategies. These are pretexts with which they try to legitimize their new circumstances, both to themselves and to the outside world.

The first strategy involves a denial of the situation of homelessness, both to oneself and to others. In the night shelters, many newly homeless people present various scarcely credible reasons for their presence, even though no one actually asked. For example, they state that they are unable to spend the night at home because the bedroom is flooded or because 'we have the builders in'. Perhaps the car broke down, or the person concerned 'missed the last train and didn't have enough money on me for a hotel'. Or perhaps he has simply lost the front-door key. Whatever the reason, the homeless categorically deny that they are indeed 'homeless'. They distance themselves from the others in the shelter, thus demonstrating their absolute refusal to associate themselves with the social role of 'homeless person' (cf. Snow en Anderson 1993).

"You find yourself among these street characters, and these are now the 'people like me'. That is difficult to accept. Of course, you are now just as 'down and out' as any of them, but you continue to deny it for as long as possible. You tell yourself that you just don't belong. I made a very strange sort of distinction between myself and those other people." (Sleutelberg 1998)

As time goes on, once they have become one of the regular visitors to the shelter, any denial of their homelessness using this type of excuse becomes ever more untenable. They then adopt a different course.

In the second strategy, the situation of homelessness is no longer denied, but its *temporary* nature is stressed. For example, "I'm getting a room next month. I'll be out of here soon. Once I'm gone, you won't be seeing me again." Such statements evince a deliberate rejection of the idea that homelessness could in any way be permanent. In fact, this mechanism is by no means exclusive to the homeless. It can also be seen among people in other unpleasant or socially unacceptable circumstances, as illustrated by *Porn Row* by Jack McIver (quoted in Glasser 1988:152). The book is an account of McIver's study of visitors to pornographic bookstores. The author wrestles with the question of how he can make his own presence in the sex shops plausible without revealing himself as a researcher. Eventually, McIver discovered that almost everyone found in such places, whether as customer or sales assistant, had devised a story which would explain their presence to the outside world while emphasizing the purely temporary nature of their involvement.

The third strategy employed by the newly homeless is to present a socially acceptable explanation for their situation, one which is also acceptable to themselves. They re-invent their personal history, adapting the details in such a way as to offer a legitimate cause for the deplorable circumstances in which they now find themselves. They devise a story which will explain certain facts which they would otherwise be unwilling or unable to accept. A remarkably large number of homeless people state that they find themselves on the streets due to the 'classic adultery situation'. The story usually goes something like this:

"I arrived home early from work and caught my wife in the bedroom with my best friend. Now, I'm sure you know what they were up to. I closed the door behind me and have never been back." (Man, 39)

Occasionally, the 'cuckolded' husband will go on to state that he was generous enough to allow his wife to keep the house, its contents and all their joint savings. Such reassuring stories serve to alleviate feelings of panic, distress and insecurity. The homeless person becomes the central figure in a partly or totally fictitious scenario, his true identity eventually becoming merged with that of the character he has invented. The American literature refers to a similar mechanism. Some years ago, the American news media reported that a large number of Vietnam veterans were to be found among the country's homeless. Indeed, many homeless people recounted their war experiences – most of which displayed remarkable similarities – and told of the traumas that had scarred them and which had driven them onto the streets. There was great public indignation: how could the nation treat its war heroes in such a shameful fashion? An official inquiry was ordered. Background checks revealed that some people's claims of wartime involvement were not entirely based on fact. The majority of the homeless who had 'served in Vietnam' had in fact been nowhere near the country. A substantial proportion had been declared unfit for military service due to drug addiction or mental problems. In many cases, the actual background to their circumstances proved to be even more harrowing than the stories they had presented to justify their position.

It is clear that the losses and setbacks that the newly homeless have to endure are likely to take a heavy toll on their mental resilience. The majority experience their arrival on the streets – and particularly the first days – as a particularly traumatic event. With only the occasional exception, they regard their new transient existence as one great torment. They are gradually sapped of all energy.

"I had already suffered some major setbacks: I had lost my job and my marriage was on the rocks. I had been feeling 'down' for some time. But when you find yourself on the streets, the stress and the sheer unfamiliarity of it all drains you completely; you just can't be bothered doing anything." (Man, 62)

"I always say that being homeless is like living through the Great Depression or the Second World War. It is just as dramatic. The difference is that no one is there to help you cope with it." (Man, 46)

Due to the lack of sleep and of a healthy diet, many newly homeless persons develop psychosomatic conditions, including stress, headache, nervous tension and depression. In her study of homeless women, Elliot Liebow (1993) uses the term 'crazymaking homelessness'. It seems particularly apt.

Conclusion

The personal histories of the respondents in this study vary enormously, as do the accounts of the circumstances leading to their becoming homeless. Nevertheless, during the first days in which they find themselves 'out on the streets', all face almost identical problems. Street life requires certain skills and knowledge which few will have acquired. Finding solutions to the problems is the one thing that unites all newly homeless persons. It forms the basis of a 'sense of community' with others in the same position. All are condemned to each other and to the facilities available.

The most dramatic consequence of losing one's home is to be seen in terms of the 'learning curve' that must then be embarked upon, and especially the changes in one's cultural orientation and in the perception of identity. The newly homeless adapt to street life out of sheer necessity. The new behaviour becomes ingrained and eventually develops into a lifestyle. At the same time, they are 'labelled' as homeless by those around them. This initiates a process whereby their former social identity is placed under pressure. Although the newly homeless generally resist this assigned identity, they eventually come to identify with other homeless people, to regard themselves as homeless and to behave as such. In short, there is an unavoidable process of acclimatization to street life, which shows a strong similarity to the 'hospitalization effect' observed among the residents of 'total' institutions, as described by Goffman (1968). The processes by which the newly homeless adapt to street life are based on a dynamic interaction between their changing self-perception, the manner in which they are treated in the shelters and other facilities, and the manner in which they are treated by the outside world.

The findings with regard to the newly homeless give rise to consequences in terms of institutional interventions and policy. To prevent the *newly* homeless becoming *long-term* homeless, it is essential that the newcomers are traced at an early stage

and offered targeted assistance. This will make the best possible use of the motivation for behavioural change which is present among the newly homeless, but which gradually subsides the longer they have to spend on the streets.

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