SOC207: Poverty in America

Professor Matthew Desmond

To Stay or To Go: Evaluative Judgements on the "Unwritten Continuum of Housing Solutions"

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This assignment has been completed in accord with University Regulations.

"When people think of homelessness, they think of a person sleeping on the street in a major city…but the reality is more complicated. We have people who are bouncing from couch to couch, who live in their car, who live in motels—but in general they have fewer places to go and fewer people trying to help them."
    –   Angie Lyon, program coordinator at Hancock Hope House (Indiana)

INTRODUCTION

The word "homelessness" is perhaps most closely associated with a specific image: that of a man sitting on a street corner, wrapped in blankets and holding up a cardboard sign asking for help. Less ubiquitous but still common is the association of "homelessness" with life in homeless shelters. But these conceptualizations overlook a significant population experiencing homelessness in other, less visible forms: those who are living out of their cars, couch surfing, staying with family, and occupying trap houses and other non-traditional living spaces.

The "hidden homeless" are largely excluded from the Department of Housing and Urban Development's official homelessness statistics, which come from point-in-time (PIT) counts conducted by thousands of volunteers throughout the United States every January. Volunteers have access to data from shelters and can survey the sidewalks to get a fairly accurate count of people camped outside overnight, but they don't have the same type of access to people residing in the shadows. The result of this disparity is twofold: first, it perpetuates a narrow view of homeless individuals (one which reflects the stereotypical image); and second, it leads to underfunded programs and policies that don't serve people facing hidden homelessness.[1][2] In a 20-county stretch of Illinois with only four operating homeless shelters, for example, "unless a person is sleeping on the street or in one of those shelters, they don't qualify for HUD programs such as 'rapid rehousing,' which offers families short-term financial aid to pay for permanent housing."[3]

Crucial to overcoming these effects is comprehending the experiences of individuals who have been part of the hidden homeless population, as well as their relationships with various institutions we might traditionally associate with homelessness (such as shelters, food stamp programs, and social safety nets). Even if the limitations of PIT counts remain, these pursuits can at least lead to more informed data consumption, and at best contribute to the shaping of policy to meet specific needs of the hidden homeless. Moreover, adopting a more holistic view of homelessness forces us to address gaps in our understanding of housing insecurity.

Several scholars have attempted to deepen research across the spectrum of homeless experiences over the last few decades. Hoch and Slayton identify shortcomings in the modern emergency shelter system, providing examples of shelters that have been shut down due to safety issues and situational factors that contribute to dysfunctional shelter dynamics.[4] Watson et al. echo these concerns, pointing to poor shelter conditions as a primary reason that homeless individuals choose street living over shelter living and seek out non-traditional living solutions.[5]

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[1] Wakin, Michele. *Otherwise Homeless: Vehicle Living and the Culture of Homelessness*. P. 4
[2] Wasserman, Jason Adam., and Jeffrey M. Clair. *At Home on the Street: People, Poverty, and a Hidden Culture of Homelessness*.
[3] Bittle, Jake. "The 'Hidden' Crisis of Rural Homelessness." *The Nation*.
[4] Hoch, Charles, and Robert A. Slayton. *New Homeless and Old: Community and the Skid Row Hotel*.
[5] Watson, J., et al. "Social Exclusion, Health and Hidden Homelessness."

While each individual makes specific value judgements about various living situations, outcomes are often driven by similar forces across groups. It has been found that the Hispanic homeless population are systematically undercounted due to their collective tendency to occupy nontraditional homeless spaces,[6] and that street-based sexual and physical violence are drivers in women's pursuit of hidden sleeping locations in England.[7] Findings from Terui and Hsieh show that homeless individuals highlight their virtues in personal hygiene, lack of addiction, and employment as distinguishing factors, suggesting that they might choose their living spaces in order to sustain these priorities.[8] But what do transitions between different living situations look like?

Some recent literature has uncovered specific concessions that people make when they opt for less visible forms of homelessness. Chatterjee et al. note that motel-shelters impede residents' food security and catalyze unhealthy eating.[9] Thomas and So demonstrate significant physical and psychological effects for people staying in emergency assistance hotels and motels, including "profound isolation" and "immense difficulty meeting basic needs."[10] Lewinson provides a contrasting perspective by highlighting numerous environmental affordances of long-term hotel stays, or ways in which hotels support individuals physically, psychologically, socially, or otherwise.[11]

Wakin sheds light on numerous tradeoffs that occur in the transition from street homelessness to vehicle living; while vehicles "allow for more safety, privacy, and autonomy than the shelters or the streets can provide…[as well as] needed, uninterrupted rest,"[12] they also come with liabilities, including the need to pay for gas and maintenance. In presenting this contrast, she introduces the concept of an "unwritten continuum of housing solutions" by which individuals distinguish between different forms of homelessness.

The concept in and of itself touches on an area that is heretofore largely unexplored. While it may be broadly understood that homeless people are aware of a spectrum of available housing options and that they occasionally choose to move between them, a mechanism for this process has yet to be discussed. Throughout this paper, I will seek to answer the question:

What are the mechanisms by which individuals experiencing housing insecurity evaluate their own living situations and decide to pursue others?

First, I will expand Wakin's "unwritten continuum of housing solutions" by placing other forms of homelessness onto the spectrum. I will then use data from my fieldwork to identify patterns in situational evaluation and decision-making processes of homeless individuals pertaining to movement between housing solutions. Finally, I will use these findings to present a generalized

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[6] Conroy, Stephen J., and David M. Heer. "Hidden Hispanic Homelessness in Los Angeles: The 'Latino Paradox' Revisited."

[7] Bulman, May. *Official Records Don't Reflect the True Scale of Female Homelessness.*

[8] Terui, Sachiko, and Elaine Hsieh. "'Not Homeless Yet. I'm Kind of Couch Surfing': Finding Identities for People at a Homeless Shelter."

[9] Chatterjee, Avik, et al. "'Feastworthy Is Something That Gives Us Our Dignity Back:" Feasibility of A Delivered Prepared Meal Program for Families in Motel-Shelters."

[10] Thomas, Kristie A., and Marvin So. "Lost in Limbo: An Exploratory Study of Homeless Mothers Experiences and Needs at Emergency Assistance Hotels."

[11] Lewinson, Terri. "Capturing Environmental Affordances: Low-Income Families Identify Positive Characteristics of a Hotel Housing Solution."

[12] Wakin, Michele. *Otherwise Homeless: Vehicle Living and the Culture of Homelessness.*

view of housing solutions as a spectrum constructed through a collective hierarchy of values, and I will make various policy recommendations that take that hierarchy into account.

EXPANSION of WAKIN'S CONTINUUM of HOUSING SOLUTIONS

Wakin suggests that street living is at the bottom extreme of the continuum and that RV living is "seen as more desirable, provided inhabitants have the resources and wherewithal to maintain the vehicle."[13] To expand this concept, I will compare six living situations, using incarceration and homeownership as bookends: street living, shelter living, vehicle living, hotel/motel living, couch surfing or doubling-up, and temporary housing. I will use field notes describing each of these scenarios to determine a subjective measure on four scales:

I. *Security*, or physical safeness
II. *Autonomy*, or the ability to move around and structure day according to one's will
III. *Stability*, or the sustainability of the living situation
IV. *Responsibility,* or obligation to perform some action in exchange for the occupation of a living space

Moving along the continuum results in the emergence of certain benefits and liabilities that can characterize each living situation. They are defined here:

Benefits:
i. Protective (contributing to *security*) – ex. shelter from weather and violence
ii. Stabilizing (contributing to *stability*) – ex. assurance of sustainability of living situation

Liabilities:
i. Monetary (adding to *responsibility*) – ex. paying for gas, maintenance
ii. Obligational (detracting from *autonomy*) – ex. curfew, doing chores

I will conclude that movement on the continuum generally corresponds with two tradeoffs: higher *security* in exchange for lower *autonomy* (or vice versa), and higher *responsibility* in exchange for lower *stability* (or vice versa).

METHODS

The findings in this paper are the result of interviews with five individuals who have experienced or are currently experiencing temporary or chronic homelessness that cannot be characterized as living on the streets or in a shelter. Most participants were recruited through snowball sampling (or chain referral sampling), in which potential interviewees are contacted by past interviewees.[14] During the data collection period, four participants lived in San Diego, California, while one lived in Princeton, New Jersey. San Diego has one of the largest homeless populations in the country. Of the five participants, two were men (one white, one Hispanic) and three were women (one white, two black). Two participants considered themselves to be homeless at the time of the interview, while the remaining three did not explicitly characterize

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[13] Wakin, Michele. *Otherwise Homeless: Vehicle Living and the Culture of Homelessness*. P. 64.
[14] "Snowball Sampling." *Oregon State University: Research Office.*

their living situations homelessness. Interviews lasted between 20 and 90 minutes and were conducted between February and April of 2019.

During each interview, I asked participants to describe their current and previous living situations. I then asked follow-up questions tailored to their stories, generally touching on two themes: (1) access to resources and (2) self-perceptions. I also inquired about participants' (changing) relationships with family and friends. I formulated questions comparatively, attempting to understand how these themes were understood differently for participants when reflecting on different types of homelessness they'd experienced. I recorded all five interviews using the Voice Memos application on my iPhone; during phone conversations, I also took sparse notes in order to guide my questions. Later on, I returned to transcribe them and look more broadly at patterns that emerged in the interviews.

My first interview was with Marchelle, to whom I was connected by a friend from the homeless chorus I sang with last summer (the Voices of Our City Choir). I called her from Princeton University, and after our hour-long conversation, she agreed to send information about the project (as well as my email address) to several of her friends who might be willing to participate. In the following weeks, we corresponded via email and arranged to meet while I was visiting San Diego during my Spring Break so that she could assist me in connecting with members of the local homeless community.

On a predesignated day during my break, I packed my car with food and blankets, drove to downtown San Diego, and bought some plastic water bottles from a gas station. Marchelle met me at the gas station in the morning (around 8:45 AM), and we drove around looking for homeless encampments on the sidewalks. Marchelle noted that many inhabitants of these encampments would be gathering their belongings before the police forced them out or confiscated their possessions (usually around 9 AM). We parked near a group we saw packing up, and Marchelle told them about my project while I gathered some food and blankets from the car. I walked over and handed out water bottles, apples, and blankets as requested; only one of the group members indicated that she might be willing to speak for the project. She gave Marchelle her contact information, but there was no follow-up.

After this encounter, Marchelle and I sat in the car for some time while she updated me on her own experience with homelessness. We then drove to the San Diego Public Library, where I ended up finding 3 of my interview participants. As I was working to reserve a study room for interviewing purposes, Marchelle approached two men sitting at a computer cluster on the ground floor and told them about my project; both men agreed to speak with me. I interviewed Marco first, after which I spent some time talking to Sean. As we were leaving the library, we ran into one of Marchelle's friends, Sharon, who also agreed to be participate; I interviewed her in the same area on the ground floor of the library.

My final interview was with Vanessa, who visited our class as a guest speaker and agreed to speak to me more about her experience with homelessness after the fact. I called her and spoke to her after returning to Princeton from San Diego.

FINDINGS

This fieldwork documents perceptions of different types of homelessness as expressed by five individuals who had experienced homelessness prior to or during the interview. Between the five participants, accounts of every living situation on the continuum (excluding incarceration and homeownership) were provided. Participants spoke of past and current living situations with

varying depth and exhibited different feelings about each situation, providing salient and interesting points about their experiences with different forms of homelessness.

Findings are split into eight subsections, each using the four aforementioned scales to generalize participants' personal experiences.

1. Incarceration

While no participants spoke about spending time in prison during our interviews, it is widely understood that incarceration is a close neighbor to street homelessness.[15] While placement on the four scales varies drastically between institutions and circumstances, prisons and jails generally have fairly high *security*, as individuals are often isolated and protected by guards. This comes at an almost complete loss of *autonomy*, however, as incarcerated persons face extreme physical confinement and are often required to enter and exit different parts of the prison or jail at specific times.

Incarceration also offers a particularly high sense of *stability* – while individuals may face obligational liabilities such as having to work for little pay, their disobedience can only exacerbate their punishment; in other words, slipping up will rarely lead to less incarceration. In this way in particular, incarceration transcends the normal tradeoff between *stability* and *responsibility*. It is the lower extreme on the continuum of homelessness, since there is nowhere to go from there.

2. Street Living

Due to the focus of the conversations on hidden forms of homelessness, commentary about street living was largely comparative (affirming Wakin's idea that street living is at the bottom of the continuum). Participants would use street living as an object of relation in order to highlight the benefits of their other living situations. Vanessa demonstrated this rhetoric in describing her time living in her car; while she characterized eating and sleeping in a car as "hard and uncomfortable," she added that "when it was raining out, it was better than nothing." In other words, the physical discomfort was seen as a justifiable concession in the context of street living.

Street living offers low levels of *security* for homeless individuals; several participants reported that the danger of physical violence that loomed over their experience on the streets. In exchange, however, individuals have high levels of *autonomy*. They can, to a large extent, determine where they spend their time, and what to do with it. Street living also offers individuals with low levels of *responsibility*: most of the time, their only pressing obligations are to themselves – maintaining a desired level of personal hygiene, securing a physical space to sleep each night, and protecting against any external threats. With these benefits, however, come a lower sense of *stability*, as individuals who lack the protective benefits of a more hidden environment risk police intervention and incarceration even when engaging in normal activities.[16] [17]

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[15] Mitchell, Mindy. "Homelessness and Incarceration Are Intimately Linked. New Federal Funding Is Available to Reduce the Harm of Both." *National Alliance to End Homelessness.*
[16] Sarma, Bidish, and Jessica Brand. "The Criminalization of Homelessness: Explained." *The Appeal.*
[17] "Incarceration & Homelessness: A Revolving Door of Risk." Quarterly Research Review of the NHCHC.

3. Shelter Living

Although it provides individuals with higher levels of *security* than street living, there are plenty of risks inherent to shelter living. Larry Adams, a formerly homeless individual who went on to serve on the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program's Consumer Advisory Board, explained:

> It's hard to sleep in a shelter…you never know if you're going to be robbed or if the person beside you will be robbed. If that happens, when you wake up everyone is looking at you and you're the suspect.

Noise contributes to inability to sleep, as well. In one study, only about one-third of participants living in a shelter reported feeling rested upon waking up in the morning, while 70% said they "occasionally felt so tired that they could not function normally during the day."[18] While noise is not inherently dangerous, it can be provocative for homeless individuals, especially those suffering from post-traumatic stress and other disorders.

The modest gains in *security* are paired with modest losses in *autonomy* – individuals and families who meet the threshold for shelter entry are generally required to follow strict rules of conduct throughout their stays, enforced by staff and volunteer shelter monitors.[19] These rules range from respecting quiet hours and obeying a curfew to attending mandatory house meetings and obtaining employment (which can become contradictory goals).[20] Due to overcrowding and resource depletion in many shelters, even minor transgressions can lead to forced departure for residents. Marchelle recounted such an experience with Rachel's Choice, a shelter for female victims of domestic abuse in San Diego. She said that she was asked to put take her bags off of a chair and put them on the floor, and that her resistance led to an escalation that ultimately prevented her from participating in the lottery draw (to stay overnight in the shelter) that day. Hence, increased levels of *responsibility* in shelters are linked to much lower levels of *stability*.

4. Vehicle Living

Vehicle living often affords homeless individuals a greater sense of *security* than street living. In *The Homeless Chorus Speaks*, a documentary about a homeless choir in San Diego, Chiara (a woman who had spent time living in her minivan) stated that her minivan "keeps me safe at night. And warm. And dry."[21] However, that initial perception of safety is not always adequate. Chiara went on to detail some of the discomfort she faced in vehicle living:

> When it's cold outside, it's terrible. You can't sleep at night. It's noisy, you know, and it's cold – very uncomfortable. I try to avoid places where a lot of people walk around because it kind of scares me when I know there's people walking around and I'm sleeping.

Marchelle echoed this sentiment, saying that living in her 2002 Ford Mustang pushed her to develop "some really bad survival techniques…[such as] really being aggressive and cussing." Once or twice every week, she noted, someone would approach the car and knock on the

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[18] "Sufficient Sleep: A Necessity, Not A Luxury." *Healing Hands: A Publication of the HCH Clinicians' Network*
[19] "Shelter Monitor Job Description." *Hospitality House.*
[20] Mandell, Betty Reid. "Homeless Shelters: A Feeble Response to Homelessness." *New Politics.*
[21] Schutz, Susan Polis. "The Homeless Chorus Speaks."

window. When she felt particularly unsafe, she would get out of the car and yell until a security guard from the parking area arrived.

But security guards are not always present, and survival instincts can only get a person so far. Mari Gordon-Rayborn, a potential participant with whom I was not able to conduct a full interview, wrote in an email about a negative experience while living in her car: "Yesterday was a horrible day for me. My wallet was stolen from my car and o [sic] lost all my money for my storage and my car insurance. I lost my EBT food benefit card, my driver's license and a few other things." An incident like this can have painful consequences for homeless individuals; as such, common theft and property confiscation by law enforcement become major deterrents for street and vehicle living.

Maintenance and gas costs also represent a shift from *responsibility* in previously-discussed forms of homelessness, which are typically not associated with monetary liabilities. Due to these particular liabilities, individuals ultimately face relatively low levels of *stability* when living in their cars. Vanessa commented that when her family was living in her 2004 Chrysler Pacifica, she had to scout for a safe spot to park overnight.

> Yeah, I probably would just stay in the same spot and camp out. But sometimes I would just drive around, until I got tired, but I couldn't do that too much because I didn't want to waste my little bit of gas, you know. I was on a budget. So whatever little dark corner was quiet and we could sleep did until morning then that's what we did.

Due to the mobility a car provides, vehicle living does provide more *autonomy* than street living in some respects. At the same time, however, vehicle regulations in many cities counteract that effect by creating a "can't move must move" dilemma for vehicle owners.[22] Reflecting on his transition from vehicle living to apartment living, a man named Louie expressed that he "no longer had to worry about moving the vehicle or coming into contact with law enforcement."[23] Marchelle quipped:

> …you wouldn't deal with them [the police] 'cause you wanted to stay off the radar…you know, once the police were coming around I would [laughs] drive away. You know, I- I didn't want to engage with them or whatever. 'Cause you never know if you'll get a ticket…or [they will] start asking questions.

She noted that there was a time when she didn't have insurance, which would have caused them to tow her car – another risk to *stability* for people in vehicle living.

5. Hotel/Motel Living

Hotel and motel living often represented a shorter-term housing solution for participants, who generally viewed it as superior to street living (and often preferred it to vehicle living when alternating between the two). Sharon described street living as tumultuous, in contrast with the relative comfort of the Motel 6 she stayed at for a few days each month. She expressed a sense of *security*, noting that she "felt safe and not worried where I got to sleep, and all that." But

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[22] Wakin, Michele. *Otherwise Homeless: Vehicle Living and the Culture of Homelessness*. P 59.
[23] Wakin, Michele. *Otherwise Homeless: Vehicle Living and the Culture of Homelessness*. P. 3.

Vanessa introduced a more nuanced perspective on hotel living, noting that cheaper hotels and motels frequently afford residents less physical *security*:

> Man, that shit, that jump was scary. [laughs] that was like the Bates Motel or something, like it was so scary in the back of the woods, like, I don't know. I said- we stayed there for one night, I told the kids, I said I'd rather go back to the city than stay over here. Man, I never stayed in a hotel like that. But I guess that's what they gave the people, that was like the cheapest one – it was like 40 dollars a night. I told the kids, I said nah, I'd rather go pay a hotel seventy dollars if it's a little safer you know.

Vanessa's account demonstrates the tradeoff between levels of monetary liability (greater *responsibility*) and protective benefits (greater *security*), but also a tradeoff involving access to important resources that contribute to individuals' physical and psychological well-being. She explained that she sometimes made the conscious choice to stay at a cheaper hotel so as to feed her kids better, but that staying at one whose price was "not too reasonable" forced them to eat from the food pantry. While living at Motel 6, Sharon frequented Denny's and the local market to get meals for herself and her ex-fiancé. She emphasized the stress of finding the source of her next meal:

> You had to find out where you get your last meal. If there's gonna be drive by. It's hard, right. I mean a lot of people out here struggle where you gonna get the last meal. Money- money's coming in or food stamps coming in. It's very hard.

Importantly, hotel/motel living can provide individuals with high levels of *autonomy*, which can be useful in situations like Sharon's dilemma; aside from those designated specifically for homeless individuals, most hotels and motels place no restrictions on residents' whereabouts at any given time.

At the same time, a major impediment to *stability* in hotel/motel living is the monetary liability. Sharon justified her short stays at the Motel 6 with the acknowledgement that it was a drag on her resources, even when sharing a room. "I didn't have much money at the time," she said. "[It] was like I had to buy food for me and someone else. So it was hard." On top of covering meals, hotel/motel residents are expected to pay for their rooms. These nightly, weekly, or monthly payments represent a significant increase in *responsibility* from lower forms of homelessness, due to their regularity. While some hotels/motels may be flexible about these fees, it is generally understood that missing payments will result in forced removal from the premises.

6. Doubling-Up / Couch Surfing

The primary protective benefits of doubling-up, again, arose from a perception of distance from the violence of street living. Marco explained that living with his parents made him feel like "I don't need to worry about someone cracking my head over night. You know, like street- the street homelessness is…it's a lot more. You've got to have someone to watch your back." At the same time, not every house provides this sense of *security*. Vanessa noted that she was able to stay with some people from around the neighborhood contingent on her paying them for the night (an informal monetary liability), but that these situations came with a hefty tradeoff:

> You know what bad places in the ghetto is? You give somebody a couple dollars they'll let you stay. Like a crack house. So, I was not trying to take my kids there, so yeah. But on emergency, I had to take them there once or twice and they- it was not [a] good experience. You can't sleep somewhere like that, you gotta sleep one eye open. You know what I'm talking about? And I have two daughters so it's not easy. So it was better and safer for us to sleep in the car.

Beyond the threat of violence and theft, staying on someone else's property can carry the risk of health and safety hazards. Marchelle faced a lack of *security* in this way while paying to stay in an underground garage she found through a flyer; despite Marchelle's paying $850 per month to stay there, the woman renting the garage did not provide heat and refused to address the ant and spider infestations.

In cases of doubling-up with friends or family, a tradeoff between obligational liabilities and stabilizing benefits was frequently reported. Staying with a friend or family member was frequently a source of strain for the host, so they required certain behaviors of their guest. Marco's experience highlighted the losses in *autonomy* he faced when staying with his parents:

> Transitioning? It's it's very hard and it's very humbling because they make me feel like a little kid. You know I still have you know 10:00 curfew. I'm a grown ass man. I'm 50 years old almost and just being told what time to come in and all that is just not. It's not cool. It's not kosher.

For people who are doubling-up, however, stabilizing benefits are sometimes altogether inaccessible. Regulations by landlords can cause these stays to be infrequent and short in many cases, if they are allowed at all. When Vanessa looked to her community for support during a bout of housing insecurity, she couldn't stay with her middle school best friend, Sheri Sprouse, because of Section 8 housing regulations that prohibited guests in federally-subsidized housing.[24] These actions can serve as a barrier to entry for homeless individuals, but they can also decrease the *stability* of living situations into which they have already transitioned. Sean's experience moving in with his wife's mother demonstrated a similar lack of control:

> We didn't have that decision [to leave]. It was…[the] decision was made by the landlord. They decided to take the property and they wanted to remodel it, and they didn't want any tenants in it, and they told us we had a 60-day notice to leave. And my baby was just born at the moment.

Reflecting on the transition from motel living to doubling-up with his parents, Marco expressed that the latter came with more *responsibility* than he had when living alone:

> What's the hardest thing? [It] would be having to make my bed every day, fold my blankets and put them back in bed back into their plastic covers, me having to go to this...it's like a little cabinet where I have all my clothes in – clean clothes – and then pulling out what I'm going to wear. You know that's- that's like the one of the hardest stuff for me to do, because actually even in the motel when I was living day by day, everything was organized; like, these books are in their shelves. You see them organized. I had my- my work clothes ironed, I had a [sic] iron. I would iron my uniform. I knew exactly where everything was at. And just for me to have everything spread out has just like been one of the hardest things for me to do.

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[24] Desmond, Matthew. "Americans Want to Believe Jobs Are the Solution to Poverty. They're Not." *New York Times.*

7. Temporary Housing

Temporary housing can take many forms, but this section will focus on affordable housing provided by non-profits and local governments. Vanessa currently occupies this type of housing; after being profiled in the *New York Times*, the Housing Initiative of Princeton provided her with a two-bedroom house in Princeton, New Jersey, with a time limit of two years. Temporary housing of this type can afford residents extremely significant protective benefits, placing it high on a measure of *security*. And while that safety does not necessarily encroach on day-to-day *autonomy* (in the way of mobility, for example), it can come with serious restrictions on *autonomy* in a broader sense. Upon earning a higher wage, Vanessa was notified that she would not be allowed to stay on the property:

> That's why I still feel like, you know, I'm still going through something, because I feel like…the situation I'm in now is still a temporary situation. It's only for two years. So I'm like, well what happens after the two years? So basically, you know…now I'm working, I'm getting a little more; so now, for even affordable housing in Princeton, they're saying, "Oh, now she's making too much money." So it's like, well what the heck? [laughs] …right now, nah, I don't feel secure right now. I feel sort of like I'm still homeless.

Crucially, this lack of *stability* made her feel something akin to homelessness, even if she would not fully qualify it as such. Unlike homeownership, in which increased *stability* does not necessitate increased *responsibility*, temporary housing imposes similar monetary liabilities on inhabitants while denying them long-term stabilizing benefits.

8. Homeownership

Homeownership sits at the upper extreme of the continuum largely because it provides such appreciable benefits to individuals and families. Vanessa depicts it as her "ultimate goal": "Then I feel a little more secure, you know?" As in every other case, its measures on the four scales is highly dependent on environmental factors. Broadly, however, homeownership comes with a very high sense of *security*, a very high sense of *autonomy*, and a (potentially) very high sense of *stability*.

Homeownership also results in a heightened sense of *responsibility*, as individuals must pay for the space and its maintenance (monetary liabilities) and often tend to it in small, unforeseeable ways, such as being present for inspections, taking out the trash, and cleaning up (obligational liabilities). While these liabilities do weigh on *autonomy*, they can generally be incorporated into a routine such that they do not make homeownership less desirable than temporary housing.

CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this paper support the generalizability of the "unwritten continuum of housing solutions" as a lens for understanding different forms of homelessness. As individuals move through the continuum, they make conscious or unconscious tradeoffs between certain values: *security* and *autonomy*, and between *stability* and *responsibility*. Examining trends in these exchanges as demonstrated through narrative interviews with individuals who

have experienced homelessness shows that individuals tend to favor *security* to *autonomy*, and that they will accept greater *responsibility* if it ensures greater *stability*.

The findings also suggest that, while hidden forms of homelessness may be generally perceived as "better" than street homelessness, they come with their own sets of significant challenges that merit consideration. Individuals facing homelessness should be given a more significant platform (through journalism, academia, etc.) to give voice to their experiences and shed light on challenges that accompany different living situations, and policymakers should pay attention to research that seeks to explain these issues. Ultimately, there is more that our society can be doing to assist people along the continuum of housing solutions, and our approaches ought to be tailored to the needs of each situation – not just to "homelessness" generally.

These findings are subject to several limitations that merit consideration. First, the pool of participants was quite small (only five individuals) and heavily concentrated in one city (San Diego). While some of the feelings recounted in interviews were common to multiple participants, more studies should be performed to incorporate a larger and more diverse set of perspectives, both in terms of experience with homelessness and in terms of geographical location. Another possible limitation is that participant responses may have been subject to order effects bias, such that the order in which I asked questions led to responses that confirmed certain hypotheses.[25] As there was no pre-set order for interview questions, comparisons between living situations were often drawn out on between situations that appeared adjacent in the participant's narrative (whether or not they were chronologically consecutive). Lastly, due to the personal nature of the interview content, it is also highly plausible that participant responses were influenced by social desirability bias.[26]

Some notable policies and programs have been proposed and implemented in recent years. These include Massachusetts's "right to shelter", which requires that every eligible man, woman and child in the state be provided with temporary emergency shelter every night;[27] the Safe Parking Program that exists in some California cities, which manages and monitors parking lots specifically for people living in their cars;[28] and the Couch Project, a fundraiser for resources for couch-surfing teenagers based in Australia.[29] While these programs are a good start to addressing homelessness more holistically, there are many more steps that can be taken to target specific forms of homelessness.

Curry et al. suggest that "more couch surfing-sensitive efforts could include targeting individuals and families that support couch surfing youth, engaging venues where youth congregate during the day (e.g., facilities with free Wi-Fi), and partnering with schools (both through McKinney-Vento school liaisons in secondary schools and student resource centers in post-secondary institutions)."[30] Broadly, however, it should be acknowledged that people experiencing forms of hidden homelessness have ideas as well; several ideas for improving access to healthful foods emerged from interviews of motel-shelter residents conducted by Chatterjee et al., including nutrition education, re-housing, and motel-based meal provisions.[31]

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[25] "Questionnaire Design." *Pew Research Center.*
[26] Choi, Bernard C.K., and Anita W.P. Pak. "A Catalog of Biases in Questionnaires." *Preventing Chronic Disease.*
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This research brings out but does not seek to answer many questions regarding the viability of various living situations and the physical and psychological difficulties of transitioning between different forms of homelessness. It also does not explore very deeply the self-perceptions of the "hidden homeless," which may act as a psychological affordance that motivates movement between living situations. All of these areas should be researched further, and the value exchanges presented in this paper should be taken into account in future academic contributions to the field.

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This assignment was completed in accordance with University regulations.