The Homeless in America: An Examination of Possessions and Consumption Behaviors

RONALD PAUL HILL
MARK STAMEY*

This research utilized an ethnographic approach to advance our understanding of the survival strategies employed by the homeless in our society. We examine the types o˙ possessions consumed, how possessions are acquired through nontraditional ι iployment and scavenging, and why some products are purchased while others are scavenged. We also look at the tools used to facilitate search, acquisition, storage, and consumption of these products. Finally, we consider the importance of community for protection of self and possessions and how community among the homeless affects consumption. Emergent themes that allow interpretation of the description are presented.

Lying, thinking
Last night
How to find my soul a home
Where water is not thirsty
And bread loaf is not stone
I came up with one thing
And I don't believe I'm wrong
That nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone.
[MAYA ANGELOU 1986]

During the 1980s, homeless men, women, and children began crowding urban America's back alleys and streets (King et al. 1989, National Mental Health Association 1988). Current debates center around the makeup of the homeless population and its size. Government-sponsored research suggests that the homeless are made up of deinstitutionalized mental patients, drug and alcohol abusers, families with a black or Hispanic woman as head of household, and the marginally employed who have suffered a major financial setback, such as with a prolonged illness (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1984). However, few sources agree on the precise representation of these groups among the homeless. For ex-

ample, Torrey (1988), author of *Nowhere to Go,* suggests that recent increases in homelessness are due primarily to a public policy of deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, who are released into communities unprepared to provide adequate support. Conversely, Wright (1988) reports that the true rate of mental illness among the homeless is only 10–33 percent (see also Snow et al. 1986).

There is also controversy surrounding the actual number of homeless persons (Ropers 1988). Democratic leaders, such as former presidential candidate Michael Dukakis and former Speaker of the House Jim Wright, have claimed that 3 million Americans are huddled in the streets, doorways, and shelters each night (Whitman 1989). However, a 1988 study by the nonpartisan Urban Institute concluded that, at most, 600,000 Americans were homeless on any given day in 1987.

While these concerns are important, another set of pertinent issues involves the struggle by the homeless for survival (Hirsch and Stamey 1988). To date, no attempt has been made by consumer researchers to investigate what possessions are deemed necessary for survival, how the homeless acquire these possessions, and whether these possessions are consumed in isolation or within some form of community. The purpose of this research is to provide preliminary answers to these questions.

First, we turn our attention to the plight of the homeless and provide a definition of homelessness that establishes a framework for understanding their unique consumer-behavior situation. Second, we describe our research method, which is based on the ethnographic tradition used in many studies involving the homeless (Koegel 1987). Third, we present our findings by de-

303

scribing the types of possessions consumed as well as how they are acquired and consumed by homeless persons. Finally, emergent themes are provided to aid in the interpretation of this research, and consumer-behavior implications are summarized.

THE HOMELESS

Prevailing Causes of Homelessness

Unemployment. Although the rate of unemployment in the United States is at a relatively low level (approximately 5.4 percent), joblessness among the poor and minority groups remains at a higher percentage (see Freeman and Hall 1987). Further, some states underestimate the joblessness rate by reporting as "employed" anyone who works one or more hours a week or those who have exhausted their unemployment benefits (Ropers 1988). Statistics obtained from municipal shelters in New York City show that 40 percent of current occupants report loss of a job as the cause of their seeking shelter (Salerno, Hopper, and Baxter 1984). Part of this problem may be a result of the loss of millions of well-paying, unionized, semi-skilled manufacturing jobs and their replacement by low-level service jobs. Hirsch and Stamey (1988, p. 5) state that "the unionized manufacturing jobs which have been lost provided unique opportunities for high wages to those with lower levels of skill and education. Newer low-level service jobs—such as hospital orderlies, typists and word-processors, retail check-out clerks, waiters and waitresses, messengers for financial firms, chambermaids in hotels—are not unionized and often pay below poverty level wages even for full-time, year-round workers." Thus, the incentive to pursue employment by those at the lower economic and social strata in society has been considerably reduced in recent years.

Deinstitutionalization. The deinstitutionalization movement of the past three decades resulted in the discharge of hundreds of thousands of former patients of state mental institutions into unwilling and unready communities (French 1987). Between 1955 and 1985, the number of psychiatric patients in hospitals nationwide dropped from 559,000 to 138,000 (Greer 1986). Originally, it was expected that treatment would be transferred to outpatient clinics. However, fewer than 800 of the 2,000 community mental health centers estimated as necessary to service this population have been built, and the existing ones are not adequately coordinated with those institutions discharging patients. According to Hombs and Snyder (1983), 1,000 mental patients are released from hospitals nationally each day, and only 7 percent are referred to these centers. As a result, many patients end up on the streets with no assistance and no alternatives.

Drug Addiction. Substance abuse, especially alcoholism, remains a persistent cause of homelessness.[1] Recent investigations show that 33–38 percent of homeless adults are alcoholics, and 13–25 percent are drug abusers (Whitman 1989). Further, these dependencies tend to exacerbate typical adverse health consequences of homelessness, such as nutritional and gastrointestinal disorders (Schutt and Garrett 1988). For example, individuals with addictive disorders will often spend what little money they have on such substances rather than on food, clothing, or shelter.

Further, addictive problems may be one of the primary causes of homelessness among families (see Fabricant 1988; French 1987), and drug and alcohol abuse may result in physical violence, including spouse battering and sexual abuse (Hagen 1987a; Ropers 1988). Frequently, such violent behavior by an adult male will cause a woman to take her child(ren) and leave, which renders them homeless. Because most of these women come from poverty, they are unable to turn to their extended families for financial assistance. Occasionally, both parents have addictive disorders, which may prompt children to seek alternative living arrangements on the streets (Hagen 1987b).

Scarcity of Low-Cost Housing. According to recent estimates by the National Housing Law Project, the number of people who have been involuntarily removed from their homes is 2.5 million (Salerno et al. 1984). Most of this displacement is the result of city "revitalization" projects and economic development schemes (King et al. 1989) that allow occupied buildings to deteriorate to the point of being uninhabitable before renovation for use by those with higher incomes. At the same time, half a million units of low-cost housing are lost each year through conversion, abandonment, arson, and demolition (Ropers 1988). Hirsch and Stamey (1988, p. 6) report that in New York City alone, "the combined impact of gentrification and abandonment was to displace 225,000 city residents a year; most of these are low-income families since both gentrification and abandonment disproportionately affect poor people. The people displaced can find nowhere to go to live in part because the same process is destroying low-income housing units at the rate of nearly one hundred thousand a year."

This trend probably will continue. Throughout the 1970s and well into the 1980s, housing costs rose at a rate greater than inflation (Hartman 1983; Rossi and Wright 1987). Unfortunately, this rate is more than twice the percentage increase in household income among renters during the same time period (Dolbeare 1983; Ropers 1988). David Schwartz and John Glascock of the American Affordable Housing Institute at

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[1]However, the question of causality—whether substance abuse leads to homelessness or homelessness to substance abuse—has yet to be resolved (see National Mental Health Association 1988).

Rutgers University estimate that an additional 4–14 million American families are "now living on the knife edge of homelessness; they are doubled and tripled up in the (mostly overcrowded and deteriorating) apartments of friends and family; they are one paycheck, one domestic argument from the streets" (Rich 1989, p. A19).

The Homeless as Consumers

Homelessness has been defined as a lack of shelter that meets minimal health and safety standards (Bachrach 1984; Caro 1981), and the definition includes those living squatter style in vacant housing, stores, cars, vans and buses, and makeshift structures, or living on the streets (Nassau-Suffolk Coalition for the Homeless 1989). However, this view is too narrow for consumer-behavior purposes in that it does not encompass the full range of needs that are difficult for the homeless to meet. Other researchers have suggested that poverty among the homeless inhibits their ability to acquire not only adequate shelter but also food, clothing, medical care, and a host of other goods and services necessary for physical and mental health (Freeman and Hall 1987; Hirsch and Stamey 1988).

With regard to such products, Belk (1988, p. 139) states, "We cannot hope to understand consumer behavior without first gaining some understanding of the meanings that consumers attach to possessions." For the homeless, possessions and consumption behaviors that ordinary consumers take for granted are often unavailable, reduced, or restricted. According to Koegel, Farr, and Burnam (1986, p. 133), "finding themselves homeless, their energies become focused on survival—on finding a place to sleep and getting food into their stomachs. These tasks become full-time endeavors in and of themselves; they have no time to do anything other than seek those things." Thus, our research objectives were to (1) investigate the unique consumer-behavior activities of the homeless in terms of what possessions are acquired as well as how they are acquired and consumed and (2) develop a deep understanding of the meanings of these possessions and behaviors and their importance to the sense of self of homeless persons in our society.

METHOD

The use of the ethnographic research method has received some degree of acceptance in consumer-behavior research recently (see Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Hudson and Ozanne 1988). However, ethnography has been utilized for many years, particularly by cultural anthropologists and, to a lesser extent, by sociologists (Berg 1989; Fetterman 1989). Despite differences in terminology, most social scientists agree that the practice of ethnography places researchers in the midst of whatever it is they study. Thus, Wolcott (1973) has defined ethnography as the science of "cultural description," Geertz (1973) suggests that the researcher's task is to provide "thick description," and Ellen (1984) characterizes the ethnographic process as "subjective soaking."

Important criticisms have been raised concerning the ability of such naturalistic inquiry to produce scientific knowledge consistent with the criteria posed by the positivist approach (Calder and Tybout 1989; Hunt 1989). According to Wallendorf and Belk (1989, p. 70), the positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity can be substituted with the following characteristics, originally formulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), to maintain scientific integrity: (1) credibility (adequate and believable representations of the constructions of reality studied); (2) transferability (the extent to which working hypotheses can be employed in other contexts on the basis of an assessment of similarity between two contexts); (3) dependability (the extent to which interpretation is constructed in a way that avoids instability other than the inherent instability of a social phenomenon); and (4) confirmability (the ability to trace a researcher's construction of an interpretation by following the records kept). It is also clearly necessary that the interpretation be unimpaired by lies, evasions, misinformation, or misrepresentations by informants.[2]

Lincoln and Guba (1985) further suggest the following research techniques to improve the ability of ethnographic research to meet criteria of integrity: prolonged engagement and persistent observation; triangulation of sources, sites, methods, and researchers; regular, on-site team interaction; negative case analysis; debriefing by peers; member checks; seeking limiting exceptions; purposive sampling; reflexive journals; and independent audit. A discussion of the extent to which each of these techniques was utilized during this investigation follows.

Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observation

Prolonged engagement and persistent observation are recommended to understand the broader culture in which the phenomenon under investigation is imbedded and to provide the researcher with the depth of knowledge necessary to recognize potential distortions in perception during the course of data collection. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) recommend that re-

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[2] The term "key actors" is used occasionally instead of "informants" to avoid any stigma associated with historical antecedents (see Fetterman 1989 for more details). However, we will refer to the homeless persons we spoke with as informants since this nomenclature is used more frequently in the consumer-behavior literature.

searchers employ *perspectives of action*—self-reports of behavior to the investigator by informants—as well as *perspectives in action*—actual observations of informants' behaviors in their natural environment. (This technique was originally developed by Gould et al. [1974].) Finally, they recommend honest and open discussion with informants regarding the research purpose to allow access to a wide range of relevant consumer behaviors.

Utilizing this technique, the researchers spent more than 1,000 hours in the field, developing a deep understanding of the way of life of the homeless. Fieldwork began in early 1985 and continued without interruption until the middle of 1989. During the early months of this project, the focus was on learning how to build rapport with homeless individuals, developing an approach to data collection on the basis of this rapport, and discovering the nuances of the survival strategies of the homeless.

These tasks were not easily accomplished. Many homeless persons are fearful of strangers because they suffer such abuses as assault (e.g., "bum burnings" by teenagers) and rape and they fear that their possessions may be stolen or confiscated. Thus, the mannerisms, dress, language, and behavior of the researchers were tailored to reduce fear levels. Informal clothing and language, slow movements, and an open and honest description of who the researchers were and why they were "visiting" were employed. Often, providing a few dollars, something warm to eat or wear, or sharing a bottle (making sure never to wipe the opening before drinking) would relax the informant and produce more detailed descriptions or allow access to possessions and communal behaviors. Further, the research team included both males and females to reduce the sense of possible threat, particularly among homeless women, and visits to the same sites at regular intervals allowed trust to develop between the researchers and informants.

Certain ethical issues also guided these interactions. As we became keenly aware of the "hidden" homeless, we were careful not to divulge their whereabouts to others, especially the police. Thus, we took every precaution to make sure that we were never followed on return visits. Further, our field notes contained full descriptions of these encounters but avoided any attempt to place a particular individual (at least by full name) in any specific location. Finally, we approached our informants with compassion and understanding, avoiding any judgments that might further erode their self-esteem.

Triangulation of Sources, Sites, Methods, and Researchers

According to Wallendorf and Belk (1989), triangulation across sources and sites requires that the researcher collect data from several informants in the variety of settings where the behavior under investigation regularly takes place.[3] Triangulation of methods dictates the use of multiple forms of primary data collection, including field notes, still photography, tape recording, and video recording. Finally, triangulation across researchers demands the use of a team of researchers who provide interpretations of interactions with informants on the basis of their own frames of reference or training.

To meet these requirements, several procedural steps were employed. First, the researchers collected data from more than 100 informants in a variety of settings, including abandoned buildings, bridge abutments and tunnels, shantytowns (i.e., small communities of makeshift dwellings), public parks, and automobiles used primarily for shelter in both urban and suburban areas.

The urban locale in this research is a large northeastern city where homelessness is considered a growing problem due to an influx of illegal aliens and the unemployed from other parts of the nation, as well as because of persistent poverty in several areas within the city. The sites selected by our research team were the regions dominated by the poor and destitute, and these usually were characterized by inadequately maintained buildings and almost nonexistent public services. Crime, especially stealing, arson, and drug use, is a continuous problem for all residents of these areas, including the homeless.

The suburban environment used is a middle-class area located in the center of a northeastern state. This suburb is characterized by moderate crime but relatively high unemployment due to the decreased emphasis on the manufacturing sector of our economy. Homelessness in this community is considered a growing problem and exists on the fringes of the populated areas, in public parks and forested areas and in the older, more dilapidated sections of the community.

Second, data were collected with hundreds of audiotapes and thousands of photographs, as well as videotapes on several occasions. Field notes were maintained to record information not easily observable with the other methods of data gathering. Third, the two primary researchers, each trained in different disciplines (marketing/consumer behavior and sociology), provided separate interpretations of the data to achieve triangulation across researchers.

Regular, On-Site Team Interaction and Negative Case Analysis

Regular, on-site team interaction requires that the researchers meet routinely to develop a greater understanding of the range of possible interpretations of behaviors observed and information obtained in the

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[3]This technique involves purposive sampling.

field. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) suggest that such meetings take place after each member of the team has had an opportunity to generate personal interpretations of the events to be discussed. One goal of such interaction is to produce a so-called negative case. A negative case would involve interactions with informants that do not support the current set of perspectives generated by the researchers. Therefore, interactions with informants in the field should include an active search for such scenarios.

To ensure regular interaction between the primary researchers, discussions were held after each contact with informants. The investigators formed their own private interpretations of the events before these meetings through the continuous use of reflexive journals, and discussions highlighted differences of opinion. Although formal negative cases were not developed, an attempt was made to continue gathering information in the areas where differences of opinion regarding experiences in the field existed.

Debriefing by Peers and Member Checks

Wallendorf and Belk (1989) suggest that the primary investigators employ researchers not directly involved with the project to critique and question the developing interpretations of the behaviors under scrutiny. This support group should contain representatives from as wide a variety of disciplines and backgrounds as appropriate to produce a diversity of opinions. Member checks require a similar critique from a group of informants in the field. Precautions should also be taken to include a variety of individuals as heterogeneous as the environment under investigation.

Debriefing by peers was accomplished in this project by providing a group whose professional training included sociology, psychology, social work, anthropology, and marketing (consumer behavior) with various perceptions of the field as well as materials used in the formation of these perceptions over the course of the development of our final interpretation. Their reactions and stated uncertainties provided an ongoing independent audit of data-collection activities and were used to guide additional data gathering.

Member checks were performed by providing homeless individuals with a description of how others like themselves behaved (based on our data) and asking them for comments. Occasionally, scenarios would be purposefully inaccurate to test the honesty of their reactions. For the most part, homeless individuals were quick to provide opinions regarding their peers and demonstrated highly capable powers of observation that had been developed, in part, as a result of their need to protect themselves and their possessions from harm and to remain alert for new sources of goods and services.

Seeking Limiting Exceptions

This technique requires that the researchers progressively expand the number of sites and groups included in their data collection to understand the limits of the transferability of their findings. In this study, we found that our findings were limited to the homeless who live on the streets rather than in public shelters. Most homeless persons differentiate themselves from shelter inhabitants and feel that shelters are the choice of the most destitute or the insane. Thus, our findings concern the independent-minded homeless who believe that they are surviving by their own wits and resources. However, our informants varied widely demographically: 76 percent were males and 24 percent females; 14 percent were under 30 years of age, 46 percent were 30–40 years of age, 34 percent were 40–50 years of age, and 6 percent were older than 50 years old; 42 percent were white and 58 percent black.

RESULTS

Our inquiry began with a general approach to data collection that investigated *how* and *what* possessions are acquired as well as the environment in which these possessions are consumed by the homeless. Also, we attempted to discover the effects of alternative consumer behaviors on the meaning of possessions and their subsequent impact on the sense of self of the homeless. Consistent with the interpretivist tradition, subcategories of these research directions were identified on an iterative basis as revealed by the data during fieldwork (Fetterman 1989; Ozanne and Hudson 1989). Each point is discussed, and support is provided by verbatim quotes from the interviews; emergent themes are identified to clarify the meanings inherent in these experiences for the homeless (Denzin 1989).

Acquiring Possessions

For the homeless, acquiring possessions involves activities that are markedly different from the typical consumer in our society. First, many of the necessities of life (food, clothing, materials for shelter, etc.) are scavenged from the refuse of others rather than purchased. Second, access to traditional outlets for products, such as supermarkets or restaurants, often is restricted for the homeless because of financial and/or hygiene factors, dress requirements, and interpersonal problems. Third, the homeless come in contact with nontraditional outlets for goods and services (e.g., drug dealers), and many engage regularly in nonconventional acquisition (i.e., barter or sharing with other homeless persons).

The Art of Scavenging. One of the primary means of acquiring possessions for the homeless is scavenging. This activity involves the search for partially consumed products, with homeless persons as secondary con-

sumers. Sometimes items are used in their entirety by the primary consumer, and nothing is left for a secondary consumer (e.g., a pair of shoes so worn that they provide little protection from the cold or objects on the streets). However, many industrial and commercial establishments as well as residential homes discard partially consumed products ranging from food to clothing to such items as wood and cardboard that can be used in the construction of a shelter. While the worth of these items varies with an individual's level of deprivation (e.g., at subzero temperatures, even the smallest piece of clothing becomes valuable), the homeless persons we met believe that others' "garbage" often has value.

> You go look at [trash] cans today. People throw waste out—waste that's good waste—waste that can help other people. [wm, thirties][4]

Most scavenging takes place in public garbage cans or dumpsters, which hold up to 20 cubic yards of material. Uninformed observers may think that homeless persons aimlessly search such receptacles, but those who scavenge are adept at acquiring useful items and employ developed methods of selection and search to improve the likelihood of success in finding such goods as food and clothing. For example, one key informant provided us with the following rule-of-thumb:

> There're a lot of fast-food places and they all work pretty much the same. You find out when the place closes, and you just go over there and climb in [the dumpster]. It's usually the same procedure. One bag has all of the stuff from the kitchen, the other bags are all full of refuse paper. You get the heaviest bag out, and that's the one with all the burgers in it, and fill up your sack. [wm, forties]

To avoid detection, scavengers often resort to late-night rummaging and random use of several geographically diverse sites. Others selectively scavenge dumpsters in areas where they have an implicit agreement with various owners, managers, or workers. These people will carefully place garbage bags containing whatever they consider to be of value to the homeless in the front of the dumpsters at the same time every day or on the same day every week to facilitate retrieval by the homeless.

Income Sources. While scavenging may provide the homeless with much of what they need for survival, they seldom exist entirely outside of the cash-flow economy.[5] A common misconception by the public is that the homeless rely on the generosity of others through begging, charity, or welfare to provide them with money. However, a majority of the homeless persons we encountered were actively engaged in some form of traditional or nontraditional employment and were proud of their independence from the welfare system. Some worked typical 40-hour-a-week jobs, while others were employed sporadically as day laborers. However, nontraditional sources of income were far more likely choices of the persons we met. One man summed up the situation this way.

> People look at us like we are lounging around, but it's not easy—it's a job surviving out here! We're always working. At 4:30 in the mornings, I'm already out on the street. They don't see us because when they're sleeping, we're working. [wm, fifties]

One common method of making money is recycling. This source of income is consistent with the outdoor, continuously mobile life-style of the homeless. Further, it requires little in the way of equipment, personal presentation, or training. All one needs is a container (a plastic garbage bag or grocery cart), a territory with reasonable potential, and a redemption center.

However, informants report that this business is intensely competitive, particularly when it comes to returnable bottles and aluminum cans. Competition comes from retirees, lower-level employees of businesses in the vicinity of their search, garbage handlers, and other homeless individuals. Further, most retail outlets will accept only clean bottles or cans for brands that they sell. Since homeless persons have limited access to water (particularly in the winter), these requirements reduce the number of acceptable containers. A person would have to collect 280,000 bottles a year to reach the U.S. poverty level for a family of four. However, the most commonly reported estimated amount for a day's collecting is $6.

Because of the limitations on cans and bottles for income, homeless persons often turn to the collection of scrap metal to earn money. The recycling process is about the same, but the value of individual items often is significantly higher. There are three primary sources of metals accessible to the homeless. One is cars that have been abandoned by either their owners or car thieves. These usually are stripped of everything that is detachable (see photograph 2 in Fig. 1 for an example). One can remove external equipment like hubcaps, trim, antennae, mirrors, and lights without entering the vehicle. The car is then elevated (often with the abandoned car's jack), and the wheels and tires are removed. Doors can be opened from the outside with a flat piece of metal inserted between the window glass and the metal frame. If this method is unsuccessful, a small window, like the wing vent, can be broken with a brick or tire iron. Inside, the radio or tape player, seats, and such accessories as mirrors and the lighter can be removed. Finally, the carpet, doors, and hood are detached, and several engine parts, such as the radiator, battery, and air conditioner, are broken loose. These pieces are then sold to parts deal-

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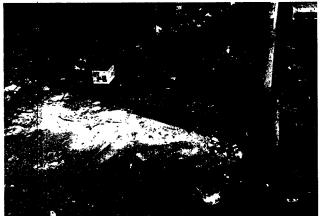[4]Parenthetical notations with field notes indicate race, gender, and age.

[5]All of the activities described in this subsection also are performed by persons who are not homeless.

FIGURE 1

PHOTOGRAPHS PORTRAYING THE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR ACTIVITIES OF THE HOMELESS

1   A shopping cart loaded beyond capacity

2   An automobile after bands of scavengers were done "picking its bones."

3. A hole in a bridge abutment that leads to a hidden shelter.

4. The inside of the hidden shelter shown in photograph 3.

5. A lamppost that has been opened to connect electricity to a makeshift shelter, sand is used to hide the wire

6. An abandoned building that had been occupied by the man in the picture for shelter.

ers, scrap-metal yards, or directly to consumers on the streets.

Although the entire car often will be gutted over time, the process usually involves several individuals who specialize in the removal of certain parts. As the following quote suggests, they each become adept at the acquisition and disposal of their particular specialty.

> Anybody who is doing what I've been doing knows what to touch in a car and what not to touch. . . . [I] walk around to an abandoned car, go over with my hammer or something, make sure there is no license plate or nothing on it to make sure I won't get into no trouble. . . . I take the radiator, air conditioner, the car battery, [or] anything that's dealing with aluminum, copper, or brass. [bm, thirties]

A second source of scrap metal is abandoned buildings. When a building is deserted, the services are physically cut. Boilers are decommissioned to discourage their being reconnected, electrical supplies and water lines are severed, maintenance is discontinued, and doorways and windows are sealed with concrete blocks. However, these precautions do little to discourage recyclers, who use tire irons, crowbars, and other tools to gain entrance. Inside, virtually everything that can be detached and carried is removed and sold. Recyclers rip open the walls to remove the pipes and plumbing fixtures—usually only the bathtubs are left because they are too cumbersome to transport to the scrap yards. The electrical wiring is extracted from the walls. The insulation is then burned off so that it can be sold more easily. Elevator equipment and stairs are both valuable. Staircases are either removed as a unit, or the marble steps and risers are taken, which leaves only the metal frame. Finally, windows, doors, trim, door casings, and decorative woodwork are confiscated. These items are either sold or burned to provide life-sustaining heat during the winter months.

The extraction of metal from buildings by homeless recyclers, similar to the automobile example, is quite thorough. For example, one man provided us with the following process for removing the coating from wire to facilitate recycling.

> I only take wire if I see a whole stack—50 pounds or a hundred pounds. [To remove the plastic coating to make it more valuable] I'll put it in a steel barrel, get a little gasoline, pour it in there, throw some wood at the bottom of the can, start it, sprinkle the gas on it—once the rubber come off I have clean copper. I wait till it cool off, pour some water over it, turn the barrel upside down, take it all out, and then compress the wire, and see how much I have. [bm, thirties]

A final source of scrap metal is dumpsters. Homeless recyclers look primarily for aluminum, copper, lead, and brass. Excess metals of these types are discarded by window installers, building wreckers, and remodelers. Success at scavenging such scraps requires an awareness of where such work is taking place. For example, one of our informants specializes in the scrap discarded by replacement-window installers. He searches during the day for sites where this kind of work is occurring and raids the dumpster after the workmen leave, scrutinizing the debris for the largest and most valuable pieces.

After the collection process ends, the difficult task of transporting these metals to recycling centers begins. With bottles and cans, the number of redemption centers is larger because of the number of retail establishments that must redeem them. However, recycling centers for scrap often are located in remote areas of cities and suburbs. Since most homeless persons have no access to a functioning automobile, they must find some way to carry the metals on foot. Thus, they often resort to shopping carts and load them to or beyond their capacity (see photograph 1). This situation provides the uninformed observer with a picture of the homeless as eccentric hoarders of worthless items. Nevertheless, as the following statement suggests, homeless individuals are patient in this task.

> Once it [the shopping cart] is filled up, then I'll go to the scrap yard. I'll walk there because it's not too far. It's only 8–9 miles away from here. It don't bother me— I'm used to it. I take my time—it's no rush. Every other block or so I stop to catch a breather. On the way, I might find a few more, you know, pound of aluminum or whatever.[6] [bm, forties]

Although recycling is probably the first choice of homeless persons seeking money, alternative occupations exist. One is to be a "wiper" or, in street terminology, to "shine cars." Wipers make a living by waiting at busy intersections for the traffic to stop, approaching cars, and proceeding to clean the front windows. For this service, they receive a tip that may range from nothing to $100, averaging about 25¢–50¢. Some wipers report having good days that exceed several hundred dollars, but an average day's tips are usually in the $50–$70 range. Many of these intersections are manned by several individuals in an attempt to exclude others from their territory.

> Nobody from nowhere else can come down here and shine no car. . . . They not allowed. If they do something, they [the police] blame it on us . . . so somebody is always here [to protect our turf]. [bm, twenties]

The procedure is quite simple. The wiper uses a squeegee or a rag dipped in water (often from the street) and attempts to clean the driver's side of the front window. Occasionally, they will spray "cleaner" on the windshield so that the job will need to be finished. However, this occupation is not without its hazards. Some wipers report being "stiffed" by "customers,"

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[6]It should be noted that some homeless individuals choose to sell their scavenged items on the streets rather than to dealers or recycling centers.

threatened with physical harm by angry drivers, and harassed by police, who write them tickets or confiscate their equipment. Thus, to be successful, they must take certain precautions. One young wiper avoids trouble by reading facial expressions to determine whether to approach a car.

> You've got to really look at 'em. . . . If they smile, you shine their window. . . . You've gotta be a good salesman! [bm, thirties]

With regard to illegal activities, like drug dealing or prostitution, few of the homeless are involved in such operations. Since these practices are often financially rewarding, most who engage in them are able to find affordable housing. However, we did find homeless youths (under age 18) who engaged in such activities, especially prostitution. One woman described a young man who lived in her shantytown in the following way.

> The kids that are homeless, that are, let's say, the age of 13 and up—basically they survive by selling their bodies. We had a kid staying here, he was about 16, and all he knew was homosexuals—his world revolved around homosexuality. [wf, forties]

Scavenging versus Buying. There are two interrelated reasons why homeless persons choose to scavenge rather than purchase goods. The first is simple economics. Homeless persons are severely constrained in their ability to afford food, clothing, and shelter, as well as other products. As the previous subsection reported, the average daily wage of homeless persons who engage in some form of nontraditional work is between $6 and $60—a small sum to provide the necessities of life.[7] The second involves their different perspective regarding what represents acceptable quality in the items they consume. As stated earlier, the homeless often perceive value where others see garbage. Several of our informants feel that they can get everything they need to survive by scavenging.

When money is available, homeless persons will splurge and treat themselves to something special. At the top of the list often is a hot meal (especially in the winter), a favorite food that they rarely have the opportunity to eat, or staples such as coffee and cigarettes. Unfortunately, informants report that they or others in their situation may spend much of their limited funds on alcohol or illegal drugs. One recovering addict provided the following perspective on the powerful impact drugs have on the lives of his peers and how they quickly deplete all available financial resources.

> Crack is so powerful that one shot will get you "ripped." If you got $500, you'll spend $500 on crack. If you got $1,000, you'll spend $1,000. Whatever it take to get the money to get it, that's what you're going to do. If you're on welfare, they'll [drug dealers] give you credit. They'll

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[7]This average is much closer to $6, given that recycling is the most common occupation of the homeless.

hold your ID card to cash your checks so when check day comes, they return your ID and go with you to the check cashing place, and once the check is cashed, you hand over the money to them. [bm, thirties]

Not surprisingly, the homeless often use nonconventional acquisition methods, such as barter or sharing, to acquire products. It is not uncommon for one person to have a fire in a barrel, for another to come over to cook food just purchased from a supermarket for the group, and for a third to bring a bottle of inexpensive wine to share. These kinds of informal meetings take place on a regular basis, with the same people typically in attendance.

Types of Possessions

The homeless need the same basic items as an average middle-class consumer—shelter, food, clothing, and personal hygiene and health care products—and use a variety of tools to acquire and transport these items. However, the ways the homeless fulfill their needs are often creative and strikingly different from the remainder of society. The following discussion is organized by the major categories of items consumed.

Shelter. Going from "housed" to "homeless" is rarely a sudden or unexpected event. Instead, it is a process whereby an individual moves from a self-sufficient dwelling, such as an apartment, to living with friends, relatives, or in government-controlled, temporary housing, to the streets. Each homeless person we met had a different version of this same story. One woman in her thirties told us that she had been living in an apartment but could no longer afford to pay the rent. She then moved to an "SRO"—a welfare hotel that allowed her to rent a room on a continuous basis at a relatively low rate. Unfortunately, because of an urban revitalization project, the hotel was renovated and all of the residents were removed. It was at this point that she became homeless. Other histories showed a similar spiral down the housing chain. One middle-aged male told us how he was kicked out of his apartment by his girlfriend. He then lived in a public garage owned by his brother but was forced out onto the streets after the patrons complained.

Governmental authorities as well as the general public often wonder why homeless individuals opt for the streets over the shelters that are available in many communities. During the winter months, the newspapers carry stories about homeless persons, characterized as "insane," who refuse to leave the outdoors for the shelters. However, several visits to these establishments provided us with a picture of an inhospitable alternative. Many of these facilities are overcrowded during their peak usage months (i.e., the winter months) and consequently are poorly maintained. Privacy is nonexistent, the smell of drugs and urine regularly fill the air, the staff at some facilities mistreat

the homeless, and some residents behave in a violent or threatening manner.

At some point, most homeless persons have tried shelters as an alternative to the streets, but few intend to return. Their characterizations of the environment in these shelters are quite graphic.

> [The shelters] they dirty, they filthy, and the people in there—they thieves. I don't know who in there might have AIDS. They rob you, they devious, a lot of them have lice. They smell, don't want to take a bath. . . . They [shelter employees] don't care, they treat you like you nobody. They feel like this—if you in here, you nobody cause you don't want to work. I'm not much better than them [shelter people], but at least I keep myself from smelling. [bm, thirties]

Therefore, the homeless choose independent living and feel that survival, even under adverse conditions, is possible.

> Once you've really lived outside in the middle of winter—all winter long—it's no longer that scary thing. When you get right down to it, a guy can roll up in a blanket in a snow bank and be warmer than a guy in a house. It's just the idea of it—scares the hell out of you. You do what has to be done. You look back later and say "Did I really do that?" and you really did. People have done that stuff for a thousand years. [wm, forties]

A common perception is that the homeless occupy public spaces, such as train and subway stations, shopping malls, or street grates, but our informants feel that they are more likely to be hassled by police, security guards, teenagers, and so on in these places. Therefore, homeless persons who are able choose to live more discretely, where their presence will go unnoticed or unchallenged. Although the number of alternatives is rather large, the most common forms of shelter are abandoned or unoccupied buildings, apartments, or automobiles, makeshift quarters made out of scavenged construction materials, and partially protected, out-of-the-way places, such as bridge abutments and tunnels.

Many homeless persons live in buildings that have been abandoned for years (see photograph 6). Patient observation of these dwellings, which superficially seem devoid of life, often reveals activity. Since occupancy is technically illegal, squatters take certain precautions to avoid being discovered. Further, most buildings are infested with rats, and, if a ground-level entrance exists, wild dogs may occupy the lower levels. Thus, for protection and to avoid detection, garbage is used frequently to barricade inhabited areas, stairs leading to occupied rooms are removed at random, and holes in the floor are covered with cardboard to booby trap entrances. We once watched a man wall himself into a cellar using scavenged bricks.

Homeless persons may also search for an apartment that is between occupants in a populated building or a house between owners or renters. Unlike abandoned structures, these facilities receive attention, and, therefore, even greater secrecy is required. One informant summarized his strategy for utilizing such dwellings as follows:

> One of the number one [rules] of living like that is, even to another bum, you never tell him where you live. . . . The time that you do this [live in an unoccupied apartment in a populated building] you're always taking notes of things. . . . You're "stealthily" when you come in and out. . . . The object is not to be visible because the next thing you know you're getting run out. [wm, fifties]

Abandoned cars are also popular shelters, particularly when they are left on empty lots. Cardboard often is used to cover windows and as a sleeping pad. Blocking the windows keeps the car cooler in the summer, warmer in the winter, and allows for greater privacy. If the rear seat of the vehicle is removed, the floor can be leveled and padded with layers of cardboard to shield a person from exposed metal. Of course, many hazards exist with this type of shelter. Cars are more visible and expose the homeless to potential victimization by gangs, criminals, and the police. Further, cars may be towed by city authorities or dismantled by recyclers.

Makeshift quarters are the most elaborate of all the shelters used by the homeless. They may exist on vacant lots, in shantytowns, or hidden away in the woods. To find materials for these structures, the homeless will scavenge widely and are very resourceful at finding appropriate building materials.

> It [his shelter] was out of the trash. A lot of stores threw out their rugs, so I went around and got those. I had rugs over logs and plastic over the top of that to waterproof it. Gradually, inside I insulated with cardboard boxes, trash bags, and leaves, and it was pretty tight. I didn't do it in one day—you fix it up and you fix it up. [wm, forties]

One informant showed us a rather remarkable structure that was 3 feet high, 4 feet wide, and 8 feet long. The exterior was made of corrugated, translucent fiberglass, plastic garbage bags, and ⅝-inch plywood. The floor was made from an old wooden door covered with carpet. On this particular day, it was raining heavily, but the interior remained dry.

Some of these structures contain multiple rooms. For instance, one woman gave us a tour of a dwelling where she and her boyfriend lived. The structure had three compartments that included a bedroom and separate, private areas for her cosmetics and his personal belongings. The entire arrangement was intended to produce a homey atmosphere. The homeless often feel a strong attachment for these shelters that they insist others who visit share.

Persons who live in places like bridge abutments and tunnels appear to be the least able to fend for themselves (see photographs 3 and 4). Unfortunately, this environment is frequently the most treacherous.

While they have some protection from rain or snow, inhabitants are exposed to the wind and cold, and they are more vulnerable to attacks by wild dogs or other people since they are unable to isolate themselves. One of our informants who lived under a bridge became the victim of bum burning—a sadistic practice of gangs of teenagers who pour gasoline on a sleeping homeless person and then set him or her on fire. The man we knew was killed by an automobile as he attempted to run across a highway to reach a nearby river to extinguish the fire.

Regardless of the type of shelter, maintaining a source of life-sustaining heat during the winter months (known as the "death season") is an important challenge for the homeless. The most common method of warming a shelter is to burn newspaper or wood they find while scavenging. These are burned in buckets, bathtubs, sinks, stoves, old refrigerators, or any other fireproof container that can hold a sufficient amount of material. One of our informants used a water heater that someone had discarded as junk to develop a heating system for his shelter. He rigged it so that it sucked air up from the bottom and sent smoke out the top of his shack.

However, the smoke and light of these fires can attract the attention of the police or the fire department, with disastrous results. These authorities may destroy a shelter on the premise that it poses a fire hazard to the surrounding community or wooded area. Also, the fire department may extinguish the fire and simultaneously soak the entire living area, including bedding and clothing. One homeless person described how such official action nearly ended a man's life:

> School called the fire department on the man [his shack is close to the school]. He be burning wood out here trying to stay warm. They wets up his bed because the fire is around there and everything [and] he slept on it the same night. . . . This old man [who lived in the shack] comes to my car and asks me to give him a cigarette, and how critical he be shaking from the cold. . . . I said "George, take this drink." By the time the cup gets to his mouth, half of whatever I give him was going out of the cup—he was shaking that much. [bm, forties]   .

An alternative source of heat involves the use of electricity, and occupants of an abandoned building may rely on stolen electricity. When a building is deserted, the utilities are cut at the main junction box and the wiring is removed. Under most circumstances, however, power continues to be supplied to this receptacle. The homeless may tap into the power line ahead of the fuse box and use whatever wiring is available to improvise a wiring harness that can generate electricity. This form of "hot wiring" is not limited to buildings. Public street lamps are tapped in a similar manner by inhabitants of both abandoned cars and makeshift quarters or shacks (see photograph 5).

Once tapped, electricity is attached to an appliance such as a hot plate, electric frying pan, or any other device that generates heat.[8] However, this method of heating is not without its dangers. The wiring is connected without the benefit of in-line fuses that normally protect against overload. Uninsulated wire is used regularly, and several strands may be twisted together to reach from a basement through a hall and into an apartment, or from a lamppost to a car used for shelter. Without fuses, the power does not shut off until the wire burns, which is a fire hazard.

All of the efforts described here—building or finding a shelter and devising a system to provide heat in the winter—can be wiped out quickly. For example, one group of homeless persons who lived in a shantytown told us that a representative from the "Department of Real Property/Vacant Lot Unit" visited their community and told them that their homes were to be demolished. Another informant reported that the police asked city officials to cut off his source of electricity; they subsequently placed a new metal plate over the site where he was tapping electricity from a lamppost. Since he was then without heat, he was forced to search for a new location to live. Such tactics by the authorities may lead to a further spiral down the housing chain from substandard but adequate refuge to shelterless. Thus, impermanence characterizes these living conditions, and homeless persons report moving many times over the course of several years.

Food. Not surprisingly, our informants eat everything from "roadkill" to sushi. And although food is one of the products likely to be purchased when money is available, homeless persons secure much of the food they consume through scavenging. The choice of "garbage" over soup kitchens or shelters for nourishment bewilders many people in our society. However, consistent with their attitude toward shelters for housing, the homeless persons we met felt that "shelter" food usually was inedible.

> I don't like the shelters. . . . I said, "I'm not going to eat this mess, man; I cannot eat it." I asked the guy for some salt, and he said, "You got any money?" . . . I went to another shelter, guess what they feed me—army food! [bm, sixties]

Success in rummaging through dumpsters for food, like the scavenging tactics described earlier, relies on planning. For instance, one informant told us that members of her community regularly call take-out restaurants near closing time and place large orders. When no one comes for the food, it generally is tossed in the trash. Then, after all of the employees have gone, it is retrieved by a member of the group. Further, sifting through discarded foodstuffs requires some method of

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[8]Some homeless persons also attach other appliances, including televisions, radios, lamps, microwaves, and refrigerators.

distinguishing between what is ingestible and what is not. Rules of thumb are common, and some homeless are aware of current trends in healthful diet.

> Open food that people have [partially eaten]—the least amount, you [can] get disease. The majority of the time if it's cold or not warm, don't eat it. The best kind of food to eat today is fiber food. Too much meat will hurt you; fish is better for you. [wm, thirties]

Once food is acquired, the homeless face problems with storage and preparation. Thus, they eat when food is available but often go hungry. Occasionally, homeless persons use pirated electricity to run a small refrigerator or a cooking device, such as a hot plate. Still others come up with resourceful solutions. For example, a homeless male told us how he resolved a storage problem during the summer months one year.

> One time, with roadkills, I used to actually break into this place of business. They had a refrigerator in there to keep all their sodas, all their stuff. So I could get in the window and stuff like a woodchuck in the freezer, and hope that one guy would come in and say, "Oh Fred put a woodchuck in the freezer," and Fred would say, "Bill left a woodchuck in the freezer," and it would still be there when I went to get it. [wm, fifties]

Preparation also has its difficulties. Without electricity, the homeless resort to cooking on an open fire. However, as described earlier, the light and smoke from such a fire may attract unwanted attention. Also, the smell of cooking or cooked food may lure a number of different animals, including rats, mice, and wild dogs.

An additional problem involves the acquisition and storage of water. The homeless get water for drinking or cooking from a number of sources, including fire hydrants and faucets at gas stations, fast-food restaurants, churches, shelters, and public office buildings. However, they are restricted by accessibility (e.g., in the case of fire hydrants a pipe wrench is required, and many retail establishments restrict admission to paying customers) and by problems of transport. A steady and adequate supply is difficult to maintain. Thus, the homeless must go without water on a regular basis and sometimes resort to rainwater.

Clothing. Clearly, the primary purpose of clothing for the homeless is protection from the elements, a concern of particular importance during the winter months. They have learned that layers of material provide the best protection, and they may supplement clothing with sleeping bags, plastic trash bags, old curtains, and blankets, depending on their shelter and heating arrangements, and may actually stuff leaves or rags between these layers.

Another purpose of clothing for the homeless is protection from attack. Thick material and a number of layers reduce the impact of blows from a physical assault. Further, it decreases the vulnerability of women

to rape. For such reasons, homeless persons often wear large amounts of clothing even during the summer months, which fuels the perception that they are mentally unbalanced and unable to make simple decisions concerning appropriate dress.

As with other basic commodities, the primary source of clothing is scavenging. However, clothing drives and private charity also provide the homeless with items to wear. Further, although everything one would normally wear is needed by the homeless, certain items are regarded more highly than others. For example, sweatshirts, particularly the hooded variety, provide solid protection and are easily removed and carried. Also, socks that are not too worn are difficult to acquire and are needed. Finally, jackets or strongly constructed pants that have a number of deep pockets that can be used for storage are valued.

Personal Hygiene and Health Care. Personal hygiene concerns among the homeless differ from those of more typical members of our society for two primary reasons. First, the constant search for the basic necessities of life and the everyday struggle for survival reduce the importance of hygiene to the trivial.

> When you're sitting out in a shack in the middle of winter, you got a fire going all the time; you're always rolling around all the time in the dirt and leaves; you don't really think about how much you perspire under your arms. There is nobody else to please there but yourself—you lose the [self-] consciousness. [wm, forties]

Second, restricted access to water reduces their ability to clean themselves or their clothing on a regular basis. None of the abandoned buildings, automobiles, makeshift shacks, or any other alternative shelter used by the homeless has indoor plumbing. Because they must carry water between the sources of supply and their homes, the quantity available tends to be minimal. Further, consider other unique difficulties associated with homelessness and cleanliness. The homeless need to wear all of the clothing they own, particularly during the winter months. Thus, even if water, detergent, and a washing basin or machine were available to them, they would have nothing to wear during the cleaning process. Given these obstacles, the homeless clean themselves on an infrequent basis, rarely wash their clothing, and urinate and defecate in the outdoors. Surprisingly, contrary to their opinions about shelters in general, our informants felt that the shelters were useful for these purposes, especially for the opportunity to wash oneself.

Health care presents homeless persons with a different set of obstacles. They typically suffer from a wide variety of health-related problems caused by lack of food and water, substance abuse, and the weather (i.e., extreme heat or cold). Nonetheless, because the homeless lack health insurance and savings, most choose to ignore these problems until they are unable to function at all. At point, the first choice for health care is

the emergency rooms of public hospitals or free clinics. However, a surprising alternative choice by some of our informants was jail. One man provided us with the following description:

> Every time I feel myself going down, I feel depressed, I got nobody to talk to, I get aggravated by life, [I go to jail]. . . . I do it deliberately [get arrested] just to go in there to get some decent rest and get "cleaned up" [off drugs]. I'll just carry something I know I shouldn't be carrying. Unless I'm really, really sick, I go to jail for help. They give me a thorough checkup—an AIDS test, you know, they give you a TB test. They give you all type of body tests. [bm, thirties]

Tools. The homeless use tools primarily for acquiring possessions, transporting possessions, and obtaining access to possessions. There are many ways that the homeless can transport possessions, but the preferred method is by shopping cart (sometimes referred to as the "ship of the ghetto"; see photograph 1). This "vehicle" can be used to carry large amounts of scavenged materials to recycling centers or back to a shelter for personal consumption. However, an alternative function of shopping carts involves security. Homeless persons, even if they are fortunate enough to have some form of regular shelter, must carry the bulk of their belongings with them at all times to avoid theft. Thus, they often heap these carts with a wide variety of items, including books, clothing, food, other valued tools, and scavenged metals. One homeless man summarized the dilemma faced by the homeless with the following example:

> I knew a woman, she was an American Indian, and she used to take a shopping cart everywhere she went. So if she walked into a restaurant to get a cup of coffee, boom, boom, in comes the shopping cart! Is she trying to be visible? Is she trying to make a point? She just didn't know any better, I mean, she just didn't want to lose that shopping cart. If you have anything you want secure, you keep it on you—you don't leave it in a place. [wm, fifties]

A second category of tools facilitates acquisition of possessions, particularly for recycling. Preferred items include tire irons, ice picks, sledgehammers, screwdrivers, flashlights and candles, and magnets. Tire irons are one of the most valued tools. They afford entrance to abandoned buildings and can be used as a means of protection from wild animals or human intruders. Ice picks, sledgehammers, and screwdrivers are useful in the removal of large metal parts from automobiles (e.g., breaking the connecting bolts attached to a radiator) or metal pipes from abandoned buildings. Flashlights as well as wax candles facilitate search at night and allow the homeless to see in abandoned buildings that are sealed shut by the housing authorities. An interesting tool we came across was the magnet. One informant described its use as follows:

> Sometimes [in an abandoned building] they have the old pipes—the brass pipes, the copper pipes coming up

through the ceiling or the side of the walls, or down in the basement. I know what to look for. I take my magnet and, if it sticks, it means it's iron, if it don't stick, the majority of the time it is either brass or copper, so I know what I got. [bm, forties]

Community and Consumption

While some of the homeless persons we encountered had little or no regular contact with other people, many were part of some type of support group. These groups band together for two fundamental reasons. The first is protection. As mentioned earlier, the homeless are vulnerable to physical assault and robbery from outsiders as well as harassment from governmental authorities.[9] Thus, homeless persons are wary of strangers, typically are unwilling to provide information regarding the physical location of others, and often act to protect the possessions of members of their community or shantytown.

The second reason involves the benefits derived from sharing. Rarely will a homeless person have all of the necessities of life. Therefore, community consumption of available products improves the quality of their lives. One woman described this kind of sharing in the following way:

> One of the guys brings up ice when they come home; somebody else brings water up. If I come up here and I'm hungry and somebody's cooking and [I say] "I'm hungry, can I have some of that?" and they say, "No problem." [bf, thirties]

The groups we encountered ranged from loosely aligned individuals who were aware of each other's presence but interacted infrequently to thriving communities with daily communication. The loosely connected groups can best be described as "shadow" communities. Conversations are limited, and the basis of the relationship is shared assets. For instance, one person may possess a pipe wrench that allows access to water from fire hydrants. In exchange for the water, another person may provide food, liquor, or a place to store belongings. Even though they may exchange resources only occasionally, homeless persons in these relationships are keenly aware of the location and physical condition of each other and place a high value on these associations.

The other end of the spectrum includes enclaves of makeshift shelters referred to previously as shantytowns.[10] These communities are more explicitly social, and members regularly converse, sing and play music, or even "work in the yard" together. Sharing in these

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[9]Our research suggests that women are particularly aware of the need for protection and are more likely to live within such communities.

[10]These communities are similar in design and purpose to the extended kinship networks in many poorer black neighborhoods (Stack 1974).

enclaves is frequent, and informants report a sense of duty, understanding, and caring toward the other members of their group. Further, because of their greater visibility, the role of protecting one another and their communal possessions increases in importance. Our informants who live in shantytowns reported assaults by teenagers armed with bricks or by local residents who toss garbage at their homes.[11] Also, these "neighborhoods" may have rules that members must follow to remain within their community.

> One day my wife told him [a teenager who lived in their shantytown] to do something, and he said he was nobody's maid, so we told him to leave. We felt sorry for him, but he was too hardheaded. All he knew was "I got the money, and I don't give a shit," which is not right. [wm, fifties]

INTERPRETATION AND EMERGENT THEMES

To aid in the interpretation of this "thick description," the following emergent themes were developed.

The Homeless as a Nomadic Society

The homeless population studied in this investigation often survive by using the foraging mode of subsistence typical of early peoples (see Lee 1979). This system is characterized by a reliance on nature to provide the necessities of life, mobility within an area large enough to provide sufficient quantities of these items, and flexibility as changing opportunities are revealed within the environment. Further, this approach may include living in "uninhabitable" locales and eating foods that "outsiders" find repugnant. Such a survival strategy affects the character of possessions as well as personal relationships with others.

With regard to possessions, the nomadic way of life of foraging societies strictly limits the accumulation of wealth (Lee 1979). For people whose survival requires mobility, portability is a major feature of the items that are retained. Thus, belongings generally are few, lightweight, made from locally available materials, and multipurpose. The homeless clearly are aware of the limitations of ownership imposed by mobility. Our informants expressed the need to carry valued items with them at all times since they lacked safe storage facilities. In view of this requirement, the homeless regularly wear bulky clothing with several pockets for holding items and acquire shopping carts or laundry bins to transport larger possessions.

Further, as in foraging societies, the homeless scavenge most of their possessions from available sources

in their environment, acquiring goods that former owners have deemed worthless. From abandoned buildings and cars to commercial and residential dumpsters, the homeless have learned to find materials for shelter, clothing, recycling, and food. Such an approach to survival requires flexibility because the same sources cannot be relied on to provide sustenance for any extended period of time because of natural depletion and intervention from outsiders, including the police. Thus, a continuous search for new opportunities and sources of supply is required to maintain a relatively consistent level of resources.

Finally, some of the most valued possessions are tools that have several purposes and support the foraging mode of production. For example, the shopping cart facilitates storage, transportation, and safety of belongings. Further, the tire iron provides access to abandoned buildings, aids in the removal of valuable items from both buildings and automobiles, and can be used in self-defense.

In correspondence with early societies, exchange among homeless persons is best characterized by reciprocity and has instrumental value that often acts to initiate or sustain social relationships. Sahlins (1972) has provided a spectrum of reciprocities with extremes and a midpoint. Generalized reciprocity refers to exchanges that are altruistic, such as voluntary food sharing among kinspeople. Balanced reciprocity refers to the exchange of items that are perceived to be of equivalent value without a time delay. Negative reciprocity is the attempt to get something for nothing and includes such activities as gambling and theft.

The types of reciprocity practiced in foraging societies are a function of kinship distance and the nature of the items to be exchanged (Lee 1979; Sahlins 1972). Reciprocity tends toward the generalized variety with close friends and family and toward the negative variety with strangers. However, even among close kinspeople, transactions may include a counterobligation, but the expectation of reciprocation is indefinite and depends on what the initial giver needs as well as what the initial receiver can afford when this need arises. Further, tools and other items with instrumental value are more likely to be exchanged with balanced reciprocity, whereas food is shared according to generalized reciprocity. The difference can be understood in terms of the immediacy of the need and the dire consequences of going without. The following explanation by Evans-Pritchard (quoted in Sahlins 1972, p. 210) provides the underlying rationale: "This habit of share alike is easily understandable in a community where everyone is likely to find himself in difficulties from time to time, for it is scarcity and not sufficiency that makes people generous, since everybody is thereby assured against hunger. He who is in need today receives help from him who may be in like need tomorrow."

Similar interactions took place among the homeless we observed and interviewed, especially in the shan-

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[11]However, informants also reported positive relationships with members of the surrounding communities. One woman told us of "old ladies" in neighboring buildings who regularly brought food for her group and for their cat as well.

tytowns, where a sense of community is more prevalent. In these "neighborhoods," a feeling of kinship develops and results in protective, supportive, and sharing behaviors among individuals within the enclave. Further, an understanding with neighbors and nearby residents evolves to extend the network and protect against possible threats. Finally, suspicion thrives regarding strangers, who often are perceived to be thieves or arsonists. As one young woman stated,

> It's very fucking opportunistic! You suddenly start associating with people that are in tune with your instincts. That are as aware of surviving at your particular stage. . . . It's like a pack or clan! There's codes of behavior, regressing all the way to the most primitive behavior that must be adhered to or the individual will suffer expulsion, which is a fear because he's already been expelled from society. This is his nucleus. . . . This is protection [from outsiders]. [wf, thirties]

Thus, where trust exists among the homeless, generalized reciprocity is the rule rather than the exception. This is especially true for food. The homeless have experienced hunger on a regular or occasional basis and can easily identify with those in need. Further, since many food items rarely can be stored even in the most elaborate of homeless shelters, giving the excess above one's individual needs to someone else has little cost. However, the shantytowns we observed extended this mode of exchange beyond such necessities to include tools, storage, shelter, and personal services that aid survival. As one informant told us,

> You have to understand, these [the homeless persons in our group] are people from all walks of life. One'll be a plumber, one'll be an electrician, one'll be an artist, one'll be a belly dancer. Whatever it is, they will use their trades to help themselves and those around them. [wf, twenties]

Generosity was more pronounced in times of extreme threat, such as particularly cold weather or the imminent destruction of shelters by the authorities, which may have triggered a survival instinct within the community and tended to increase the bonds among members (see both Lee 1979 and Sahlins 1972).

Self-Concept Development by the Homeless: Fighting a Deviant Label

Since the publication of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* by Erving Goffman (1959), researchers investigating the psychological and philosophical issues related to the self increasingly have focused on social definitions and interpretations. For example, work in social psychology suggests that our self-conceptions and resulting self-esteem are molded by communications we receive from others, by comparisons with others, and by self-labeling that is both socially learned and arbitrary (Mischel 1977). Thus, our sense of self is embedded in the interactions and roles played within a society.

More specifically, the self-concept is an organized structure of various identities and attributes and their evaluations, which are derived from an individual's reflexive, social, and symbolic activities (Gecas 1982; Scheier and Carver 1980). Thus, a distinction can be made between the content of self-conceptions (i.e., identities) and self-evaluations (i.e., self-esteem). According to Gecas (1982, p. 4), "Identity focuses on the meanings comprising the self as an object, gives structure and content to the self-concept, and anchors the self to social systems. Self-esteem deals with the evaluative and emotional dimensions of the self-concept."

With regard to self-concepts, most individuals are much less interested in reality testing than in self-affirmation and self-protection (Becker 1971; Gecas 1982). For example, research suggests that people often use the process of selectivity to distort their images of themselves (Rosenberg 1973). This process affects both the sources of social influence and the social comparisons that are used in the development of self-conception. Thus, individuals may seek out other persons who confirm their self-identities and compare themselves with other groups to their own advantage.

Evidence consistent with this perspective suggests that some individuals resist deviant societal labels and implied degradation and instead choose to fight back through repudiation or modification of such labels (Rogers and Buffalo 1974). This form of adaptation may trigger the self-efficacy motive, which causes individuals to seek control over the forces that influence their self-conceptions (see Gecas 1982). Accordingly, individuals will seek personal power over the events that affect and, therefore, define them by actively engaging their social and physical environments (see Bandura 1977).

In our society, the label "homeless" is viewed as a public stigma and may cue collective avoidance, ostracism, and isolation (see Goffman 1963). For example, Harper (1979, p. 25) characterizes the literature in the social sciences on the "skid row man": "His lifestyle is not integrated into the mainstream. His use of alcohol seems to be abnormal or diseased. He sleeps in the open, or as a ward to the state in a mission; and his filthy clothes, messed hair, and offensive odor mark him as a likely object of public disdain, scorn, or pity. As a 'deviant' his lifestyle has been considered in terms of 'role-failure'—failure to integrate successfully into socially sanctioned places in the social order." Snow and Anderson (1987, pp. 1339–1340) concur with this perspective and feel that the homeless exist outside the role-based sources of self-esteem and human dignity that most individuals in our society take for granted: "Their tattered and soiled clothes function as an ever-present and readily perceivable 'role sign' or 'stigma symbol' that immediately draws attention to them and sets them apart from others."

Given these impediments, the development of personal identities that lead to positive self-conceptions

is a difficult task for homeless persons. However, Snow and Anderson (1987) suggest that the homeless often use *identity talk* to bolster their sense of self. For example, they found that homeless persons use associational and institutional distancing to draw distinctions between themselves and social identities inconsistent with their desired self-conceptions. These forms of distancing were more pronounced among individuals who were not regular social service or shelter users and who thus viewed themselves as more independent and resourceful.

Our findings support this conclusion.[12] The homeless we investigated were individuals who lived primarily outside the welfare system. These persons consistently denigrated the social services available to the homeless and claim that reliance on such organizations reduces self-esteem.

> It's [welfare and social services] geared to cause shame. . . . We're talking about a society where status quos and status symbols "emblemate." These are the things that give a man a penis. This economic prowess, social prowess. If he can't feed his family, if he can't get a job, he's not a man. He's a dog. [wf, thirties]

Thus, our informants used associational (e.g., "I'm not like shelter users!") and institutional (e.g., "Welfare? Forget it!") distancing to bolster an image of themselves as persons living by their own resources and abilities rather than under the control of these institutions. One informant summarized these feelings in the following way:

> A certain type of person likes welfare, another type of person doesn't like welfare. A guy that can do something on his own doesn't think he should be taking money from them [the welfare office] when there are people in wheelchairs that need that. You actually do have a responsibility—I mean I don't really believe that you can bleed the state and get away with it. I think everybody just abuses that stuff [welfare]—plus you abuse yourself when you don't never mind your own talents, your own resourcefulness, and lean on somebody else. The state wants to run your life really when they get you into something like that. It really rubs you wrong when you're into being fiercely independent. [wm, forties]

Our findings go beyond the work of Snow and Anderson (1987) to suggest that the activities as well as the talk of the homeless are used to support their self-conceptions. Our informants participate regularly in alternative work, such as recycling, to maintain a minimal standard of living. These activities are often viewed with pride that is evident in their detailed discussions of how such work is performed. Further, the homeless believe that by engaging in such activities, they are contributing to the good of society rather than

burdening the "system." For example, one man told us,

> You feel good about it [recycling metals] because you don't feel that you're [just making a buck], I mean you're doing something that's worthwhile for society. [wm, forties]

Further, an analogous sense of accomplishment is apparent in the scavenging activities that provide the majority of the products they consume. Sources, techniques, and modes of adaptation supply them with a feeling of resourcefulness that results in the belief that they can survive the many perils of homeless life where others might fail.

> The name of the game is survival on the street. There's a proper way and a wrong way. . . . I try to wait patiently; I'm trying to alleviate a lot of problems I got. Maybe I have to go through what I go through for a reason—on my own part. You go through life and you learn through the hard, rough [times], but [to survive out here] you've got to learn to live off the land. [wm, thirties]

Thus, the homeless persons we interviewed were able to maintain at least some self-esteem with social and institutional distancing and with work to improve their standard of living and survival potential under adverse conditions.

The Meaning of Possessions: A Comparison with Middle America

Recent research in consumer behavior contends that rising real incomes and an abundance of consumer goods have resulted in a material outlook that construes possessions as an integral part of self-identity (Belk 1985). While some scholars suggest that the satisfactions derived from material pursuits are the result of self-deception (Wachtel 1983), few debate the importance of belongings in our society. According to Belk (1989, p. 129), "As shown by studies asking American adults and children the open-ended question 'Who are you?' . . . possessions are prominently viewed as part of self and are generally mentioned just after personal characteristics such as age and gender. Possessions are part of the extended self in this society, while age and gender are more proximal."

This stream of research is influenced heavily by the work of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), who focus on the symbolic value of possessions and their relationship to the self. While accepting that the necessities of survival must be met first, these researchers believe that, for most members of our society, "things" embody goals, make abilities apparent, and shape the identities of the owners. Thus, people invest psychic energy in an object and channel part of themselves into a relationship with that object to the exclusion of other possibilities. To the extent that these transactions with possessions result in the accom-

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[12]In accordance with Snow and Anderson (1987), our findings show that the longer persons are homeless, the more likely they are to modify the deviant label rather than repudiate it.

plishment of important goals or positive feedback, they may strengthen the self and promote personal growth.

The consumer-behavior literature has focused attention on the importance of special possessions, suggesting that such belongings are potentially growth promoting throughout a person's lifetime (see Myers 1985). In a cross-cultural investigation, Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) found that favorite objects enhance self-expression and promote differentiation and integration of an individual within society. McCracken (1989) extends this perspective through his ethnographic investigation of the North American home. He found that the creation of "homeyness" is one of the most important goals in the transactions between people and their homes and leads to the inclusion of such cherished objects as gifts, trophies, and family heirlooms. Surrounding oneself with belongings in this fashion creates a buffer between oneself and the rest of the world. "The pragmatic properties of homeyness give the individual a means by which to fashion their relationship with the larger institutions of modern society. It lets them reckon with the intrusion of alien meanings from the market place, the distracting competitive impulses of a mobile society, and the unwelcome aesthetics of changing fashions. Homeyness helps the individual to mediate his or her relationship with the larger world, refusing some of its influences, and transforming still others" (McCracken 1989, p. 179).

Because belongings, including the home, hold such important meaning for individuals in our society, the loss of material possessions is often viewed as a violation of the self (Belk 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Neal (1985) lovingly recounts the story of her grandmother, whose dignity and control over her life were stripped from her by the gradual loss of her possessions as she moved from her own house into a small room in a nursing home. Further, Lewis (1966) believes that, in a society that values the accumulation of wealth and property, the lack of such possessions by members of the lower socioeconomic strata may lead to feelings of fatalism, helplessness, dependence, and inferiority. Such feelings arise because of the perceived improbability of their achieving success in terms of the prevailing values and goals.

Clearly, these feelings exist among the homeless, who often have lost their possessions or had them stolen and who cling to a precious few belongings that have symbolic value of times past. Such items might include photographs, books, or mementos that remind them of happier days or significant others. However, in accordance with Belk (1988), many homeless deal with such loss through an attempt at self-restoration, particularly as it relates to shelter. The self-restoration process usually involves three steps or stages. The first entails a perceptual change as the homeless person modifies the habitual framework used to interpret what a "home" should be in a physical sense. The standards for what constitutes an adequate shelter vary widely

from culture to culture (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). One homeless man showed us that such a modification reduces many necessities to luxuries, which mirrors the needs of poorer societies:

> [When you think of shelter] you don't think in terms of showers and things like this because you [can] just jump in a stream or you get under where the canal passes over the stream and it leaks. You know all these things—[like] having a bathroom—you don't need those things. [wm, fifties]

Second, while most members of our society develop a sense of pride from the purchase and subsequent alteration of the home to meet their physical and psychic needs, the homeless may develop similar feelings in the creation of their shelters. Although the living quarters are meager by the standards of middle-class Americans, the homeless who build their own shelters are very proud of their ingenuity.

> I took two 2 X 4s and stuck 'em at the end of the bed as you can see. I tied 'em on that end. I took two more 2 X 4s, another 2 X 4 as a beam across, and tied it from one end to other. Then I found me two doors and threw 'em on top, then I pulled the see-through plastic on top. And then I threw a blanket and a cover and another piece of plastic, which is solid plastic, which is grained. Okay, now it doesn't drip! It can rain as hard as it wants. Right this moment, I'll never get wet! [bm, thirties]

Third, the meaning of the home, like that of a dream, does not lie in its manifest content but in its underlying latent content (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Thus, even for a shelter that lacks many of the features common within middle-class society, the "home" still represents a place where the owner or occupant sets the rules and is "king or queen of the castle."

> This house is made out of wood and it's a shack, but it's our home and we respect our home, and everybody who comes into the door is welcome to come in as long as they respect the house. [wf, forties]

Thus, through changes in perception, pride in creation of the shelter, and focus on the latent content of what it means to have a "home," the homeless are able to cope with the loss of possessions through a form of self-restoration.

CONCLUSION

Our research provides a sharp contrast with the work of Lewis (1966) by suggesting that homeless persons take an active role in determining their life choices. These individuals confront their challenging environments and engage regularly in endeavors designed to improve the quality of their lives. This active role is particularly evident when the homeless are viewed as consumers. The homeless employ unique adaptation strategies in their search for, and consumption of,

goods and services. These alternative consumer behaviors allow them to survive, serve to restore meaning to their lives, and bolster their sense of self.

As we stated, the homeless face a variety of restrictions that limit their ability to function as ordinary consumers. Most prominent among these are hygiene, dress, and interpersonal problems, as well as general economic distress. However, many overcome these obstacles through nontraditional employment activities, scavenging, and the sharing of possessions through various forms of community. Further, their active role in the acquisition as well as creation of many of their possessions (e.g., the building of a shelter) tends to bolster their self-concept and increases their self-esteem.

This perspective on the homeless does not imply that they are without need. Many go hungry frequently and find themselves without shelter on a regular basis. Further, the most needy—the mentally ill and the physically disabled—are the least likely to be able to devise and employ the survival strategies described. Nonetheless, our research suggests that service providers to the homeless need to find methods of support that allow individuals to maintain their independence and dignity through nonconventional but self-reliant activities.

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