



# THE WORD ON THE STREET

Homeless Men in Las Vegas

Kurt Borchard

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## Homeless Men in Las Vegas

KURT BORCHARD

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## Preface

I traveled to the Czech Republic in the summer of 2000. During a package bus tour of a small town, Cesky Krumlov, I struck up a conversation with a young woman from Australia who held an advanced degree and worked in medical research. I told her I was a professor, and for my doctoral dissertation I had studied homeless men in Las Vegas.

“Homeless men in Las Vegas?” she replied. “That’s funny. I visited there a year ago and I didn’t see any homeless people.”

In one sentence she had captured a paradox. I told her that much of my dissertation considered the social conditions that caused homeless men in Las Vegas to be “invisible.” I explained that I had spent five years studying not only homeless men but also a tourist economy that limited the presence of homeless persons by excluding them from popular tourist areas.

On our tour of Cesky Krumlov we visited a three-hundred-year-old royal palace. Inside the palace were priceless antiques, dozens of portraits of the royalty who had lived there, and several pieces of ornate original furniture. I was still distracted by the comment my tourist friend had made. While walking through room after glorious room of the royal palace, I realized that all around me was evidence that wealthier individuals are usually those remembered by history. Those people who had the resources to maintain luxurious material goods have their renovated estates toured, while those with little or nothing leave scant traces of their existence.

Both of these ideas, the contemporary invisibility of the poor and their historical invisibility, are political. In Las Vegas, the contemporary invisibility of the homeless occurs through their segregation from tourist areas because it’s “good business.” To paraphrase what one homeless service provider told me, people don’t come to Las Vegas to see the same problems they just left in their own city or town. This contemporary erasure of homeless persons from the “scene” of Las

Vegas, however, might also result in the disappearance of homeless persons from the city's history and memory.

Las Vegas has received intense media coverage over the past decade for its unprecedented growth and its ever-expanding economy, based on gambling and tourism. The city is often presented as a fantasy-land where luxury and excess abound. In this book, though, I look at how the community and its media interpret the social problem of homelessness, and how this interpretation is used to create social policy to deal with homeless men in particular ways. I also consider homeless men's experiences of the city. Through interviews, conversations, and simply "hanging out" with homeless males, I wanted to reproduce their world and, as much as possible, their words. After all, if educated tourists from places as far away as Australia perceive that there are not any homeless people in Las Vegas, then the image of Las Vegas differs substantially from its reality. The voices and experiences of homeless men need to become part of the city's historical record because without them the popular image of Las Vegas will remain incomplete and distorted.

In preparing this work I have come to owe a great debt of thanks to many people. I am particularly grateful to the members of my dissertation committee, Simon Gottschalk, David R. Dickens, Barbara Brents, and Satish Sharma, all of whom took the time to read my written work and suggested ways to improve it. My mother, Elizabeth, and sisters Marleyse and Susan provided ongoing emotional support. Christopher J. Taylor took the photographs for this book and collected dozens of articles on homelessness from Las Vegas newspapers. Sandy Crooms, Trudy McMurrin, and Monica Miceli helped answer many early questions concerning the publishing process and encouraged me to complete an early draft of this manuscript. Joanne O'Hare, director and editor-in-chief at the University of Nevada Press, answered further questions and suggested additional ways to improve my writing. Anonymous reviewers of the manuscript gave me detailed comments and suggestions that further enhanced the writing. Julie K. Schorfheide provided expert copyediting. Finally, Susan H. Wood spent many hours reading drafts of my work and

helped me completely transform those drafts into the chapters of this book. As an editor, critic, and friend, she is without peer.

Kathryn Haisan, director of communications at Catholic Charities of Southern Nevada, generously allowed me access to St. Vincent's Shelter for several months. Without her assistance, many of the interviews I conducted for this book would not have been possible. Also, Gary Peck, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Nevada, and Linda Lera-Randel El, a homeless advocate, each gave me important insights into male homelessness in Las Vegas.

The University of Nevada Las Vegas Graduate Student Association and the University of Nebraska at Kearney Research Services Council each provided me generous grants to conduct this research.

Becky Ulrey and Sue Peterson spent many hours transcribing taped interviews for this project.

An earlier version of chapter 1 appeared in "Fear of and Sympathy toward Homeless Men in Las Vegas," *Humanity and Society* 24, no. 1 (2000):3–18, currently edited by Corey Dolgon. Portions of the history of Las Vegas discussed in the introduction first appeared in "From *Flanerie* to Pseudo-*Flanerie*: The Postmodern Tourist in Las Vegas," *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 26 (2003):191–213, edited by Norman K. Denzin. Thank you to both editors for permission to republish the material.

Finally, this work would not have been possible without the time, assistance, and input of dozens of anonymous homeless men and a few homeless service providers. I wish I could find some way to adequately express my gratitude to you for having shared your lives. I hope this work conveys at least some of that gratitude.

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## Introduction: Interpreting Male Homelessness

This book developed out of discussions I have had about homelessness, discussions with people from all walks of life. Few people I encounter in everyday life have met or have spent significant time with homeless people. However, when we talk about homeless people, and in particular homeless men, people frequently display preconceived notions about those men, their lives, and their problems. Often, they express strong sentiments about why these men have become homeless. Over and over again, I field the same questions or hear similar statements: “Is it true that most homeless men are mentally ill?” “Aren’t most of them alcoholics, or drug addicts?” “Aren’t homeless men usually uneducated, or illiterate?” “Why don’t they just get a job?” “I see a homeless man around town named [blank], and he just wants to collect cans. He seems to like being homeless.”

Such questions and comments indicate that homelessness begs to be interpreted. Interpretation of other people’s actions and motivations is a basic human activity, something people do routinely to make sense of their world. However, unlike more benign human activities (like attending school, shopping, or working), witnessing another person’s homelessness frequently raises disturbing questions for people with housing. When I see someone who is clearly homeless, for example, I want to know why he or she has reached that state. Why is this person without a place to live? What circumstances has this person faced that have caused him or her to be homeless? If the person asks me for help, say, in the form of spare change, how should I respond? I might wonder whether he or she will use the money for survival purposes, such as getting food or shelter, or if he or she will use the money to buy alcohol or tobacco. If he or she tells me a story about why he or she needs the money, I might wonder if the story is true.

The conditions of individual homeless persons beg to be interpreted more than other forms of social activity because homelessness isn’t

“normal.” On the one hand, most people are taught to feel an ethical responsibility toward others who appear to need help or who are in pain. On the other hand, if I encounter a homeless man, I might think, “Why should his problems concern me?” or “Aren’t there places for this man to go to get help?” Some people feel it is important to try to make sense out of such a horrible condition, but they also might feel unsure about how to help a homeless person. This dichotomy of thinking shows that questions about what our society should do about homelessness are often inseparable from judgments about homeless people.

I came to study *male* homelessness in particular because people’s reactions to homeless men differed from their reactions to homeless women and children. In the United States, homeless men are generally seen as more individually responsible for their homelessness, largely because of traditional gender roles: men should be breadwinners and self-sufficient; women and children are dependents. Views of homeless persons are always informed by a homeless person’s gender and his or her status as a child or an adult. For example, we rarely hear of people telling a homeless woman with children that she is a “bum” and should “just get a job,” and we rarely if ever hear people characterize homeless children as “lazy.” The fact that we do not usually hear such statements means that judgments about different levels of personal responsibility pervade assumptions about homeless men, women, and children, even if those assumptions often go unstated. Although the homelessness of women and children is a rapidly growing problem, and one that has received more attention from social scientists in the past decade, I believed that the special issues and unique questions raised by male homelessness were deserving of a more specific study.<sup>1</sup>

Another reason I wanted to write this book, though, was because of the types of questions people have raised to me about male homelessness. These questions—about homeless men’s mental health status, alcohol or drug use, education levels, willingness to be employed, or seeming “enjoyment” of homelessness—all revolve around a key issue: notions of personal responsibility. People typically frame their questions in ways that blame homeless men for their homelessness.

This book is a corrective to views that seek to style male homelessness entirely as an individual, and not a social, problem. To be sure, homeless men make individual choices and often take individual responsibility for their lives. But if the primary way we come to understand male homelessness is as an individual rather than a social problem, we are failing to understand how particular social contexts might contribute to and exacerbate such extreme poverty. Although people generally see homeless men as individually responsible for their homelessness, I think it is essential that they consider how media representations of and political rhetoric about homeless men also tend to promote male homelessness as an individual rather than a social problem. In other words, “we” (the housed) tend to blame “them” (homeless men) for their condition, and this is an oversimplification. By failing to see how “we” are also part of the problem of male homelessness, our understanding of the roots of the condition are essentially flawed. Any social policy that is developed from such a skewed and one-sided perspective cannot help but fail to effect real change.

I first came to understand male homelessness as a complex issue involving both individual and societal responsibility after several months working with homeless men in my hometown, Fairbanks, Alaska. After graduating from the University of Alaska–Fairbanks in 1990 with a bachelor’s degree in sociology and briefly pursuing graduate study in Colorado Springs, I began work as the director of a Men’s Transition Program for the Salvation Army in Fairbanks in the spring of 1993. The program was designed to assist a select few homeless men by providing them a guaranteed place to stay for ninety days, as well as weekly one-on-one meetings in which I would work with each program participant in developing strategies by which he was to end his homelessness. The shelter space provided by the Salvation Army was enough for ten participants to live in a bunkhouse with individual lockers, a shared shower, a recreation room, and a dining area. In addition, breakfast and dinner were provided free of charge for all participants. As director of the program I would interview potential participants and select candidates who seemed most likely to follow the program’s rules and regulations and who might successfully accomplish the program’s goals.



After the program's funds were cut, I decided to return to graduate school. I am proud of my association with the Salvation Army and the role I might have had in helping a few homeless men change their lives. However, during my stay as director I could not help but consider the assumptions underlying this assistance program and the paradoxes left unaccounted for by those assumptions. Because our program was so small, I had to select only ten men—out of hundreds of applicants—who had the best chance of “succeeding” in the program. One underlying assumption in particular drove the selection process: some homeless men were considered more worthy of assistance than others based on their ability to articulate and achieve goals in line with our mission statement. One program goal was the notion of “progress,” or the idea that success was measured by the degree of activity each man undertook to secure a stable housing arrangement. Goal-oriented homeless men were to be selected for the program because the Salvation Army needed to justify its funding by documenting “success rates,” or the degree to which the program actually helped end its participants’ homelessness.

By assuming that some homeless men are more worthy of help than others, the Salvation Army (and the Men's Transition Program) was implicitly promoting the idea that these men had a great deal of choice in whether or not they remained homeless. This view promoted the idea of an individual's agency in ending his predicament. However, the program could not address the local environment, or social-structural reasons, explaining the existence of so many homeless men in Fairbanks (approximately three hundred on any given night) in the first place. In part, the town attracted a large number of semi-skilled and unskilled workers who had heard that jobs were readily available in a state known for oil wells and gold mines. The purpose of the Salvation Army's program was spiritually to “save” individuals and to provide for immediate material needs, but the program's design did not allow us to address local homelessness as a social problem with structural dimensions.

Although we would turn a dozen or more men away every week, there was another, night-by-night shelter in Fairbanks that held nearly two hundred homeless men, women, and children. This shelter had

neither counselors nor criteria for admission, except a mandatory prayer service. This agency, called the Rescue Mission, would warehouse homeless persons in large bunkhouses and provide for immediate shelter needs, with a thirty-day limit of assistance. In contrast to the Salvation Army, the shelter had no program to help address why individuals had become homeless, to convey what other resources were available to the indigent in Fairbanks, or to evaluate what personal steps a homeless person could take to end his or her homelessness.

Together, both the Salvation Army program and the Rescue Mission seemed to have categorized homeless individuals as necessarily suffering from character flaws. The religious orientation of both programs, which promoted being “saved” or “rescued” by caring churchgoers, required homeless individuals to recognize their condition primarily as a sign of personal failure, not as the result of structured inequality, a fluctuating job market, and the area’s high cost of living. While the Salvation Army program promoted the notion of individual responsibility despite structural constraints such as seasonal variations in employment rates (particularly affecting manual laborers, who are at greater risk of becoming homeless), the Rescue Mission promoted an understanding of homelessness as a character flaw requiring restoration of religious faith. Although each of the two programs provided a specific type of relief service for homeless persons, the long-term goals of each agency were not directed toward ending homelessness locally. Indeed, both programs assumed there would always be a homeless population in Fairbanks and that the best approach to this problem was to provide immediate relief to as many people as possible, or to select a few who could successfully end their homelessness.

My experience with the Salvation Army program left me wondering why homelessness is so frequently addressed in such a manner. Although several of the homeless men I met during my stay in Fairbanks were able to “succeed” in the Salvation Army’s program, many could not. Those able to succeed had quite a task ahead of them. Most needed to secure a steady job, but their employment backgrounds were frequently in manual labor. The men frequently found it difficult to receive messages from potential employers at the

shelter's single phone. In addition to dressing appropriately for interviews (often using secondhand clothing), the men had to determine how they would get back and forth to the interviews without a vehicle. Besides these barriers, the men were also limited to finding daytime jobs so they could follow the program's curfew rules. Some would miss meals in order to work and then would eat larger portions at breakfast because their first paycheck had not yet arrived.

Several of the men experienced other barriers to employment such as disabilities, mental illness, substance abuse problems, or criminal backgrounds. Although I selected program participants in part because they had plans to use other social services in the community to address their conditions, they often experienced the same transportation problems in gaining access to those services as did the participants trying to find work. Many would begin the bureaucratic paperwork usually required to access these services (particularly governmental assistance programs), but because of overuse and limited office hours, the program participants would typically become frustrated. In Fairbanks, indigent persons, without insurance, had limited options for entering treatment programs for alcohol and drug dependency and often used free services such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Although these programs can be successful for many, others need more intensive support programs specifically designed for drug or alcohol withdrawal and treatment. The stress of being homeless also led some individuals to return to substance abuse or crime or to neglect to take daily medications necessary to control their mental illnesses.

Meanwhile, despite all these pressing concerns, a participant's time in the transition program was rapidly diminishing. I frequently selected men who had developed a focused, sequential, and realistic plan for addressing (usually many) interacting issues that had led to their homelessness. Those who applied to the program without a plan were rarely even considered precisely because they had so little time to save enough money for an apartment, provided that they first obtain a job, Social Security, disability, unemployment checks, or other benefits within a month of arrival. Most men also had to wait an additional two weeks for their first paychecks. These men,

now halfway through the program, still had to save enough money to pay apartment expenses, including first and last month's rent and a deposit (which in Fairbanks ran between one and two thousand dollars). To complicate matters, program participants would often be encouraged to begin payment on debts ranging from hospital bills to child support. I spent many hours helping participants develop plans as well as directing them to social or other services that might help them achieve their goals, but because the difficulties facing them were so numerous, few could actually achieve the program's goal of ending their homelessness.

While the Men's Transition Program was being promoted as a way for homeless men to end their homelessness, it frequently could not help men fully accomplish this task. Because such a gap existed between the men's goals and their possibilities for achieving them, I even began redefining what success meant for program participants. I started believing that the program was successful for some participants if they were "off the street" for a while. I believe the men felt that way, too, as several individuals pursued their stated goals only in the most superficial sense. I also felt a modest amount of success by simply directing some of the men toward social services they had never heard of or were not aware they might have been entitled to. For example, one man in the program was terminally ill and without any material resources. His "goal" was simply to find a place to live before he died. After he applied for Social Security benefits, I discovered his terminally ill status made him eligible to live in a state apartment complex for senior citizens. He stayed in the Men's Transition Program for one month while the paperwork was being processed.

My work experience at a homeless shelter made me realize that even agencies with good intentions, such as the Salvation Army, neither address the larger reasons behind individuals' becoming homeless in the first place nor change how certain perspectives seem to justify homelessness. For each individual who was brought into the program, many were turned away. Neither those admitted nor those turned away were men who had committed crimes for which homelessness was a punishment, but agencies such as the Salvation Army and the Rescue Mission seemed to embody a view that placed the

blame squarely on their shoulders. I realized during my time as a director that although I made an immediate impact on a few homeless men, I was not engaging the root causes of their problem.

The frustration I felt in Fairbanks in trying to alleviate male homelessness left an impression on me. After finishing my master's degree in Colorado, I lived in and attended graduate school in Las Vegas. From 1994 to 1998 I studied male homelessness in the city and returned there on a grant to conduct further interviews with homeless men during the summer of 1999. Although studying male homelessness was my principal focus, I soon realized that male homelessness in Las Vegas was very different from what I had encountered in Fairbanks because of the former's unique social and cultural environment. First, there were far more homeless people in Las Vegas. A study conducted by the University of Nevada–Las Vegas Sociology Department in 1999 estimated the city's homeless population to be 6,700 persons, the majority of whom were male (Moller 2000). Second, during the time of my study the Las Vegas Valley was among the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the United States, and it still adds nearly 70,000 people a year to its current population of 1.4 million (Egan 2001). Third, Las Vegas is also one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world, with a gambling- and entertainment-based economy drawing 36.7 million visitors in 2000 (Kaplan 2001, 141). Finally, the city has been touted as a harbinger of many trends that are now ever-present throughout the United States (examples of these trends include legalized gambling, theme resorts and restaurants, and commercialized entertainment) (Gottdiener, Collins, and Dickens 1999). In 1985, cultural critic Neil Postman described Las Vegas as the symbolic capital of the United States. The city has also been studied as an exemplar of "postmodern" life and culture (Andersen 1994; Baudrillard 1988; Borchard 1998b, 2001; Denzin 1993; Fontana and Preston 1990; Gottschalk 1995; Venturi, Brown, and Izenour 1972).

In order to understand male homelessness in Las Vegas, therefore, it is important to consider, briefly, its history. In the 1930s Las Vegas developed a unique niche, becoming a popular tourist destination as well as a forerunner of contemporary trends. The construction of the

spectacular Hoover Dam in the 1930s combined with the legalization of gambling in the state in 1931 helped promote tourism in the Las Vegas area, despite its location in the middle of one of the world's most forbidding deserts (Gottdiener et al. 1999, 1).<sup>2</sup> The city was accessible by rail or car from Los Angeles, a fact that became important when Los Angeles banned gambling in 1938. El Rancho Vegas, the city's first resort hotel, was built in 1941 just beyond the Las Vegas city limits, on what is now known as the Las Vegas Strip, and introduced Las Vegas to the concept of the "lounge act" by promoting singers and comedians on the premises. During this period the Last Frontier resort was also developed, with elaborate décor and a mock frontier village that made it the first "themed resort" in the city (Gottdiener et al. 1999, 1–18). In 1946 Mob-connected Bugsy Siegel developed an even more lavish complex, the Flamingo, which moved the city's resorts away from monolithic western themes (Reid and Demaris 1963). These early trends in resort development also indicate how particular parts of the city, such as the Las Vegas Strip, grew central to the tourist-based economy of Las Vegas.

Rothman (1998) argues that the promotion of gambling and the development of themed resorts occurred in Las Vegas because the city could not offer many heritage-, cultural-, or outdoor recreation-based tourist opportunities like those found in western tourist towns such as Santa Fe and Aspen. Instead, the upfront marketing of vice and adult entertainment became Las Vegas's strong suit for attracting visitors, and a host of disreputable characters soon became key players in transforming the desert town through gambling and themed resort development (Reid and Demaris 1963). The Mob also set the stage for ongoing patterns of urban development. The Las Vegas Strip was clearly becoming modeled and socially controlled as a tourist area while other regions, such as North Las Vegas, became seedier areas known for poverty, drug dealing, and street prostitution (Thompson 1971). Mob dominance in Las Vegas, however, began to end in the 1960s, as Howard Hughes began purchasing property through corporate funding. This, along with the Nevada state legislature's passage of the revised Corporate Gaming Act in 1969, which allowed

public corporations to own casinos for the first time, forever altered resort and casino development in Las Vegas (Gottdiener et al. 1999, 29; Rothman 1998, 287).

As the number of resort casinos increased on the Las Vegas Strip, Las Vegas became known, not simply as a place for gambling, but as a unique tourist destination and “experience” unto itself. Tens of millions of tourists began experiencing Las Vegas annually, and by 1977 profits from gambling in Clark County (which surrounds the city) exceeded \$1 billion (Gottdiener et al. 1999). As Las Vegas honed its service economy, new forms of gambling became legal across the United States in the 1980s. In response, corporations in Las Vegas developed several 2,000- to 5,000-room themed megaresorts, including the Mirage in 1989, the Excalibur in 1990, and the Luxor, Treasure Island, and MGM Grand in 1993 (Rothman 1998; Gottdiener et al. 1999, 36). In addition, during the mid- to late 1990s several older resorts, including the Dunes, Landmark, Hacienda, Sands, and Aladdin Hotels, were imploded, often to make room for larger, more spectacular structures (Borchard 2001).

The latest megaresorts in Las Vegas are designed to attract a diversity of tourists beyond avid gamblers, perhaps epitomizing what Rothman refers to as a new form of tourism developed after World War II, “entertainment tourism” (1998, 24). Through what architecture critic Kamin has called “architainment” centers (quoted in Borchard 1998b, 249), each themed megaresort in the city embodies a slightly different organizing principle and offers various types of attractions, shopping, and entertainment. The new importance of diverse offerings for tourists is also reflected in a recent visitors’ survey that indicated 72 percent of visitors now come to the city for a vacation, while only 4 percent travel there principally to gamble (Gottdiener et al. 1999, 119).

The city now boasts more than 120,000 hotel rooms, and its sights are globally recognizable cultural icons that can be regularly found on U.S. television shows and in movies.<sup>3</sup> The symbolic and image-based nature of the city reflects the cornerstones of its economy—tourism, gaming, and entertainment. Unlike large cities such as Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Chicago, whose manufacturing-based economies helped

propel the U.S. economy in the 1800s and early 1900s, Las Vegas is an example of a postmodern economy in which few things are built. The “things” that are created, marketed, and sold in Las Vegas are images, forms of entertainment, and experiences.

I have found that homeless men generally like Las Vegas (and have recently been coming to the city in record numbers) because of its warm climate and its liberal laws that promote hedonism—in other words, for the same reasons many tourists and residents like it. Homeless men also initially perceive the city as a place with employment opportunities and excitement, and one where they can “get a fresh start.” The presence of homeless men in the city, though, creates an unpleasant contradiction for both residents and tourists because the city promotes itself as a vacation destination and a land of eternal sunshine, pleasure, and excess. From the perspective of residents and tourists, then, the presence of homeless men can be understood as jeopardizing the city’s image and economy. Several homeless men I spoke to in Las Vegas believed that, in fact, they were understood first and foremost as a problem for others rather than as human beings trying to survive and at times needing help. In repeated interviews, homeless men told me that they believe their presence in the city is dealt with in a particular way—that they are often removed from sight in Las Vegas. This practice helps produce a sanitized environment for both tourists and residents of the Las Vegas Valley.

How is this removal of homeless men accomplished? Perhaps the clearest example is found in the city planning and spatial organization of the Las Vegas Valley. While the tourist district of the Las Vegas Strip saw increased development in the 1960s, the area of North Las Vegas was predominantly African American, economically marginalized, and crime ridden (Thompson 1971). These trends continued into the 1980s and 1990s, when on the border of North Las Vegas the “homeless corridor” was developed, an area miles from the Las Vegas Strip that extends “from A Street to east of Las Vegas Boulevard, south to Bonanza Road, and north to Owens [Avenue, and includes] a conglomeration of emergency shelters, soup kitchens, transitional housing, job training facilities and other services” (Walters 2001, 18) (see map). Development of the corridor was conceived as an important



part of a strategic, multi-jurisdictional, and multi-agency plan for addressing homelessness:

For a decade, Las Vegas, Clark County and non-profit service providers have been working together under two long-term plans: CASA (Comprehensive Affordable Strategy Analysis), and the 1995 HUD-mandated Continuum of Care (CoC). These plans' main focus was providing a centralized collection of facilities that would provide a range of services to homeless people, from basic needs to health, social, educational, job and housing assistance. Since then, \$52 million has gone into the area [of the corridor] for capital improvements. (Walters 2001, 22)

Proponents of the plan contend that it is convenient for homeless men in Las Vegas to have services centralized in one area; local homeless men, who usually must walk or rely on public transportation, need not travel far to access services. Homeless men point out, though, that the homeless corridor is also convenient for the community because it allows those men to be removed from tourist and residential areas (a phenomenon sometimes referred to as NIMBY, or "not in my backyard"), placing them out of sight and out of mind. Homeless men using the services in the corridor are isolated from other areas of town, particularly from more viable economic areas. If the steps toward ending homelessness frequently involve gaining and sustaining employment, then, from the perspective of homeless men, having the homeless corridor away from such opportunities cannot help end homelessness. In addition, the homeless corridor is in a dangerous area, often exposing homeless men to potential violence. The homeless men I spoke to indicated that such conditions create fear and therefore are not conducive to ending homelessness.

Debates have emerged about the usefulness of the homeless corridor, especially about whether the corridor is designed to truly "help" homeless men or if it is simply designed to "manage" a problem population, perhaps indicating that even more aggressive removal tactics might eventually be used. For example, in July 2001 the mayor of Las Vegas, Oscar Goodman, proposed that homeless people in his city be moved thirty miles away to a vacant state prison in Jean,

Nevada, vaguely indicating that such a segregation policy would “take care of a lot of issues” (Goodman quoted in Moller 2001d). As Mayor Goodman sees it, homeless people ought to be “taken care of” by being eliminated from the city and by being placed in the same facilities once used to incarcerate criminals.

The placement and structure of the homeless corridor, and the fact that the mayor would like to centralize services for homeless persons in Las Vegas away from the city entirely, seems to indicate how impossible some think it would be to help homeless men integrate into the image- and tourism-based Las Vegas economy. The problems faced by homeless men, however, cannot be fully understood outside of the context of the social environment in which they occur. If homeless men are held solely to blame for their homelessness, those with housing in Las Vegas cannot understand how their perceptions of homeless men and reactions to homeless men at times exacerbate the problems they face. Policies such as the one proposed by the mayor purport to “solve” the problem of homeless men, but simply removing the homeless men from sight does little more than treat people as objects. Such a “solution” would be terribly one-sided and would violate the civil rights of homeless men (Stoner 1995). It proposes to separate homeless men from the very economy that currently allows them, albeit marginally, to survive.

How will this book, then, serve as a corrective to the view that homeless men are solely to blame for their homelessness? First, I will consider the popular views of homeless men in the United States and in Las Vegas. In chapter 1, I analyze a range of documents about homeless men and the spatial arrangement of Las Vegas to discuss common themes about homeless men found in that city. Although these themes range from fear of homeless men to sympathy for them, I find that all the themes work to support centralizing services for homeless men away from tourist and residential areas. Popular themes and methods of assistance common in the city therefore both help and hinder homeless men.

Chapter 2 takes an in-depth look at the life of one homeless man, Jerry, to show that he is not fully culpable for his homelessness. During a daylong interaction with Jerry, his homelessness is revealed to

be a result of bad personal decisions and bad circumstances. Medical and charitable institutions fail to help him beyond his most immediate needs, and nearly everyone he encounters shows a lack of empathy for his plight.

Jerry's humbling circumstances lead me to consider the personal accounts of other homeless men I interviewed in Las Vegas. Chapter 3 considers how those men became homeless and what problems they faced that kept them homeless. Chapter 4 examines the men's use of homeless shelters and one group that, as an alternative to using shelters, took over an abandoned hotel and became squatters on the Las Vegas Strip. These chapters reveal how social conditions greatly inform homelessness and the lives of homeless men. In the fifth chapter, I focus on how homeless men survive beyond finding a place to live. The men engage in a range of activities, including working, accessing social services, scavenging, selling personal items, panhandling, and theft. Although some of these activities might make some men appear to "like" or seem content with homelessness, I find that the longer a man is homeless the more likely he is to engage in stigmatized activities in order to survive, and that such men do not so much "like" the activities as feel resigned to them.

Chapter 6 considers how crime and violence affect the lives of homeless men. Although some homeless men engage in crime and violence, others note that the homeless corridor is a dangerous area, promoting conditions not conducive to a man ending his homelessness. Chapter 7 analyzes recent debates about the wisdom of centralizing services for homeless men in the homeless corridor and Mayor Goodman's increasing calls to reduce charity for local homeless men in his city and to criminalize their survival practices. I conclude by considering the implications of my thesis, and why it is important to view male homelessness as both an individual and a social problem.

# The Word on the Street

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# Popular Interpretations of Homelessness

Male homelessness is often interpreted as an individual, rather than a social, problem. Particular values and beliefs in the United States stress individualism and promote an individual as the most responsible party for his or her problems. Different regions of the United States come to define a problem like male homelessness as a greater or less important social problem than others. Evaluation of local media coverage is therefore particularly important in order to understand, first, if a particular region considers male homelessness as a social problem, and second, if it does, how such media defines and frames the problem.

First, I consider how people in the United States are generally encouraged to think about male homelessness as an individual problem based on the dominant values and beliefs promoted in this country. Second, through an analysis of media in Las Vegas, I show how at times male homelessness in Las Vegas is presented as an individual

problem and at other times as a social problem. Even when male homelessness is presented as a social problem in Las Vegas media reports, one theme runs consistently through these accounts: homeless men are defined as different from tourists and community members, which works to normalize the control and segregation of this population. Presenting homeless men as “others,” or outsiders, also lulls the community into thinking that they themselves are not vulnerable to becoming homeless.

## Homelessness Often Considered an “Individual” Problem

Attitudes toward homelessness in the United States have been greatly informed by certain traditional values held by its citizens. In particular, the Protestant work ethic stigmatizes poverty and welfare and strongly promotes the idea that individuals show signs of their salvation through work, leading to material accumulation. This dominant U.S. value has helped structure our nation’s view of work, as well as its view of those individuals perceived as lazy, incapable of, or unwilling to work.

Other traditional U.S. values such as individualism also help structure attitudes toward homelessness. Many early colonists from Britain came to America to escape a rigid social class system, relishing opportunities to own property and gain social advancement through individual effort. Horatio Alger myths, or stories about individuals who succeed materially despite humble beginnings, also define the United States as a meritocracy in which individual achievement can determine one’s social class and material wealth. An emphasis on achieved rather than ascribed characteristics in the United States has allowed many individuals to experience upward class mobility. Furthermore, recent legislation such as the Civil Rights Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, protecting individual rights, have continued to promote the notion that if an individual fails to succeed in the United States, it is largely his or her own fault. The United States promotes the belief that protecting rights promotes opportunity—therefore, there is no excuse for failure.

Other core American values include competition and the value of honest hard work as a means to material success. The U.S. economic system promotes and distributes rewards differentially based on a competitive market that differs from socialist systems in which all citizens are provided for by the state. The competition bred by a capitalist market economy is believed to motivate individuals to do their best. Such a system parallels the Protestant work ethic's definition of spiritual success in material terms and the achievement of this materialism through honest hard work.

Another core American value is the notion of individual freedom. The idea that an individual can determine his or her own fate makes the United States very appealing to people from other countries where the political and economic orders circumscribe individual action and limit an individual's opportunities. However, individual freedom in such a competitive and material success-oriented culture does not mean that everyone can achieve material success. In the United States large numbers of people live in abject poverty with little hope of escape and experience little compassion from those more fortunate. Our dominant values of individual achievement, competition, and material success through honest hard work also tend to promote a strong negative reaction to the poor as individuals who deserve their fate. While socialist countries such as England, Denmark, and Sweden have developed systems to try and provide all citizens with the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care, many U.S. citizens remain unconvinced that such socialist systems are truly necessary to help this country's poor. Many U.S. citizens feel that support of the welfare state might undermine the conditions of competition and promotion based on individual achievement that have allowed the United States to develop one of the richest economies of all industrialized nations (Block et al. 1987).

The United States also has a long history of agencies designed to help the poor, such as the Salvation Army, and state and federal welfare and aid programs for the indigent. Such agencies and programs, however, are not without controversy. Debates over what types of homeless people should be given aid in the United States can be found



in discussions concerning the “guilty” versus the “innocent” poor, and particularly in distinctions between the “undeserving” versus the “deserving” poor (Block et al. 1987; Caton 1990, 3–4; Gounis 1993; Katz 1993; Rowe 1999, 74). At issue in such distinctions are questions about the causes of poverty and homelessness, how responsible poor and homeless people are for their problems, and how responsible the government or community is for assisting those people out of their condition.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of a view of homeless persons as “guilty” and “undeserving” came from former president Ronald Reagan, who once said that many homeless people in the United States “make it their own choice” not to seek traditional housing and that a “large percentage” of homeless individuals are “retarded” people who voluntarily left institutional settings (Cannon quoted in Wallace and Wolf 1994, 60). Reagan’s statements present homelessness as an individual’s problem and “fault” but also explain homelessness as a choice: homeless people are guilty of personal failures or bad life decisions. Homeless people, from Reagan’s perspective, frequently reject the very charitable or governmental institutions designed to assist them. Such “retarded” people cannot see that the institution is their best hope for ending homelessness. Because of a strong belief in individual freedom in the United States, however, it is implicit in Reagan’s statements that homeless people have the right to reject such help even if the decision to do so harms them. Such a view justifies a less-than-sympathetic, uncaring, or often downright hostile attitude toward homeless individuals. As our former president saw it, homeless people either “chose” homelessness over better options or were “guilty” of stupidity, laziness, mental illness, or retardation, thereby “deserving” to be without shelter.

In contrast to Reagan’s position, another view presents homeless persons as “innocent” and “deserving” of charity and understands homeless persons as victims who, because of circumstances beyond their control, have been rendered destitute and shelterless. This second view places more emphasis on the individual’s environment rather than on character flaws. One example of people usually considered “innocent” and “deserving” would be a family suddenly made desti-

tute and homeless because of a natural disaster. Most people would probably feel sympathy and perhaps even charitably toward such a family.

When evaluating those in the United States who are embedded in poverty who clearly have not been the victims of unfortunate circumstances, people frequently categorize homeless people as “innocent” and “deserving” of charity or government assistance or “guilty” and “undeserving” based primarily on their gender or status as child or adult. Paralleling the general values held by U.S. citizens regarding achievement, competition, and material accumulation, dominant forms of masculinity are also defined through similar criteria of success, especially since masculinity is traditionally linked to a man’s role as an employed, self-sufficient, breadwinner (Bernard 1992; Pleck 1992). Also, “in the United States more than in other countries, and for men more than for women, what you do defines who you are. A man’s work is an important part of his identity as a man” (Astrachan 1992, 221). Therefore, male homelessness is arguably more shameful for a man because masculinity’s traditional definition includes employment and self-sufficiency. Because homeless men also seem to have either refused or failed at their masculine role in family life (Anderson 1961), outsiders often view them as disengaged (Bahr 1973), dangerous, or untrustworthy (Marin 1987). The provision of charitable or government assistance to homeless women or children is usually far more supported in the United States than similar forms of assistance are for homeless men.

While dominant American values and beliefs inform citizens’ general interpretations of homelessness, these values can be understood as providing only basic guidelines for understanding how Americans generally act toward these individuals. In Las Vegas, my study of media accounts in the late 1990s and from 2000 to 2001 shows that the media there frequently present a more complex picture than simply understanding homeless men as either “innocent” or “guilty,” “deserving” or “undeserving” of charitable assistance.

The local media expressed three dominant themes or popular interpretations: 1) Las Vegas should fear homeless men; 2) Las Vegas should feel sympathy for homeless men; and 3) Las Vegas should feel

a mixture of fear of and sympathy for homeless men.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, very different themes regarding male homelessness in Las Vegas, fear and sympathy, have resulted in a similar way of dealing with the problem there. In order to sanitize its public realm (Lofland 1998, 248), Las Vegas engages in the “sympathetic segregation” of homeless persons to an area called the “homeless corridor,” where charitable institutions are concentrated far away from tourists and the community (see map). In Las Vegas, the themes of fear and sympathy appear in texts that also promote a subtext of segregation and social control as the best way to address homelessness.

## Local Media Accounts Expressing Fear

In deciding on the “newsworthiness” of a given story, journalists have often been directed by the phrase “if it bleeds, it leads.” Beginning January 4, 1996, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (the city’s largest-circulation newspaper) published several front-page news stories about the fatal stabbing of a Scottish tourist, James Smith, on the Las Vegas Strip that month. The first story called Trent Strader, the man accused of the fatal stabbing, a “panhandler” twice within the first two paragraphs and referred to him as a “vagrant” in the report’s third paragraph (Flanagan 1996b).

Although the initial articles on the murder focused largely on the capture of the assailant, they also emphasized his homeless status. The lead sentences of several *Las Vegas Review-Journal* articles on the Smith murder focused on Strader’s homeless status relative to the victim’s tourist status. One such article presented Strader as unstable and marginal, describing him as “angrily mumbling” after approaching a group of people for “a handout” just before the stabbing occurred, as well as indicating that he “showed little remorse” after the incident (Flanagan 1996b). In addition, police homicide sergeant Bill Keeton was quoted as saying, “I have no doubt he [Strader] will have a history with us” (Flanagan 1996b).

On January 5, the second front-page article on the Smith murder from the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* stated that police thought Strader might be connected to another stabbing on the Strip that had oc-

curred in December 1995. Described this time as a “homeless man” and a “transient” in the first two paragraphs of the article, Strader’s name is not used until the second paragraph (Flanagan 1996a). The article also noted that since Smith’s stabbing, the Las Vegas Police Department had been inundated with phone calls from reporters in Scotland, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington inquiring about the incident (Flanagan 1996a).

On the one hand, a series of news articles about the tragic death of a tourist that follow the process of bringing his killer to justice are not in and of themselves surprising news topics. On the other hand, the stories can also be read for the way that they construct a socially marginalized group (homeless men) as a social threat in relation to a dominant group (tourists with disposable income). Significantly, each article repeatedly identifies Strader as a vagrant, a panhandler, a transient, or a homeless man (and sometimes more than one of these within the same story). The frames used in these stories emphasize Strader’s identity as a member of a particular “alien” social group with unique characteristics. Although any number of identifying features could have been chosen in describing Strader (his race, national identity, or age, for example), the articles tell the story of the stabbing by first focusing on Strader’s homeless status. His actions are then related to his status.

James Smith, the victim, is also identified in a particular manner. In the articles Smith is usually first presented as foreign tourist, and occasionally his age and status as a retiree are mentioned. Using these identity markers (Goffman 1963) in relation to a single incident, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* articles thematically developed the idea of *homeless men* as a threat to *tourists* on the Las Vegas Strip, one of the most surveilled and socially controlled tourist attractions in the world (Taylor 1999)—a threat, moreover, that included murder in broad daylight. Framed in such an alarming manner, the event then becomes one of great concern not only to tourists but also to the Las Vegas community that depends on tourist revenue.

In the third *Las Vegas Review-Journal* article on the incident, published January 6, authorities in Las Vegas began addressing the negative publicity regarding tourist safety in Las Vegas generated by

both national and international media reports. The article reprinted a photograph of the front page of the Glasgow, Scotland, *Daily Record* published January 5. Its headline read “KNIFE MANIAC KILLS SCOT IN VEGAS.” The lead sentence of the *Daily Record* article stated, “A Scots tourist has been knifed to death by a crazed beggar in Las Vegas.” The first paragraph of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* article, by contrast, stated, “Las Vegas officials say the city is safe for tourists despite the fatal knifing” (Geer 1996), while the article’s second and fourth paragraphs note that a “high bail” of \$500,000 dollars had been set for the suspect because “of the seriousness of the crime” and because “Strader has no ties to the community” (Geer 1996). In his discussion of homeless persons as disaffiliated, Howard Bahr said homeless men are those individuals “outside the usual system of sanctions, and hence [the man’s] behavior cannot be predicted with any certainty” (Bahr 1973, 41). The bail, an amount apparently impossible for a homeless man to post, then represented a community response to an outsider who seemed disaffiliated.

A spokesman for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors’ Authority (LVCVA) and two Las Vegas Police officers were then quoted to establish the continued safety of Las Vegas as a tourist destination. In contrast to the situation presented in previous newspaper reports, LVCVA spokesman Rob Powers began de-emphasizing Strader as representative of homeless men in general, saying that the stabbing “appears to be a random act by a deranged person.” Hoping to reduce the potential impact the negative press might have on tourism, Powers also noted that the stabbing had received a great deal of publicity because such incidents are so rare in Las Vegas, a city which, he said, “rightfully has a reputation of being the safest resort in the country, if not the world” (Geer 1996). Police lieutenant Dan Mahony reaffirmed this statement, calling Las Vegas “the safest tourist destination in the country” (Geer 1996). To further diminish the impact of earlier stories and their emphasis on Strader’s homelessness, police sergeant Chuck Jones added that most homeless people are “docile” but that because some may have criminal backgrounds or experience mental illness, “it is very, very important not to antagonize somebody” (Geer 1996).

Such statements from officials who were attempting to control the negative impact that stories of the stabbing could have had on the tourist industry might well represent their awareness of the devastating economic effects that high-profile media coverage of other murders have had on similar tourism-based economies. In 1993, after nine international tourists were murdered in Florida within a period of eleven months, a spate of national and international media attention caused a full-blown “moral panic” (Cohen 1980) regarding the safety of tourists visiting Florida (Beck 1993). The negative impact that stories of the murders had on Florida’s \$31 billion tourist industry (De-George 1993, 40; Zbar 1993, 6) included Britain’s issuing its first-ever travel advisory for a U.S. destination. After a British newspaper ran the headline “GUNNED DOWN LIKE ANIMALS” to describe the slaying of a Yorkshire man, Florida governor Lawton Chiles pulled \$350,000 worth of Florida’s promotional advertising in domestic and international publications for thirty days. One tourist official claimed the advertising blackout was carried out in order to not “draw attention to a negative” (Zbar 1993, 6). Although the governor also ordered an additional 840 police officers to patrol major airports and created a toll-free telephone information line to diminish visitors’ fears, other officials recognized the negative impact such attention would have on one of Florida’s most important industries. As Florida Department of Commerce Secretary Greg Farmer said, news of the most recent murders would “have a very, very negative impact” on Florida tourism (Zbar 1993, 6). After several news stories focusing on a foreign tourist murdered by a homeless man in Las Vegas, LVCVA officials and local police began reframing the event as an “isolated incident” in order to alleviate concerns that might reduce tourism to the city.

Beyond creating tourism publicity concerns for the city, media coverage of the Smith murder also caused Las Vegas residents to become wary of homeless men. Within weeks after the murder, a sign appeared on the sixth floor of the Flora Dungan Humanities building on the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), campus warning that “THIS BUILDING HAS BEEN ACCESSED BY HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS DURING EVENINGS AND WEEKENDS” and that these individuals “MAY BE ARMED.” Advice was given on the sign to “REPORT, DON’T CHAL-

LENGE” any homeless individual encountered in the building after hours. Although a homeless man was later arrested in the building, the sensationalized reporting of the Smith murder seemed to have affected one university department’s perception of homeless men in general as threatening and capable of violence. The warning was posted in several areas of the building and was printed on official UNLV Department of English stationery.

Socially marginalized individuals thought to be a threat have long been controlled through the criminalization of their behaviors (Adler 1987; Chambliss 1964; Harring 1977; Monkkonen 1981; Watts 1983). Following local media accounts of the Smith murder and some Las Vegas residents’ increased fear of homeless persons, local officials and casino owners attempted to introduce legislation to prevent similar incidents from occurring on the Strip. In January 1997, one year after the fatal stabbing, a *Las Vegas Review-Journal* article noted that Clark County Commissioner Lorraine Hunt had begun working with casino and resort owners to develop a measure to outlaw “aggressive panhandling” on the Las Vegas Strip. Echoing the tendency toward characterizations of all homeless men as dangerous, which was apparent in newspaper descriptions of Strader and UNLV English Department signs, Hunt stated that panhandlers should be restricted from the Strip because “we need to make Las Vegas Boulevard a showplace, not a garbage dump. We want to make it an enjoyable experience, free of harassment and intimidation of people” (Greene 1997). In response to the negative publicity surrounding the murder, casino and resort owners began work with government officials to sanitize, control and homogenize public space, a move supporting their private interests (Lofland 1998).

Together, local media accounts of the Smith murder and fear within the community generated enough interest in the (potential) social threat presented by homeless men to develop legislation to restrict their practices (but, oddly, only in tourist areas). However, these accounts are only organized around one potential theme concerning homelessness. Another series of Las Vegas newspaper reports in 1997 paradoxically express both fear of homeless men and sympathy for their condition.

## Local Media Accounts Expressing Fear and Sympathy

Another popular interpretation of homeless males in Las Vegas is that while these men might be a safety concern, they might also require assistance to change their plight. Articles found primarily in two Las Vegas newspapers in 1997, the *Las Vegas Sun* (a newspaper with a smaller circulation than the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*) and *City Life* (a free newspaper), express both a fear of homeless men and a concern about how to help them. The articles developed these themes around discussions of recently created local ordinances that fine employers for picking up often-destitute day laborers on Bonanza Road. The road is not a tourist area but lies closer to a concentration of homeless shelters on the border of Las Vegas (see map). Properties on the road are largely industrial and construction-based businesses and working-class residential houses.

The first article, which appeared in the *Las Vegas Sun*, reports that the Las Vegas City Council unanimously approved an ordinance, on June 23, 1997, making it illegal for individuals or companies to hire day laborers from Bonanza Road (Cardinal 1997c). Councilman Gary Reese ostensibly introduced the ordinance for “safety reasons,” yet the *Las Vegas Sun* article notes that the ordinance restricts those employers whose pick-up practices pose no immediate threat to traffic safety. The article states that “even if employers aren’t slowing down traffic while picking up workers, they can be fined up to \$1000 or given six months in jail” for doing so (Cardinal 1997c) (see figs. 1 and 2).

Although the article notes that the city was developing a new, legal pick-up station to accommodate the day laborers, questions regarding the constitutionality of the ordinance were also discussed. The article indicates that the ordinance might have originated out of complaints from businesses on Bonanza Road, where day laborers typically stood waiting for employers. These businesses “complained to Reese about problems with the workers using their bathrooms, drinking their coffee and scaring potential clients” (Cardinal 1997c). In a *City Life* article, J. J. Bartz of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department’s Homeless Evaluation Liaison Program (HELP) stated that “the majority of them have drug and alcohol problems, and they just work to



support their habit” (Kiraly 1997, 13). An employee who works at a business on Bonanza Road says, in the *City Life* article, that the men often steal, vandalize, and leave trash in the area. Despite what seem to be complaints based partially on prejudicial characterizations, the *Las Vegas Sun* article concludes that the ordinance will probably stand if traffic safety, and not free speech, is considered the issue underlying its creation.

The articles also noted, however, that those who needed the day-labor jobs were often homeless men who have experienced difficulty in gaining steady, full-time employment locally. David Norment, coordinator at the Salvation Army shelter, told the *Las Vegas Sun* that many men who seek work on Bonanza Road also used his shelter’s nearby mailboxes and showers. Norment said that the new ordinance would further restrict the already limited possibilities for employment for economically marginalized men who “can’t even pay for their health card or their union card to get employed” (Cardinal 1997c). The *City Life* article described how one homeless man, David Villapando, tried picking up work on Bonanza Road between stays at the Salvation Army and St. Vincent’s shelters (Kiraly 1997). Villapando said he came to Las Vegas expecting to find work after a dry-walling job in Fresno, California, ended. Reiterating the comments of Norment, Villapando also stated that he “didn’t know you needed a sheriff’s card and all that stuff” to work in Las Vegas.<sup>2</sup> He ended up seeking day-labor work on Bonanza Road, “trying to make a dollar today so I can look for a job tomorrow” (Kiraly 1997, 13).

Additionally, the *City Life* article noted a potential new threat of increased racial and ethnic tensions and fighting resulting from the city’s newly devised central pick-up location for these laborers. Through interviews with the day laborers, the author of the article indicated that underlying tensions existed between Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic groups of men looking for work on Bonanza Road. Traditionally, the groups had remained separated from each other, occupying different parts of Bonanza Road. However, the city’s newly proposed centralization of day laborers as a solution to the “traffic safety issue” was presented as potentially causing increased hostility from racial and ethnic groups forced to intermingle

while competing for scarce jobs. According to one Hispanic laborer quoted in the article, "If you put us all together, there's gonna be fights, maybe even killings" (Kiraly 1997, 12). Another regular day laborer, who is African American, said, "I've seen some real knock-down, drag-out fights, and this [the new pick-up site] is only going to make it worse. I'm not going there" (Kiraly 1997, 13).

As late as October 1997, however, hundreds of men still stood on Bonanza Road hoping to find work (Cardinal 1997b). City Councilman Reese explained to Denise Cardinal, of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, that he did not want the police to begin fining drivers until signs explaining the ordinance had been posted. The next step, according to Metro police officer Phil Roland, was to "hand . . . out warnings" (Cardinal 1997b). In addition to these warnings, the article indicated, publicity from newspaper articles on the Bonanza Road ordinance, which had emphasized the laborers' potential for violence, might further reduce employers' interest in visiting such an explosive area. It is also likely that newspaper characterizations of these men as violent might have reduced public sympathy for them in their quest to continue looking for work on Bonanza Road.

Together the articles focus on the tension that homeless men bring to an area where they congregate. Although a new ordinance ultimately restricting homeless men's employment opportunities was deemed necessary because the homeless men in that area ostensibly presented a "traffic safety" problem, fear of homeless men was also promoted in these articles because the men were presented as drug addicts, vandals, thieves, and individuals who intimidated businesses and their customers. The articles also presented a sympathetic view of homeless men and their efforts to acquire day labor jobs on Bonanza Road, including their difficulty in finding steady local employment, their need for immediate cash, and their wish to end their homelessness through work. Additionally, the ready availability of such day laborers was noted as being in the interests of some members of the community and the businesses within this community that intermittently relied on their services. However, the strong possibility of interracial or interethnic violence occurring at the new day-labor pick-up station was the dominant theme in the articles, indicating that

this marginal population presents an ongoing social threat despite the best efforts of city councilmen and urban planners (using tax dollars) to assist them.

An analysis of the articles reveals both fear of and sympathy toward homeless men. The articles' framing of the problems of homeless men mirrors Reagan's earlier stated position that homeless people often reject the very institutions that are supposed to help them. Homeless men can be seen as unappreciative of the assistance the community is willing to give them, or perhaps so unintelligent that they foil attempts to improve their condition. The view that homeless men deserve sympathy and charitable assistance, but that they cannot be trusted to use such assistance without segregation, supervision, and restrictions, is further discussed in the next section.

## Local Media Accounts Expressing Sympathy

Bunis, Yancik, and Snow (1996) note that sympathy is a traditional and prominent cultural response to the plight of homeless people in both the United States and England. Their research indicates that the sympathetic attention the media gives to the plight of homeless people varies temporally and geographically. In the United States, recent studies of several metropolitan areas (Bunis et al. 1996; Snow and Anderson 1993, 201) show that the number of stories about the plight of homeless persons increase substantially before Thanksgiving and Christmas. Charity is seasonal and strongly linked to these celebrations, which are seen as "seasons for giving." Such sympathetic accounts diminish quickly after the holidays. Similar patterns of news media coverage are evident in Las Vegas.

In local media accounts and other documents, homeless men are usually presented as objects of pity or as individuals in need of immediate assistance in the weeks preceding the holiday season. However, the manner in which homeless men are presented in these and other popular accounts, as well as the forms of assistance encouraged by local relief agencies and officials, frequently reproduce homeless men's marginalized and unwanted status within the community. Several accounts serve to indicate that although homeless men deserve

charity, these men should not be trusted with individual charitable donations. These accounts typically combined requests for donations by charitable institutions with the image of individual homeless men as untrustworthy in order to underscore the wisdom of providing services through the institutions located away from tourists and the community at large.

In the mail solicitations of one charitable organization in Las Vegas, for example, the negative psychological effects of homelessness on homeless men's self-images are discussed to increase sympathetic donations, but the homeless men are simultaneously presented as outsiders. In the homeless shelter's mail solicitations sent just before Thanksgiving, a bearded man is pictured eating a cafeteria meal, one presumably provided by a charitable organization. The timing of this mailing seems to have been calculated to elicit maximum sympathy, as the Thanksgiving holiday marks the period of the year most homeless shelters find successful for gaining donations (Snow and Anderson 1993). This particular mailer reads: "When these people come to us, cold, hungry, and in despair, *they are often shocked when they're not turned away, or treated like worthless junk*" (mail solicitation from Las Vegas Rescue Mission, emphasis theirs). Solicitations such as this one are thematically organized to present homeless men as objects of pity with the self-image of "worthless junk," men who are used to being thought of as human garbage.

However, within a single sentence the mail solicitation also presents homeless men as "these people" and "they," implicitly compared to "us," those social-service providers who mailed the flyer and also those community members who received it by mail. This phrasing positions homeless men as people outside, and not part of, the community. There are two connotations within this phrasing: first, even when homeless men are considered worthy of charitable relief, their primary status is as individuals *external* to the Las Vegas community; second, such outsiders are not an entire community's responsibility but may be helped at the whim of charitable individuals (Fiske 1991). Homeless men such as the one pictured in the mail solicitation are men "we" can help, but only if "we" want to. The mailer also implies that the sympathy homeless men receive through concerned

individuals is best routed through charitable agencies and organizations. The distance between “us” and “them” widens as concerned individuals deliver impersonal forms of assistance, such as cast-off objects, canned food, or the money that was solicited in the previous ad. This practice/text allows individuals who are not homeless to be physically and geographically removed from the problem because such donations are “sent in.” This assistance is then centralized and distributed by administrators. In Las Vegas canned foods, with lengthy shelf lives, are frequently gathered through canned food drives at places like supermarkets and movie theaters. Such food remains edible even while being transported during extreme summer heat into the area in Las Vegas where shelter services for hundreds of homeless men are centralized (see map).

Although charitable agencies everywhere engage in similar campaigns that legitimize their position as a distributor of charitable resources, in Las Vegas these campaigns also serve to segregate homeless men from tourist areas and distance these men from the local community. In the 1970s the city of Las Vegas sold a failed mall and other property lying on the border of the city to charitable organizations, which then developed these properties into homeless shelters. Today, several of the city’s largest and best-known shelters are concentrated in one of the city’s most impoverished areas, at the border of Las Vegas and North Las Vegas—an area referred to by local social-service agencies and local media as the homeless corridor and located several miles from the extravagance of the South Las Vegas Strip (see map). Since the beginning of sociological research on homelessness, researchers have studied the systematic segregation of homeless men from economically prosperous areas of various cities into economically defunct and harder-to-find niche areas (Anderson 1961; Snow and Anderson 1993; Spradley 1970; Wiseman 1970; Wright 1997). However, few of these cities have been so entirely dependent on an image-based tourist economy as has Las Vegas (Rothman 1998). The manner in which homelessness is currently addressed in Las Vegas provides an interesting case study of how private-sector interests might be attempting to sanitize public space for tourists by supporting charitable institutions far from their resorts (Lofland 1998, 247–48).

Finally, other evidence of the belief that sympathy toward homeless men is best expressed through donations to charitable institutions can be found in posters in storefront windows in the Fremont Street area. Fremont Street is a recently redeveloped gambling and resort area less than one mile from the homeless corridor. The most extensively redeveloped portion has now been renamed the Fremont Street Experience, an outdoor pedestrian mall consisting of a four-block-long canopy that straddles several of the most popular of the downtown hotel casinos. First developed in 1991, the \$70-million canopy includes two million lamps and a 208-speaker sound system that provides spectacular shows at night, and a misting system that promotes climate control in this otherwise outdoor area during the day (Gottdiener et al. 1999, 55). The Fremont Street area is more often frequented by homeless people than is the South Las Vegas Strip about five miles away (see map). The posters seem to indicate that homeless men deserve sympathetic donations, but that homeless men are also irresponsible and thus need to be given assistance only through charitable organizations that can regulate their use of donations. The posters, which show a suited man's clean hand dropping change into a (presumably) homeless man's dirty hand, read:

IF YOU GIVE SPARE CHANGE, THINGS WON'T CHANGE.

Too often, spare change given to panhandlers is spent on drugs or alcohol. By giving your spare change to MASH instead, you'll help people who really do want to break the cycle of homelessness. MASH, the Mobilized Assistance and Shelter for the Homeless[,] is a City of Las Vegas/Clark County facility that will centralize all of the services the homeless need to get off the streets permanently.

POSITIVE CHANGE NOT SPARE CHANGE

Produced by the Downtown Las Vegas Partnership

These signs in shops near the Fremont Street Experience discourage individuals from giving money directly to panhandlers by indicating that the money may be used to buy alcohol or drugs. Homeless panhandlers, then, deserve sympathy but also cannot be trusted, since they have little self-control or are addicted spendthrifts. These posters

instead promote the charitable relief organization as the most appropriate form of assistance for homeless men, a suggestion that also coincides with resorts' and casinos' interests in controlling the image tourists have of that area.

These signs parallel a measure passed in 1995 that prohibited panhandling specifically in the downtown area of Las Vegas where Fremont Street is located. One *Las Vegas Review-Journal* article from January 1997 noted that homeless people generally deserve sympathy but also indicated that homeless men are not to be trusted with direct donations (Greene 1997). The article mentioned that a recently televised police warning had asked viewers to donate money to charities rather than give cash directly to panhandlers. As evidence that poor-looking people asking for money may not truly deserve it, police sergeant Richard McKee stated in the article that one of his officers knew of a panhandler who was "raking in \$50,000 a year" (Greene 1997).

The local mail solicitations, the organizations that provide services for homeless persons in Las Vegas away from tourists, and the posters and news stories concerning how "the homeless" may best be helped, all thematically present homeless men as objects of pity. Several reproduce the social marginalization of homeless men from the community, while others imply that some presenting themselves as homeless persons might instead be con artists. Together, these different documents and advertisements indicate that homeless individuals are best assisted through "direct" donations to relief agencies. Such agencies might require proof of an individual's poverty before they would provide assistance and can also restrict and control such assistance (for example, by providing food or clothing instead of cash and by transferring cash donations to the organization into other forms of assistance).

In the final set of newspaper articles I analyze from 2001, homeless people who use agencies in the homeless corridor are presented at times as victims and, at other times, as not receiving adequate support from the city. The articles then present a reduction in charitable support for homeless persons, not as a problem, but as necessitating the increased use of law enforcement to manage homeless persons.

## Local Media Accounts Expressing Fear and Sympathy

Although the support of charitable shelters presented an ostensible solution to how the issue of homeless persons should best be addressed in the late 1990s, new themes focusing on violence against homeless men in the homeless corridor and the vulnerability of its homeless people began appearing in news reports in 2001. From April to August 2001, a series of articles in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* followed the story of the murder of a homeless man, Russel “Rusty” Frasher, by four local teenagers and the boys’ subsequent trial and conviction. Frasher had been beaten, bludgeoned, and kicked to death by the teens at his campsite on Martin Luther King Boulevard, an area within walking distance of the shelters in the homeless corridor. Two of the boys pleaded guilty to charges of second-degree murder. Each boy received a sentence of ten years to life. The two others involved in the attack pled guilty to battery with use of a deadly weapon causing substantial bodily harm. Each boy was sentenced to a six- to fifteen-year prison term. Although some of the boys expressed remorse for the killing and stated that they had been drinking on the night of the attack, “police also said that [Frasher] had been brutalized by a group of teens several times in the weeks before his death” (O’Connell 2001; Puit 2001). Such newspaper reports arguably would generate sympathy for those men and could have prompted questions as to whether the homeless corridor was the most effective way of addressing local homelessness.

While the murder of Frasher and the subsequent trial of his killers made headlines in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, two other newspaper articles from June 8 focused on the conflicting roles of police in the lives of homeless persons. The first article discussed the work of a local police officer who assists homeless persons as part of her duties as a Homeless Evaluation Liaison Program (HELP) officer. The second article discussed a move by the city of Las Vegas to break up a camp of homeless men and women, called Tent City, which was located on the Union Pacific Railroad tracks south of Owens Avenue within blocks of major shelters in the homeless corridor (see map). While the first article noted the daily rounds and assistance provided to homeless



men and women by HELP officers since the program's inception in 1992, the second article stated that the residents of Tent City had been told to leave the area after the city began forcing the property owner to clear the vacant land. The articles stated that the men camped in the area for primarily two reasons: first, for the freedom the homeless men and women have there from the restraints of living in local shelters while also being able to access their services during the daytime; and second, because several other temporary housing options, such as those provided by MASH Village, either had temporarily reduced their number of available beds or simply could not offer enough beds for all homeless people in the area (Casey 2001l, 2001c).

The articles also featured several photographs, including two color pictures of a homeless man named Robert David Broadhead. The June 8 article and photographs of Broadhead took on a new importance when approximately one month later, on July 3, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that Broadhead had been attacked by three individuals wielding metal pipes after having been forced to leave Tent City. The July 3 article included a much larger color photo of Broadhead, revealing one of his eyes swollen shut and large scabs across his cheekbone and nose. The article also noted that earlier in the week an unidentified homeless man had been found dead behind a convenience store. The man had apparently also been beaten before his death (Casey 2001p).

Together, the articles of June 8 and July 3 present the conflicting relationship homeless men have with the police: officers sometimes take on the duties of social workers, while at other times they are engaged strictly in law enforcement. The increasing need for this dual role is also evident through the newspaper's reports of more homeless people sleeping outside. The articles note that the victimization of homeless people is a result of their trying to create an alternative to nearby charitable shelters, which homeless people either cannot use or resent for their restrictive policies. Law enforcement appears to be the city's next response to addressing homeless persons presented as either less able or less willing to use charitable shelters.

An example of the increasingly conflicted roles of police is found in the July 3 article. Las Vegas police officer Kendall Wiley, a member

of the HELP program, described how homeless people are easy prey for attacks like the one on Broadhead, which she indicated is sometimes called bum-bashing. She also noted that the attack might have been avoided had the city not ordered homeless persons to leave Tent City earlier in the week. Wiley stated, “This is a great example of how when they [homeless persons] are not in groups, like they were in Tent City, they are more prone to be victimized” (quoted in Casey 2001p). Broadhead concurred, saying that at least in Tent City there had been “two, three, four guys around all the time—people watching out for each other” (quoted in Casey 2001p).

Tent City indeed seemed to serve the purpose of securing “safety in numbers” for local homeless people who either could not or did not want to use nearby charitable shelters. Together the articles indicate that homeless men sleep in makeshift camps in part because the city does not have enough shelter space to hold them. Men like Broadhead in such areas are easy prey for attacks. However, the solution to this problem enacted by the city was, not to create more or better shelters, but instead to dismantle Tent City and step up police presence in the corridor. The newspaper articles were just two examples showing the apparent contradictions in recent social policy directed toward homeless persons in Las Vegas and the role of the police in enforcing such policy that seemed to increase the chances of homeless persons being victimized. Additional articles in the summer of 2001 focused further on the political battles and the ongoing contradictions in police practices addressing homelessness.

On June 2, the *Review-Journal* reported that the owner of the property on which Tent City stood had been issued an abatement notice in May that would soon have to be acted on. The notice demanded the removal of “all vagrant camps, trash, junk material, etc., from this vacant strip of land” (quoted in Moller 2001a) and said that failure to comply would result in misdemeanor citations. Although city official Sharon Segerbloom said that the homeless people on the property would be removed “humanely” and that people who wanted shelter would be granted it, she also said no additional funds would be spent by the city on housing homeless people. Brother David Buer, a local advocate for homeless people, pointed out that the city now of-

ferred fewer shelter beds than it had a year ago, strongly implying that homeless people living in Tent City had few other shelter options. Finally, a homeless man discussed at the end of the article indicated that, although some homeless people might not take advantage of social services, others would have been glad to have access to indoor shelter.

On June 30, the *Review-Journal* reported that a federal court had denied a restraining order that would have prevented the eviction of homeless persons from Tent City. Attorney Matthew Callister, who had filed the original complaint, “argued that the city for years has known about a shortage of shelter space. He asked for time ‘for the desperately inadequate system to absorb these people’ and to give charities a chance to catch up with the demand” (Casey 2001s). The homeless population at Tent City, however, soon received written notice from the police that they had to leave. Las Vegas police officer Christopher Crawford was quoted as having told them on that sweltering Friday afternoon “not to rush into the heat but to wait until evening to move” (Casey 2001s).

As some police officers were escorting men out of Tent City, other police officers had been asked by Mayor Goodman to evaluate data to assess the amount of crime caused by homeless people. On July 1, the *Review-Journal* ran an article stating that the Las Vegas Police Department would soon be finishing “a study of how much crime in [the downtown] area is caused by the homeless” (Moller 2001e). The article also stated that the report was part of Mayor Goodman’s request to the police and city officials for increased enforcement to reduce petty crime downtown. The article stated that while overall crime in the downtown area seemed to be in decline, local business owners’ complaints about problems related to homeless persons had increased. Doug DeMasi, owner of a wheel alignment business on 10th Street and Ogden Avenue, said that many small problems he had with homeless persons interfering with his business, including public intoxication, petty theft, and vagrancy, were driving off his customers and that the number of homeless persons in the area had probably increased because a nearby church had recently begun offering meals to them. This article developed the idea that the Las Vegas community

still should fear homeless men as potential criminals and implied that providing charitable services to homeless persons might actually be causing their criminality to spread.

The July 1 article additionally noted that the president of the Fremont Street Experience, Mark Paris, favored a greater police presence downtown, while local American Civil Liberties Union director Gary Peck expressed concern that a focus on the crimes the homeless people really meant that homeless people were being criminalized rather than being helped. Toward the end of the article, police captain Cliff Davis is quoted as saying that the criminalization of homelessness was not something he was interested in: “We can put people in jail for murder and robbery, but you just don’t put people in jail for being homeless . . . and what we have to do is explain our position and rules of enforcement to the mayor, not in an argumental or denial state, but in a positive state of mind” (quoted in Moller 2001e). At the end of the article, Davis also seemed to say that he was not happy with the Mayor’s call for a crackdown apparently focused on indigent persons, but he indicated that he still needed to carry out the wishes of his superiors: “When you arrest people for being homeless through no fault of their own . . . there’s something unholy about that in my opinion. But I’m a soldier and I follow marching orders” (quoted in Moller 2001e). The articles indicate that a reduction in available space at charitable shelters then led law enforcement to an increased role in the city’s overall approach to homeless persons. However, a key officer expressed unhappiness at now having to arrest homeless persons simply engaged in survival activities, indicating that he felt officers should not be in the position of having to arrest people who could be helped through improved or additional charitable shelters.

The contradictions apparent in city policies and police practices toward homeless persons being reported by local media, however, seemed to inspire at least one public protest for better social services for homeless persons. On July 6, 2001, the *Review-Journal* reported that local advocates for homeless persons held a vigil. The advocates were requesting funds so that the MASH Village tent could offer shelter to 250 men during the summer (Casey 2001r). These members of the Las Vegas community seemed to be requesting that the city in-

crease charitable services for homeless people instead of criminalizing their homelessness.

Overall, by having reduced the number of available beds at local shelters through cuts in funding and by removing homeless persons from Tent City, which provided safety in numbers, city officials and the police seemed to be placing homeless persons at risk for crime and violence while also focusing on homeless persons as criminal. In these articles homeless people are presented as entitled to make choices about whether and how they might use such institutionalized forms of assistance, but they are also presented as having created an ongoing crime and image problem for the city. In the first years of the twenty-first century, as steadily growing numbers of homeless persons in the city combined their use of the institutional resources within the homeless corridor with their use of collective camps like Tent City, city politicians began to realize that the strategy of centralizing services for homeless persons in the homeless corridor could not fully meet new demand. It also seemed apparent to some members of the Las Vegas community that the city was not dealing with homeless people in a humane way.

## Discussion

The problem of male homelessness is both individual and social in nature. Typically, individualism is stressed in the United States, and a focus on individual action and responsibility is often promoted as the best way to understand the roots of male homelessness. In contrast to this dominant cultural tendency, male homelessness is often framed as a social problem by the Las Vegas media. This framing encourages a range of local responses from fear of homeless men to sympathy toward them. While it would seem that the perceptions of fear and sympathy would result in very different policies regarding homeless men, I found that both themes work together to promote, first, policies and regulations directed toward the social control of local homeless men's activities, and, second, the overall social and geographic segregation of the men from tourists and residential communities. Several studies of homelessness have typically consid-

ered either the social threat presented by homeless men (Adler 1989; Chambliss 1964; Lofland 1998) or the cultural patterning of sympathy toward them (Bunis et al. 1996). In this chapter I have considered how both themes are present in local popular texts and how together these themes support interconnected policies of assistance and social control.

Homeless males have long been considered threatening (Bahr 1973, 41–42; Lofland 1998, 153–57). As Peter Marin (1987, 41) wrote, males who are “homeless, simply because they are homeless, are strangers, alien—and therefore a threat.” Lofland (1998) notes that the presence of homeless men in most metropolitan areas generally elicits “fear and loathing” and that homeless men are seen as particularly visible examples of several ills that people often attribute to the public realm (153–57, 164–67). Laws prohibiting vagrancy go back to the sixteenth century in Europe, indicating that views of homeless men as threatening and the development of policy to control their behavior are not new (Beier 1985; Chambliss 1964; Stoner 1995). The articles on the Smith murder in Las Vegas, however, indicate a distinctive way in which fear of homeless men was perpetuated in Las Vegas in the 1990s. Media development of this theme in turn influenced other social institutions and their interaction with homeless men. News stories promoting fear of homeless men preceded the development of ordinances designed to restrict the practices of homeless men in Las Vegas. Themes developed in these stories also parallel the logic behind the segregation of charitable services for homeless men to economically disadvantaged parts of the city, limiting these men’s mobility. When these services were still seen as inadequate, law enforcement increasingly began addressing the growing presence of homeless people in Las Vegas.

While Chambliss (1964) has argued that laws regulating vagrants were developed and evolved specifically to protect the interests of economic elites, Adler (1989) contends that middle-class fears over a decline in shared values within industrial society provide a better explanation of changes in vagrancy laws in the United States over time. However, the way in which popular documents in Las Vegas socially construct the problem of male homelessness involves more than ei-

ther the interests of economic elites or the fears of the middle class. In Las Vegas, homeless men are addressed through both direct social control (through ordinances and the criminalization of homelessness) and indirect social control (through practices of representation and through the spatial placement and discourses of charitable organizations that “help” homeless persons). The significance of these trends lies in noting their overlapping results—homeless men are seen as separate from the Las Vegas community, and services for them are to be centralized in the homeless corridor. Homeless men are more, rather than less, distinct from the community. Additionally, there should be a greater, rather than a reduced, effort to concentrate them in a particular area.

It is easy to understand how the socially threatening presence of homeless men expressed in Las Vegas news accounts can begin generating local interest in the development of new ordinances to control their actions. However, the development of a particular view of homeless men that then influenced changes in an area’s legal code also paralleled and reinforced other cultural values and ecological patterns in Las Vegas. In my analysis, initially the greatest expressions of fear seem strongly related to limiting homeless men’s proximity to upscale and recently developed tourist areas. A mix of fear and sympathy characterizes the articles that discuss homeless men’s presence in an area where they have traditionally found employment and have even been of some benefit to the community (as a pool of inexpensive laborers) but simultaneously are considered a nuisance and a threat by some of that area’s businesses and residents. Sympathy is most clearly expressed in media accounts and donation campaigns that work to direct homeless men to a specific economically marginal area in Las Vegas where many shelters are located and which segregates them from local businesses and residents. More recent articles at first indicate readers should again feel sympathy for homeless men being attacked in the homeless corridor. Implicitly, however, the final articles point toward the presence of a new fear—the fear that homeless people are now coming to the city in record numbers, outstripping the charitable services available to them. This fear is that homeless persons can no longer be contained in the homeless corridor and that

their continued presence represents new image and legal problems for the city. Based on this new fear, the most recent articles indicate that even more repressive measures might be required to address the problem of homeless persons, such as the criminalization of their survival practices.

The texts I analyzed suggest that both formal and informal social controls result in a combination of segregation patterns. Such patterns involve laws, local traditions concerning appropriate forms of assistance toward homeless men, and the centralized location of shelters. While some of these restrictions clearly violate the civil rights of homeless persons, others might organize space and thoughts in ways that make it difficult for homeless men, even if they wish, to enter the economic mainstream central to the rest of the Las Vegas community. As Lofland notes, cities with tourist-based economies are those that most frequently engage in sanitizing practices that restrict the presence of unfamiliar others (1998, 248–49). As an increasing amount of Las Vegas's once-public space is handed over to corporate gaming interests (Davis 1994), homeless men in that city might find themselves even more restricted from participation in any aspect of life outside of the immediate area where shelters are located.

Overall, it seems that the way in which homeless men are represented is crucial to fully understanding the manner in which a community addresses homeless men. Perhaps part of the local social construction of the problem of homelessness I have outlined is a specific product of Las Vegas's economic cornerstone in gambling and tourism, and the growing presence of homeless men is perceived as threatening these. However, the local social construction of the problem of homelessness also systematically presents homeless persons, and particularly homeless men, as alien, as "other," as non-tourists, and as outsiders to the community. The ongoing presentation of homeless men as outsiders then serves a purpose besides presenting a rationale for their control. If the dominant view of homeless men in Las Vegas regards them as outsiders, then that view also promotes the idea that "homelessness can't happen to me." In the fragile economy of Las Vegas (overwhelmingly dependent on tourist revenue), presenting homeless men as outsiders serves to reinforce the idea that



homelessness is not something that happens to the average person, to “me,” but to someone else. This lulls members of the Las Vegas community into the false belief that they themselves are not vulnerable to homelessness.

Other regional studies that would consider local media accounts about homeless persons, the local structures of assistance for homeless persons, and ordinances regarding homelessness might well indicate the manner in which these elements produce a different view of homelessness that in turn parallels a different community response to the condition. Not all regional media across the United States engaged in the same social constructions of the problem of homelessness as did Las Vegas from 1996 to 2001, nor have all regions dealt with homelessness primarily by removing the problem from sight. Other studies of the representations of homeless men and how those correspond with particular local responses to male homelessness, therefore, could help underscore that, while male homelessness is an individual condition that involves choice, it also cannot be understood outside of the social context in which it occurs.

## Talking to One Homeless Man in Las Vegas

In order to understand how homeless men in Las Vegas interpret their homelessness, I conducted in-depth interviews with forty-eight homeless men and two service providers in the city between 1995 and 1999.<sup>1</sup> I often conducted interviews in the homeless corridor in Las Vegas, and usually the interviews were unstructured, or like conversations.<sup>2</sup> These interviews and my field notes serve as the basis for the next several chapters, in which I consider what, according to the men, were the reasons they had become homeless and what current problems kept them homeless, where they live while homeless, their survival strategies, and crime and violence in their lives.

Of all the men I met, one man, Jerry, stands out. When I face questions about homelessness, I often think of Jerry and the story of our day together. The interview shows, in Jerry's own words, what he thinks of homelessness and the Las Vegas community's response to his situation. The interview also shows how homelessness is the result

of a complex relationship between the individual homeless man and a social structure. Although it is clear that Jerry has made some bad life decisions, it also becomes evident that several local institutions failed to assist him with his health problems and his homelessness in a meaningful way, and that his future did not hold much hope. In sum, Jerry reveals that homeless men have a unique understanding of their problem, which we should listen to.

Jerry and I met at the Downtown Transportation Center (DTC), a connecting point for me on my way to the homeless corridor. Meeting Jerry that day on my way to the shelters was the beginning of one of the hardest but most memorable experiences of my research.

## My Day with Jerry

I met Jerry at the bus depot downtown. We were sitting on separate benches waiting for the 113 line to the shelter. He was about 5'5", and his salt-and-pepper hair concealed his face as he leaned over his cane, head hanging toward the ground. His shoulder blades protruded from his blue T-shirt. His arms were thin and covered with scabs.

I figured out rather quickly he was homeless. He was talking to another man whom I'd seen at the free breakfasts given by the Catholic Worker, a local charitable organization up on Washington and D Street, in the homeless corridor. Jerry told him that he'd be going over to Working Shelter later.<sup>3</sup> Once the man left, Jerry immediately looked through a nearby garbage can, where he found a McDonald's cup containing only ice. Leaning into the can, he revealed the back of his light blue pants, which were stained brown, and a pink rope that held them up. He came back and quickly consumed all the ice and water in the dirty cup, ignoring or not caring about people staring nearby.

He looked at me over his shoulder. He had two days' stubble on his cheeks. His bright blue eyes were a surprising contrast to his otherwise defeated appearance.

"How you doin'?" I smiled and asked.

"Hey, all right. How you doin'?" he replied.

We made small talk about the weather and how long we'd been

in Las Vegas. He asked what I did, and I told him I was a student at UNLV. When he asked what I studied, I told him homelessness. I told him I'd love to talk to him and offered to buy him something to eat.

"Oh, hey, I'm homeless," he said. "I'll talk to ya."

After Jerry read and initialed the consent form, I sat down beside him, and he began talking into the tape recorder, telling his story.<sup>4</sup>

"I came to Las Vegas a year ago," Jerry started. "I am homeless, I'm 53, an alcoholic, but I have chronic emphysema. I'm having a hard time breathing. When you get down and out, you can never get back up. You cannot get off the street."

"How long have you been homeless?" I asked.

"Been homeless a year, since I got here," he said.

"Where did you come from?"

"Miami Veterans Hospital. I was in the VA hospital in Miami, and I decided to come to Vegas because I was here before, you know? In this town, it's bad to be homeless, but at least you can get something to eat once in a while. It's a town where you can eat in."

"So, were you homeless in Miami?"

"Yes, I was."

"What type of work did you do?"

"Plumbing."

"So, you came out to Vegas because it seemed like a better place to be than Miami?"

"Yes sir," he said. "I been here before, and the police don't really bother you. They don't even want to take you to jail because all they do is kick you out the next day. They tell you. I asked them once to let me stay there. They said, 'We don't have room for you here, you just gotta get out.'"

"The police?"

"Yes," he said. "And that's the truth. I said, 'Well can't I just spend a few more hours, just stay another day and night?' He said, 'No, I'm sorry. We don't want you here. We don't have room for you guys here.'"

I paused. "What types of services have you been able to access since you've been here? You mentioned Working Shelter."

"That's about the only one. It's hard to get any kind of aid here in

town. It really is. It's just at different places. Religious Shelter, they got different places to give out food at certain days and at certain times, you know? And you got to be at the right spot at the right time. You don't get much help here at all in Vegas."

"So you said you were going to probably stay at Working Shelter tonight. Where do you usually stay?"

"On the street. Park. I got a letter from a doctor, saying I'm chronically ill. I'm gonna show them that. Hopefully they'll let me spend the night there."

As he mentioned the doctor, I noticed a white bandage about one-inch square underneath one of his shoulder blades, showing through the shirt. I also noticed his clear plastic identification bracelet, still on his wrist. He began coughing.

"Boy, man, I wish I would have met you before."

"Oh, really?" I said, surprised.

"Yeah. Just to talk to somebody is good."

"Oh sure," I said, caught off guard by the comment. "No, and I'm interested in the experiences that people have had. It seems like a range of a lot of different experiences that homeless guys have had here in Las Vegas."

"Well, a lot of them get checks, and they just gamble their money. And they're homeless by choice. Um, they just get their money and they can't do nothing, they just gamble it and can't do nothing but drink and gamble, and they sit out on the street and they stay there. And they won't pay no rent. But it's just that there's so many phonies in this town. If you try to pay half the rent, they won't pay half the rent. You wind up paying it all, and the people you meet up with, they're gonna gamble and drink their money away anyway. So it's hard to get anybody to get a place with you. And the guys don't get enough by themselves to get a place. Understand?"

"So, you're talking about having roommates and such?"

"Right, right."

"Well, tell me about what happened when you got ill. Have you been in contact with your family?"

"I have no family and no relatives. Ah, my family's dead, and, um, I want to get off the street bad, there's just no way in hell I can do it,"

he explained, his voice rising. "I get \$484 from the government, but I didn't get my check this month. I don't know what happened."

"Where does it get sent to?"

"General delivery. Post Office, downtown here."

"OK," I said.

"I didn't get my check this month, so I got all messed up," he said, beginning to cough.

I paused. "So you spend a lot of time down here at the bus stop?" I eventually asked.

"Yeah. I go through because this is where the main terminal is. Buses come through from all over. What was your name, sir?" he asked.

"Kurt."

"Kurt?" he replied. "Captain Kirk," he said, laughing.

"You got it," I replied, being used to the joke.

"It's hard when you're dying, you're old, you got no family, and you're homeless, and you can't get off the street. It's just, see I, I can honestly say I don't want to live anymore. But I don't want to commit suicide and jump in front of a bus. Even today I thought, 'I'll just run out in front of one of these buses and let them hit me and take me to the hospital,' you know what I mean? But ah, I know it's kinda fruitful, I mean fruitless. To get off the street is almost gonna be an impossibility."

"I'm surprised that there isn't anybody out, you know, in the community who can give you some support, you know, like to get you into a program . . ."

"Oh, man," Jerry said, "I would love that. But I'm having trouble finding anything."

"Have you checked in with the MASH [Mobilized Assistance and Shelter for the Homeless] unit down at Working Shelter?" I asked.

"No. I never even heard of them."

"OK. The MASH, I think, is a program . . ."

Suddenly Jerry began asking for matches from a man walking by with a cigarette. The man offered him his lighter. Jerry used it to light a butt from the ground.

"Excuse me," he said to me.

“Sure,” I replied.

When he had it lit, I began again. “I think the MASH program is near, it’s in the same complex as Working Shelter. My understanding is that they’ll provide you with, um, sort of the starting place to access services if you need services, like for your health, and you need to find a regular place to stay. They’re the first place to go. Um, if you want we can go down there. I mean I know it’s there and there are people to help you.”

“I will,” he said.

“I think they close at three o’clock today, so . . . ,” I said, looking at my watch.

“I’m going to miss it,” he said.

“I think it’s a little too far probably to get there today,” I said, nodding at the buses.

“I’m going down there tonight, I got a letter from my doctor. I’ll show it to you. I just got out of the hospital. I’m chronically ill. You can read it out loud if you want,” he said, showing me the letter.

“Sure, sure,” I replied, and begin reading from the prescription sheet. “Patient chronically ill. Valley Services working on group home. Please allow patient to stay at your facilities until he is placed in a group home, or has improved enough to be on his own. . . . This is from a public hospital?”

“Yeah, Valley Medical.”

“Valley Medical. They give you a prescription there, too?” I asked.

“Yeah, I can’t get them filled, though,” he said, laughing. After a long pause, he said, “They give you prescriptions you can’t get filled.” He began coughing and using his two inhalers.

I waited. “Tell me,” I said, “do you have friends out here? I noticed you talking to another guy a few minutes ago with a gray beard.”

“He’s homeless. He was living in the baseball diamond, over at the park? And the cops finally got on about a hundred of them over there, told them they had to move. He just told me he’s staying at the library now, in back of the state library.”

“And where is that?”

“It’s down on Vegas Boulevard about four or five blocks from here.”

“Have you stayed over there?”

“One night I stayed there,” he said. “It’s too hard a concrete. The steps, you know? And there’s like maybe a hundred, a hundred and fifty guys. That’s kinda rough.”

“OK, now I know where you’re talking about,” I replied. “It’s on the way to Working Shelter.”

“Right. There you go, Kurt.”

“So, how else do you make ends meet? How do you get food?”

“See, right now I’m hungry as hell and I gotta think, and I’m glad I met you because I am hungry. I’m weak right now, I can hardly walk. But uh, I’ll get something to eat, through your generosity, and uh, sometimes you just get hungry, buddy. You go without, you dig in garbage cans. See ‘cause I can’t get to these places, I don’t know where they’re at, and they change all the time too, you know what I mean?”

“You mean the places that give out food?”

“Right. See there’s something at the Addict Shelter, but it’s up a hill and I can’t walk it. When you get off that bus, you’re gonna have to walk about three blocks. Up a hill, on Owens, and I can’t even walk it, so I won’t be able to make it.”

“Do the bus drivers ever let you ride the bus for free?”

“Very seldom. One time maybe, and one time only.”

“How did you get into town? Did you hitchhike, or by bus?”

“By bus. Greyhound Bus.”

After a pause, Jerry changed the topic. “Boy, am I sick. I shit in my pants, I’m running around with shit in my pants, I’m digging it out with my fingernails, I’m just doing terrible, you know what I mean? I really don’t want to keep on going on living, you know? This ain’t living.”

“Yeah, I, I, um,” I stammered and grew quiet, trying to think of an appropriate response.

Looking back on this interview, I remember being uncomfortable with the contradictions Jerry presented. On the one hand, here was a man clearly in need of social services, someone who seemed to be a victim of unfortunate circumstances such as not having health insurance and who was without family who could help him. On the



other hand, he seemed to dismiss the information about social services for homeless persons that I was telling him, and he continued to smoke while having emphysema, making him sicker. His plight was depressing.

I eventually rephrased my earlier statement to Jerry. "I keep thinking that MASH program might be able to help you, 'cause I talked with someone down there, and she said that the way MASH works is it's like the first place homeless people should go to, because they have counselors who can direct you to services in the community."

"Sounds good. I never heard of it. But usually you just run into dead ends. I've been to so many places and went there, you know? They just send you to somewhere else. 'Oh we can't help you, you've got to do this first and do that. Go over here and go over there,' and they just want to send you someplace else. They run you around, it really is true, Kurt. When you're down and out, they really don't want to be bothered with you."

"Yeah," I said, finding it impossible to add something hopeful to his outlook. I decided to drop it. As he started to use his inhalers, I asked, "How did you get the money for the inhalers?"

"I had them before, and I stole them off the cart in the hospital. When they come around for treatments, they give you breathing treatments, and they have them on a cart and they leave the cart there. You just take them off the cart."

"Yeah, well, you need them, so," I said, smiling back at him, hoping I conveyed sympathy at his theft.

"I know, and I can't get them filled," he said, laughing, "'cause I have the prescriptions on me too for 'em, but I can't buy 'em, 'cause I ain't got no money. So uh, truthfully, I just take 'em. The three or four on me, that's from Valley Hospital, that's from the cart."

"How do you store your clothes?" I asked.

"I have no clothes."

"That's it? What you're wearing right now?"

"That's it."

"Did you just get out of the hospital?"

"Yes I did. I got out this morning at nine o'clock."

"How long were you there?"

“Seventeen days.”

“And they just basically let you out on the street with . . . without . . .”

“Without no money, I’m sick and they know I’m chronically ill,” he said, finishing my sentence. “I’m pooping in my pants, and they know I’m sick, you know? But they can’t really do nothing for me. And it’s a money-making outfit there.”

“So the seventeen days they let you stay,” I asked, “are they going to bill you?”

“No,” he said. “When I went to emergency, I passed out here at the bus station. And the ambulance took me, and they knew I was chronically ill. I couldn’t walk, I couldn’t talk. I needed treatment right away for survival, so they break down and they give you that. But they figure I can do just as good now out on the street as I could in the hospital.”

“What are your plans for the future, for the immediate future?”

“Well, I wanna get something to eat and go to Working Shelter and try to sleep there tonight,” he said and began coughing. “I hope I have enough strength to check the post office. I have to find out what happened to my check, my Social Security, ssi check. But really I have no energy to do anything, you know what I mean? It’s crazy. It’s nuts.”

There was a long pause where I couldn’t think of anything to say. I was listening to his description of his life, but at the same time I was trying to make some sense out of it. My overwhelming feeling was that an impossible situation was sitting across from me, facing me. I never knew the problems I would hear about during an interview. I was never fully prepared for them.

As if Jerry sensed that I was growing depressed, he began asking me questions.

“How long have you been going to college here?” Jerry finally asked me.

“About three years,” I said.

“Have you? That’s great.”

“It’s been nice. Nice school, and you know the weather’s nice here in Vegas.”

"Well Kurt, what are you gonna do? What kinda trade are you taking?"

"I'm hopefully gonna finish the degree, the sociology degree, and then maybe, um, I'll teach."

"Really?" Jerry said.

"Yeah. But I'd like to, you know, develop this, in order to, to find out what the experiences of homeless guys are, and maybe . . ."

"It's a living hell." Jerry interrupted, swinging back to our original topic. "These guys'll kill you for a dime. I'm serious. Most of them drink. To live on the street you have to drink, almost. First of all, how can you sleep on concrete or the grass, and the ants and the water's turned on, and you gotta pass out and the only thing that knocks you out is booze, you know?" he said in one breath, then began coughing. "It's no picnic," he finally found the breath to say.

"Have you ever been attacked out here? Physically, or . . ."

"Yeah, oh yeah. Yeah, yeah, the bottle guys will try to take it from you if you're sleeping with a bottle. It's like a pacifier. I'll be honest with you, I try not to drink, but I try to go along without drinking. Hey buddy, can I get a smoke from you, please, sir?" he said, calling to the man who passed by earlier with a cigarette in his mouth and lit Jerry's.

The man wore a baseball cap, jeans, and a T-shirt, and sported mirrored wraparound sunglasses and a mustache. He hesitated slightly before handing Jerry a cigarette. He made no visible facial expression while lighting Jerry's smoke. Jerry thanked him before taking a labored drag. The man nodded slightly before walking purposefully toward a bus.

After his first, long drag, Jerry immediately began a succession of deep coughs. I found myself unable to think about the interview when he began coughing like that. Having asthma myself, I know how it feels to be unable to catch your breath. The closest thing I can relate it to is being under water, of fearing you will drown.

"At least you're doing something. You're getting an idea of how the picture is," he said to me.

"Well yeah, and I'd love to show it to the people who provide

services to homeless guys so they can be better informed how homelessness is.”

After a rash of coughing, Jerry said, “Once you get on the street, you just can’t get off it. Just put yourself homeless. No relatives, no friends, and none of these guys have any family. Most of them all, believe me, they have no family. What can they do? They don’t get a check. A lot of them don’t get checks. So they’re out here on the streets, in ill health. There’s only one place to go, and that’s down, deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper, and you just die out here.”

I remained quiet.

“Where you from, Kurt?” he asked.

“I’m from Alaska originally,” I replied, and Jerry laughed.

“It’s cold up there,” he stated.

“Oh yeah, a lot different from here. This is beautiful for me. I love the weather. When you were working, you worked as a plumber?” I said, returning to him.

“A plumber’s helper,” he said.

“A plumber’s helper. Where were you living? Did you spend all your life in Florida?”

“I traveled a lot, but I have spent a lot of time in Florida. I was born and raised in Hollywood, Florida. I have no inclination to go back.”

“Did you ever get married or have kids?”

“No, I didn’t. I never got married and I never had no kids. I’ve had five or six different girlfriends in parts of the country where I worked, you know, and I lived with ’em. And they were all married before and they had two or three kids, usually by different men. That’s why I guess I never got married,” Jerry said, smiling before he began coughing. We paused.

“This is warm weather to you, Kurt,” he said.

“Yeah, I love it. It’s hot here. Did the doctors or nurses have any kind of advice or recommendations for you when you left the hospital?”

“They see so many sick and homeless people, that they either, peo-

ple got a lot of money and insurance and they're not homeless and they pay, or they're like me, they're in because I was dying there. I was in real bad shape. I passed out over here," he said, pointing to another area of the bus stop. "I shitted all over myself and the ambulance came and they took me to Valley Hospital in an ambulance. When you're that sick they almost gotta take you. They gave me shots to get my heart going, and they gave me breathing treatments, iv treatments for my lungs, and they got stuff they put in your blood now. So they're kinda cold and detached about this. They know you're homeless and you're sick and you're going out and you're dying. It don't faze 'em, they get cold-hearted after a while. They see so much of it. Just another number, add one more to the pile."

"What time is Working Shelter going to be open to take you?"

"I'll be going down there shortly after I leave you."

"You taking the bus?"

"Yeah, I have a bus ticket, a transfer. You sometimes find them in garbage cans."

"Well, tell me something, if you were in my position, if you were gonna do a study of homeless in Las Vegas, of homeless guys, how would you go about studying the topic? What would you do if you were me?"

"I would talk to the guys, just what you're doing. They're mostly honest, they're basically honest. They're gonna tell you the truth. And uh, they don't want to be homeless, a lot of them don't, but they have no choice, there's no choice. Once you're there, you're there."

"Yeah. Yeah," I added, quietly. Here Jerry seemed to contradict his earlier statement that some homeless men he knew chose to be homeless. Jerry's mention of choice again reminded me of the way President Reagan thought homeless people chose to be homeless. It's as if that word is the main issue around which so much of homelessness was understood. People with housing often think homeless people have chosen homelessness as a lifestyle option. Jerry vacillated between seeing the plight of homeless people as something that involved choices and seeing it as a status that trapped homeless people.

"Well, you want like a hamburger or something?" I asked. "I can

go over to that window and get you something,” I said, referring to the McDonald’s inside the terminal.

“All right. I’d like a cheeseburger, and could you get me some fries and a large glass of ice water? Thank you, Kurt. I really appreciate it.”

I returned with the food. Jerry ate the whole meal, while talking, in about four minutes.

“How is being homeless here different from other places you’ve been to? Gambling is really popular here. What are the other differences?”

“They expect you to be drunk and broke and homeless. And they expect you to either get out of town and get some money, or get a job, but it don’t work that way. But they expect you to be drunk and broke and lose your job and gamble, you know, win some money and lose it. The cops will even tell you, we expect you to be drunk and broke in this town.”

“When you’re homeless?”

“Right.”

“So they don’t bother you like in other towns, the cops don’t bother you. How about with casinos and, say, like the Fremont Street area up here?” I asked, pointing to the nearby Fremont Street Experience. I asked Jerry about how he was treated in the Fremont Street area because, despite being partially funded by public funds, the area also has its own private security force that several homeless men said actively discouraged them from remaining there.

“They can just look and tell a guy’s homeless. And they tell you to move on.”

“Oh, they tell you to move on?”

“Mm hm.”

“So they’ve told you to move on on Fremont Street?”

“Mm hm. They told me never come back.”

“How long ago was this?”

“About five, six months ago. They said, ‘You don’t come back on Fremont.’”

“So I take it, then, that they don’t even let you into casinos?”

“No, unless you get money. Unless you get a check or something.

If you got any money on you at all, anybody can go in, they don't care how you look. And they know if you got money or not."

"Where do you go once you get your check, your money? What type of stuff do you do?"

"I try to rent a place, but the last few guys I met they split on me. Two times in the last three months I gave guys money to get a place and they didn't do it."

"Do you get a weekly or a monthly rental?"

"A couple weeks."

"OK, weeklies. And you get them usually with a roommate?"

"Right."

"How is rent here, compared to other places?"

"It's the same. Food's cheaper here."

"What do you think is the future of homelessness here in Las Vegas? Do you think it's gonna get better, gonna get worse?"

"It's gonna get worse. It will. In time you're gonna see a lot more homeless people here. They're coming from Salt Lake City, Utah, they're coming from California, from all over."

"How do they get here?"

"Freight train, hitchhike. And they will come."

"You ever taken a freight train?"

"Mm hmm. Just take a blanket and a water jug," he said, laughing.

"I know they're a few trains that run over near Addict Shelter. Some guys stay underneath the bridge over there."

"Yep," Jerry said. "That's true, Kurt, they live up under that bridge. See, the police, they really don't want to screw with you, 'cause then they gonna put you up, you know what I mean?"

"So they pretty much ignore you?"

"They tell you to move on," he said before using his inhalers.

"So you told me that about a hundred, a hundred and fifty guys stay every night around that library, out near that pavilion, a lot of stairs."

"That's it."

"Where do they go to eat, typically?"

"'Addict Shelter' at 3 o'clock, Religious Shelter on Bonanza at

5 o'clock, Working Shelter at 10:30 AM. They give you a bowl of soup there, at 10:30 AM."

"So there's sort of a routine, of going to places for food?"

"Yeah. Those are the three main ones, and those are the same time every day."

"How did you find out about that?"

"Other homeless guys."

"Do the people here at the bus stop ever ask you to move on, like the police?"

"All the time. All the time."

"But it's a public area."

"Right, but they tell you, they give you a ticket, and they give you a warning each time they keep seeing you."

"They give you a ticket? How much?"

"Nobody ever pays it. The judge always dismisses it."

"You've been given tickets here?"

"Oh yeah. They'll come by and say, 'You're not catching a bus. I gotta give you a ticket.' They run a check on you to see if you got any warrants, and then if you don't got any warrants they give you a ticket."

"But if you have a bus transfer on you, then you're OK?"

"Yeah. They tell you to get on the bus, though. They don't let you sit here."

"Has anybody ever harassed you at a public park such as this?"

"Oh yeah. I just came from Maryland Parkway park. I was laying out at a park, out on Maryland. The police drive you [away] all the time, they say 'You've been here long enough, it's time to move on.'" (see figs. 9, 10)

Jerry finished the last of his hamburger. "That hit the spot. That was good, I was hungry," he says.

"Good, I'm glad. You're all done!" I replied, suddenly realizing his bag was empty. "Was that enough for you?"

"Oh yeah."

"I guess that's why they call it fast food. Well, you think homelessness in Las Vegas will definitely get worse?"



“Yep. No doubt about it.”

We both sat for a few moments, watching the buses.

“So you want to catch a bus, you want to catch the 113 now?” I asked. “I’m gonna get on it.”

“I wanna go down there, I wanna see what kind of help they can give me with that ticket. If I show them that letter from the doctor, I hope it helps.”

“You wanna give it a try?” I said, turning off the recorder.

We went over to Working Shelter by bus. On the bus Jerry asked a nondisabled woman who was sitting in the seats reserved for the elderly and disabled if he could have one of the seats. The woman moved, but a nearby woman complained, saying, “You’re making a woman give up her seat?” He ignored her. I stood near him and noticed a couple staring at him as he sat, hunched over his cane. I realized he was trying to concentrate on breathing.

Before we exited, the bus driver announced nearby landmarks to the stop, including the shelter. I felt people staring at us as we left the bus, predicting where we were going. The stares seemed to have different meanings—judgmental, sympathetic, apologetic.

The building we approached was a large structure that once had been a shopping mall. Outside the bare, weathered exterior, small groups of men stood outside in blatant violation of the “NO LOITERING” signs painted on the building. We walked knowingly to the shelter’s entrance, a bright blue door with no visible markings. When we got inside Jerry introduced himself to a staff member whom I had met before. He told the man that he has just come out of the hospital and showed him the note from the doctor that said he was chronically ill and needed a place to stay. The staff member took the note and said he’d talk to a residential counselor about getting him a place there for that night.

Jerry and I waited together. He was given a chair in an area where chairs normally are not allowed because of the fire code. Jerry asked if there was a water cooler nearby and was told no. He then asked if he could please have a glass of water brought to him, again explaining his

condition. The staff member asked another front-desk staff person to please bring him a glass of water.

Jerry thanked the man and consumed the water quickly. After several minutes, Jerry said, "I hope they give me back my papers," referring to the fact that half of his worldly possessions now lay in the hands of someone else. I told him that the people here were good and that they'd return his letters and forms in a couple of minutes. He tried to relax and simply breathe while we waited.

The staff member returned, expressionless, holding his papers.

"I'm sorry," he said in a booming voice, "but unfortunately we can't help you here. We talked to your doctor, and we just don't have the facilities to help someone in your condition." He handed Jerry back his forms and held out his other hand. "'Addict Shelter' is a few blocks up the street, on Owens. We've called them, and they say they have the facilities and the staff to help you. Here are two bus tokens," he said, placing them in Jerry's hand. "You'll have to go across the street and catch the bus, then catch another bus up Owens."

"I can't go there. The bus doesn't go all the way and I can't walk up that hill," Jerry said, his voice rising as he turned to me.

"Well, unfortunately, we can't help you here. This gentleman will assist you to the bus stop," the staff member said, referring to the man who brought Jerry water a moment ago.

I was momentarily confused but soon realized that the staff member thought that Jerry came there by himself.

"That's OK, I'll walk him back," I said to the staff member.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

On the way back to the bus stop, Jerry explained again that he wouldn't go to Addict Shelter because of the hill, maybe in part because he was unsure if the Working Shelter staff member heard him. He said that he wanted to try another facility in the flat, downtown area where he stayed before and the people knew him.

"See, I told you they just give you the runaround. It's crazy."

"It is," I replied, still numbed from the shelter's response. It was a

strange moment—someone so obviously in need was refused assistance by a charitable organization. After presenting him with another option, Jerry had explained that he couldn't walk up the hill to access their services. The shelter he had just approached, though, still couldn't help him.

"You know, I think I would've had a better chance of getting in if I hadn't showed them the doctor's note. They'd rather I sleep outside than take responsibility."

His awareness of the irony in his situation depressed me. He started to talk about other shelter options, though, and I turned on the recorder.

"Three weeks ago I spent about eight days at a transitional living facility, eight nights. Then I left and went to the hospital, I went to the VA clinic? And I wound up at Nellis Air Force Hospital for two days and two nights. On Friday I went to Valley Hospital, but I knew I was in a catch-22 situation over there [he said, pointing back at the shelter] because I'm too sick, they can't take me. It's the runaround—remember I told you about the runaround? They always give you the runaround."

I repeated the story of Jerry's rejection from Working Shelter into the tape recorder and said that they had given him tokens to go to the Addict Shelter.

"That's right, they said I was too sick," he added, leaning into the recorder.

The people at the bus stop, however, seemed inspired by his story of rejection. A few began to talk about their own experiences with different shelters. An Asian man said that the shelter we had just come from wasn't religious in the charitable sense but instead was more like a business. One younger Caucasian man with a southern accent began to say that, of all the places he's stayed in, the Addict Shelter was the best.

"At least they care about you," he said. "These other places," he said, pointing his thumb back at Working Shelter, "they don't even want you to carry stuff in the shelter. What are you gonna do if you can't have any stuff?" he said to me while Jerry nodded.

After reboarding the bus back to the station, Jerry took a seat reserved for the disabled. People began staring while he coughed and inhaled his medication.

Once we arrived at the bus station, I remembered Jerry had mentioned some military experiences, and I asked him more about them.

"I was in the Army in France '60, '61, '62. I came back from France. An honorable discharge."

"So you are a veteran, then. Do you get any benefits for that?"

"No I don't."

"How come?"

"That's the way it is. If you don't get connected while you're in the service, you don't get it. You better get the service to put it in black and white, so you get it."

Suddenly Jerry noticed a friend, a young man, passing nearby. He asked him if he could have his bus pass. "Please," Jerry says, "I gotta have a pass. It'll give me a place to sleep. They won't kick me off if I have the pass. Come on, please," he begged for a couple of minutes, his voice rising. "Look, I'll give you all the tokens I got." Shaking, Jerry pulled seven tokens out of his wallet and a transfer.

"I can't do it, Jerry," his friend replied.

"Come on, I put you and your girlfriend up when you were on the street. I need a place to stay. I can't sleep outside, I can't walk around because of this emphysema."

The friend smirked and looked away, shaking his head.

"Quit trying to guilt trip me, Jerry. I need this pass too," the friend said.

"Look, I'll give it back to ya. Just give it to me for tonight!"

"And how am I gonna get it back?" the friend asked rhetorically.

"I'll be here tomorrow morning," Jerry said.

"I can't. I'm sorry," the friend calmly stated before walking away.

Jerry mumbled something, looking away from his friend.

"Let me ask you about what just happened," I said after the friend left. "You just talked to a guy, and you just asked him if you could borrow his bus pass."

“Right,” Jerry explained. “I helped him before. I put him up several times. I’ve had apartments about three times in Vegas. So I got my money, I spent the whole damn check in about three weeks straight. I put him and his lady friend who goes to church with him up. I know him pretty well.”

“You want to use the bus pass so you can ride the bus all night long?”

“Yeah, you sleep on the bus.”

“You do that before?”

“Yeah.”

“And they don’t kick you off?”

“No. You get off, at the end of the line. Then you get on the next bus.”

While Jerry and I waited for our bus, I thought about what it must have been like to sleep like that. We left the bench and walked toward the bus, talking about how it would take him to the next shelter he’d try to stay at that night.

We got off at the closest bus stop and started walking gradually toward the shelter. Jerry saw a garbage can near us and began to explain how he found food to eat.

“If you have a bus pass you can stand next to the garbage and look in it. You always find some kinda food, some lunch bag somebody just threw out, cause they’re eating and they’re changing buses or something. Any of these bus stops, you get off the bus and you check the garbage. You’ll find something to eat.”

“It works best around bus stops?”

“Right. See, like this can here?” he said, pointing to one. “Also, usually there’s a half a quart of beer. There’s no town like this for a quart of beer and food. That’s why all these homeless people are here.”

We got to the next shelter after walking a couple of blocks. The facility looked more like several single-story apartments than a shelter. It turned out to be a transitional living facility for former offenders and substance abusers, providing housing and meals for six to eight men in each apartment at eighty dollars a week per person.

Jerry tried talking to the man in charge in the front office. We waited several minutes. He eventually told Jerry to come in. I waited at the doorway. As Jerry sat at the desk, the man told Jerry that despite his having lived there before, he would need eighty dollars up front for the first week and that he'd have to look through his files to see if Jerry had any outstanding debts from previous stays. Jerry said he had paid all previous bills. He also told the man that he would have an SSI check coming from the government. After looking through his files, the man hedged. He finally told Jerry he didn't have any space open at the moment. He did, however, recommend an extension of the facility two blocks up the street.

Jerry wanted to sit a while before we began walking. I asked him to tell me about the center.

"If the judges only knew it. They want people to be incarcerated six months, and they send them here. They think they're locked up for six months. Within seventy-two hours they gotta be up and find a job. They gotta get a job and start paying their eighty bucks a week."

"What's that job board for, on the wall over there?"

"When you go somewhere you sign your name, when you go out, and where you're going, and when you should be back. Like you gotta go to AA meetings, approximately seven a week here. And then they charge you eighty bucks a week to stay here. You get three meals, basically coffee and a doughnut for breakfast that they get for free at the local bakeries, and a bologna sandwich with mustard for lunch, and at supper you get supper."

"And you said a hundred and fifty men live here?"

"Right. They put seven to eight in a room. Mainly people on parole and probation."

"How big are the rooms?"

"Small," he said, smiling.

"What are the rules here?"

"Well, if you do things you're not supposed to, they give you hours to work, different chores like cut trees or bushes, and then they take the hours off of you again."

“So if you break certain rules you get assigned extra work hours?”

“Right, like if you walk on the gravel, that’s breaking a rule.”

“And you said there’s no common rec room here?”

“No, nothing at all. It’s a working place. They just want you to pay them that eighty bucks a week.”

After Jerry explained the housing facility, he and I began the walk, cutting through a gravel lot behind the local Knights of Columbus hall. We walked toward a bus owned by the Knights, which has the word *Hope* on the front. We got as far as the bus and Jerry needed to stop. He grabbed hold of a handle near the bus door and said, “Hold on.” I waited a few feet away.

At first, I thought he has a bad case of gas. Then I noticed he was looking down at his feet. Diarrhea had fallen down his pants, and now sat in a small pile by his left slipper. Suddenly I saw him grimace, reaching into the back of his pants with one hand while pulling the clothing away from his body with the other. He whipped his left hand, covered with diarrhea, toward the ground, throwing the feces. He repeated this motion again, and then began to wipe his hand on the front wheel and wheel well of the “Hope” bus.

“I shit myself again,” he said angrily. “I’m sorry, Kurt.”

“Oh hey, don’t apologize,” I said, feeling queasy. My mind had gone completely blank from this unexpected turn, but I somehow managed to assure him that I wasn’t sickened or upset by what happened. “You had an accident,” I said.

He cursed as he continued to try to clean himself. I noticed he was shaking. After he restabilized himself on the bus, I mentioned that he could rub his hand in the gravel nearby to help get rid of the shit. He began to do this and asked me if he looked all right from behind. I said yes. I couldn’t really see a difference from the stains on his pants from before.

“I gotta go back. They have a bathroom there.”

“OK,” I said.

He switched his cane to his clean hand, and we began walking back to the transitional living facility that had just turned him

down. He repeatedly stated that he hoped they would let him use the bathroom.

Back at the beige one-story front office, Jerry asked the young, casually dressed man in change if he could please use the bathroom in his old apartment nearby. When the man suggested he use the one in the main office, Jerry's reply was high-pitched. "Please, I can't use that one because of all the handles. I need to use the one in the apartment. Please!"

The man in change relented. Jerry went into the apartment. As he entered I notice he had left feces on the door handle. After I took a seat on the concrete outside the building to wait for him, I saw he was also trailing it into the apartment carpet on his slippers.

"I sure made a mess in their bathtub," he said after returning, sitting down on the concrete near his slipper stain. I noticed a couple of flies land on the stain, then land on both of us.

Suddenly he looked me in the eye. "Are you sure this is what you want to do?" he said, referring to my research. "Doesn't this depress you?"

"It's very depressing," I said without hesitation, realizing that there was no other way to think about it. I had a hard time looking at him. "I guess I'm doing this because I think it's awful that people in your condition are without a place to stay. There's so much wealth here, and then there are people with nothing. It, ah, seems really unfair to me."

"It's criminal. It's a crime," he said. "America survives to keep the rich man rich, to keep him in money, with tax breaks, and the poor man poor, the homeless homeless, and they're gonna stay that way. There's no way to get off the street. They send you here and they send you there, and then they can't take you in and then send you somewhere else. And you really can't do nothing to get off the streets. It's almost an impossibility."

"Kurt, I noticed you have a bus pass," he eventually added. "I really need a bus pass. I don't know if they'll let me stay here tonight. I'll



give you all my tokens,” he said, repeating the offer he made to his friend. “It’s security for me. It’ll mean security for me.”

We talked about the pass, and he noted that he usually gets a reduced fare pass for half the price of a regular pass because of his disability. I asked him some questions about the complex before I made my final decision. I then told him I needed to go do something, and that I’d be back in a few minutes.

“You promise? Because I can’t take it if you’re gonna lie to me. Don’t tell me you’re coming back if you’re not coming back. I can’t take no more lies.”

“I’m coming back, Jerry. You have my word,” I said before I left.

I then walked up to Fremont Street toward a cash machine. The people there were well-dressed. An older couple walked by me wearing fanny packs and carrying small buckets of change. They spoke of dinner plans. I decided that I couldn’t part with my bus pass because I needed it to travel downtown and to the border of North Las Vegas to conduct research. But I decided that I should give Jerry enough cash for the reduced-fare pass he could get as a disabled person. If I were in a similar state, I hope someone would do at least that much for me.

When I returned, Jerry was drinking a pop similar to the ones stacked inside the manager’s office. He was very happy to see me. He explained that an old friend of his who was in charge of the complex that evening had offered to let him stay. We talked about how great that was and that maybe this could be a more permanent place to stay than Working Shelter would have been.

“This is for you,” I said, handing him the ten dollars for the bus pass quickly so that none of the men nearby saw me give it to him. I also tried not to touch his hand. On the walk back from the cash machine I’d even been thinking about what I could do to avoid shaking his hand when I said good-bye.

“Well, I’m glad you got a place to stay. Maybe you can use the ten for a bus pass next month. I have to get going,” I said, feeling drained. “Thanks very much for letting me hang out with you today, Jerry.”

“Thanks so much for this, Kurt,” he said, holding up the bill. “You don’t know how much this means to me,” as he held out his other hand to shake.

I took his hand, unsure at the time which one he had used to clean himself by the bus. His grip was firm, not the grip of a sick man. We both smiled as I walked away. On my way to the bus depot I stopped in to the nearest casino to use the bathroom. I washed my hands several times while the shoeshine man looked on.

## Discussion

My day with Jerry offers a more complex picture of male homelessness than is commonly understood. Hearing about Jerry’s experiences, it becomes harder to simply say that homeless men are either “innocent” or “guilty” of their homelessness, “deserving” or “undeserving” of charitable or governmental assistance. After considering Jerry’s plight, it becomes difficult for most people to fully blame him for his homelessness.

I introduce Jerry’s case in chapter 2 of this book because it clearly articulates certain themes that recur throughout the following pages. One theme is, How do homeless men become homeless, and what are the problems that keep them homeless? Chapter 3 reveals that male homelessness can be understood partially as the result of individual problems and choices and partially as the result of social conditions that exacerbate these problems. Jerry certainly has made some bad life decisions. One example: he continues to smoke despite having chronic emphysema. However, millions of people in the United States grew up when cigarette smoking was common, and many of those people took up smoking. It is a notoriously difficult habit to break. Many smokers who sustained homes and long careers, faced with the same potentially lethal ailment, have continued smoking against doctor’s orders. Jerry’s actions seem like the patterns of an addicted smoker, one who might need help and intensive support to quit. He is not likely to find either of those on the street. Are his problems, therefore, the result of poor personal decisions, the culture surrounding him, or both? It is important to investigate what types of health problems

homeless men in Las Vegas have, and what types of help they can get for those problems. I discuss both of these issues in chapter 3.

Jerry mentioned being an alcoholic but did not go into details about how that affected his employment or relationships. Although he again takes personal responsibility for this character flaw by mentioning it early on, he also points out that drinking helps a homeless man sleep in unpleasant places, such as in a field with ants. Alcohol use, then, is presented as both a problem and a coping mechanism for dealing with the pains (physical and mental) of homelessness. Problems often associated with homeless men, such as alcoholism, substance abuse, gambling, and mental illness, need to be understood within a social context, which I will consider in chapter 3. There I explain and give examples of how I sometimes found it hard to tell if a particular problem like addiction or mental illness preceded a man's homelessness, was perhaps a manageable problem that then grew worse after he became homeless, or if it only became a problem after a man became homeless.

Jerry also talked to me about his employment history. Jerry worked as a semi-skilled laborer most of his life, a job that probably left him without a retirement plan or health insurance. His military service would seem to entitle him to some governmental assistance, but his current circumstances make his accessing veterans' health services difficult. His meager Social Security check is not enough to pay for rent, much less food, electricity, health care, and other basic living expenses. Now approaching his middle fifties and suffering from extensive health problems, he has little hope of using employment to address his homelessness. How some men try to use employment to end their homelessness, and the problems men find in trying to work while homeless, are discussed in chapter 3 and again in chapter 5.

Jerry mentioned his difficulties with relying on friends and family for help in ending his homelessness. Jerry says all of his family members are dead and that his relationships with friends are tenuous. His uneven relationships with his "friends" would seem to make it difficult to rely on them for help, especially as roommates. How such problems may be at the root of some men's homelessness, and how

men try to overcome these problems as they try to find permanent shelter, are further discussed in chapter 3.

For Jerry, the police could help him get off the street for a while, if only they had room for him in jail. He believes they do not. Conversely, he says that the police harass and intimidate many homeless men like him. I discuss the difficulty some men face avoiding homelessness when leaving jail or prison in chapter 3, and I discuss recent newspaper reports on the relationship between homeless men and the police in chapter 7.

A great deal of Jerry's day is spent trying to secure a space at a shelter. He feels service providers generally give him and other homeless men the "runaround," sending them to another service provider or being unable to provide the most important, immediate services that a homeless man needs. Here Jerry is expressing a common sentiment among homeless men in Las Vegas: that the way services are provided to them at times helps them but at other times hinders them from leaving the street. Men discuss the pros and cons of trying to use charitable shelters in chapter 4. Also in that chapter I consider how one group of homeless people found shelter by squatting in an abandoned hotel on the Las Vegas Strip, and the pros and cons of that living arrangement.

Beyond finding shelter, Jerry showed me or told me about several techniques he used to live from day to day, including taking food and bus transfers from garbage cans, panhandling, trying to sell or barter items, and trying to access other social services. These are only a few of the techniques homeless men in Las Vegas use to survive. In chapter 5 I detail how homeless men use a range of techniques to meet their needs, and I also consider how, like Jerry, homeless men eventually learn to use such information to establish how long a given man has been homeless.

All of these topics reveal that homeless men's lives and behaviors must be understood in a social context in order to better understand how homeless men might possibly be helped.

## Causes and Consequences of Homelessness

Many individuals ask me, *How* have these men become homeless? What are the underlying causes behind a homeless man's current life circumstances? For many people, such questions are at the heart of the debate over the "guilty" versus the "innocent" homeless and which homeless men should be considered "deserving" or "undeserving" of assistance. The range and variety of ways that a particular man became homeless, I found, are as unique and personal as the life story of any individual one meets. However, there were also patterns to the men's stories. Here I present and discuss what homeless men in Las Vegas say led to their homelessness and the reasons why they believe their homelessness continues, again showing how homelessness involves both a man's personal problems and the social conditions surrounding him. I have created several general categories to better present the patterns I see regarding how these men became homeless. Understanding the reasons for local male homelessness and categoriz-

ing those reasons are also important because, although *homelessness* is a catch-all term useful for describing a common condition, the label alone cannot help a person appreciate how a given man became homeless or determine how, or perhaps even if, he might be helped.

I am, of course, not the first to investigate the reasons homeless men become homeless or the problems such men face. Across the United States several researchers have looked at factors that directly cause or strongly contribute to homelessness. In one particularly broad overview of causes from 1992, Anne Shlay and Peter Rossi summarized the findings of sixty surveys of homeless persons from across the United States. The authors analyzed several interrelated factors that they believed contributed to homelessness, including structural factors such as housing-market dynamics, economic restructuring, and welfare policies. They placed a greater emphasis, however, on what they called the “personal vulnerabilities” (1992, 138) of homeless persons. They developed a typology of these vulnerabilities, which included a homeless person having experienced disability, the abandonment of kinship and friendship networks, alcohol and drug abuse, mental illness, and/or involvement in crime (Shlay and Rossi 1992, 137–41).<sup>1</sup>

My research in Las Vegas suggests that the explanations given by homeless men as to why they became homeless in that city parallel the reasons for homelessness across the United States discussed by Shlay and Rossi but also involve reasons that are somewhat unique to Las Vegas and, of course, to each man’s life situations and activities in the city. For example, Jerry earlier stated several reasons for his having become homeless. Among the more immediate reasons were his Social Security check getting lost and his release from the local hospital with nowhere to live. Other, less direct but perhaps more long-term reasons might include his admission of alcoholism, his previous work as an semi-skilled laborer, his chronic illness, his problems with roommates, and the lack of family members who would help him get off the street.

It is important to note that the categories I have created to show patterns in the explanations given by these men as to why they became homeless are only part of each man’s full story. The categories also cannot be understood as exhaustive or mutually exclusive: home-

lessness is almost never reducible to a single cause-and-effect relationship. In developing an overview of patterns, either the homeless men I interviewed or I are emphasizing what we perceive to be an important cause. These causes, as we shall see, should never be considered entirely apart from the other issues faced by homeless men.

## Health and Physical Disabilities

Across the United States (and as Jerry discussed), homeless men cite health and healthcare system problems as important to understanding their homeless status. Sometimes the men considered illnesses to be a direct cause of their homelessness. Bob, for example, explained that he went from earning thirty-three thousand dollars a year to homelessness because he contracted chronic active hepatitis C from a blood transfusion at a local hospital. He said that because of the disease, "I basically got stripped of everything I've ever owned." Steve explained to me that his having come to Las Vegas for a brain operation precipitated his most recent reliance on a homeless shelter:

I had an aneurysm taken off my brain by our now lieutenant governor, Lonnie Hammargren . . . [A]fter the operation I was homeless when I was released from the hospital, and someone suggested [a local shelter], and I said, well, I've been there before. So I came back out here, and I'm rehabilitating.

One man, Marty, said he contracted AIDS in prison, resulting in an overall decline in his health. At the time of his interview, Marty had difficulty with basic life functions. Although he arguably would have received better care for his illness in prison, he wanted to die a free man:

AIDS, man, I found out [that I had contracted it] a year ago. My whole life, man, I never had a girlfriend. I fucked a lot of punks in the penitentiary. I spent twelve years of my life, never one year, out in one, in, out two weeks, in. . . . I've fucked a lot of men in the ass, never got fucked. Been in prison since I was sixteen. . . . Actually, I don't have to ask nobody for nothing. I'd come out

and take it, but I can't do any more time. . . . I'm just throwing up yellow mucus. I got diarrhea, I can't hold my bowels. I gotta shit now. I have to always—I go in 7–11 stores, like yesterday, I gotta keep napkins in case I have to go somewhere and use the restroom, man. . . . I'm gonna die. And I don't want to die in prison.

Fred, a man in his late fifties, said that he was staying at a homeless shelter because he was having medical problems and did not want to pay the two thousand dollar deductible on his insurance to receive treatment. The shelter seemed to be his way of addressing the potential financial problems his illness might cause him if he were to spend an extended period in a hospital, or if he were to try recovering from his illness by himself:

By coming into a program like this, I can do volunteer work at [the shelter], and at the same time I can go through Clark County and have [them] pick up my medical bills, and, therefore, I'm not stuck with the two thousand dollars and also I have a place to recuperate and I have other people who can look after me. . . . [S]ince this was the first illness I had had in quite a number of years, I didn't feel like I should really pay two thousand dollars up front plus all the other bills as well, and then I didn't know how long I would take to heal, and I was getting estimates anywhere from six weeks to six months, and in that case I figured well, why should I burden all of the cost myself? Since the state of Nevada is very poor when it comes to any sort of insurance or funding the state itself will do. . . . [O]ther states, if you don't have proper insurance coverage and so forth, the state will help. . . . Nevada is not one of the better ones for that.

Fred indicates that his use of a homeless shelter was the direct result of a poorly structured healthcare system that demands payment from those who have money. By becoming “homeless,” though, Fred can have more of his bills paid for by the county government, a plan that might allow him to keep some of his savings. This seems, not like the plan of a person with a lot of money, but more like a carefully



planned “choice” of someone without medical insurance and afraid of facing similar bills in the future.

Beyond injuries or illness that preceded a man’s homelessness, I also encountered several instances of men having become sick or injured once they had become homeless. While these illnesses or injuries were not an initial cause of their homelessness, the problems caused by their new illness and/or injuries became part of the larger series of problems inhibiting them from gaining a place to live.

Jeff, for example, was angry that he could not find any dentists willing to work on credit. He began telling me about the problem in general terms:

You can’t go in there and pay them so much down and do the work and pay them the rest of the money. They just don’t do it anymore. What happens to the working poor who can’t afford five hundred dollars, a hundred dollars a shot to get a tooth fixed? You go through pain or lose your teeth.

Although his explanation was initially (and somewhat abstractly) stated in the third person, Jeff finally began grimacing and then stated, “I have a bad tooth.”

During three of the interviews I conducted, the men stopped talking momentarily to rub their feet and legs, actions they said were necessary to alleviate pains from all of the walking they had had to do since becoming homeless. When I asked Ronald about his sudden cry of pain and rubbing of his foot, he simply said, “Do too much walking, get pains.” A homeless services provider also told me that foot problems and dental problems were two basic yet insidious health issues faced by local homeless men.

In addition to the men who noted foot and tooth pain during interviews, I regularly noticed that men I spoke with would be missing several teeth. During my research I learned that if I wanted to give a man food, the best idea was to give him something soft. Early in my research I offered one of the men an apple and was confused when he turned me down. Another man later told me that because of his bad teeth he simply could not eat apples anymore. Later, when I gave another man a hamburger, a food I thought was considerably softer,

he still picked out only the softest parts of the bread and crushed the meat with his hands to eat it, throwing away the rest. Although these may seem less important problems to a person with a place to live, the impact of such chronic foot or dental problems can be devastating to a homeless man. For example, recurring dental pain makes it difficult to eat a varied diet, affecting a man's overall nutrition and health. Foot problems are also quite disabling to men who usually have few transportation options other than walking. Overtaxing such injuries might then compound a man's other problems: for example, by making it painful to work manual labor jobs or walk several blocks, or at times miles, in Las Vegas, to access different social services such as soup lines and shelters.

The men occasionally expressed other health concerns about using the services provided by charitable agencies. Several of the men I spoke with who used nightly shelters expressed concern over their shelters' unsanitary conditions. Bob, who as I mentioned has hepatitis C, said that when he first became homeless he had stayed in a shelter that he felt had poor hygiene. He worried about growing sicker from his surroundings:

Getting back to this place, the homeless place. The hygiene is very poor here. I don't know if the health department has anything to do with this, but with my illness especially, a blood-borne illness through blood transfusions or dirty needles, you have a lot of communicable diseases here, and it's filthy here.

Even men who were seemingly homeless for reasons not related to health were at times concerned about the unsanitary conditions in shelters. Bill, who seemed to be homeless because he had come to Las Vegas without enough money and was unable quickly to find a job as a waiter, worried about contracting tuberculosis from the conditions he saw in the shelter he used. He explained these concerns to me after I had asked him what life was like inside his current shelter:

**Bill:** You know, they feed you breakfast, and then you have to take a shower, and then you kind of just stay in this like, bunk-house? Like a little barracks, right? With no inside plumbing. It's

like an outhouse. You know, it's there for you to go to the bathroom.

**Kurt:** Oh.

**Bill:** Now, you know what scares me the most about these places, right, is contracting like, TB?

**Kurt:** Really?

**Bill:** You know, this is what crossed my mind. You know, like to get my health card? You've got to take a TB test, right?

**Kurt:** Yeah, for your job.

**Bill:** Yeah, you know, but what I've learned, my career, if I got TB or something.

**Kurt:** Uh huh.

**Bill:** Yeah, you know.

**Kurt:** Yeah, it would screw a lot of things up.

**Bill:** Yeah.

**Kurt:** And they don't do any kind of check for you to stay at these places? [pointing back at Shelter x] . . .

**Bill:** No . . .

**Kurt:** . . . Because they couldn't . . .

**Bill:** They couldn't. You know, it takes four days for the test. But you know, it's like hepatitis, it's like, and so, [laughing] I don't use their bathrooms that often. That make sense?

In addition to wanting shelters to provide a more sanitary environment, several other men expressed concern over the nutritional value of the meals they were receiving at different local shelters. The comments of three men from my research summarize key problems homeless men often expressed concerning meals served by local shelters. First, Ziggy once told me that at one particular shelter, "the only meal you get out of them . . . is not befitting to be called a meal, in my opinion." Second, Jeff, who earlier mentioned having dental problems, said that at his shelter, a "typical breakfast is an ounce of cereal, half a pint of milk, [a] cup of coffee, and maybe a sweet roll that's five days old." He complained that "they expect you to go out and work eight hours on that" and that the bag lunch, with a bologna sandwich, was simply "not enough food for the people here." Finally,

Jerome got to the heart of the problem expressed by several homeless men, succinctly stating: “The meals they serve here have absolutely no nutritional value. They will sustain you, but that’s about it.”

The men’s consistent comments about the poor quality of food in Las Vegas shelters are ironic considering the city’s reputation for world-class dining and all-you-can-eat buffets, which are an integral part of most resorts. Sue, an administrator of one charitable organization providing services for homeless men in the city, told me that although it appeared that leftovers from such resorts might be an important source of good food for homeless men, there were many problems with resorts donating leftover food to homeless shelters:

The hotels actually run those buffets far more efficiently than what it looks like. . . . There’s not as much wasted as what you could easily think. And after it goes on the buffet lines it goes to the employees’ lounge. . . . [O]ne of the benefits and perks is eating this great food as an employee. Even though there’s a Good Samaritan law that protects the donor, the food donor [still might] get nervous, [thinking] “Okay, I’ve got this prepared food [and I’ll] donate it to somebody. [But] I don’t know that they’re keeping it temperature controlled. I don’t know if bacteria’s growing, I don’t know if it’s refrigerated or not, I don’t know”—all those unknowns. And all they need is a hotel’s name in the media that says they gave away all this food and . . . someone got sick, or someone died. . . . The [Good] Samaritan law protects the donor to a degree on that [but] . . . [i]t’s still a scary area to go into.

The other part of that is when they have it . . . [t]he recipient needs to . . . pick it up on the spot, and sometimes we don’t have the resources to do that. We may not have a truck, we may not have a driver, we don’t certainly have a refrigerated truck. So there’s a transportation issue. So we said, okay, if we could make the commitment that we would have vehicles and staff and all that stuff ready, could we then open the doors and say, “Come on, come on”? Maybe, maybe not. . . . The other challenge we have is, can this be consumed right away? [An additional problem is that] if you know you’ve got x amount of meals you need to

prepare every day, [and] if the donation doesn't come in, [then] what do you do? I mean, you still have to operate, you still have to cook, you still have to be prepared, so we have to do that anyway, then when this food comes in, is it extra? Well, then if it's extra, is it enough for everybody? Probably not. Then how do you determine if you've got four hundred men in the program that you've got enough food for fifty or a hundred, which fifty or a hundred gets it? . . . So it's not as simple as saying, "All leftover food from the buffets ought to go to a shelter," end of conversation.

There are several health-related problems, therefore, that some men indicated were related to their homelessness. Men such as Bob, Marty, and Fred seemed to indicate that the healthcare system in Nevada did not or could not provide them with enough help so that each could avoid becoming homeless or avoid using services for homeless men. Others claimed that health problems they had developed since becoming homeless, or trepidation at ruining their health from using services for homeless persons, were inhibiting their ability to end their homelessness. Men complained about the nutritional quality of the food at shelters, but from the perspective of at least one homeless services provider, the appearance of limitless food at many Las Vegas resort buffets cannot currently be considered a resource for providing better food at the shelters.

## Addictions

Many researchers of homelessness have documented that alcohol and drug abuse and/or addictions seem to play a part in homelessness nationwide. In 1992 Shlay and Rossi found that 29 percent of homeless persons across the United States had a "detox experience" and 27 percent indicated having an "alcohol addiction," both of which are potential indicators of a drug or alcohol problem (1992, 138). Gambling, however, was not evaluated as a particular problem with homeless men in Shlay and Rossi's study, probably because gambling was not as widespread nationally then as it is today. There are more than fifty

Gamblers Anonymous meetings a week in Las Vegas (Gottdiener et al. 1999). A number of the men I interviewed discussed having gambled, and some of these considered themselves problem gamblers.

Las Vegas is, of course, well known for promoting vice. Both gambling and alcohol are legal and available in the city twenty-four hours a day, year-round. While for some this type of environment seemed to be part of the attraction of Las Vegas, others (including Jerry) saw various addictions, including drug, alcohol, and gambling, as a primary reason those around them had become homeless.

Tyrone put it bluntly: "I'll tell you the two main reasons people are here [in the shelter]: gambling and drugs." Bob concurred, saying, "I notice a lot of people sleep here [in the shelter] because they have gambling and alcohol and drugs [issues]." After eighteen months at one shelter, Matthew noted that "some people gamble to the point [that] they end up here. Some people are heavily involved in drugs or alcohol and they end up down here." Other homeless men, such as Steve, made more generalized statements about those around them. Steve, like several researchers of homelessness, said that among the homeless people he knew "you have the alcoholics and drug addicts who because of their addiction cannot break the cycle where they're at," finally resulting in an inability to keep a house or apartment.

Ziggy offered a slightly more complicated explanation of the relationship between addictions and homelessness among some men he had observed. He said that some of the men who stayed at a shelter annex by paying a few dollars a night were physically or mentally disabled and were receiving monthly payments from Social Security. The amount they received might not allow them to afford a house or an apartment but was more than enough to secure a three- to five-dollar-a-night bunk at a shelter for a month at a time. Ziggy said:

They'll get their check during the month and they'll pay ninety dollars to stay here for the whole month, and that guarantees them a meal every day and they can take the rest of that four or five or six hundred bucks and go out within a week or less and blow it. . . . They just sit around and wait for that check to come, to go out and "hoo-rah" for a week.

Matthew, however, viewed some of those same men discussed by Ziggy in a different light. Instead of wasting the majority of their disability check on a week-long party, as Ziggy indicated, Matthew believed that some of those same disabled men were older veterans, at times marginally employed, and lived hand to mouth:

And a lot of these older men, it's really sad because they're World War II veterans, Korean veterans, a lot of Vietnam veterans down here, which is my peer group. Some of them down here are on disability and they stay at the pay annex . . . and they have the showers, you know, and some of these guys have jobs that don't pay enough to pay rent, not even a weekly apartment in town. So the pay annex is good for them.

The men I interviewed, then, had different ideas about what subgroups among homeless men might be more likely to have gambling, alcohol, or substance abuse problems. Such differences among homeless men should be taken into account when creating programs or policies to assist them.

Among homeless men with addictions it is important to distinguish when those addictions first became apparent. Some I interviewed said that many homeless men experiencing substance and/or alcohol addictions have known for years that they have those problems. Matthew, however, indicated that some men who arrive in Las Vegas with relatively little money might get caught up in an environment where gambling is legal and unwittingly discover they have a gambling problem, which then leads to their homelessness:

If you come here, and you come from another state and get off that bus or get off that plane, a lot of people go downtown or go to the Strip, that eight hundred, nine hundred dollars you saved to start you off, they hit these casinos and it's gone just like that. They find themselves without a place to live, without anything to eat.

Although many men blamed other men's homelessness on alcoholism, drug use, or excessive gambling, several of these same men did not explain their own homelessness as addiction related. Besides Jerry, only

one other man I interviewed, Albert, started our discussion by pointing to his substance addiction as precipitating his homelessness:

I'll be truly and totally honest with you. I was married for seventeen years, and I started using drugs and I started drinking alcohol. And before I knew it, the alcohol and drugs just totally overruled my life, man. I mean, I used to be a chef at [a Strip hotel] for five years, I was a chef at [another Strip hotel] for two years, . . . I've been [in the] Culinary [Union for] thirteen years. But through the drugs and alcohol, it drug me out here to this point where all I'm doing is living day to day. And I pray to God and I seek out the Lord to try to change my life.

Many homeless men I spoke to gave gambling as an important explanation for why several of their peers had become homeless. Again, however, few of the individuals themselves indicated gambling as an important contributing factor in their homelessness. Phillip was one exception:

I've got to stay out of the casinos, 'cause that's [a] weakness with me, so I got to stay out of there. . . . [M]yself, I'll sit down at the table and I'll stay there until I'm broke. That's one of the things that keeps me homeless, unfortunately. So I've got to get to where I don't go in casinos no more.

The candor displayed by Albert and Phillip, however, was unique. In four interviews with other men, several other factors relating to their homelessness were discussed before each mentioned that he considered himself to be an alcoholic or drug addict. Only toward the end of his interview did Larry, for example, discuss his drinking patterns as alcoholism, and only at the end of a list of other reasons why he became homeless:

Like I say, it's a vicious circle. If you have some sort of disability, or in my particular case my education isn't updated, therefore I can't really get a job in my profession. Then again, I had medical problems on top of that. I'm blessed with the simple fact that I was in the military and I am honorably discharged, because I can



go to the VA hospital if I have to. . . . But there are some of these guys that are out here that aren't in that situation. They have no place to go, basically. They need a medical system, and they need to basically address the fact that there are homeless people here and some of them are mentally ill and they just basically—you know, myself, I'm an alcoholic, I'll admit it. I have been for quite a few years. I'll get off and there's times I might go, like I said, as long as a year and a half without even drinking a thing. Then all of a sudden, boom, one day something will happen and I'll jump back onto the bottle for a week or two. That's my biggest problem right now. That's something I have to deal with on my own.

Men often avoided directly stating that their homelessness was the result of an alcohol, drug, or gambling problem. Occasionally, though, I had cause to believe there might be more to a man's story than he told me at first. Ronald, for example, initially said he was homeless because he had "no money." Because I had heard his story in another context a week earlier I knew his homelessness involved other factors, including an arrest for Driving Under the Influence (DUI). I present a transcription of part of our first official interview below:

**Kurt:** I met [Ronald] last week. He was talking with a few guys about how he became homeless, and I wanted to ask him again what those circumstances were.

**Ronald:** The reason I'm here?

**Kurt:** Yeah.

**Ronald:** No money.

**Kurt:** I think [last week] you mentioned something about losing a job and your family being in another shelter, too.

**Ronald:** Yeah. I got terminated from my job, and I had enough money saved for three weeks' rent on a weekly basis that I was paying my rent.

**Kurt:** You were staying in a weekly motel?

**Ronald:** It wasn't a motel, it was an apartment, but you could pay weekly or monthly. I was there eight months and paid on a weekly basis, a hundred and sixty dollars a week, which averaged

about six hundred forty dollars a month. I had a good job. I was making \$24.66 an hour.

**Kurt:** What did you do?

**Ronald:** I'm a concrete cutter; I cut concrete. But I went out on Friday night, I got pulled over for drunk driving, impounded the company truck. I went out the next day and I lost my job.

**Kurt:** So you were driving the company car when you were stopped for DUI?

**Ronald:** Yeah, exactly.

Ronald's initial explanation of his homelessness, therefore, was probably his way to avoid discussing another, more embarrassing cause. Other interviews reveal that some men attempted to downplay the extent to which alcohol had contributed to their homelessness. Two other men I spoke with told me about their patterns of substance abuse only after the taped interview had ended, one saying he had been addicted to cocaine for years, the other saying he was an alcoholic. What seems important about this trend is that, although homeless men are frequently represented as personal failures because of a lack of self-control, most of the homeless men I spoke to did not voluntarily represent themselves in this manner. This might be because, as Jackson Underwood, a researcher on homelessness in California, phrased it, "everyone likes to feel competent and we all tell stories that put us in a favorable light, both for our audience and for ourselves" (1993, 56). One problem with asking homeless men about why they became homeless, then, is that humans generally do not like to admit having done things that they believe might make them look stupid, as if they lack sound judgment, or as if they lack self-control. Such decisions are particularly painful when a person seems to have suffered a profound consequence for his or her actions, such as enduring homelessness.

There might be an additional explanation for the reluctance of these men to mention alcoholism, drug addiction, or gambling: perhaps they did not want to discuss those issues because of the general public's stereotyped notions of individual loss of control leading to homelessness. The tendency toward downplaying substance or gam-

bling addiction in my interviews, however, deserved further consideration because it contradicts the work of homeless researchers like John Fiske (1991) and Howard Bahr and Theodore Caplow (1973), who theorized that homeless men frequently reject middle-class values. I do not doubt that the men I spoke to are rejecting some dominant social values in practice. However, they also were very hesitant to admit, much less emphasize, substance or gambling addiction as a key to explaining why they were homeless. There are at least two possible explanations for wanting to downplay or hide addictions. One could be that these homeless men seemed to retain dominant values against alcoholism, gambling, or drug addiction, or at least seemed to hold values against these addictions when they interfered with a person's ability to maintain a stable living arrangement. Another explanation could be that these men have learned that if they admit to having an addiction they will get less assistance or sympathetic understanding from people who might otherwise help them.

No matter what the reason men have for downplaying or hiding addiction, those in charge of homeless shelters in Las Vegas tend to view homeless men as lacking important forms of self-control. Bill, for example, stated that various shelters use more-or-less stringent methods to ensure that everyone in the shelter is alcohol-free; and although he drank occasionally, he implicitly understood the rationale underlying this policy:

**Bill:** Mainly . . . they do Breathalyzer on you, right?

**Kurt:** They do Breathalyzer [testing] on everybody?

**Bill:** Yeah, over there, where we just came from [a shelter].

**Kurt:** OK.

**Bill:** Well, over at [a different shelter] they don't, but if they catch you drinking they'll kick you out. Which is cool, right?

Jeff also explained to me his shelter's zero tolerance alcohol policy, indicating that shelters rigorously screen potential residents for alcohol use because many shelter programs are developed around the notion that alcohol or drugs might have seriously contributed to a person's homelessness. He indicated that, instead of actually enforcing a policy

of zero tolerance, the shelter where he acted as security might allow one violation of the alcohol rules before kicking a person out.

You come back, you get a chance to explain yourself to the director of personnel, and they'll keep an eye on you, and [if it happens again] you're kicked out of the program. But you're told that when you walk in, so you know it's a zero tolerance on alcohol and drugs. If you were out there on the streets because of alcohol, and you try to make a commitment to get back on your feet, you're going through a program to help you get back on your feet, then you have to believe what caused you to fall on your ass the first time, and that's the alcohol or the drugs. If you don't do it, this program's not going to help you. You can go through this program and get out and you'll be back on your ass, back here in three months because you haven't given up drinking and you haven't given up drugs.

Matthew, who also worked as shelter security, once explained to me what was happening as a man he worked with at the shelter tried to check in after drinking:

**Kurt:** We were just interrupted. There was a small incident and [Matthew ] . . . told me about . . . how he needed to address a situation.

**Matthew:** One of my security guys, he was intoxicated. He was treated just like anybody else in the program that comes up intox. This is his second offense. Two weeks ago I had him reduced to a corporal, from sergeant to corporal, and a week's pay taken away from him. This is his second offense, so it's a possibility this time he'll be discharged from the program.

Jeff's and Matthew's statements indicate that men staying in Las Vegas shelters quickly learn not only their alcohol policies but the levels at which they are enforced and the penalties for infractions. Men I interviewed seemed to have mixed reactions to shelters demanding their clients' sobriety. While some men understood and tolerated the limits placed on their behavior by shelters, others seemed determined to continue drinking before attempting to enter a shelter and would

either try to hide their behavior or would simply deal with the consequences of breaking the rules in a given shelter. Mark also noted that, ironically, although shelters demand sobriety and provide a place for alcoholics to dry out, they frequently could not test for other drugs, either because the tests are too expensive or because the drugs used are difficult to test for. Such selective enforcement of a zero tolerance policy means shelters ultimately experience limited success in attempting to control the substance use of men on the premises.

In one example of a man's substance abuse while staying in a shelter, Larry said during an interview that he had been homeless off and on for years and was a daily marijuana user. At one point while talking he asked me about the Breathalyzer policies of a local shelter. He had consumed some alcohol earlier and was now trying to figure out if enough time had elapsed to allow him to pass the test for admittance. We both went to the shelter together later that evening, and we were both given Breathalyzer tests upon entry, which we passed. Larry told me that the test must have been fairly liberal, because he had consumed three beers that day. After we were inside, he added that he always kept marijuana on or near him. "Before I check into shelter," Larry said, "I make sure I have more with me and [hide it] where I know where I have access to get some if I need some."

Albert said he could use cocaine and stay at local shelters with a zero tolerance policy. He said that many of the men and women he used drugs with were the same people he would see at shelters and at a nearby plasma donation center. About donating plasma while high, Albert said:

I pass every one of their [tests]—I don't know whether they're checking this stuff. They say that they check it. . . . I've got signed papers that say that they do. But for three years I've been using crack cocaine and doing regular cocaine and smoking pot and drinking alcohol, and every time my test [from the plasma donation center] comes back, everything's okay.

In many of the above instances, there are clear indications that a man might have a drug, alcohol, or gambling problem, and in some instances a quite serious one. With other men, however, it was difficult

to ascertain the degree to which substance abuse or gambling was a contributing factor toward his becoming homeless. For some, an individual's substance abuse and/or gambling might have put into motion a series of other events, such as an arrest, the loss of a job, the depletion of savings, the dissolution of a marriage, and the severing of other family ties, each of which arguably promoted his homelessness. Conversely, any one of the aforementioned events could also have pushed a man from being a social drinker, drug user, or gambler to a habitual user and/or gambler. Determining a precise cause-and-effect relationship between addiction and homelessness becomes even more difficult by the time a man becomes homeless. Once homeless, some of the men I interviewed seemed to resort to substance abuse or gambling as a form of escape from the problems associated with homelessness, or as a way to tolerate an intolerable situation. Jerry, for example, earlier indicated that the use of alcohol or drugs is frequently of some comfort to those who end up homeless. Alcohol was perhaps the one "over-the-counter medication" that was both easy to obtain and most effective at numbing a number of pains, both physical and mental.

## Mental Illness

The problem of trying to accurately determine how many homeless persons in the United States are mentally ill is well documented. In their national overview of surveys of homeless persons, Shlay and Rossi (1992, 138) estimated that approximately one-third of homeless persons currently experience some form of mental illness. But Snow, Baker, Anderson, and Martin (1986) found that only 10 percent of their sample of homeless persons in Austin, Texas, were mentally ill. Such diverse findings show that how one defines mental illness and decides what counts as an indicator of the condition will affect the degree to which mental illness is "found" among any group of homeless males.

Although I have no training in psychiatry, I encountered during fieldwork homeless men whose behaviors seemed, in my unprofessional opinion, to be symptomatic of mental illness. I experienced

great difficulty in trying to interview these individuals, and my requests were frequently turned down. After approaching one man who was gesticulating and verbalizing to no one in particular, for example, he simply told me, "I'm busy." Another asked me for change, whereupon I offered to buy him lunch and asked if I could talk with him about his homelessness. He took me up on the offer, but most of our "conversation" consisted of his turning his head to the side and mumbling when he spoke. He also refused to let me use a tape recorder or take notes.<sup>2</sup>

However, one man who I believe was mentally ill granted me an interview and allowed me to spend several hours with him. I ran into Jorge, a charming man in his late fifties, several times during the course of my research. He always fascinated me with his perspective and stories:

I have my brains completely controlled. There is a secret hospital. There are medical doctors who pick me up and take me there. I have my brains, my sight, and everything controlled, but I have my own system for knowing things. They are criminals from the Nazi Party who control my brains. I don't remember anything. If I remembers anything it is because I have espionage with my enemy. [He began laughing.]

At another point, he explained the medicinal benefits of Coca-Cola:

Coca-Cola prevents heart attack. I told a doctor at a hospital this and he told me, "You are crazy." But then his nurses gave Coca-Cola to all the patients with arterial sclerosis, and they started getting better. When you drink Coca-Cola, your whole body gets better, your circulation. I told a woman who was dying to drink Coca-Cola every day, and she lived for another ten years. You know when she died? The day she stopped drinking Coca-Cola!

As a researcher, I found Jorge's instability harmless. But as friendly as he usually was, Jorge was not always easy to talk to. During our infrequent meetings after my initial interview he occasionally seemed to think I was not really a researcher but a spy who wanted to kill him. "I think you are important people," he said. "Are you sure you are not

from a newspaper? Because, please don't be offended if I tell the truth, but if you want to kill me, please shoot me now."

As several studies indicate, some amount of mental illness seems evident with some homeless men. How much mental illness there is among homeless men in Las Vegas and the degree to which mental illness contributes to a given man's homelessness are debatable issues. Again from the perspective of a layperson, other than a few individuals like Jorge (most of whom did not want to be interviewed), the majority of the men I encountered in Las Vegas did not seem to be experiencing serious mental illness. Only Sam admitted having been placed in a "psycho ward" once for a few weeks. This brief institutionalization occurred after years of personal problems and episodic violence within his family.

I had some difficulty at times understanding what Sam was trying to say during our interview:

I have a sixteen-year-old son and he was just kind of drawing apart from me and becoming aloof, and I think my wife was interested in somebody else, so she kind of let it be known that she wanted me out of there, and I kind of caused the thing to come to a head by telling my son I didn't think he loved me and I grabbed a knife and acted like I was going to kill myself, which I knew I wouldn't have, but I committed suicide before and I was just getting too dependent on them and I was sucking love from my son.

When Sam said he had "committed suicide" before, I thought he meant that he had *attempted* suicide before. However, he could also have meant he that had committed *homicide* before. Given the amount of violence he had told me about facing in his life, I decided not to ask for clarification.

My interview with Paul, who I suspect had brain damage, was also confusing. He initially explained to me that he had lost the full use of one arm from a farming accident when he was sixteen. Although he contradicted himself several times during our interview, he smiled often and seemed very happy. When I turned the tape recorder off, however, he told me about the difficulties he experienced with move-



ment and thought since a suicide attempt with a gun. I then asked him if I could turn the recorder back on while he retold the story:

**Kurt:** So you were telling me about how your arm is unable to move, and you were telling me what happened with playing a guitar.

**Paul:** Yeah, well, that was due to, I was listening to Santana, and trying to play it, but I shot myself in the head. I don't know if I was stupid or what. I don't know if I'm suicidal or what, I don't know. I think I wanted to feel the pain, man, just to see what it was like.

**Kurt:** Were you depressed at the time?

**Paul:** Uh, no. I wasn't depressed at all. I just said I was going to shoot myself, and I asked a friend to bring my gun, and I lit myself up, man.

**Kurt:** Where did you hit yourself in the head?

**Paul:** Right there [points to forehead].

**Kurt:** Oh, you did?

**Paul:** Yeah, it's right there. If you put your finger there, you can feel it. That—

**Kurt:** [I declined to touch his head]. I trust you, yeah, but—

**Paul:** I'm not a liar, one thing I ain't.

**Kurt:** No, I believe you. So, did they remove the bullet then?

**Paul:** Yeah, they took the bullet out. I was in surgery several hours.

**Kurt:** How old were you when this happened?

**Paul:** Oh, about twenty-one. Yeah.

**Kurt:** So you hadn't left Lincoln, then?

**Paul:** Oh, no, no, no, this is [a small town in] Colorado. I did a little traveling in my time. Yeah, I did. The streets slowed me down some. Being I was run over and everything. Yeah, slowed me down quite a bit.

**Kurt:** But you seem like you're getting around okay now.

**Paul:** Oh, yeah, I'm happy. Yeah. I'm happy.

**Kurt:** Good.

**Paul:** Nothing gets me down, man.

**Kurt:** That's good. That's good. What kind of gun was it, if I may ask?

**Paul:** Oh, it was a twenty-two snub nose.

**Kurt:** And you owned that? That was your gun?

**Paul:** Yeah, yeah, I owned it, yeah. So, they can't get me for suicide, because it was bought and paid for.

**Kurt:** Well, that is an amazing story. It's not every day you talk to somebody who survived that.

**Paul:** Yeah, oh, yeah. Well, you know when you want to die, you just put your hand in your own—in your own life, and I figured it would go through my brain, man, and unfortunately it didn't. I'm still here.

Paul had also mentioned using drugs when he was younger. Larry, who I discussed earlier as using marijuana on a daily basis, indicated that he had seen psychiatrists and had been prescribed a host of antidepressant medications. Like Jorge, Larry told a number of stories that blurred what could have been real events with the fantastic. He claimed that he had traveled through most of the United States and Caribbean and that his family was wealthy, and he indicated that he might also have been receiving a disability payment from Social Security:

**Larry:** All you need to be is my psychiatrist and you work for the federal government. So I am crazy, and it's all because of Federal Reserve.

**Kurt:** The Federal Reserve?

**Larry:** It's because of them I am crazy. Because they have documentation that says that if I say I'm crazy, I receive Federal Reserve forms.

When Larry referred to Federal Reserve forms, I was unsure if he was talking about receiving money from the government, receiving forms regarding his attempts at requesting assistance from the federal government, or something else real or unreal.

Although there are undoubtedly a greater percentage of mentally ill individuals among homeless persons, studies indicate that deter-

mining the degree to which the illness has led to overall increases in homelessness is also complicated. Segal and Baumohl (1980), for example, indicate that deinstitutionalization is an important contributing factor in explaining the rise in the number of mentally ill homeless persons.<sup>3</sup> However, Hopper, Susser, and Conover (1985) criticize such research, saying that there was a significant time lag between major periods of deinstitutionalization in the United States and an increased appearance of homeless mentally ill persons. The authors believe that the gradual reduction in affordable housing, such as single room occupancy hotels, throughout the 1960s and early 1970s and a lack of other housing options eventually caused deinstitutionalized persons to become homeless (Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989, 59; Hoch and Slayton 1989; Hopper, Susser, and Conover 1985).

It seems that in Las Vegas, as well as in most large cities across the United States, few if any community-based resources for homeless persons who are mentally ill were in place after deinstitutionalization. One homeless services provider, Becky, explained that mental illness among the homeless is “probably a major problem everywhere, but in Las Vegas it’s definitely a major problem. . . . There is not enough service for the mentally ill homeless . . . [or] housing for them.”

Becky explained that there were some community-based mental health programs in the city, such as the Path and Pathways Program run by the Salvation Army, which she said “are some of the most comprehensive programs for the homeless down here.” She added, however, that “even they can’t house as many people that need to be housed that are mentally ill. I don’t know how we’re going to solve that issue other than to get into more funding.”

Another homeless services provider, Sue, stated that in Nevada there seemed to be more funding for social service programs directed at homelessness rather than at mental illness:

There are not many resources nationally either that deal with it, and we’re not any different on a local level. We’re not a shining star in that arena. Part of it is how society looks at it, part of it again relates to money, part of it is funding sources. There’s not much money to fund mental illness, but there’s more money to

fund [help for the] homeless . . . so which part of the pot do you pull the money out of?

Becky also bluntly indicated that the program she ran, which was directed toward a more general homeless population, also experienced difficulty in providing specific help for this population:

Many times homeless mentally ill people get put out of programs because they act mentally ill. And it's a reality: most places [shelters] are not equipped staff-wise to handle the mentally ill. You have certain amount of line staff that are not experienced enough to handle the mentally ill. We get many of them in here actively psychotic, suicidal, homicidal, both, the dual diagnosis, schizophrenic, so you have to be able to have enough staff around that knows that population enough to not escalate the issues, who are more tolerant. Mental illness is a problem.

Sue said that, by default, mentally ill homeless persons often were simply just another part of the overall diversity of the homeless population her program tried to serve with limited resources:

The challenge that programs like ours have is you're dealing with . . . all diverse [people], different background, different personalities, different character, different value systems, different everything. So now you take that conglomeration, put them all together under one roof, and then maintain sanity, maintain organization where you're not—it's real tough.

Although the service providers interviewed above seemed to indicate that mental illness preceded and even caused much of the homelessness they encountered, one homeless man, Ziggy, offered a different explanation. In the following interview excerpt, he explained how the stress of homelessness seemed enough to “drive you crazy”:

**Kurt:** I meant to ask you about mental illness. There's a common perception that this is a big problem with homeless people.

**Ziggy:** It's the very biggest. I've been in this program for six months, maybe. I've seen thousands of homeless men. Homelessness itself can drive you crazy. I've seen an old man in the

street—I'll give you an example. When I first came to Vegas after I lost my job, when I lost my car, with the magazine, I worked for a T-shirt company, selling T-shirts on the Strip, and I met this one guy who was on the streets—totally sane, totally normal. And as time went on as he got dirtier and dirtier and hungrier and hungrier, he started losing it. I mean, your self-respect goes, then your mind goes. It could be temporary, but when hunger, desperation, people see you, give this reaction to you, depression, your self-esteem is gone, your pride is gone. You start just lashing out mentally, and all of a sudden you lose perception of reality. You really don't care about what you look like or you smell like, or what people think of you. You're in your own little world. In a matter of months I saw this guy [go] from a normal person to about an idiot. A guy who didn't bathe, who didn't care anymore, who had lost sixty pounds in a matter of months. And no one cared. He wandered the Strip and no one cared. I mean, if even a cop, somebody, would bring this guy over here [to the corridor where services for the homeless are], but no one bothered to tell him about it.

To some extent, Ziggy's thoughts that someone should have intervened in this particular situation parallel those of Bachrach (cited in Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989, 59), who believes one should distinguish between two groups: homeless persons who have mental illness and the mentally ill homeless. The latter group may be defined as those who have at one point been referred to a psychiatrist. The former group may seem mentally ill but have had no contact with a mental health facility. The labeling of mental illness by professionals, although imperfect, would seem to be a much better indicator for assessing the rate of mental illness among homeless persons than the judgment of laypersons.

The pitfalls of laypersons trying to determine which homeless men suffer from mental illness and require special forms of assistance is also evident in the title of one research article on homelessness, "On the precariousness of measuring insanity in insane contexts" (Snow, Baker, and Anderson 1988). Many people who have regular housing

might look at homelessness as an insane way of living, and it becomes easy to characterize many of the things homeless people do to “get by” as potential indicators of insanity. Homeless men might be stereotyped as mentally ill in part because their survival strategies are radically different from the way of life followed by most people who have housing and steady employment.<sup>4</sup>

## Loss of Regular Employment

Perhaps the single most important factor men discussed in explaining their homelessness was the loss of or inability to maintain full-time jobs. The loss of employment among homeless men is often one part of a complicated web of problems they faced on the road to homelessness. At times the loss of a job was preceded by another event, such as the death of a family member, a divorce, or health issues. To give only one example, Bill had quit his job and moved from another Sunbelt city because of a failed relationship, and in Las Vegas he was having difficulty finding a new job as a waiter.

Bill’s story of coming to Las Vegas without much money and then trying to find a job as a waiter (which he believed would pay well and be an easy job to find) is a common phenomenon in Las Vegas, both among homeless and non-homeless residents. Becky, who provided social services for homeless men, believed that some people became homeless in Las Vegas because they thought that finding a job would be easy in a city with such expansive growth:

The way the city is represented across the United States, it’s like a Mecca of growth and development, and people come here looking for their American dream, and it’s not here, not like you would think, like you want. This is a tourist community, and if you don’t come prepared to live here, even though the cost of living is not bad here, many people come unprepared just because it’s all across the nation that we’re one of the fastest growing cities, you know, you can get a job here. Myths are just magnified, and it’s not happening.

Indeed, in Las Vegas, legends of valets, cocktail waitresses, and blackjack dealers who make fifty thousand dollars a year or more abound. As Las Vegas is one of the fastest growing urban areas in the nation, jobs in construction would also seem to be prevalent. However, the predominance of low-paying, low-skill service jobs concentrated in the city runs counter to the myth that employment opportunity and good wages exist for everyone. In a separate interview, Sue, who also provided services for the homeless, reiterated Becky's idea that many who come to Las Vegas hoping to find good-paying work quickly become disillusioned:

[At the shelter] we're dealing with a lot of people that came to Las Vegas with unrealistic expectations, 'cause to the outside world it practically does sound like we have gold on our streets, it sounds like it's just the flourishing place to be, so people come, and either they think they can get a job quicker than they can or they're not ready to deal with the lower wages that so many of our entry-level positions offer.

Many of the entry-level jobs in Las Vegas are in the service sector, which accounts for the largest number of jobs in Las Vegas. Nevada Department of Employment, Training, and Rehabilitation figures show that 47.5 percent of all industrial employment in 1994 was within the service sector; trade-related positions, the next highest source of employment, accounted for 19.8 percent; and government positions, 10.9 percent. Although this local trend reflects "a remarkable proportionate surge in service employment since the early 1970s" in the United States (Harvey 1990, 156), Las Vegas has an even larger percentage of service-sector employment than most of the nation because of the local predominance of the hotel and casino industry. Put simply, "Las Vegas . . . has more hotel and motel rooms than any other city in the nation," thus requiring armies of employees to help provide their services (Center for Business and Economic Research 1995).

Within the local service-sector categories of employment, hotel gaming and resort employment accounts for a full 60.4 percent of all jobs. The next highest categories within the service sector are the

“other service” category (15.4 percent) and business services (11.3 percent). A list of Las Vegas’s most popular jobs shows that a disproportionate percentage of workers in Las Vegas hold gaming and resort services positions. In 1996, retail sales was the number one occupation in the Las Vegas metropolitan area, with more than twenty thousand workers, followed by waitpersons, then cashiers, janitors and cleaners, general office clerks, and maids and housekeeping workers. Carpentry, a job many homeless men had worked or expressed an interest in, was eleventh on the list (Parker 1999).

The demand for such employment in Las Vegas is also far greater than the supply. Before even opening its doors in 1993, for example, the 5,005-room MGM Grand was inundated with more than 100,000 applications (Davis 1994). These employment trends have also undermined attempts at unionization in several resort casinos. In 1993, four thousand members of Culinary Union Workers Local 226 went on strike against the nonunion MGM Grand. This strike was one of several that have occurred in the city since corporate interests began taking over the industry once controlled by the Mafia. Such trends reflect what David Harvey calls the current economic period of “flexible accumulation” (1990, 147). As a small number of corporations increasingly control more capital, Harvey notes, employee unions have weakened and marginally employed persons can be underpaid more easily.

If the hotel and casino industry undermines unions, this reflects larger national trends. Harvey (1990, 192) notes that the general shift toward a service economy “increases inequalities of income, perhaps presaging the rise of a new aristocracy of labour as well as the emergence of an ill-remunerated and broadly disempowered under-class.” Although the city has annually employed thousands of new residents for the last several years, the vast majority of the most popular positions listed above offer low wages and require little in the way of education or skills. When the majority of jobs in an area such as Las Vegas involve limited and undervalued skills, such as hotel room cleaning, security, food preparation, food service, and gambling services, it is easy to find replacements in a competitive labor market or laborers who will work without union support.



These labor trends in Las Vegas certainly affected homeless men such as Bill. Eventually having gone through his savings while looking for work as a waiter in a resort, Bill began turning in applications for any job opening he saw related to the food-service industry. He soon found work at a pizza parlor and was paid minimum wage. However, as evidenced through the following excerpts from his diary, the frustration of his entry-level position combined with abusive treatment from a supervisor caused him to quit within a few days:

9/26

I saw a help wanted signh at a pizza joint got hired, start tomorrow . . .

9/28

My Job by [Bill] The food Is Fantastic Detroit style pizza Is Cool! Very Few Bugs For the side of town It's on. The work chalanging. I'm Lurning a lot. I have never spun Doe for pizza I've learned how to make a Calzone. My Boss I quit tomorrow! Scriming Buitch Cunt White trash! I'm making 4.25 hr. *No!* No mater what the pay nomater what the work I must and will be Treated with the respect and Dignity any Human Being Desurves. their is a diffrence between slacking off Being degraded and realy trying and Being Belittled becouse you Don't know Better So I'm not treated like the specal Human Artict Freind Spoled Bratt That I Am. That's ok. They don't know me. what's not ok is being cused out!! Who dumped the (I Hate to write it Beouse I don't say it) G. Damd coffee it's 11:30 we close at 12 don't dump the fucken coffie untill 12:00 I made it for me their better be another G. am coffie filters I made their coffie for me Don't ever dump the Fuken God Dame Coffie Untill after 12 *please!* I didn't know, she sint me home earley this night I messed up on ticked she came back cussing coping attitude I wouldn't let her Finish a sintance I keep interrupting her she keep saying don't interrupt me And I did the minite she yoused A cuse word At me I don't leasen semple as that is this is Las Vagas why are people so Faul. . . . But what I seen she is tipiucal to Vagas or mabe at 4.25 hr. she has this Right to feal above and cuss me at. *Enough* so much for that job.

Tomorrow I'm going to go to the owner look I'm going to Fight  
for 4.25 hr. No I'm going to Fight for dignity and my strength and  
God will Pule me through.

Next Job Please?

I hate Being Unemployed. the only Reason I'm going to owner  
is to face it like a man to be

*Respected!*

Two problems of using service-sector jobs as a way to address male homelessness are apparent from Bill's diary entries. First, this type of job involves entry-level fast-food work—a job, Bill indicates, where his managers and fellow employees did not feel much of a need to treat him decently. Second, the final entry also indicates that Bill's masculinity is being compromised through his low pay, his treatment by a female supervisor, and his humiliation at having to ask for his job back the next day. Bill eventually found another near–minimum wage job, working part-time at a security company.

Other men also seem to have employment histories focused on either semi-skilled or unskilled work, leaving them more open to a reduction in wages, replacement, or elimination. Matthew, for example, described becoming homeless after his wages significantly declined while working a job not unlike the one Bill took after his job at the pizza parlor:

I came [to a local shelter] after working four-and-a-half years on a job here in town as security. I even had my own apartment.

We had a new general manager come in who wanted to cut my salary from almost twelve dollars an hour back to eight-fifty. . . .

I couldn't agree to that. . . . I was laid off for six months drawing my unemployment, and I found another job six months later,

but the income was not the same. . . . [B]y dropping in income,

I could pay my rent, but I had little money for anything else.

Ziggy, who earlier mentioned working for a magazine and then selling T-shirts on the Las Vegas Strip, also discussed difficulties with ongoing local employment. He later told me he had successfully ended his homelessness with the help of a local charitable organization by

working for them at a low-skilled position, but the same organization had recently fired him, and he had become homeless again.

Clyde believed he had been laid off and forced into homelessness because of changes in the U.S. economy:

I got laid off in Los Angeles, and that's what brought me here.

I was a supervisor in a factory. The new word, though, is downsizing. If you're not bilingual, you're at a disadvantage. That was a factor in the discharge.

Matthew, Ziggy, and Clyde were all African American. Mike Davis (1994) has noted that Las Vegas seems to have two types of resort employment: those in the "front of the house" and those in the "back of the house." Davis believes that the most visible and often better-paying jobs in resorts tend to be disproportionately held by Caucasians, while the least visible and often lower-paying jobs tend to be disproportionately held by African Americans, Hispanics, and other people of color. Perhaps such racism in hiring practices could help explain why several of the homeless men I interviewed in Las Vegas were African American. Summarizing more the effect of general economic trends on minority group employment, Harvey also notes that "while some . . . minorities have gained access to more privileged positions, the new labor market conditions have for the most part re-emphasized the vulnerability of disadvantaged groups" (1990, 152).<sup>5</sup>

Race or the drudgery of unskilled employment, however, did not always seem to be important factors in why other men lost their jobs. Bob, who was Caucasian, thought he no longer had his job because of an illness and because he overburdened the company's insurance policy:

I don't have a degree, I did go to college, but I was gifted in sales. . . . [O]ut of seventeen years that I've worked, thirteen of them have been in sales. . . . I made a really good living. When I got ill, I tried to work, and I got so ill, I passed out. Medically, I just couldn't work. And I maxed my insurance policy—quarter of a million—and the company "worked me out," so to speak.

Therefore, for a range of reasons, men at times said that losing a job was clearly linked to their eventual homelessness. Some had come to Las Vegas after losing jobs elsewhere, only to encounter difficulties in gaining local employment. Others seemed to be unable earn a living wage while working at low-skill and at times demeaning jobs. Still others seemed to face discrimination in the workplace because of race or illness.

## Released from Jail or Prison

Based on their nationwide study, Shlay and Rossi noted that more than 40 percent of homeless men have spent time in jail, prison, or both (1992). Earlier I mentioned that Marty, who had AIDS, had been released recently from prison. Although I generally did not raise the subject of time spent in jail or prison with the men I interviewed, a number of men like Marty with whom I spoke mentioned having jail or prison experience, and sometimes they discussed how it might have contributed to their homelessness.

Sue, a previously mentioned social service provider, told me that men who had come from prison might also use the shelter for housing while they tried to secure employment and a more traditional living arrangement. However, she said that they also are usually unaware of all the difficulties they will face trying to find employment and housing in Las Vegas, particularly if they come from out of state:

We have the new homeless. . . . Maybe been recently released from prison. [In] this particular state, they could have committed the crime here, but not been a resident here, so they're back here. Now, they have to understand in this state you must be registered as an ex-felon. In this state we require work cards that are not usually [required] in other cities. There also is an explanation for it—if you are an ex-felon [it] does not mean that you can't get a sheriff's card. It just means there may be limitations on that, or maybe not, just depending on the nature, the length, the crime, [and] the length of the conviction.

Tyrone was a perfect example of Sue's description of the circumstances that might lead a convicted man to homelessness. He had lived in Arizona but had been arrested in Nevada, causing him to become homeless in the latter:

I got arrested with three dollars worth of speed in Laughlin, and they remanded me—I live in Arizona, and I got busted in Laughlin, which is right across the river. They remanded me to this state to do a year in a drug program here. So when they released me from jail, I had no home, no food, no money, no clothes, or anything else, so that's what I'm doing here. This is the first time I've ever been homeless, and that's the reason for it.

George said he had both a full-time job and an apartment before being arrested. Being in and out of jail, though, had caused him to lose his housing:

I got, went down and turned myself in on some warrants that were out for my arrest. . . . [B]ut the crime, I didn't commit, so. But anyway, instead of finding out who accused me of the crime . . . they just decided to put me in jail. And so I spent fifteen days in jail the first time, got out, and I almost lost everything then. Then I spent another fifty-five days in jail after that when I came back from another preliminary hearing. They finally found their [perpetrator], who happened to be a homeless guy. That's how I found out about the homeless shelter and stuff like that, from listening to them talk about it. Plus I went by on the bus after I got out and I just came in. But like I said, I got a good job, had a nice apartment, I had everything going for me. I've been doing fine on my own since I was eighteen years old. So I just ended up coming here.

Larry also said that problems from spending time in jail had led to a period of being "semi-homeless" before his more recent homelessness in Las Vegas.

Well, I came up here—I was in Laughlin. I had some court problems down in Bullhead. And I started out in 1990 with two DUI's

and seven hundred sixty dollars in fines. Now I owe the state of Arizona right at four thousand six hundred dollars, because [when] they put you in jail down there, they charge you forty-six dollars a day. And that's not counting fines or anything like that. So consequently I was semi-homeless there.

In general, incarceration seemed to have been the direct cause of some men's inability to maintain permanent housing. Once released, these men began relying on shelter services, but they did not typically see themselves as homeless. While talking to me, men such as Tyrone and George, for example, distinguished themselves from what they saw as the "real" homeless. George began his interview by saying, "I'm not really homeless, but I'll talk to you." Some of these men felt incarceration had temporarily impeded their ability to earn a living through legitimate means. Others, though, might have had drug or alcohol problems related to their arrest.

## Loss of Family Network

The family networks of the homeless men I spoke with were often fragmented or nonexistent, a situation reported in many studies of homelessness in the United States over the years. In 1992 Shlay and Rossi reported that 36 percent of the homeless men in their national survey claimed to have no friends, and 31 percent said they had no kin in contact (1992, 138). Generally, few men in Las Vegas with whom I spoke had relied directly on support from their family of origin since having become homeless, but there were exceptions.

Bob, for example, once contacted his multimillionaire brother for assistance, but eventually Bob could not tolerate the stress of his brother's home life. Brandon indicated that he viewed his homelessness as an "adventure," visiting Las Vegas from his family home in Detroit:

I just got back out here about two weeks ago. I went home to see my family. . . . Then I returned, because this is like a challenge. . . . If I [want to] meet a challenge, then I'll stick it out no matter how long it takes. . . . If I make it, then I make it. If I

don't, then I'll stand upright and accept my graces and return [to my parents].

Brandon's friend Hector also knew his family would help him, but for the time being he still wanted to try and "make it" on his own. When I asked him if he had family, he said:

Yeah, I got people. They're in California. My brother helps me now. If times are too hard, I can get [help from him]. [But] I'm forty-five years old, I can't be scurging all my life. I'm not lazy, I just got stuck out here, and, you know, what can you say? But, I don't know. I figure I'll make it. Just keep trying, I guess.

However, as in the case of Jerry, several men with whom I spoke indicated that they had no family to turn to once they realized they might be on the verge of homelessness, or that they had severed ties with their spouses, girlfriends, and/or other individuals who once belonged in their social network. Several individuals, including Albert, Bill, Clyde, Jim, Sam, Mark, Matthew, and Ziggy, had divorced. At a local shelter Mark told me, "This is the second time I've been in here. The last time I was recently divorced, lost everything; I was totally destitute, I had absolutely nothing."

In one particularly graphic account, reproduced in full below, Sam explained an incident that precipitated his divorce and ultimately ended his contact with other family members.

**Sam:** But recently I had an incident which made me think that there is a God.

**Kurt:** What happened, if I may ask?

**Sam:** I was alone and separated from my wife and my family. And this was after a real bad incident. One Thanksgiving weekend my wife was going to leave me and take my thirteen-year-old son with her. And my thirty-year-old sons, three of them all around thirty, they were going to make sure I didn't do anything violent, because I have a violent temper, or did have most of my life, but I had been reading psychology and got off caffeine since 1989. This was in '94 when it happened. So I really didn't—I

don't get mad anymore. Well, I got mad then, you know, because it was such a devastating thing to me to lose everything. So anyway, after they beat me up—

**Kurt:** Your family?

**Sam:** Yeah, my three sons, they beat me up pretty bad.

**Kurt:** What precipitated that?

**Sam:** Because they provoked me and so I went after them, but once I saw them cowering on the floor I didn't do anything, and then the other two, they tackled me, and then another time later on, about an hour later, I just went up and shook the window of his car, and my older son, you know, he caused the whole thing, so that's when they beat me up. I just ran when they all three started coming at me. I just ran. I was fifty-nine years old and out of shape and they tackled me and they beat me up, so I filled the house up with gas and I just turned off the water heater and turned down the thermostat so it wouldn't go off, and it's a rented seven-bedroom home, and something ignited it; you know, the refrigerator coming on or something, some spark, and it just blew the whole house. I was sitting on the couch and it just blew me back and I came forward and I just looked around. I could see all my neighbors and I could see the sky—it was 9:30 at night. So I just got up off the couch and walked through the rubble and walked out to the street.

Not all accounts of fallings-out with family were quite so evocative. Ziggy explained losing track of or not wanting to contact family members, in part because of divorce, or the loss of other social ties because of a separation between individuals. Ziggy's statements, below, interested me, because he seemed to be defining who counted as “family” both in terms of a biological or marital connection and an emotional connection. Ultimately he seemed to no longer consider any of his biological or marriage-related persons “family” because he had lost an emotional connection with them:

**Kurt:** Tell me something, have you ever been in contact with your family since you've been homeless to talk with them, maybe if they could help you out?



**Ziggy:** There is no family. I mean, I've got a daughter, but I lost track of her; in-laws, I lost track of them before I even got divorced. You know, it's not a very friendly arrangement with us. I didn't like them from the beginning anyway. Then once we divorced there was a little more animosity between us, so.

**Kurt:** Mom and dad? Brothers, sisters?

**Ziggy:** No more. It's just myself. So whatever I get, I get.

Bill also indicated that he had family and friends earlier in his adult life but had abandoned them after his divorce:

In Albuquerque I knew people. . . . I had friends I could go do my laundry at their house, you know . . . a circle of friends, we go back years. It's quite different when you come to a new town and you don't know anybody. [In Albuquerque] I had broke up with a relationship I had been in for seven years. . . . I had a hundred bucks saved up, and you know it was just time to go away. It also helps ease the breakup too, you know, she's not just right around the corner.

Some of the men I spoke to, including Sam, Paul, and James, indicated that they had grown up in foster-care homes or group homes. Sosin, Colson, and Grossman (1988) note that homeless persons are more likely to have been raised in foster-care-family situations. Although Paul said his foster family had been good, he had not spoken to them for some time, possibly because of his memory problems. Sam felt that he could no longer ask his foster parents for assistance, in part because they had sent him to a boarding school:

My mother deserted me when I was four, and I went to foster parents. They were pretty nice, but at seven they put me in a boarding school and then at eight I went to another boarding school, all boys. And then at eleven I went back to live with my mother, and at seventeen I joined the army. I fought with my mother when I went back to live with her a lot. I ran and butted her with my head right in her stomach when she was pregnant with my half-sister, and I just—I've been kind of a misfit all of my life.

James said that he had left home at thirteen, after his father had been labeled an unfit parent, and had ended up in group homes. In a confusing statement, James told me that there had been at least one remarriage within his family as well as tragic events that destabilized his family network:

My brother keeps contacting my grandmother, wanting me to contact [my father]. He's in prison for I don't know, God knows what, you know? Basically, the way I look at it is my dad traded his new family for his old family. You know, my brother left about the same age as I did. I just couldn't take it any more. Plus there was some incest with my stepsisters and stuff like that and I was ridiculed. My dad wouldn't do nothing about it. I got tired of it. I ran away and I never looked back.

Other men simply did not see contacting their family for help as an option, even if their families might help. Fred thought his family was too far away to really help with his illness, and he did not want to bother them with his personal troubles. After telling me "I haven't seen most of my family in a few years," Fred later added that he had not seen his mother in decades. Jeff was in contact with his family but, like Fred, did not feel it was appropriate to discuss his personal problems with them:

They know I'm staying here right now because I just called them and told them. But I don't want any help. I'm the only boy, I've got five older sisters. And I've never needed any help until I came to Las Vegas. I don't want to ask them. I'm sure they'd help me out, but I don't want to ask for a loan which is temporary. I don't have a full-time job to back up that loan.

Jorge, who, as I earlier mentioned, possibly suffers from mental illness, said that he could not be in contact with his extended family. Jorge believed that the Nazi Party controlled his mind and that "if I send a letter or phone call to my family, they will kill my family."

Another common response to my questions, Have you been in touch with your family? or Does your family know you're out here? were statements of embarrassment at having become homeless and

not wanting to reveal their homeless status to family members. Albert, for example, felt so ashamed of his lifestyle that he would rarely call his former wife and his children. Before becoming addicted to drugs and homeless, Albert said that

being there with my kids, that was life. My kids crawling up in my arms and laying down on the couch and watching TV with them and helping them with their homework. Now here, you know, they're lucky if I call on the phone, 'cause I'm so embarrassed of my lifestyle right now. I hate myself. I mean, I totally, 100 percent, I hate what I'm doing. It's a possessive life. Drugs and alcohol, man, it's just—God, man, I don't wish it on my worst enemy. . . . It hurts.

Kenneth had a similar response when I asked him about his family. He once had family in Las Vegas, a brother and a sister, but they had moved. He did not want to contact his family for help because he was embarrassed and did not think they could really afford to provide it:

You know they say, "Kenneth, if you ever need anything just give me a call," but that's not how it really is. They've got kids to take care of. And I don't want them to see Uncle Kenneth and think, "What's wrong with him?"

Mark said he was not in contact with his family because they so deeply disapproved of his homelessness and his life choices:

I have no family in Las Vegas. My brother will probably never speak to me again, and he's a lawyer and he teaches political science and all this stuff. He's [earning] \$40,000 a year. I would be scum of the earth [to him]. My mother was very disappointed in me that I could not keep my life more evenly wrapped.

Overall, several of the men I spoke to felt that because they had become homeless on their own, they should solve their problems without family assistance. Although Phillip had teen-age sons and living parents, he told me, "I just kind of feel that the reason why I got here was because I made bad decisions, and one way to straighten it out is

to do it on my own. I've got to do my own thing," Kent said he had spoken to his brother since becoming homeless but had told him he was staying in a work program rather than a homeless shelter. About his family Kent said:

I don't want their help. I'm a capable person, I'm going to get out and do it myself. I've took care of myself since I was fourteen years old. I had to grow up. My mom was married to a lot of alcoholics who were abusive and beat on her and stuff, and I didn't have a chance to be a kid. I had to grow up and do it myself. I'm not going to let this, even being homeless—I'm not going to fail at life. . . . I'm going to do it all myself personally.

Matthew reiterated Phillip's and Kent's thoughts about needing to address his homelessness without his family's help:

I stay in touch with my family and they were more than willing to help, but, you know, I don't know what you want to call it, pride or a situation where I'm grown, I'm adult, you know, I can work my way through this. I can do this. My grandmother would say what doesn't kill you only makes you strong. So that's kind of the way I look at it. I can do this, you know?

As men like Kent, Phillip, and Matthew feel they should address their homelessness without family assistance, they also seem to embody the view, discussed above, that homeless men are personally responsible for their homelessness. This view, along with the fragmented family networks of several men, are important factors in understanding why some might choose homelessness over returning to a home with family members.

## Rental Problems

Several men said they had difficulties with renting apartments or houses in Las Vegas. These problems included paying for those rentals, negotiating with roommates, and negotiating with their landlords once they had fallen behind in paying their rent. Many also said

that renting an apartment in Las Vegas is more expensive than other places they had lived, and they found the practice by local weekly motels of confiscating the property of those who are unable to pay rent unscrupulous.

When I asked Kenneth what had led to his homelessness, he began by stating, "I had a gay roommate I didn't get along with." When I asked him to elaborate on the relationship, he said that their lifestyle differences made it difficult for them to live together. Eventually falling behind on his share of the rent, he had to rely on the assistance of a "charitable" religious organization, which he said charged him and twelve others \$277 each per month to rent an apartment. This figure was just short of the standard amount of a rental voucher once given to homeless persons who applied for government assistance through Clark County. The price of such apartments being set so close to the amount of a rental voucher is a marketing strategy that shares strong parallels with Winberg and Wilson's (1981) description of dilapidated single room occupancy hotels in New York City. The owners of such hotels would typically charge as much as state welfare programs would allow for housing while minimizing their investment in the property, since those who lived there had few other housing options. Kenneth, then, experienced two separate rental difficulties: one in sharing his rented apartment with a roommate, and another in questioning the motives of a supposedly charitable organization that charged as much as they could from those receiving local government rental vouchers.

Bill acquired a rental voucher from Clark County after he had been homeless and stayed in a local shelter for several weeks. At the shelter, he eventually befriended another homeless man, Vincent. My field notes, transcribed below, indicate that Bill had decided to help Vincent by letting him stay in his newly acquired apartment, despite the fact that Vincent had no money and their relationship seemed tense:

I go to Bill's new apartment, the one paid [for] with a voucher from county social services. Vincent is there. Bill is drunk and keeps referring to Vincent as "hombre." Vincent tells him to cut that Spanish shit out, mocks him, says he doesn't know nothing.

He is sitting on Bill's bed. He gives Bill six dollars and orders him to pick up some more booze when we leave. In the car Bill says that Vincent helped him out when no one else would and that he wants to help him now that he has something.

Bill ended up sharing his motel room with this homeless "friend" even though it could have gotten him evicted. The landlord eventually caught Vincent sleeping in Bill's room, a violation of Bill's tenant agreement. After receiving a warning from the landlord that they would both be evicted if Vincent was caught in the room again, Bill changed his mind about helping his homeless friend: "I like [Vincent] a lot, but if it's him or me, you know who's gonna go."

Matthew drew a link between low wages and the difficulty some people might have securing an apartment in Las Vegas: "You have to at least be making ten bucks an hour to live decent in the town, you know, to get an apartment and utilities and so forth." Jeff also told me that wages in Las Vegas were not keeping up with the increasing cost of renting an apartment. In addition he explained that some homeless men he knew rented apartments or hotels by the week instead of the month. He said that weekly rental agents were very unforgiving of men who fall behind on their rent and that there are few local laws to protect those who rent apartments or hotels/motels by the week:

There's a lot of weekly rentals in Vegas, which is one of the traps people get in. You'll find more people that come to Vegas who get into these weekly apartments. They should be outlawed. [They put people] in the streets within two or three months. Because once you miss your weekly rent, you're out in the street, there's no laws to protect you. You're gone the next day. . . . In California you don't pay your rent, you go through a long process. You can go through nine months of not paying your rent before you're finally out. Here, it's three days, you're out.

Jeff then described how landlords at weekly rentals could confiscate the property of a man who falls behind on the rent. Furthermore, Jeff indicated that although weeklies seem like an immediate alternative

to the shelter for men with little savings, only one missed paycheck could cause a man to become homeless again:

The weeklies . . . want their money right on the minute it's due. If it's due at 12:00, it better be in by 12:00. . . . The men get out and they get so tired of [living in a shelter] that the minute they get a full-time job, they're out of here, the first paycheck for the weekly place and [then] they're back here [within] two weeks, three weeks, four weeks, a month later. . . . [The problem is that] most guys here, the first paycheck they get, they want to get out of here.

Jeff was not alone in using weekly rentals in Las Vegas, which are typically more expensive than monthly ones because of their high turnover rate. Ronald also rented a weekly apartment and had done so for months at a rate higher than many monthly rentals would have been. Ronald said, "I was there eight months and paid on a weekly basis, a hundred sixty dollars a week, which averaged about six hundred forty dollars a month." Alex also paid for his housing by the week but found it difficult to keep up with the rental payments when, like Ronald, he lost his job. Alex said his weekly payments were "two hundred-plus dollars a week." This meant he was paying about eight hundred dollars a month as a single man living in an apartment.

To summarize, rental problems such as difficulty in paying rent, difficulty with roommates, and expensive weekly rentals with limited grace periods for paying were mentioned by several men as problems contributing to their homelessness.

## Discussion

Based on excerpts from interviews presented in this chapter, I created several general categories indicating the many ways these men became homeless and some problems they faced while homeless. I must stress again, however, that these categories are in no way mutually exclusive. In other words, the causes that may lead a man to homelessness are overlapping and seem to frequently interact with one another. One man I discussed here, for example, has health problems and was

recently released from prison. Another had health problems, then lost his job, then became homeless. Two men engaged in substance abuse and then lost their full-time jobs. One man saw his pay reduced, quit his job, and then became unable to pay his rent. Several of the reasons listed above, such as loss of a permanent job, may seem to have been the most immediate causes of why someone became homeless, but other reasons, such as the loss of a family network, may be just as important in understanding why a man was unable to stop a series of unfortunate events from leading to homelessness.

This research, then, does not support the idea that the conditions leading to homelessness are reducible to several categories that can then be used to develop social programs that target specific problems at the expense of others. Instead, homelessness is better thought of as the result of a process in which a bad break or unfortunate circumstance leads to other problems that in turn affect a man's ability to maintain reliable shelter. Although I used quotations from the men's own explanations under my headings to form a generalized understanding of why men became homeless, the fact that I included parts of one man's story under multiple headings means that men often experienced a unique and, to some extent, impossible-to-categorize set of circumstances surrounding their current lack of shelter.

Homelessness is a condition that several thousand individuals in Las Vegas on any given night may share, but often for entirely different reasons. In developing social policy to address homelessness, therefore, one must consider the unique circumstances that precipitated a given individual's homelessness. Although there are certain patterns in the circumstances leading to the homelessness of these men, there will be a number of men whose unique circumstances will inhibit them from accessing or making the best use of highly specialized programs. Conversely, night-by-night shelters that warehouse homeless people often have difficulty providing any assistance programs beyond immediate shelter to homeless men who often suffer from a range of problems.

Social service providers, then, are faced with their own daunting set of problems in providing relief and long-term assistance to end homelessness. For example, several different services for home-



less men exist in Las Vegas, but homeless men who need specialized services might not be aware of programs with different orientations. During our interview Becky discussed at length how the MASH program (Mobilized Assistance and Shelter for the Homeless) hoped to provide several on-site services as well as a network among homeless service providers to create a “continuum of care.”

Becky said her program was run

a bit like a triage in a hospital. A person coming in here will stop at the front window, do an intake form, which is a few pages of information—background history, veteran status, medical status, financial status, work history, emergency numbers, whatever they have available. And then they come through that part and see a case manager. And that case manager will do a needs assessment on that person, anything from they need socks or Band-Aids for their blisters to employment skills to mental health skills to ascertaining if it’s a dual diagnosis: is it a person that needs substance abuse [treatment], is it a person that could benefit by a work program, a shelter work program, or does this person need to go to a detox unit because they’re actively coming down from a substance at that point, is it somebody that needs to go to the state facility and have their psychotropic medications filled—it could be anything—any gamut. It could be a homicidal/suicidal person coming through to the person who’s never been homeless and just got their wallet lifted and they’re stranded here in Las Vegas. So many of the men that come through will be looking for some short-term intervention. Some of them are looking for long-term intervention and have been chronically homeless for years.

Having worked with chronically homeless men for eight years, Becky knew that sometimes the men found all the paperwork and bureaucracy of assistance programs to be a potentially shameful process and one that at times did nothing to help them. As Jerry experienced during our day together, some shelters would not accept a person in his medical condition and, as he phrased it, they “give you the runaround.”

In her essay “What Is Poverty?” an anonymous author described what it was like for her to seek help from agencies providing services for the poor:

Poverty is asking for help. I will tell you how it feels. You find out where the office is that you are supposed to visit. You circle that block four or five times. . . . You go in. Everybody is very busy. Finally, someone comes out and you tell her that you need help. That person is never the person you need to see. You go see another person, and after spilling the whole shame of your poverty all over the desk between you, you find that this isn’t the right office after all—you must repeat the whole process, and it never is any easier at the next place. (Parker 1989, 556–57)

The pain of this process can significantly inhibit men from trying to find institutional assistance for any of their problems. Becky, though, believed that the MASH program tried to add a more personal touch to providing services to avoid feelings of alienation and frustration with clients:

We have to do a lot of explaining. A lot of ours is of intimacy with the person, to be sitting like I’m sitting with you and be able to say this is Kurt Borchard, and Kurt, what’s unique to your situation? We’ve been able to be much more relaxed with people, be much closer to people, giving them back a little dignity and a little bit more identity than just slamming through, “Well, I can’t get you this service, and you need to move on.” We’re able to actually lay out something that same day. So that a person comes in and doesn’t leave with nothing, even if it’s a lengthy conversation that says we care, that these are some of the things that you need to be able to accomplish, you’re making some of these choices and this is how I can facilitate this without enabling that person. And so I think that that’s one of the most unique things about having the crisis intervention center portion of [our homeless services] is that we can reach a lot of the population, and we can always give them a little something to go on.

Becky described a litany of different groups she worked with, including the Veterans Administration, the State of Nevada Employment Office, and a group called Homeless Health Care that provided various services to the homeless persons in her program, some visiting three or four times a week. The problems with this approach, though, are twofold. First, many homeless men in Las Vegas did not care to wait for their immediate needs to eventually be met by learning about and going through the series of bureaucratic hurdles that even well-intentioned administrators like Becky could not avoid promoting. Second, many men I spoke to did not know that such a clearinghouse agency existed in Las Vegas. Jerry earlier explained that he had found out about the local distribution of free meals from other homeless persons. Similarly, as Ziggy explained, most homeless people do not use agency information but instead find out how to access social services from other homeless people through a street network:

You talk to these people in these agencies, and they don't know jack. And in the papers that they do give you for the services that they think they got a handle on are no longer available or these places are closed down or moved or no longer providing these services. So your best information for getting any information is talk to people on the street. You get a lot better information. . . . A lot more current, updated information.

These networks are lifelines for many homeless persons. Without constantly updated and accurate information, however, homeless men (and women) may inadvertently attempt to address their homelessness through less appropriate agencies or through shelter programs designed for other types of homeless persons. Homeless men like Jerry may feel such frustration at trying to have their needs met through bureaucratic agencies that they then resort to alternative survival strategies.

## Homeless Shelters and Squatting on the Strip

Once a man had become homeless, I wondered, how did he survive from day to day? I knew from experience as a shelter administrator that homeless shelters are important resources in the lives of some homeless men. Before coming to Las Vegas, however, I had little direct knowledge about the other ways men found places to sleep, such as occupying abandoned buildings. Homeless men in Las Vegas recognize important differences between forms of temporary housing such as shelters and abandoned buildings, use their resources in various ways, and have carefully considered the pros and cons of different forms of shelter, facts that are important for two reasons. First, homeless men face ongoing obstacles in their attempts to secure regular shelter in Las Vegas. Second, a homeless man's ability either to end his homelessness or to simply survive depends largely on his assessment of how a given shelter arrangement might best suit his needs.

While many institutional shelters restrict men's autonomy through rules and structures promoting dependency on shelter life, a more self-sufficient arrangement, like squatting in an abandoned building, means that men there give up basic social services, safety, and regular meals. The shortcomings of either type of arrangement are structural, a point that again indicates the importance of understanding a man's homelessness as more than an individual problem.

Shelters that house homeless men for brief periods are the dominant forms of direct assistance delivered to homeless men across the United States (DeOllos 1997). According to Stark (1994), as homelessness was becoming recognized as a pressing social problem across the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many temporary, makeshift shelters were created. By the late 1980s, however, "with the realization that homelessness was not a problem that could be solved quickly, shelters began to be transformed into permanent institutions" (Stark 1994, 554). Stark notes that these now-dominant forms of shelter in the United States share several characteristics with what Erving Goffman called "total institutions," which are defined as "place[s] of residence . . . where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life" (Goffman in Stark 1994, 554). Although Goffman himself did not discuss homeless shelters as examples of total institutions, since the late 1980s many homeless shelters seem to have developed commonalities with other total institutions he discussed, such as prisons and mental hospitals. Patterns in how homeless shelters as "total institutions" deal with homeless men, also apparent in Las Vegas, indicate that such shelters are not well suited for helping promote autonomous, self-sufficient individuals once those individuals leave the institutional setting.

However, not all shelters are the same. Each shelter has its own form and manner of assistance, as well as its own unique staff, rules of admission, codes of conduct, facilities, levels of tolerance, and location. Such variety in local shelters means that the particular aspects of a given shelter might greatly affect an individual man who requests admittance. Homeless men I interviewed in Las Vegas had typically

relied on at least one of three local charitable shelters. During interviews the men often described the rules, patterns, and organization they found at each of the shelters, and revealed both positive and negative aspects of shelter life. In addition to interviewing men who used shelters, I also interviewed and observed three groups of homeless men who occupied an abandoned building on the South Las Vegas Strip. I came to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their reliance on that environment for temporary housing.

## The Working Shelter

Working Shelter, the largest of the three charitable shelters discussed here, can provide space for between three hundred and five hundred men on any given night. It is located in the homeless corridor of Las Vegas in what was once an abandoned shopping center on the edge of North Las Vegas (see map). The administrators of Working Shelter define it both as an emergency shelter for homeless men in need and as one where a work program is in place. The dual definition of the shelter's role helps explain how the administrators assist homeless men and organize the men's labor to keep the shelter running.

Upon admittance, a man can choose from a range of different "statuses," depending on whether he chooses to work in the shelter (in jobs homeless men often referred to as "chores") or if he wants to engage in paid employment outside of the building, with the expectation that he will contribute money to the shelter. All men in the work program within the shelter must always wear a laminated badge. Each badge displays a man's name and bunk assignment. Each badge also has a dime-sized circular sticker on it, colored red, orange, or white. The small, colored sticker provides a visible indicator to everyone at the shelter of the man's "status," or the terms by which a man agreed to participate in shelter life. The men also discussed the division of labor and hierarchy of authority within the main shelter based on the color of a given man's "dot."

Alex provided possibly the clearest and most detailed explanation of this shelter's system. His description clarifies both the distinctions

between different types of badges and status levels in the shelter, and the different rules that applied to men of different statuses:

When you first come in to the program, you're a red dot. If you have no job, like I came in basically off the street, I was unemployed at the time and I got no money coming in whatsoever, so I'm a red dot. And the red dot is then assigned to two days of chores on an eight-hour basis, and then you have two days off and two days on. The way the red dot works, it's like you're the lowest, you know, you're the private of the bunch, but you get the more days off to yourself to be able to look for another job. So you work two days on, then on your two days off you can go into the job office. The first time you will get out . . . they'll get you out [to a job] right away so that you got some money, and then you go out and look for jobs yourself.

An orange dot is a volunteer, which is called personnel assistant. So when you become an orange dot, you'll work forty-plus hours here with your two days off, and you'll get a steak dinner on Saturdays.

And if you have a white dot, the white dot means—okay, on the red dots now, you have a lot of rules. At 9:30 the lights are out in the dorms. At 11:00 you have a curfew. By 11:30 they have a bed check. All red dots have to be in bed by 11:00. You're not allowed on the floor after 6:30 in the morning. Now, the orange dots, they're allowed on the floor, they can go to sleep after they get off of work when they're working here, because sometimes they'll work different hours. They get their steak dinner and they don't have curfew. If they want to go out and stay out all night long, that's fine. . . . They can pretty much kind of do what they want. . . .

A white dot now, a white dot is a person who has an outside full-time job. Basically this is kind of like their apartment to them. They come and they go just basically as they please. I think they don't have to sign in. They do sign out on their way to work as to what time they went to work on those days, but on their off days they can come and go. If they decide they don't want to sleep

here tonight, they don't have to. If they don't want to eat here, you know. They pretty much got all of the freedom, you know, to do whatever they want. They just go to work, come back.

Then, of course, each payday, whatever their payday is, [those with white dots] have to pay 20 percent of what their paycheck is, not to exceed seventy-five dollars. So if they get paid weekly, they have to make sure that on payday they're back here, because they have twenty-four hours to pay it. If you don't pay within the twenty-four hours, then you're out. So you just have to make sure that whatever your payday is you cash your check, get down here and pay.

In several respects, Alex is not simply describing the shelter system but also indicating the way in which it promotes social control, forms of status, roles, and a hierarchy among the homeless men in this system. Alex says that because he came in without a job, he was assigned the identity of a "red dot." He describes it as being the "lowest" in the shelter, like being a private in the military. He notes several rules that are enforced if a man has red dot status. As a red dot, Alex has to work for the shelter two days and then gets two days of his own time but says that the status also gave him a certain advantage: more time off than those with other statuses so that he can look for paying work outside of the shelter. He also said that the employment office inside the shelter offers him the first chances at outside employment.

As the men most marginally aligned with the shelter, "red dots" seem to have more rules and restrictions placed on them. Stark explains that "total institutions are most commonly associated with persons who are seen as a threat to the community" (1994, 560). The newest men brought into such a system could then logically be seen as the most threatening. The institution has not yet had time to observe, much less alter, their behavior. Alex's description of their status as being like a private is telling—privates in the total institution of the military are the focus of extreme scrutiny and have few privileges until they can prove capable of functioning in the system.

Alex briefly discusses those called "orange dots." He says they work a traditional forty-hour workweek in the shelter, have a traditional



two-day weekend, and receive the privileges of a steak dinner and a limited curfew. The highest status for Alex, though, is the “white dot.” Alex notes that these men can treat the shelter like “an apartment” and “pretty much got all of the freedom.” Men with white dots also get additional services, such as meals and laundry, included in the program agreement. They have “an outside full-time job” and are responsible for paying 20 percent of their weekly income to the shelter.

Alex’s description outlines an important system of rewards (and, perhaps, punishments) within this shelter system. Drawing again from Goffman, Stark also describes how shelters with so many rules and statuses can promote a loss of autonomy among residents that can engender “the terror of feeling radically demoted in the age grading system” (Goffman in Stark 1994, 556) or that can cause the adult men to come to feel like children. Men who want to work and are capable of maintaining traditional, full-time employment outside the shelter are given the most freedom. Those without hope of outside employment are assigned “chores,” a word that connotes menial, domestic, and often unpaid work, work traditionally assigned to younger or female dependents within a household that has a breadwinner. Furthermore, men who have red dot status do not receive a true break from work, since the shelter expects these men to work spot jobs or look for ongoing employment during their time off from working in the shelter. Somewhere between the statuses of red dot and white dot is that of the orange dot, which represents a man who has taken on a semi-permanent, forty-hour-a-week job within the shelter. Interestingly, Alex does not refer to the tasks done by men with orange dots as “chores” and believes those men have fewer restrictions than do men with red dots. The orange dots, therefore, could be seen as living in a semi-institutionalized state, either not trying or unable to structure an autonomous, self-sufficient existence (Gounis 1993). The white dots are the men who most closely embody the ideal of a masculine breadwinner capable of maintaining dependents.

On the property that houses Working Shelter, two additional status options exist for men who request shelter for the night. Some men may choose to pay three dollars a day to stay in what is referred to as the special needs area. The payment also entitles them to receive three

meals. Finally, for men with no income and who are either unwilling or unable to do “chores,” sleeping accommodations are provided in the least comfortable area of the property, which Bob referred to as the shelter annex. “The annex is simply a place where you sleep,” Bob told me. “No sheets, no pillows, no nothing, and it’s from the duration at 6:00 PM till 5:45 in the morning. No food, no nothing.”

The men in Working Shelter understood the shelter’s organization differently depending in part on their status within the organization. In general, those men of higher status within the shelter seemed to agree with and support the shelter’s rules and organization. George, for example, came into the shelter with a full-time job, so he received white dot status. He thought the shelter was quite useful for someone like himself, an employed man who was recently homeless and did not intend to stay that way. George also thought, however, that some men of lower status did not seem interested in leaving the shelter:

Actually, I think [the shelter is] a pretty good thing. If you come here and you have a job and they’re willing to let [you in], they let you right in, and you just have to prove that you got a job and it is full-time, and you get a white dot and you can pretty much do what you want. Now these other guys come in, they start off with red dots, they have to go do spot jobs, trying to get themselves a job, and most of them, they just want to stay that way. They just want to stay on the red dot status, do spot jobs, and spot jobs are just making a living and living life, I guess.

George seems to be indicating that the shelter’s system is appropriate, because some homeless men want to have full-time work and others do not. Ironically, George believes that the shelter’s organization of labor made it much easier for him to end his homelessness, but he does not indicate that his dependence on other men’s unpaid shelter labor might also be simultaneously perpetuating their homelessness:

**Kurt:** So you have a plan, then, for trying to get out.

**George:** I hope so . . . if I could just get back to work seven days a week, twelve hours a day, then this would be the perfect place to live, because all you got to do is come home and go to bed.

You don't have to cook anything. You don't have to wash any dishes. You don't have to buy toilet paper, run around, go do this, go do that. The only thing you have to get is your toothpaste, toothbrush, shampoo, that shit [will] last you for months though.

**Kurt:** So you don't have to do any chores?

**George:** Not when you're a full-time worker.

George's statements clearly show that, by having other shelter residents do the traditionally feminized tasks (such as cooking, cleaning, and shopping) for men with white dots, the shelter reproduces the traditional societal rewards given to men who embody a traditional masculine role.

Jeff, who had an orange dot on his badge, also expressed general support for the shelter's organization and rules. As part of the security force of the shelter, he saw the majority of the shelter's rules as purposeful for the homeless men around him who he thought might need discipline:

It's regimental. There's a lot of rules; some are silly, some are not. But if you look at the program in general, all these rules, really what they are is to get you ready to pay your rent, pay your bills on time, get to work on time, so it's kind of set me up to be on your own again. Other guys [who] come in here are used to being institutionalized, come from prisons, come from jail, and have been on the streets for a long time and don't have those skills they need. . . . Eventually, once you find a full-time job and you're used to paying a fair share here, which is the same as paying rent, you have to be at a job at a certain time, there are consequences if you don't, same as if you go to a job late, you get fired. So the rules here basically are designed to get you back on your feet and get you independent again.

Jeff seems to be arguing that many men, coming from other total institutions, have failed to learn or have forgotten the traits they would need to be self-supporting. Jeff, though, did not consider how different statuses in the shelter can either promote men learning independence or keep them dependent on the shelter as a total institution.

While Jeff believed that the purpose of the shelter's rules was to help men eventually leave the shelter, Kent, who was a "red dot," believed the rules had the opposite effect. Instead of rules and a structure designed to "get you independent again," as Jeff phrased it, Kent saw that the options for different statuses within the shelter could allow some men to stay there indefinitely:

You'll see a lot of guys around here that live off the system. They don't go look for jobs, they intentionally work in the kitchen, or they work in the intake office or something like that. They've been here for a long time . . . [T]hey're what I call lifers. They have no desire to get out and make it on their own, and that's really pathetic. Totally pathetic, because my number one goal is to get placed. This is a very depressing place.

By staying for lengthy periods of time, the "lifers" that Kent refers to are perhaps the best examples of how this particular shelter system is not designed to end homelessness or promote self-sufficiency for all the men but instead operates for some as a total institution. It is difficult to know if the long-term housing of homeless men in a communal style mentioned by Kent is the intent of the shelter administrators. Ironically, it seems that a shelter with a work program that ostensibly exists in order to address and help end each man's homelessness might also provide options for some men for a long-term stay, so long as they help maintain the bureaucracy.<sup>1</sup> Such men may arrive homeless, but those who find a niche for themselves in the shelter bureaucracy may develop a unique way of life, a state between homelessness and complete autonomy in a home or rented apartment, or a state that one research described as "a hybrid between a degraded type of public housing and a new form of institutionalization" (Gounis 1992, 668).

Several other men, though, questioned whether this shelter's structure was useful to them, or if it instead was using them. For some, Working Shelter seemed to meet their basic material needs but also exploited them by taking advantage of their labor. Indeed, a key characteristic of Working Shelter as opposed to other large Las Vegas shelters (which I will discuss shortly) is the degree to which Working Shelter required its own clientele to help maintain, reproduce, and/

or police shelter life. On the one hand, this organizational feature seemed to allow men the greatest range of status options of any of the three shelters. On the other hand, the men's part in reproducing shelter life also seemed to be the basis for men to wonder about the (at best) inequality and (at worst) corruption of those within the shelter.

Chris, who also stayed in Working Shelter, expressed concern that Working Shelter might actually be taking advantage of members of a vulnerable population and inhibiting men's ability to end their homelessness:

So basically I think that what they're trying to tell us is, "You're at the bottom of the pile and we're putting you right where you should be and we're not going to give you enough to get ahead, but we're going to give you enough to stay where you're at."

Stan also noted that the difference in power between the men staying at and those running Working Shelter meant that those running the shelter not only could demand unpaid labor from the men who stayed but also could promote the social control of those willing to endure shelter conditions.<sup>2</sup> Stan noted that in the hierarchy of Working Shelter, those who are red dots frequently cannot contribute money to the shelter, which means that the shelter can afford to enforce stricter rules on and request more labor from that group, whose members are highly replaceable:

If this place wasn't here, you'd be sleeping out under a tree or in jail. And they know that. That's why they'll kick you out in a second, because they know as soon as you leave, five minutes later there's guys coming in. They've got another body to do their thing.

These examples of coercion and social control support Goffman's (1961) point that a major goal of institutional culture is not to help but to control the clientele. As Stark notes, the logic of total institutions is that such institutional control "must be maintained in spite of the client's welfare" (1993, 555).

The directness of the social control exerted in Working Shelter had a great deal to do with a man's status within the system. Overall, Working Shelter seemed to promote homeless men working at full-time, paid employment while living at their facility as an ideal. Those men using the shelter for that purpose had greater freedoms, while those unable or unwilling to work at such jobs were assigned chores and endured more paternalistic treatment. Therefore, the shelter seemed designed to meet different purposes: to help meet all the men's basic survival needs, to help some of the men save money toward an apartment through the work program, but also, as some men argued, to exploit other men in order to benefit the shelter and help other homeless men end their homelessness.

## The Addict Shelter

Several of the men I spoke to had used another, smaller shelter (of one hundred to one hundred fifty beds, depending on need) in the homeless corridor that had a somewhat different bureaucratic structure and different organization patterns, rules, and practices. I will call this shelter Addict Shelter, because its bureaucratic structure seemed ostensibly designed to assist homeless men who are also substance abusers.

One important difference between Addict Shelter and Working Shelter was that Addict Shelter used a punch-card system to limit short-term stays—a maximum of seven days—for men who could not afford to pay a small amount to stay there. Ziggy, who had used Addict Shelter, complained about the irregularity of his admittance to this shelter caused by their policy of giving priority to the most recent homeless. In addition, he found the food worse than the meals at similarly named shelters existing across the United States:

[Addict Shelter] here, you go up and they allow you to sleep at night. No problem. That's the good thing. They have a little job development office that they are now starting to incorporate into their services up there. It's a good thing. . . . [But Addict Shel-

ters] in other parts of the country and that I've gone to, you go there and they give you five to seven nights' stay. They allow you breakfast when you wake up in the morning, and when you clock in in the evening they also feed you a dinner, a real meal. The [Addict Shelter] here doesn't do that. You go in and you sleep at night and the next night you might get in. The third night you probably won't get in. They don't give you a continuous amount of days.

Ziggy also explained that this night-by-night style of accommodation provided by the shelter, which allowed up to seven nights' stay, was different from the longer-term, transitional programs that were also on the premises. According to Ziggy, these transitional programs were also offered to homeless men, but only if they met the criteria for acceptance into those programs. In the interview excerpt below, he indicated that one was a mental health program, another was for substance abusers, and a third was for men to develop culinary skills:

**Kurt:** Are there a lot of people trying to get in at [Addict Shelter]?

**Ziggy:** Not really. And the ones that are has either mental hygiene cases or some kind of chemical dependencies. And that's what their programs up there are geared for. Again, supplemented by either the state or the county or the federal government when they do provide these services for the people. Any other services is only, like I said, a bed for the night. And then you're out. They do have a couple of programs, like I said, they're incorporating now, like the job developments, and . . . they've got a culinary program. But then you have to . . . be qualified to join one of these programs. Either drug and alcohol, mental case, or one of these programs like the Culinary Union or something like that. Other than that [the shelter is] just somewhere to go during the day to get out of the sun.

Ziggy's description of the shelter's structure mirrors the way shelter management describes its primary services in its promotional materials, such as brochures and Web pages. Ziggy also notes, however, that the long-term shelter is of minor use to those homeless men who

need longer-term assistance but who seem to have different problems than men who would be entitled to use the shelter's more specialized programs.

In this shelter, the most marginal clientele appear to be those who stay night by night for up to seven days. The shelter has not made a long-term commitment to those men, nor have those men made a long-term commitment to the shelter. This part of Addict Shelter represents a short-term, emergency shelter. Addict Shelter takes on more of the characteristics of a total institution for men who must admit a particular type of shortcoming, such as a mental health issue, substance abuse issue, or lack of a saleable skill, for longer-term shelter.

Hector and Brandon noted the limited range of assistance offered by Addict Shelter, stating that the shelter seemed to have "cliques." In the following interview excerpt, both men noted that the shelter's programs were directed toward heavy substance abusers, which Brandon in particular opposed:

**Brandon:** The [Addict Shelter] is very manipulative.

**Kurt:** How do you mean?

**Hector:** Most of the programs over there are religious.

**Brandon:** Yeah, it's cliques. And if you fit in their clique, then they'll accept you. If you don't, then they'll cast you aside or whatever. I don't have a drug problem. That's why everybody looks at me, "He doesn't do crack, all he does is"—I might smoke a joint every so often. And it's like I don't have a heavy crack problem or a heavy drug problem and they can't understand it. So when I go in and ask for assistance, they're like, "What do you need assistance with?"

Brandon seemed frustrated that because the shelter program was designed for someone with different problems beyond homelessness, he could not ask them for long-term help. He was aware that the shelter represented a resource for some homeless men, but not for him. Sam also indicated, however, that if a man did not qualify for admittance to one of the Addict Shelter's more specialized programs or was not both completely destitute and recently homeless, thereby qualifying



for the short-term shelter, he could simply pay five dollars a night to stay in a dorm setting.

You've got [the Addict Shelter] . . . if you're a drug addict or alcoholic. Luckily, I'm neither one of those. So otherwise, if you're not one of those, you don't qualify for there unless you pay five dollars a night. Then everybody qualifies for that, no matter if you're homeless or not.

According to Sam, the shelter has made a choice to help homeless men with certain problems, but it can also be a nightly shelter for anyone with five dollars. For the men discussed here, Addict Shelter might be classified as a night-by-night shelter with programs helping promote mental health, job-skills training, and ending addictions. However, in some cases men using the services of Addict Shelter seemed to want or need a longer-term place to stay but felt they had to fabricate a drug or alcohol problem, mental health problem, or a problem with their job skills in order to receive longer-term shelter. At times men complained that claiming drug or alcohol problems or mental illness was the only way to ensure a longer-term stay once a man had no more cash or had used up the shelter's free night-by-night options.

Other men at the Addict Shelter complained that they were required to attend a church service, whether they paid to stay or not.<sup>3</sup> Shelter administrators promoting mandatory church attendance seem to believe that a restoration of religious faith among homeless men would help them address their personal problems. There were even more extreme requirements of church attendance and mandatory substance abuse programs at a third shelter in Las Vegas.

## The Religious Shelter

Of the three shelters the men described to me, the bureaucratic structure of the third, which I call Religious Shelter (which provides up to seventy beds) is indeed the most overtly religious. While a religious organization ran Working Shelter, that shelter did not overtly emphasize religion or a specific denomination. Working Shelter simply

had nondenominational slogans on banners in their building, for example, “The Dignity Within.” Addict Shelter promoted mandatory church attendance, but the men claimed it did not promote religion as much as Religious Shelter. The latter, by contrast, made its religious orientation known to the men before they ever set foot in the building, a building that had a large neon sign (“JESUS SAVES”) and cross on the outside.

In describing his experience at Religious Shelter, Phillip said it had the strictest requirements for church attendance of any of the local shelters that he had used:

[At the Religious Shelter] you’ve got to be willing to have the Lord forced down your throat, twenty-four/seven. Don’t get me wrong, I believe in the Lord, but I don’t believe it should get shoved down your throat. You’ve got to attend two different services a day. And that’s just going a little bit too far. You’ve got to read your Bible for thirty minutes a day and a bunch of other stuff like that. It’s just forcing it down your throat. [I stayed there only] one day. I ended up telling them what they can do with their [shelter].

Ziggy, who had also stayed at the Religious Shelter, added that the shelter maintained a two-week lockdown policy either to address the presumed addiction of all men who wanted to stay or to simply remove a homeless man from the presumed negative influences of the street. In a portion of our interview reproduced below, Ziggy also claimed that men who entered the shelter had their freedoms limited as a condition of admittance, which could possibly interfere with a man’s efforts to earn money to eventually leave the shelter:

**Ziggy:** The [Religious Shelter], they’re pretty good. But if you’ve already got a job and you run on hard times, you go over there and you’re locked down for two weeks. So if you’ve got a job, you lose that job.

**Kurt:** Locked down. You can’t leave?

**Ziggy:** Yeah. It’s like two weeks of what they call detox period. So if I’m not a drug and alcohol user, [or] compulsive gambler, I

get a job, I go in their program, I have [to] arrange a two weeks' leave of absence. [If not,] when I enter that program, I lose that job, and then I'm back to square one looking for another job because of that program.

Here again it also seems that some men might try to enter the longer-term shelter program by constructing a nonexistent drug, alcohol, or gambling problem, or simply approach the shelter for help with their homelessness without understanding that it is also designed to help men who have other problems. However, a man's plan of using the shelter to end his homelessness backfires when he cannot use the shelter as a place to stay while he works or engages in other activities outside in an attempt to earn and save money. Religious Shelter's lockdown policy, therefore, strongly parallels the characteristics of total institutions, such as mental health institutions and prisons, which incarcerate their clientele.

This shelter's strong resemblance to institutionalization did not seem to bother some men. Greg noted that with his limited range of movement, Religious Shelter was the one place that offered medical assistance, the longest continuous number of days on the premises, and a staff that even tried to find him work he could do with his disability:

I stayed in the [Religious Shelter] for about three years, primarily because I was not physically able to work. I have a bad back, bad leg, bad ankle, and a little bit of a breathing problem. The [shelter] was very helpful, because they helped me get the medical help that I needed. Although they did not support me in any financial way other than giving me a place to sleep, three meals a day, and a way to make money that I couldn't physically do, all right? They were helpful. As they saw that I couldn't do the physical work, they tried to find something I could do, but there's just not much calling for a guy that can't get any kind of aid and can't do the physical work.

Greg seems to recognize also that in some ways he represented the ideal client for Religious Shelter: he could not rejoin the everyday

work world of Las Vegas but still needed a place to live. Therefore, the shelter institutionalization model seemed to suit him, although he seemed annoyed at their attempts to give him jobs he could not do, perhaps as attempts to make him “earn his keep.” Albert also appreciated Religious Shelter, believing that the emphasis on religion and ending substance abuse at the shelter was administered out of genuine concern for and desire to help homeless men. He indicated that the shelter’s spiritual and moral structure had helped him kick cocaine for three months:

Here comes Mark, my good buddy. We were out smoking crack on the railroad tracks last night. He’s a good man. We were in the [shelter] together, the [Religious Shelter]. Now, I’ll tell you what. You want to talk about a place, of all places here in Las Vegas that really want to help the homeless people, that really want to help people get their lives together, is [that one]. It’s a Christian-run place. The pastor there is for real. It’s a for-real place. I stayed sober and clean over there for about ninety days. And one day I just got that urge to go out. Instead of dealing with that urge and going and doing something else and getting past that urge and going to sleep and waking up and being sober and taking your own—I still got my money, I went out and blew it, you know. I got kicked out of there.

Albert might have thought the Religious Shelter was most helpful because his admitted substance abuse problem and his Catholic background most paralleled this shelter’s approach to assistance. Albert perhaps was seeking out an institutional arrangement that would help him avoid his vice and provide spiritual support. Greg also appreciated the shelter’s restorative intentions but recognized that he was not the shelter’s ideal client because his injuries and age prevented him from being fully “restorable.” Instead, he seemed to need long-term housing assistance and/or government assistance for people with disabilities. Men such as Ziggy and Phillip seemed to gravitate toward other shelters, which might be explained by considering the perspective of the institution against their own perception of their needs. Each man strongly disagreed with either the shelter’s lockdown policy

or overtly religious orientation that, by focusing on their spiritual salvation, seemed to ignore or downplay the structural and material reasons for their homelessness, reasons possibly better addressed through a program with a different orientation.

Clearly, men in this study who used shelters in Las Vegas seemed to encounter different difficulties, to use shelters in different ways, and to need shelters for different purposes. A few men I studied, however, lived briefly in a surprising manner that allowed them freedom from the constraints often imposed by charitable shelters while leaving them vulnerable to other problems.

## Squatting on the Strip

During my early fieldwork I discovered three groups of homeless persons who stayed without a rental agreement at the Royal Oasis Motor Inn on the South Las Vegas Strip from January until October 1996. After a fire in October 1996, the inn was boarded up, and it was demolished in September 1997.

The building, located at 4375 South Las Vegas Boulevard, had been temporarily abandoned during a particularly active period of development in the late 1990s on the south end of the Las Vegas Strip. At that time several of the world's largest hotels, including the MGM Grand, the Tropicana, the Excalibur, and the Luxor, were within walking distance. Most of these towering resorts have between two thousand and five thousand rooms each. It now appears that the inn was marked for destruction as the exponentially increasing value of the property and the promise of redevelopment became apparent. The beige-colored inn comprised six 2-story buildings with twenty rooms each. The individual buildings were interconnected in a shape similar to a broken figure eight, with two large, central courtyards landscaped with trees, shrubbery, and grass. In the interim between destruction and redevelopment the Royal Oasis Motor Inn (hereafter referred to as RO) saw several dozen homeless individuals seek temporary shelter there.

Kenneth acted as the gatekeeper through whom I was able to meet and unobtrusively hang out with several individuals at the RO, in-

cluding a group of former convicts who seemed to control who stayed in the building. I first met Kenneth, a thirty-nine-year-old African American male, on Labor Day. He had been living at the RO in his second-floor room for four days. He sat on his bed, wearing only shorts. After I introduced myself and explained my research interest, I said I had some free food coupons that were promotional gimmicks for a nearby casino, and he could have them if he wanted them. He smiled at the gift, and after I wiped my feet on the dishrag in front of the door, he invited me in. Upon entering I noticed the smell of his sweat and cologne, reminding me that air conditioning was an impossible luxury for squatters in a desert climate.

Like those men I had interviewed in the shelters, Kenneth was recycling the throwaway objects of middle-class individuals. In this instance, though, the abandoned building and furniture seemed open to use by anyone without conditions: there was no charitable organization running this “shelter.” The freedom of the setting had seemed to inspire Kenneth’s creativity in furnishing his apartment. “I installed these two dressers from some of the other apartments,” he said. “The box spring is nothing much, but look at this mattress,” he exclaimed. It looked like new. He also had a small table with several spy and war books and a Bible he had found around the complex, books that he said were the first he had ever read. He had also decorated his apartment with a wrinkled Jackie Chan movie poster, baseball hats hung on nails in the wall, and a few pictures from free erotic brochures routinely distributed on the Strip. To protect his furnishings he had installed sliding locks onto his doors, locks he had removed from other apartments.

Because of the restrictions often placed on men in charitable shelters, it is easy to consider why Kenneth would at times relish the freedom of his environment. He explained the four-digit number—6252—he had put on his apartment door. “I figured if I was gonna stay here, I wanted to be in the lap of luxury,” he said smiling, in a not-too-veiled reference to the ritzy, penthouse existence in the five-thousand-room megaresorts just blocks away.

In addition to indicating his materialism, Kenneth’s statements also showed he still maintained other values, such as a strong work

ethic, that run counter to stereotypes of homeless persons as lazy. He said he had come to Las Vegas from Los Angeles to find work, having been a roofer and a union member. After working briefly for the recently completed Stratosphere Tower, his contract ended. In April he had found another job with a company that soon went bankrupt. While holding these jobs, he had maintained his own apartment. As first mentioned in chapter 3, Kenneth lost the apartment after falling behind on his share of the rent and having problems getting along with his gay roommate.

Kenneth had new a roommate at the RO, a Hawaiian man he called the great Kahuna, whom Kenneth said was a smart guy and kept his portion of the apartment neat. He said the great Kahuna went off during the day and somehow managed to “get stuff” they both used, things like candles now placed inside aluminum beer cans with large holes for light. He also said his roommate practiced what he called silver mining, or walking through casinos and unobtrusively looking for lost change in the pans of slot machines or on the floor (a practice I discuss further in chapter 5).

Because the great Kahuna shared his loot, Kenneth did not judge him, although he himself chose not to engage in the same practices. Kenneth simply said, “He provides for me.” Despite talking about his roommate’s petty theft, Kenneth did not reveal his own status as a former convict during our first few interactions. He often quoted the Bible and argued that the Lord had a plan in mind for him. Although his roommate and his friends (whom I would soon meet) seemed more opposed to Kenneth’s work ethic, he still seemed to want to work, save money, and find housing, despite currently squatting on someone else’s property and accepting stolen property. For example, as we spoke he was busy coloring his old shoes with a marker to make them look new. He said he hoped this would increase his chances of getting a job. Although he associated with criminals and had once been a criminal himself, he now seemed primarily committed to working his way out of a bad situation through legal, if somewhat desperate, means.

While he continued trying to find work for weeks, he would occasionally seem frustrated at attempting to end his homelessness

through legitimate means. He also said he was having difficulty at times getting and storing food at the RO:

Eating has been a problem. It's never been a problem before.

I was so hungry today I couldn't do anything. The other day I was over at [a nearby gas station and convenience store], and the woman said, "Do you want some mashed potatoes?" I said, "Do I look that bad off, lady?" [smiling] But she was real nice. When I get back on my feet, I'm gonna give her a good tip.

Many recently dislocated homeless persons, like Kenneth, show more embarrassment at their homelessness than resentment against wider social conditions that may have helped precipitate it. However, Kenneth's attempts at securing employment seemed to make him unique at the RO. A man he called the kingpin of the place, Spirit, was the acknowledged leader of a group I call the former convicts. I met Spirit, a Caucasian man in his early forties, two weeks after I first met Kenneth, during a gathering of other former convicts at Spirit's apartment. Spirit occupied arguably the best and most-furnished apartment, complete with double bed, dresser, several chairs, cooler, and a radio. When I met Spirit I had yet to introduce myself as a researcher. Thinking I was looking for a place to stay, he made it known to me that he would be the one allowing me to remain on the property. He also offered me a soda, which I thought I should politely accept. After I took a drink Spirit informed me that I would be bringing him a bottle of vodka in return.

Spirit's dictatorship over the community revolved around what he called his boys, which I discovered included Kenneth and two other men, Roberto (a Hispanic male in his late thirties) and Alan (a Caucasian male, also in his late thirties).<sup>4</sup> Kenneth grimaced when Spirit mentioned his status as a former convict, saying, "I asked you not to tell him that." Spirit referred to the row of apartments he, Kenneth, Alan, and Roberto occupied as his "tier," which he said was prison talk for his territory.

Spirit's disclosure of Kenneth's status as a former convict upset Kenneth. While Kenneth now seemed to want to end his homelessness through legitimate means, Spirit was content in securing his live-



lihood through petty theft and the intimidation of other squatters. Spirit said that he had been on the street before and that he now received five hundred to six hundred dollars a month from illegal activities and from the RO residents.

His threatening mannerisms and frequent bursts of shouting seemed to explain the respect given him by the other three men. Despite Kenneth's more muscular build, Spirit had an apartment with a running toilet, a shower, and a sink, while Kenneth did not. In my initial tour of his apartment, Kenneth had shown me that his bathroom fixtures had been pulled out of the wall. "I go next door to take a shower. It's ice cold, but it works," he said, and we both smiled and laughed. "I have the bath here filled up with water so I can wash my clothes," he said. "It [the water] looks dirty, but it's really not bad, just soapy." While both men used the resources at the RO, Kenneth clearly did not seem to be using them in the same manner and for the same purposes as Spirit.

After explaining to Spirit that I was a researcher studying homelessness in Las Vegas, he began telling me that I did not have what it took to survive in the world and that he could kill me without thinking twice. He paced as he spoke, and he punctuated his statements by hitting himself and making physically threatening gestures. At one point, he announced his personal belief system:

I'm gonna tell you something. I'm gonna tell you a story about this master of psychology who evaluated me. Do you know who Charles Manson was? See, I'm his twin brother. There were two of us. Do you see it? I AM MY GOD. I'M A GOD THAT'S REAL [pounding his chest]. I'm not your fake, plastic God. I'm not a credit card. Look deep into my eyes [moving within an inch of my face]. I COULD KILL YOU [his spit hitting my face]. All of these guys here know I'm God, and that's why they worship me. I was doing a 5/10 split in prison when I was sixteen. You know about the Vietnam War? This fucking master of psychology going on to his DOCTORATE was talking to his sergeant about me. He said, "If I could have had someone to counsel me, I wish it had been [Spirit] when I had to talk to all those boys coming

back from the war.” THAT WAS THE HIGHEST HONOR I HAVE EVER FELT [gritting his teeth]. NOTHING your professors can tell you will ever come CLOSE to that kind of knowledge. Nothing you read could defend you from me. You see, I can kill anyone with this [points to his head], but I don’t because it would hurt me more. I’m the anti–Charles Manson. I can destroy anyone at will, but I only use my powers for good. But if you hurt God, NO ONE WILL SAVE YOU.

Once I left, Kenneth quietly told me, “That’s why we call him Spirit.”

Although the former convicts were the dominant and most visible presence at the RO, other, less visible groups also existed there. On several occasions, I attempted contact with the “retirees,” a group of older men who lived on the first floor of a separate building. My encounters with members of this group were few and often brief. Qualitative research is generally recognized as the most in-depth way to get to know about a group, but several of these individuals told me in no uncertain terms that they wanted to be left alone. The difficulties of a qualitative researcher attempting to gain the trust of elderly near-homeless persons has been discussed in detail by Rollinson (1990) in his study of single room occupancy hotel residents:

At all four hotels I was introduced to the elderly participants by the desk clerk, either in the hotel lobby or in their rooms. This first meeting rarely led to an interview. Most of the tenants with whom I made contact in their rooms refused to participate. The participants in this exploration, therefore, represented the least withdrawn elderly SRO tenants. Those that remained in their rooms, out of sight or unwilling to be interviewed, were not a part of this study. (1990, 192)

I experienced similar problems in attempting to make contact with individual retirees in their rooms at the RO. The mistrust these elderly squatters showed me may have been explained in terms of considerations for their personal safety rather than in terms of being entirely “withdrawn,” as Rollinson phrased it. Some might have thought I was

a former convict out to steal or extort from them. Others might have thought I was aligned with the police or the owner of the property and could have them removed.

In one of my brief discussions with two retirees, Chuck<sup>5</sup> (a Caucasian man in his fifties) justified his presence, claiming he was “keeping an eye on the place” for the owner by living there. We talked while he played solitaire, which he wanted to do before the sun went down. He had a small radio, several books, and a bed with blankets he shared with another older man.

Chuck stated that he had lived in the room before the motor inn closed, and that explained why the owners had let him stay. He said the owners did not mind that others were staying on the property as long as they left during the daytime. As he saw it, his job was to make sure everybody cleared out Monday through Friday, but he let everyone stay on the weekends, provided they did not damage the property.

Hiro,<sup>6</sup> a fifty-five-year-old Asian man, lived next door to Chuck. He told me that he received a Social Security disability check and that he had been in Las Vegas for three years. I noticed many foreign-language newspapers in his apartment. After two minutes of talking, he asked, “Are we done?” and extended his hand toward the door.

Although the content of these interviews makes them appear less than informative, important points may be gleaned from these examples. First, the elderly compose a distinct portion of the homeless population in Las Vegas. These individuals may not embody the demographic or behavioral characteristics that some survey researchers (Shlay and Rossi 1992) have commonly associated with being homeless, such as being mentally ill, having a criminal record, lacking social networks, or engaging in substance abuse. Second, other, aggressive homeless persons in their immediate environment arguably influenced the reclusive mannerisms of these squatters. Third, the interviews might indicate why some social scientists tend toward overgeneralizations regarding homeless populations. It is much easier to conduct surveys of large groups of homeless persons conveniently located in socially controlled shelters than it is to seek out homeless persons who do not rely on such services for face-to-face interviews and/or observations.

The “partiers,” another group at the RO, also wanted to be left alone. As very temporary residents, they did not have many personal possessions or claims to specific areas of the RO. Many of the rooms at the RO were full of beer bottles, bare mattresses, erotic brochures, and trash. When I would run into a man, woman, or small groups of partiers inside, they were often sleeping. Those who were awake usually turned down my request to talk with them after I told them of my research interest. However, I did talk to others at the RO, and determined the way in which they perceived the partiers.

Kenneth once showed me an apartment two doors down from his, which had a mattress on the floor and trash and empty bottles strewn everywhere. He said it was occupied by a drunk who had promised to give him a thousand dollars if Kenneth would help him out temporarily, an idea Kenneth thought was laughable. “I know he can’t pay me back, and he knows it, so why does he think he has to lie to me? I’ve had problems with people lying to me,” he said.

He showed me a large burn hole this neighbor had made one night on the mattress. Kenneth noted the man covered it with a pair of underwear so no one would see how irresponsible he had been. “I’m really afraid the whole place is gonna go up in flames,” he said. (Ironically, the incident that caused the owner to later post no trespassing warnings and board up the RO was a fire that consumed an apartment near Kenneth’s.)

Aside from Kenneth’s fear of certain partiers’ use of fire, the former convicts seemed to regard the partiers as a relatively harmless group. Spirit once talked of taking alcohol and money from partiers whom he found drunk and asleep, but he never mentioned having directly strong-armed a partier. The partiers’ inconsistent and limited presence on the property, as well as their frequently inebriated state, meant they had little recourse against former convicts who might confiscate their limited worldly possessions or inflict violence. However, the partiers’ movement in and out of several rooms at the RO, visible in trash, abandoned clothing, and dozens of empty beer bottles, show that they too made their own use of the building.

This typology of squatters at the RO is obviously superficial and therefore of limited use. I introduced it primarily to show that dif-

ferent types of homeless people seemed interested in using an abandoned building for very different purposes. It would be wrong, however, to say that each group I have discussed was an entity unto itself or that there existed no sense of community among those who stayed at the RO. Although some alliances were stronger than others, almost everyone I met seemed aware of the presence of others in the complex through interactions, such as recognition of the complex's dog, Hootch. The presence of stronger and weaker groups in the complex, however, shows that the RO "community" was also defined by intimidation, fear, and oppositional relationships.

The individuals I encountered at the RO also show that this group of homeless people in Las Vegas who took over abandoned property did it primarily in an unorganized manner and often for immediate survival purposes. Other researchers, such as Welch (1992), discuss the formation of squatter communities as politically motivated actions by homeless persons and often present a politically idealized version of the practice. Using examples from the 1960s to the 1980s, Welch describes several squatting movements that were aimed at transforming their members' own living arrangements as well as critiquing laws and government programs such as those of the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) office that left thousands of abandoned buildings unused while homelessness in the United States continued to increase. Together, the varied groups that made up the RO community, the low visibility of many RO residents, and the transient nature of the partiers provide an example counter to Welch's description of squatting movements. Overall, although there was some sense of community at the RO, it was tempered by stronger group affiliations and strong considerations of individual well-being.

## Discussion

The way homeless men interact with both charitable and unstructured forms of shelter in Las Vegas primarily shows that once a man becomes homeless, he is forced to make many unpleasant decisions. A major, immediate concern for most men is how to rest or find shelter. Although there are choices homeless men can make about

where they will stay, each choice will limit their options in particular ways. Such socially structured choices affect a homeless man's health, safety, and level of stress. Such choices also affect how long a man will endure homelessness, and perhaps even if a man will be able to end his homelessness.

When encountering the charitable shelter system in Las Vegas, a man quickly learns that in order to stay he must give up certain rights and adhere to the rules of a shelter, or face eviction. Such shelters share many characteristics of total institutions—places that manage a problem population by removing that population from the public sphere and by working to monitor and control members of that population. Homeless men in Las Vegas recognize that assistance programs, such as the shelters mentioned in this chapter, are important sources of immediate assistance. However, some of the men who use shelters in Las Vegas disagree with those who run the shelters over the type of help they need, and are at times critical of shelter rules, structures, and/or programs that seem to hinder them from ending their homelessness.

In keeping with the definition of total institutions as places where problem populations are removed from the wider society, some of the men I interviewed believed that each of the three charitable shelters is located in an economically marginal area to keep homeless persons away from tourist areas. The men at times seemed well aware that both the resort casinos and the city of Las Vegas, in an effort to sanitize the city's resort corridor for tourists, promoted this centralization of homeless services. Some homeless men believed each shelter's primary purpose was, not to help them become self-sufficient, but, in participation with larger efforts by the city, to exclude them from the Las Vegas community or simply contain them, away from tourist and upscale residential areas. Hank, for example, believed the concentration of shelters away from the most viable tourist sections of Las Vegas was part of a citywide conspiracy against any group or individual who might interfere with casino interests:

It's like I'm saying, these people would do anything and everything to keep you from fucking with the tourists that are coming

here. Las Vegas is not like New York or California. California's industry. [Here] they have things to see, and people come to Las Vegas to gamble and to have fun and they're not going to let anybody stand in the way of that. Nobody.

The idea that shelters are part of a larger, citywide effort by resorts to help maintain the smooth function of the gambling- and tourist-based economy of Las Vegas was also understood by at least one social service provider. Sue strongly parallels Hank's thoughts:

The hotel industry, which is really unique to Las Vegas, are especially sensitive to transient or homeless people being on the streets. When mom and pop come from Iowa, they need to feel the magic of the town. They need to know that they can walk safely twenty-four hours a day, go wherever they want, not be worried about being panhandled, not worried about being attacked, not worried about being injured, and heaven knows we need to hide that part of life because if they're here for vacation, you're here for fun. You don't pay the money to see the things you can see at home. You come here for something different, and to get all swept up in the environment, the lights and the entertainment and the people, et cetera. The hotel casinos are as interested as we are not to have people loitering and hanging around their places of establishment. So it's far easier for them and they gladly put some of their donation money to places like [our shelter] to make sure that doesn't happen. It's just a good business decision. It will hurt their business if there were not programs like ours.

Ironically, both a homeless man and a homeless services provider recognized that resort industry interests were necessarily linked to keeping the "blight" of homelessness away from their businesses. As the men using shelters recognized that those facilities were in some respects useful while in other respects hindrances to addressing their plight, their day-to-day needs, and their integration into the greater Las Vegas community, it makes sense that some men chose to seek

out a less restrictive environment closer to economic opportunity in the form of an abandoned building on the South Las Vegas Strip.

Men who stayed at the RO seemed to have far greater autonomy, as they were not submitting to an agency with conditions of acceptance. The men in the abandoned building could feel a sense of freedom and self-worth that might have proven useful for them in either subsisting or perhaps ending their homelessness. However, the RO did not allow unlimited freedom to all who stayed. Without a dominant value system and a management system that ensured everyone's safety, men staying in that abandoned building were subject to neighbors who undermined their sense of physical security through patterns of intimidation, threats, or dangerous activities. The men also at times complained of hunger. In addition, the men were far removed from social services they might require.

Men at the RO had greater access to legal (and, in some cases, illegal) economic opportunity than did those men in the homeless corridor. However, the men at the RO were particularly vulnerable to each other and experienced stress as a result of their vulnerability. The insecurity of their living arrangement caused some men to appear overly protective of the space they claimed in the abandoned building. Those men felt a strong need to protect their space and possessions, which then inhibited them from leaving their "apartments" for long, in turn making it difficult for them to engage in outside activities that might have helped them end their homelessness. Although retirees and partiers feared the potential violence of the former convicts, the former convicts and retirees feared the irresponsible antics of the partiers. Perhaps the former convicts and the partiers also feared the retirees, some of whom claimed to be aligned with the owner of the building. Although the men on the South Las Vegas Strip had better access to an economically viable area than did the men in the shelters of the homeless corridor, the squatters also experienced an ongoing physical vulnerability while sleeping that men staying in shelters, with their security guards, administrative structures, and rules, did not.

If intense vulnerability defines homeless men, then it seems none of the various forms of shelter available in Las Vegas leaves them feel-



ing safe or secure. Stress seems to be a regular aspect of their lives. There does not seem to be a clear, “best” choice a man might make among such varied arrangements. The choices a man might make in securing a particular form of shelter could hinder him in unintended ways. While some men tried to endure being told what to do, being told to make lifestyle changes, and being segregated to an economically marginal area, other men tried to endure the stress of an unsafe, hostile, and unstable physical environment.

Looking at how men view and use homeless shelters as opposed to how they view and use an abandoned building shows that homeless men are, first and foremost, *vulnerable*. Considering the different types of living arrangement in this chapter reveals the ways in which homeless men attempt to address their vulnerability and how taking up nontraditional living arrangements once a man is homeless causes him to become vulnerable in possibly new and/or debilitating ways. These forms of vulnerability show that the social environment surrounding homeless men greatly informs not only their ability to end their homelessness but their ability to simply survive.

## Other Survival Strategies

Because homeless men are typically outside the traditional economy of Las Vegas, they often resort to unconventional survival strategies. I often asked homeless men basic questions about how they survived and how they managed to live from day to day. Since most domiciled people work in order to attain material goods and daily security, I also asked homeless men about work—what type of work they did if they were employed, and if not, what other options allowed them to survive in Las Vegas. Looking at the various survival strategies of homeless men in Las Vegas is important because these strategies reveal an important social factor affecting the lives of homeless men—the marginal relationship these men have to the Las Vegas economy. Homeless men at times provide valuable services to locals and at other times seem to burden the community. Discussing homeless men's survival strategies also reveals that, although such strategies

help the men to survive, they simultaneously hinder the men from ending their homelessness.

A fair body of research about the survival strategies used by homeless persons already exists. Some researchers have labeled the typically non-work related survival strategies the “makeshift economies” (Hopper, Susser, and Conover 1985) of homeless persons. Others have referred to such strategies as “shadow work” (Snow and Anderson 1993). Hopper, Susser, and Conover define “makeshift economies” as the improvised subsistence strategies of homeless men, including reliance on public assistance, participation in the underground economy (selling things such as plasma, recyclable items, and cigarettes, for example), and begging (1985, 214). Similarly, Snow and Anderson describe “shadow work” as selling and trading junk, personal possessions, or illegal goods and services; selling plasma; soliciting donations; scavenging; and theft (1993, 145–70). Both concepts show the degree to which homeless men are “grudging players in a rough theater of improvisation” (Hopper et al. 1985, 194) and the way in which these men make do when traditional wage-labor positions are either unavailable or unattainable.

While popular views on homelessness often question whether or not homeless men want to work, a focus on economies of makeshift and shadow work show that, although such men may not work in a traditional and/or institutionalized sense, homeless men are often continually working, that is, they are engaged in activities to ensure their survival (Hopper et al. 1985; Snow and Anderson 1993, 146). Men typically use shadow work to supplement or replace governmental or charitable assistance, but many of their survival activities (such as collecting cans, begging, and theft) are also heavily stigmatized. However, through their constant subsistence activities, homeless men in Las Vegas, like homeless men in other parts of the United States, often undermine categorical distinctions between work and leisure (Gounis 1993). Although their activities might not constitute traditional definitions of *work* as paid labor, it would also be incorrect to label them as leisure activities. They are perhaps best thought of as desperate activities that allow the men to be autonomous and self-sufficient. However, the extreme stigma of such activities, their

frequent low pay, and the fact that they often do not lead to better opportunities also indicate well the extreme difficulties homeless men frequently face in trying to escape homelessness.

## Trying to Find Full-Time Work

Many homeless men I spoke to were primarily interested in finding permanent, full-time employment.<sup>1</sup> While such traditional wage-labor positions are not generally thought of as part of shadow work or the makeshift economy of homeless males, it is useful to discuss some of the problems these men faced in trying to attain a full-time job. Frustration from an inability to secure traditional, full-time wage labor also helps indicate why homeless men in Las Vegas often end up implementing alternative subsistence strategies.

Several of the men that I met during research in Las Vegas had difficulty finding full-time, traditional work because of issues ranging from a lack of skills to substance abuse issues to problems with the law (some of which were discussed in chapter 3). Men in Las Vegas noted all of the problems that homeless persons in other studies have discussed in trying to secure full-time-traditional work, including not having the basic resources needed to look for work and put their best foot forward while seeking employment, not having resources such as reliable transportation, not having a reliable place to clean up or maintain personal hygiene, not having a typed résumé, not having suitable clothes, and not having a contact phone and residential address besides those of a shelter (Snow and Anderson 1993, 118–23). Because of these problems, homeless men “are at an immediate disadvantage vis à vis other prospective employees” (Snow and Anderson 1993, 118) or will have difficulty convincing an employer to hire them over other, non-homeless applicants. If men were able to find jobs despite such adverse conditions, many of these same problems would continue to haunt them throughout their employment. Once employed, homeless men usually still had difficulty finding reliable transportation to and from work sites, getting work schedules that would not conflict with the curfew rules of a given shelter, and being able to regularly clean their uniforms or work clothes.

Despite these difficulties, some homeless men I interviewed were able to secure full-time jobs. George, whose situation was first discussed in chapter 3, became homeless after serving time in jail. He was able to return to his job after serving his sentence. Although living in a shelter, he hoped to save money toward an apartment.

George's circumstances seemed to make him best suited for the shelter program he was in, where a work program was in place. This shelter programs encouraged the men to work traditional forty-hour-a-week jobs to pay a portion of their income to the shelter, but also allowed them to save money in order to resecure their home, apartment, or other traditional living arrangements. Indeed, as Fred explained to me, some shelters strongly promote work programs, making them different from those "purely" for homeless persons. He told me that sometimes people who come to the shelter

automatically think everyone's homeless. And they're not. . . . Sometimes they're asked to come in because of different court orders, because of dependencies that they may have, either alcohol or drug. Sometimes it's because of medical problems and it's easier to come through a program like this. Sometimes it's because people are new to an area and they didn't come totally prepared for the differences in the growth and the cards they have to go through and everything else for Las Vegas and so forth. So there are many other reasons, and it's not just [because] a person is homeless that they come into a shelter like this. This is why this is technically not just a shelter. It's a work program. There are certain places which are strictly shelters.

However, men who have been out of traditional wage-labor jobs for an extended period or who, as Fred mentioned, may have moved to Las Vegas without enough resources to secure the credentials necessary for local employment may have difficulty finding full-time employment. As discussed in chapter 3, Bill, who left his job as a waiter in New Mexico, was one such man who sought a traditional wage-labor position. He arrived in Las Vegas with minimal savings. His attempts to find work in casinos on the Las Vegas Strip made him

realize he would need new forms of identification, such as a sheriff's card, in order to work:

I had a problem getting my Social Security card. I had my voter's registration, I had state ID and stuff, right? But they wanted that Social Security card. And I had to come up with certain documents for that card because it's like, under an adoptive name? Long story. It took me three weeks to get a Social Security card once I got out here.

Bill said that since coming to Las Vegas he had "invested a hundred bucks in cards alone," cards that he hoped would help him secure work.

As Bill also found out, the casino jobs he thought would be plentiful were highly sought after. Indeed, in 1997 the newly constructed resort casino Sunset Station received approximately fifty thousand phone calls on its job hotline for only eighteen hundred positions (Patterson 1997b). In addition, since Bill did not belong to a union, he was excluded from consideration for union jobs at several casinos. Even if he had paid to join the union, thousands before him would have had priority for selection.

Eventually, having gone through his savings, Bill began turning in dozens of applications for any job opening he saw related to the food-service industry. He soon found work at a pizza parlor making minimum wage. Excerpts from his diary, included in an earlier chapter, showed that the frustration of his entry-level position combined with abusive treatment from a supervisor caused him to quit within days. Clearly the job was not one that would allow Bill to save for an apartment, much less provide him with health benefits, vacation leave, or a retirement program.

Bill eventually found a slightly better but still near-minimum wage job, working part-time at a security company. His employment history seemed to reflect the changing American economy, which in Bill's lifetime had moved from manufacturing employment as a dominant source of working-class family income (Block et al. 1987; Harvey 1990) to more working-class persons working today in the post-

industrial, service-based economy. While manufacturing employment in the United States once allowed semi-skilled workers an opportunity to earn a living wage, the decline in these jobs has led more people like Bill typically to seek jobs in the growing service sector.

Homeless men like Matthew believed people came to Las Vegas because the city appeared to offer reasonable wages for low-skilled work and a new chance at the American dream, especially since manufacturing-based jobs seemed to be drying up in the United States or leaving the country:

There are maids in some of the better casinos here that make ten, twelve dollars an hour making beds, and [being] porters. . . . [People come here because] it's pretty much warm all year round and very mild winters and the lure of finding a good job and kind of fulfilling the American dream . . . and a lot of the situations in—especially back East, a lot of plants closing and jobs going overseas to China and Japan and Taiwan and Mexico—a lot of people find themselves out of work, and they pack up the station wagon or whatever and come out here for jobs.

The employment mentioned by Matthew, however, is in the service sector. Although employment in the service industry has increased dramatically across the United States since 1970, Las Vegas has an even larger percentage of new jobs within the service industry than in most U.S. metropolitan areas. "According to state forecasts, the largest number of positions will continue to be in the waiter/waitress occupation through 2005, followed by cashiers, salespeople/retail, security guards and blackjack dealers" (Patterson 1997a). Such service-sector jobs pay substantially less on average than manufacturing positions once did. Local service positions in the hotel and gaming industry thus provide a major source of employment available to working-class individuals, but because these jobs often require little skill, wages can be kept low.

Other men besides Bill indicated that despite wanting to work full time, they could not support themselves on a job that paid minimum wage. Clyde, for example, who earlier mentioned having lost his job

as a factory supervisor, believed the employment future was bleak for many homeless men. "I don't see much change, unless there's a wholesale change in jobs," Clyde said. "There's so many jobs that don't pay a living wage, like hotel/motel, but you just can't live on that." Clyde even thought that homeless men, believing that they couldn't really "get ahead" through work, had simply given up hope. "A lot of these guys figure, 'I can get the same things through places like [a shelter], so why bother working? I can get it for free.'"

Matthew was a perfect example of Clyde's point that some homeless men have tried maintaining an independent residence through work, but finally gave up hope. Matthew worked for more than four years with a private security firm before his new general manager cut his pay from nearly \$12.00 an hour to \$8.50 an hour. He left his job and found another one in security six months later, but at a lower wage:

It got to the point after a year, just living to pay the rent in that apartment, it got to be not worth it anymore, just [to] pay my rent and have thirty dollars left over per week to try and eat with, and I couldn't make it. . . . So after a couple of months I came down [to a local shelter].

The general instability of employment in post-industrial Las Vegas was a recurring theme with several of the homeless men I interviewed. Ziggy, for example, explained his experience with limited labor contracts.

I find that jobs here are plentiful, but they're not all that stable. You know, you go to work, you might work for three, four, five, six months, and all of a sudden somebody is saying, "Oh, well, we got to lay you off." Just as you are beginning to get a foothold, they say, "Oh, well, we've got to cut back."

In part because of difficulty competing with non-homeless workers and in part because of contemporary employment trends, homeless men may consider other methods for maintaining their material existence.



## Finding Day-Labor Jobs

Day labor, or employment where workers are hired on a daily basis to perform manual labor, is typically a major source of work for homeless men (Snow and Anderson 1993, 123–34). In Las Vegas, employers seeking day laborers sometimes directly contact homeless shelters to find people:

**Kurt:** You told me about the job program they have at [the shelter].

**Bill:** Right. You know, you can call [the shelter] like if they need extra hands in construction, if they need warehouse work, if they need their lawn mowed. . . . They've got this list and you sign up.

Other men may pick up day-labor work on Bonanza Road. Although recent ordinances now limit the picking up of day laborers on Bonanza Road (see chapter 1), several of the men I spoke to claimed that the ordinances did not stop them from finding work there.

The popularity of this kind of employment may be explained in terms of a mutually beneficial relationship: at a moment's notice, some employers need able-bodied persons to accomplish a specific task that does not require particular skills, and homeless men are often willing to do unskilled or semi-skilled labor for quick cash. Since the jobs are usually short-term and involve manual labor, issues such as personal appearance, long-term reliability, and place of residence become far less important to employers who simply want a task done immediately. The employment might also be undocumented, allowing the employer to avoid paying taxes and benefits to the employee.

Men seek this type of employment for various reasons. Albert indicated that, despite waking up with good intentions, he would often slip back into drug and alcohol use after a day-labor job, leaving him with nothing the next day:

Every day you wake up in the morning and you walk out in the streets carrying what you have on your back, everything you own you're carrying with you. You walk out, you try to do good. You

make sixty, seventy dollars working out on Bonanza Street and you're feeling good, you're tired, you're off work, and you think, you know, a cold beer. Well, that one cold beer leads to another one and the next thing you know you're over at the [crack] house and the next thing you know you're broke and you're waking up in the morning going through it all over again. It's just such a sick life.

Other men looked to day labor as a solution to their immediate survival needs. Bill explained that day-labor jobs actually seemed more practical to him than other forms of stable employment, given his immediate needs:

Like I said, I've [just] got a job at this security company. See, the deal is, you get a full-time, paying job, right? [But] if you're not getting tipped, how are you gonna survive till you get your first paycheck?

However, the flexibility of day-labor employment also has a downside for employees, who often work without a contract and without accumulating sick pay, vacation pay, and retirement benefits (Parker 1994). Because day-labor income is unsteady and involves variable rates of pay, it also is difficult to depend on it to pay regular bills for food, rent, electricity, and phone use.

Furthermore, day laborers are often at the mercy of their employers in ways long-term employees are not. Jim mentioned having worked as a temporary jackhammer operator for four dollars an hour, but was not given earplugs. Having secured the job through a temporary employment agency, he also had money taken out of his paycheck to pay for transportation to and from the job site. Keith gave a similar account of having been taken advantage of by doing skilled labor for near-minimum wage:

**Kurt:** Tell me about the type of work you've picked up on Bonanza.

**Keith:** I ended up doing roofing for a guy for five dollars an hour. I've put up ceilings in mobile homes, installed two sprinkler

systems. The roofing job was one of those smogbuster businesses. If I had known it was for five dollars an hour, I wouldn't have gone. We had to pull all the tiles and tarpaper up to the roof with ropes. This guy bought us breakfast, but we spent a whole day in the sun. I had to put in every nail by hand, no gun. I got tar all over me. I was so dirty, I got a hotel room last night just to clean up. I slept from 6 [PM] 'til 11 [AM], the first good night sleep I've had in weeks. Everybody took Thursday off because of the rain. I don't mind roofing, but he's probably making two to three grand on the job. The tar sheeting rows weigh seventy-five pounds. He didn't do shit all day—worked for an hour putting in the soft tar. When he paid me I told the guy, "Is this all I get?" He said, "That's all I pay." I told him, "Next time you see me, don't even stop. Just drive on by."

Ronald said that only a few weeks previously he had been paid more than twenty-four dollars an hour for full-time work as a concrete cutter. However, since a DUI conviction had caused him to lose his driver's license and his job, he had done the same type of work as a day laborer for half the pay:

**Ronald:** I'm looking for cash-base work, cash basis, where they pay at the end of the day.

**Kurt:** Day labor?

**Ronald:** Yeah, day labor, yeah. It hasn't happened. I worked one day last week.

**Kurt:** Where have you been going to look for day labor?

**Ronald:** There's a place up there on Bonanza where fifty, sixty, seventy guys gather around within a mile radius. And I pretty much just hang out away from that. I just walk further up the street.

**Kurt:** How was the work you got on the day you got work? What type of stuff did you do?

**Ronald:** It was the type of work I do, concrete. I did a driveway. They paid me sixty bucks for five and a half hours. It averaged out like to be about ten bucks an hour.

**Kurt:** So a lot less than what you usually make?

**Ronald:** [I used to make] two hundred and fifty a day for ten hours, four days a week.

Despite the exploitation that often characterizes it, day labor may be the first step for some of these men toward gaining full-time employment. Keith became homeless in Las Vegas as a result of gambling. A day-labor job did eventually provide him with enough money to travel to a full-time job waiting for him in Mexico:

Since I saw you last, things have been going great. I got a full-time job roofing. I bought a bus ticket to Los Cabos and I'll have five hundred dollars saved. I'll leave next Monday. I'm going to bar-tend down there. My friend who's there got me the job. It's funny I'm running into you. Today's my only day off.

However, other men feel more pessimistic about their future when they begin their employment as "temps," particularly when, as Donald found, they acquire such jobs through agencies that use shelter residents only when they have few other workers. When I asked Donald if he thought his new job at a major national clothing retailer would turn into steady work, he simply said, "Oh no, it's just for Christmas. I work for Valley Temps. They just call down here [to a local shelter] when they need overflow [workers]."

## Finding and Accessing Social Services

For some men, a key survival strategy involves discovering and accessing social services, particularly charitable services and governmental social services programs.

In chapter 3 I discussed how large shelters in Las Vegas distribute assistance and charity. Because of their limited paperwork and the speed of their response to the immediate needs of homeless men, shelters and charitable organizations are often considered first when homeless men look to agencies for assistance. Some men had difficulty accessing the charitable services they needed while also trying to find regular employment, an irony that seemed to perpetuate their dependency. Ziggy noted the difficulty he had in both working and

accessing charitable services he needed until his paycheck could support him.

You get up at 4:30 in the morning, you go down to day-labor hall, and you sit there all morning. And whatever kind of breakfast you might be able to get out here on the street, you miss that. By the time you get back down here [to a shelter], you miss the showers that they provide in the mornings, so now you are lacking in hygiene and sustenance. You sacrifice that to try to get work for the day. You get up there and you don't get work for the day. You come back down here, all the services have ended. So now you've got to wait till the next morning and either sacrifice the sustenance and hygiene again for the possibility of work, or you sacrifice the possibility of work to make up for the shower and the meal that you didn't get yesterday.

In her discussion of shelters as total institutions, Stark notes that "civil" life (or life outside of total institutions) allows an individual to sequentially schedule his or her roles; for example, a person can schedule separate times for work, play, shopping, and rest. Total institutions, on the other hand, nearly always disrupt an individual's role scheduling (1994, 557). Ziggy's complaint is a perfect example of how several of the total institutions such as homeless shelters serving homeless men in Las Vegas have schedules running counter to the demands of civil life, making it harder for Ziggy and other homeless men to move from one style of living into the other.

Additionally, as Ziggy noted, although finding and accessing social services is not a form of work, the practice at times seems like work. The philosophy underlying social welfare programs in the United States generally makes attaining such services difficult. Early notions of charity in the United States were influenced by English Poor Laws, which were designed to make receiving charitable relief as unappealing as possible. The structure of those laws strongly encouraged individuals who could work to do so rather than take advantage of social welfare programs.

Governmental agencies seem to make applying for and receiving

assistance even more daunting. Ronald's story is an example of the catch-22 of currently being in need but facing processing delays while waiting for governmental assistance. He described the uncertainty of a positive response to his request, the waiting period, as well as the other bureaucratic alternatives he would consider pursuing if his first requests for assistance were denied:

**Kurt:** So what are your plans now, after the DUI and with your family staying at another shelter? Do you have a court date and things like that?

**Ronald:** Yeah. Well, I've got a court date in December. But for now I filed for unemployment, and I'm eligible for two hundred and fifty dollars a week, two hundred and sixty a week. And with that, if I'm not denied, you know, this is my third week being homeless; and sometime this week, in the mid-part of the week or toward the end of the week, either I'll receive or I'll be denied my claim, my insurance claim.

But if I'm denied, then the wife is going to have to go to the welfare office and show them the paper that I've been denied, and then they'll help us with some kind of FADC [Aid for Families with Dependent Children] or something, where they give us cash aid. Then we're going to get out of here. This is hard on my family.

He also described his frustration at having his son rejected from a Head Start program because his wife had not held a job in addition to raising their child:

**Ronald:** But, you know, my wife wants to work, but we have to put my son—he's four years old, and we got to put him in a Head Start school. We was denied about that too. We went to a program for low income—well, in our case homeless family—[where] they'll put you in housing, set you up and you don't have to pay the rent. But what you have to do is, they'll give you thirty days where you and your spouse have to have a full-time job . . . and if you have a child that needs to go to Head Start

school, they provide for that. The only requirements are that you have to prove that 20 percent of your gross monthly income, you and your spouse, that you have to show them a bank statement that you're saving—

**Kurt:** To be in the program?

**Ronald:** To be in the program. It's a six-month program. And that's great. That's the way to do it. You're talking about forty-hour [a week] income—I mean, eighty-hour [a week] income with me and my spouse. And we were denied last week on that because my wife hasn't had a job since '93. And the reason for that is because she's been home nurturing my son. You know, but for my wife to go out and get a job part-time, she'd have to pay between eighty to one hundred dollars a week to have him in school. That's what she'd be working for. There wouldn't be any income coming in. Very little.

The experiences of Ziggy and Ronald indicate several problems in accessing social services. On the one hand, men like Ziggy mentioned using social services that provided for a man's immediate needs (such as a place to sleep, to clean up, to eat) but noted that those services often required being certain places at certain times, restricting a man's ability to follow an employment schedule. Ronald, on the other hand, noted that social services that would help his family for a sustained period of time (including programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children, unemployment insurance, and Head Start) required meeting strict eligibility requirements and required ongoing documentation. In addition, Ronald found that some of the bureaucracies seemed based on individualized assistance while others seemed geared toward family assistance, and that the requirements of various forms of assistance for various members of his family rarely coincided.

The limitations that some men experience when using local shelters, other charitable assistance, and governmental assistance programs, and their frustration at trying to find work, might then lead them to consider alternative survival strategies.

## Scavenging for Food, Goods, and Change

Some men I spoke with described practices similar to Jerry's digging through garbage cans for food, alcohol, and bus transfers. They engaged in such scavenging practices because they believed it was easier than securing regular wage employment or day labor.

As already noted, traditional wage-labor employment frequently requires a modicum of health, references, a contact phone number, transportation, and appropriate clothing, all of which a homeless man may find difficult to obtain. Similarly, some men may avoid day labor because of previous injuries, mental health problems, fear of working conditions, substance abuse, anger at exploitation by employers, dislike of day-labor jobs, or other reasons. Men with these issues may thus consider scavenging: using or selling discarded items in order to survive (Snow and Anderson 1993, 162–65). While this source of subsistence may be sporadic, some men I spoke to seemed drawn to it because, unlike wage-labor jobs and dependence on government assistance or charitable organizations, this source of income offered them increased freedom and autonomy.

For example, Jim used a truck (which he also slept in) to collect pallets from supermarkets and businesses around town, which he would sell back to four local distributors. He learned about selling pallets from another homeless man he saw pushing them down the street in a shopping cart. Jim sold large, undamaged pallets for three dollars each, and the smaller and/or damaged ones for a dollar each. He told me that a security guard once stopped him behind a supermarket, however, and said there was a federal law against taking things from Dumpsters. (Although Jim explained to the guard that it was probably a local ordinance and not a federal law, he was nonetheless told to leave the property.)

Jim often made money reselling pallets. He would offer \$1.25 to homeless men waiting to sell theirs for \$1.00. The next day, he would take those pallets over to another business that would pay him \$3.00 apiece. He said he could make \$10.00 to \$15.00 at a time that way, but if the places where he wanted to sell the pallets were not open, his



gas expenses would consume all his profits. He told me that he did not bother collecting pallets anymore because his transmission had broken, he had problems with the security guard, and because “there are too many people doing it. If you get going early enough you have a chance, but not later.” All of the potential barriers he mentioned as undermining the profitability of his activity indicate that such a marginal economic practice deserves to be called scavenging.

On several occasions, I observed other homeless men collecting similar objects in shopping carts around the shelters of North Las Vegas, items such as aluminum cans, radiators, and even copper tubing. In his study of homeless men in Los Angeles, Underwood (1993, 63, 93) found that this practice was sometimes called canning or glassing, in reference to whatever objects were being collected and resold to recycling companies. One man informed me that the copper tubing he found would fetch fifty cents a pound from a recycling business located only two blocks from a major shelter in the homeless corridor. He also said that such businesses typically paid better rates for larger quantities, explaining why many men would accumulate a shopping cart full of aluminum cans, for example, before cashing them in.

Scavenging can also be carried out in casinos in the forms of “silver mining” or “credit claiming.” These practices involve men walking around casinos, inconspicuously checking the coin pans that catch the change payout from slot, video poker, and keno machines. Occasionally, someone might find nickels, quarters, or even dollar tokens left behind by careless players. Another version of this practice requires checking the credits left on a machine to see if coins have been accepted but for some reason left unplayed. The person who finds these credits can either play them or have those coins “returned.” While this might seem a tedious way of earning money, men indicated that they might occasionally find enough change within an hour to buy a meal using this technique. The casinos on Fremont Street closest to the shelters are often the areas of choice for men who silver mine, because the men can walk through several casinos and leave quickly before being spotted and/or told to exit by security guards. Also, there are frequently more entryways and exits to Fremont Street casinos, and these are often more easily accessible than in the larger Strip ca-

sinos. Additionally, the slot machines in many of the Fremont Street casinos are located in dark or poorly lit areas, making lost change more plentiful.

Casinos, however, strongly discourage this practice through their surveillance systems and security cameras. According to one security guard on Fremont Street:

If you are credit claiming, we ask you to please leave. If you are here gambling, you're welcome to stay and gamble, but if you're looking in the hoppers for money, and that's what we think you're doing, then [we tell that individual to] leave now.

Jeff once described how silver miners are removed from casinos. He also said that homeless men with limited employment options are most likely to engage in practices like silver mining:

**Kurt:** Have you ever been told to leave a casino or things like this?

**Jeff:** Because I was homeless?

**Kurt:** Is this an experience that homeless people have here?

**Jeff:** A lot. But then you have to understand that a lot of the homeless go in there to silver mine, that's to see if you can find coins in the machines. . . . If people are stupid enough to leave the machines with coins in, with credits in, then, hey, somebody gets lucky and gets them out, fine. But, there's—I mentioned a caste system a while back. And there is a caste system in homelessness. You do have the derelicts, and there are those that chose to be homeless. Then you have the alcoholics and drug addicts who because of their addiction cannot break the cycle where they're at. Then you have the homeless who are there because of circumstances and are trying to get out. Silver mining is one of the ways [of] trying to get enough cash to eat. Now not all people do it. Most of the lower caste or echelon of the homeless [do it]. If you notice the lower echelon are the ones who are filthy, don't shower, who wear the same clothes for months on end, when they know they have an opportunity to take a shower here, get free clothes, and they don't take—they just have lost basically all

hope, all self-esteem, all self-worth, and they don't care anymore. And there's no place they can go for help. There is and there isn't because those people, after a while, no one wants to help [them]. They're too many lost causes.

Jeff is then clearly articulating the stigmatized status of activities like silver mining. Jeff indicates that it is a survival practice of people who "choose" to be homeless, or the "lower echelon" who are so outside the norms of civil society that people no longer want to even help them. Oddly, though, Jeff does not address the contradiction that this is a supposedly a survival practice used by men who are so disheveled that they invariably attract the attention of casino security.

Jeff also seemed to lump together those men who silver mine and those who scavenge by next referring to one man he knew who scavenged as a member of the "lower echelon":

There's a guy that comes around here called Dumpster Johnny. All he does is digs through the Dumpsters to get cans and stuff. But he hasn't changed his clothes in three months I've been here. I've never seen him take a shower in the three months I've been here.

Ziggy also indicated that silver mining was more likely to be considered by a man without full-time work, day labor, or even panhandling options, as he explained in the interview excerpt below:

**Kurt:** Have you ever tried [silver mining]?

**Ziggy:** No, because it's counterproductive. I mean, you spend all day. And you might not make but four bucks from morning till night. Oh, you might get very lucky like some of 'em and you might make twenty-five, fifty bucks in a day. But why should I spend all day bobbing and weaving my head across machines, you know, when I can go out and panhandle for four hours and make fifteen or twenty bucks, or go to a day labor or whatever, you know, hopefully get known enough, get recognized and start going out [to a job] on some regular basis?

Homeless men in Las Vegas, therefore, might resort to scavenging for food and recyclable goods among the trash and outdoor areas in the

city and also might hunt for change or credits in and around the slot and video poker machines found in most Las Vegas casinos. Such tactics, however, might only provide men the leftovers of a thrown-away meal or an income of a few dollars a day at most. The cost-benefit ratio of such practices appears to make these activities undesirable to many men, and therefore, as Jeff indicated, men who regularly engaged in such practices were considered by one homeless man to make up the “lower echelon” among homeless men—men who seemed to avoid charitable agencies and/or were unable to work at either regular or day-labor jobs. As Ziggy noted, such scavenging practices can appear “counterproductive” for men who have other options.

## Selling Plasma

Anderson and Snow (1995) have noted the importance of the homeless population as a supply of “source plasma” for the commercial blood plasma industry in the United States. The authors found that because homeless people have few dependable economic opportunities, “over time on the streets many homeless individuals come to rely on selling plasma” (1995, 181). This conclusion also seems to apply to homeless men in Las Vegas:

**Kurt:** Are there any other kinds of ways [homeless men] make money?

**Bill:** Everybody donates blood.

**Kurt:** . . . Where’s that?

**Bill:** It’s up Las Vegas Boulevard, before you get to the overpass? You know, before you get to the courthouse? It’s a laundromat and a blood plasma thing. [They pay] fifteen bucks a shot. You can donate like two, three times a week.

**Kurt:** Have you done that?

**Bill:** No, I don’t know. I’m very queasy about needles. I don’t know—you never know about tomorrow, though [laughs].

The business that Bill mentioned is located on Las Vegas Boulevard North, within walking distance of the majority of homeless shelters in North Las Vegas. As evidenced from a field note excerpt repro-

duced below, other men also mentioned selling plasma as an option for making quick cash:

Jim sold plasma twice while in town. [He] received twenty dollars each time. [He] said it takes an hour, [mainly of] sitting and waiting. He said he didn't like it—it didn't feel good. He said they pay twenty dollars the first two times and fifteen dollars each of the next three.

But as Kent emphasized in the interview excerpt below, this means of subsistence can only be used infrequently for those staying at local shelters or who are new to the state:

**Kent:** Today for the first time I sold blood to get some pocket money. They pay twenty dollars for a pint. Since I'm from Indiana, I can only donate every eight weeks. A lot of people from here [a local shelter] do that. But they make it hard for people from here to do it, though, [because] they won't take this address [as a permanent address that donors have to give when selling blood]. [They] use a magic marker. They mark your finger, which can only be seen under ultraviolet light. It keeps people from going from one place to the next.

**Kurt:** And giving multiple donations?

**Kent:** Right.

Kent indicates that a business that buys blood in Las Vegas polices their clientele and seems to want “donations” only from those residents with a local address. Although the business that Bill and Kent discussed also seems to limit the number of times a person may donate both weekly and monthly, the business ironically creates monetary appeals to increase the number of donations from each donor per month. Such tactics clearly seem directed at increasing regular donations from poor people. For example, a sign inside the center read “DURING THE MONTH OF JULY YOU WILL RECEIVE A \$5.00 BONUS ON THE 8TH, 9TH AND 10TH DONATIONS. THANK YOU! MANAGEMENT.” The reliance of the local plasma donation industry on economically marginalized people such as those who are homeless is partially evident in the rules that were on display in July 1997 at

the blood plasma center mentioned by Bill and Kent. Listed under a “code of conduct,” one such rule stated, “AFTER DONATION PLEASE LEAVE THE NEIGHBORHOOD IMMEDIATELY.” Other rules that seemed directed at those without a place to live were “PLEASE BE RESPECTFUL OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND KEEP IT CLEAN” and “NO LOITERING AT ANY TIME.” However, in our free-market economy, where blood used in health care is often purchased from the economically disadvantaged, the blood/plasma industry is partially dependent on men who are “donating” largely for financial gain, sometimes with little thought about the condition of the blood they may be passing on to others. Albert, a man addicted to crack cocaine, described in detail his own ambivalence about donating blood with the drug still in his system:

**Kurt:** How did you get money today?

**Albert:** Plasma.

**Kurt:** Really? How and where?

**Albert:** Over there on Bonanza and Las Vegas Boulevard. There’s a plasma place. You go in there. It takes you about five hours for fifteen, twenty dollars. You get fifteen dollars the first time and twenty dollars the second time. But you’re hooked up to a machine for about an hour and a half, but it takes three or four hours just to get in to the back, because every homeless person in town goes up there.

**Kurt:** And you’ve done that before?

**Albert:** I’ve been doing it ever since I’ve been doing drugs, and that’s the whole thing. I say 80 percent of those people that are up there giving blood and plasma at these plasma centers that are being shipped out here to these hospitals and all these places there, I’d say a good 80 percent of them are around crack addicts and cocaine addicts, ’cause I know them down there. I do drugs with them. . . . And all this plasma that’s going out to these children, all this plasma that’s going out to these hospitals and overseas and stuff is all tainted with that cocaine. Oh, yeah.

I thought about that the other day. I thought, “Oh, man, that’s such a shame, and I’m contributing, too.” And it’s a shame. And I

really ought to not do that no more. If I'm going to continue to do drugs, I better have a conscience to never do that, because that's the first time I ever admitted that to myself. And that's wrong.

The contradictory thoughts Albert presented capture well the ambivalence many homeless men have about "donating" blood or plasma. On the one hand, as Bill indicated, the practice makes some men nervous. It also takes a long time and at times requires men to lie about where they are living, what substances they have used, or how often they have donated to be able to sell blood or plasma. On the other hand, as Albert indicated, the business buys blood and plasma when he needs the money.

### Other Bartering/Selling

Homeless men may also barter and sell things to each other or to businesses such as pawnshops, which specialize in giving individuals loans for their personal possessions. Bartering and selling items are practices that most individuals engage in at some point in their lives, but the conditions under which homeless men must often barter or sell goods or services are sufficiently unique to deserve special consideration.

Pawnshops, for example, provide loans against personal property, usually to individuals in dire need of cash. If the individual does not repay the loan, the shop claims the property. Three pawnshops exist within a three-block radius of one major Las Vegas shelter in the homeless corridor. One specializes in the pawning of automobiles. Alex described pawning his car in an attempt to avoid a series of debts that eventually led to his homelessness:

They took the tags from my truck because I didn't have the insurance. And my truck sat, and then I was having problems getting jobs because I didn't have the truck. So then I had to pawn off my truck to help pay for bills on the house.

Other men may no longer have objects of substantial value to sell. In those instances, things they receive from social service agencies, such

as food stamps, can be sold illegally to unscrupulous convenience store employees for half their value in cash. As Bill indicated:

I've never used food stamps either, and I hate to say it, but what I've found out is, if you're homeless they'll give you emergency food stamps for three days . . . and then, there's a [convenience store] right down the street . . . [Y]ou're supposed to stand outside, and hold it up, right? And the clerks will wave to you and you go in and they'll buy it from you for like seventy bucks.

**Kurt:** No kidding. [pause] Wow. So they'll give you cash. That's really fascinating. How did you find that out?

**Bill:** Somebody told me. [laughs] Right? Somebody [who] just got done doing it.

A more common practice among homeless men, however, is trading or selling smaller personal items or vouchers for social services to each other, like Jerry tried doing when he offered to trade bus tokens he had just received from a social-service agency to a man with a monthly bus pass. Ziggy presented another example:

**Kurt:** Somebody just came and gave you a couple of meal tickets and you were explaining why he gave them to you.

**Ziggy:** Yeah. Well, like I say, he works every day. He gets up, he gets up every morning. He either has a full-time job or he went to the day-labor hall and they gave him like a three, four, maybe a week repeat ticket. He can't use the breakfast and bath coupons that came with him paying for a bed for the night, so he just gives them away. Whereas a lot of guys that come out here, like he gave these to me; what they'll do is they'll run to the other side tomorrow morning and sell each one for a buck instead of using them themselves.

Steve and Phillip also developed separate cigarette businesses, one working just outside and another inside a local shelter, after discovering a market for individual cigarettes among homeless men. Steve, who had once been a carnival entrepreneur, described his business practices. He would give trustworthy men money to go to a tobacco shop one block away where they would buy tobacco and rolling paper



for between fifty-five and eighty cents. He would roll several cigarettes using his rolling machine and pay the man who made the trip two to three cigarettes. He sold the other cigarettes he rolled for a dime each, or three for a quarter. He also bartered his cigarettes for donuts. He said his business did not make him much money, but through his activities he could “smoke two packs a day for free, which is pretty good for a homeless guy.” Phillip also sold his hand-rolled cigarettes inside the shelter for the same price, but said he did this primarily because “otherwise guys just try to bum them from you.”

Realizing the stinginess of certain forms of public assistance, some homeless men take advantage of those services through claiming items they themselves do not need but can trade or sell. Bill, for example, once received bus tokens from a social-service program, but since he already had a bus pass, he sold the “bus tokens social services gave me for cigs and beer.”

Men with only a few personal possessions, therefore, might end up pawning or selling whatever they have for fast cash, sometimes losing resources that might have otherwise helped them address their homelessness. Other men might sell things they received from social-service providers, such as food stamps, meal or shower coupons, to others on a black market. Still others sell or trade things like cigarettes for cash, or to simply continue their own smoking habits.

## Panhandling

Although homeless men are often represented in popular and media accounts as panhandlers or beggars, I observed only a handful of men who panhandled, and very few men I interviewed told me that they regularly engaged in this activity.

I was able to meet and talk to Jerome, one frequent panhandler who had been on the street for more than ten years. Holding a cardboard sign to solicit donations from people in cars at a major intersection, he received very little money (nearly all of it change) in the hour I spent observing his interaction with drivers.

His income was also very inconsistent and was frequently less than the minimum wage:

**Kurt:** I noticed you because you were out here at Flamingo and the corner here at Maryland Parkway. How is it trying to get money from people with a cardboard sign?

**Jerome:** Tough. It's very tough. What you got to do is put a lot of hours in to manage to get something because it's erratic. You have to go out there for six hours and make nothing, you have to go out there for twenty minutes and make twelve dollars.

I then asked him how people would usually react to his sign:

**Jerome:** Ninety-eight, ninety-nine percent of them just look at you, don't say [a] thing, nothing. They look at you like a robot. Then you get some that look mad and everything. Every now and then you get people that want to help you. . . . And then you got the ones that hate you, and then you got them few, one out of five hundred or whatever, that want to help you. And a lot of them that want to help might have been told never to do it, but they do what they want to do, and they help you.

**Kurt:** What kind of responses have you had from the people who hate you?

**Jerome:** That hated me? I got spit at once. . . . And the guy that saw it gave me a dollar and almost beat the guy up because the guy was bigger than me.

In another example illustrating the range of responses to panhandling that Jerome mentioned, Jerome's friend, who was panhandling while I spoke to Jerome, interrupted our conversation to throw on the ground a Book of Mormon that someone had just given him.

Jerome stated that he and his friend slept outside, usually behind buildings. He no longer made use of local shelters and said several times that the shelters in Las Vegas are "worthless." Although he had once been regularly employed, by this time he found it difficult even to hold day-labor jobs because of his alcoholism and opiate addiction.

Few of the homeless men I spoke to seemed to think panhandling could actually work as a source of subsistence income. While those who could work or who were newer to homelessness had for the most

part not considered panhandling an option, some men like Ziggy had tried it:

**Ziggy:** Like I say, I'm a curious kind of person, so I tried it once. I mean, I'm not going to go for fifteen or twenty bucks, and have to stand out in the sun all day, not just standing there. So I gave it up and my curiosity was satisfied for the moment.

**Kurt:** Did you try it on the street, on a sidewalk?

**Ziggy:** Actually, it was down on the Strip. One of the crossings between MGM, Tropicana, Excalibur area down there. I was there for about maybe four, four and a half hours. So actually, it still came to be five bucks an hour, in my experience.

**Kurt:** Did you have any negative reaction?

**Ziggy:** To panhandling? No, not really. 'Cause some of the people [who panhandle], like I say, you look at them and you can tell that they're not in tune with society anymore.

At this point in the interview, Ziggy gave me a detailed description of homeless men most likely to panhandle on a regular basis:

They'll hold a sign up, "WILL WORK" or "WILL WORK FOR FOOD," and you've even got guys out here that makes no qualms about what they're there for. And they have a sign that says, "WHY LIE? I DON'T WANT TO WORK. I JUST WANT A BEER." And they stay pretty drunk most of the time. They stay pretty inebriated. And people walk up and just hand them beer, or give them the money to go buy beer. And that's what their sign reads, you know, "WHY LIE? I JUST WANT BEER." But that's what they call doing the sign, working the sign. And they make a reasonable amount of money towards the weekend, holidays, a little bit better than other days. But the average one probably makes fifteen to thirty a day holding those signs. Some of them are totally legit with what they do with that money that they get and some of 'em [do it] just to support the next quart of beer and pack of cigarettes.

The stigma often assigned to panhandling is also reproduced by some homeless men, who tend to see begging money from complete strang-

ers as a last resort after having tried working, other forms of charitable assistance, and even scavenging. It was usually considered the survival strategy of unredeemable addicts, the mentally ill, or other homeless men who have lost all hope of permanent housing.

## Theft

Earlier Jerry mentioned his having stolen inhalers and other medicine at the hospital because he could not afford to pay for the prescriptions he had been given. Although many men told me they occasionally had stolen items for either their personal use or to trade or sell, only two I spoke with considered this to be their primary source of income. Brandon claimed he made money from a range of confidence games and illegal activities:

**Kurt:** So, what other sources of income can you have besides, like you just mentioned, rolling people, and you mentioned day labor. What other ways can you get by on the street?

**Brandon:** Three-card Monty, nutshell game, selling fake gold, pickpocket.

This is what I do, I do it all. I do what I can.

Spirit, discussed earlier as living in an abandoned building, stated that he extorted the other men and women who lived there. He maintained a group of former convicts, whom he called his boys, to enforce his rule over the building, and reportedly made five hundred to six hundred dollars a month from these and other illegal activities, including fencing stolen goods.

Career thieves like Spirit and even con artists like Brandon, however, seemed more the exception than the rule among homeless men in Las Vegas. Self-reports indicated that the majority of theft among homeless persons seemed to be poverty-driven, that is, petty thefts of items for personal use or immediate trade, like Jerry's theft of inhalers from a local hospital. In another example, one man, nicknamed the great Kahuna, shoplifted candles from local casinos (in order to light his and his fellow squatter's apartment), food, and other items, such as bicycle inner tubes, from local convenience and retail stores. Ironi-

cally, it seemed that homeless men were more the victims of theft than its perpetrators. Jeff, for example, told me how he discovered which man in the shelter had stolen his shoes:

Jeff was complaining earlier about somebody having stolen his shoes. Later he was talking to a fellow monitor in the shelter. "I found my shoes. Somebody was wearing them," he said, smiling.

Steve also said that having had all his personal items stolen was what led him to consider contacting a local shelter for help.

I went completely broke, had all my clothes stolen, my suitcase stolen, and I was really in bad shape. Financially I was absolutely empty, and then with my suitcase stolen I had no clothes and finally I just went to the police asked for help, and they directed me to [a local shelter].

Although theft occurs within Las Vegas shelters, some homeless men prefer shelter life precisely because regular security persons and program assistants staff it. There are also lockers in most local shelters where, for a small fee, one can store personal possessions under lock and key. By comparison, homeless men who sleep outdoors with their personal possessions are easy targets for theft. In one observation, I watched a homeless man take donuts belonging to another man who was wrapped in blankets from head to toe while he slept on the concrete. Another homeless man who saw what happened did not intervene but simply laughed at the sleeping man's misfortune.

Perhaps some homeless persons' lack of appreciation for the property of others explains why so many of the men I spoke to had developed intricate rituals for securing their belongings while asleep. Take, for example, the measures Bill discussed in his diary for securing his few possessions while sleeping outdoors:

I found an empty Binch. . . . Well, it's time to take my shoes off. I use them as a pillow. 1st the bench is hard and my new shoes are soft and don't smell yet; 2nd, my wallet gose in my sock. I tie my shoes together, and one lace through the button hole on my shirt its reseraining but no one will stell my shoes in my sleep. My

paints are tight on my ankles. So I have to take my paints down to get my wallet in my sock. I have no money but my world lays in my back pocket, from pictors [pictures] to I.D. . . . Almost forgot my glasses shirt Pocket Hope I don't Roll over and they slip out and break that is my biggest fer!

Although Bill's actions may seem paranoid to some, other homeless men who had experienced theft regretted not having been similarly cautious. Larry described how he had his possessions taken on several occasions, by both complete strangers and potential roommates:

**Larry:** I've had two other bags stolen down there. One of them—I was sitting over here talking to a gal in a bar down the street here, and I was just sitting there and I had my bag behind the stool; somebody picked it up and walked off with it. There were a dozen people in the bar and nobody saw a thing. Go figure it out.

**Kurt:** Have you had any other things stolen since you've been out here?

**Larry:** I had a boom box and that disappeared. And like I say, two bags that had all my belongings in it. Well, one of them, the guy just took off for parts unknown. I met him at the VA hospital. And when we first got together, the game plan was my mother wants out of my sister's house, so between his disability and her pension check and her Social Security check, we could have got a fairly decent place. And he just up and disappeared, and all my stuff was in the back of his car. All my medications and all my shaving gear, my clothes.<sup>2</sup>

## Making Unique Use of Resources and Objects

Beyond using work, scavenging, theft, and social-service programs to make ends meet, homeless men in Las Vegas also find innovative ways to provide for their personal needs when these options do not. Implementing one survival strategy might at times mean losing out on other resources, as in the case of employment interfering with

accessing services provided by a local shelter. In addition, because of their already limited resources, many men are unwilling or unable to pay for necessary services, such as services that provide a place to rest and/or clean up. In these instances, homeless men sometimes make innovative use of objects or public facilities for their own purposes (Snow, Anderson, Quist, and Cress 1996).

Some homeless men become quite creative when finding areas to rest and/or clean up. For example, Jerry discussed using the local bus system for shelter purposes. Although the bus system was ostensibly not designed to be used for shelter, Jerry had developed a method that guaranteed him a warm and safe environment in which he could rest day or night for only ten dollars a month. Indeed, during my own bus trips back and forth to shelters, I frequently observed several homeless men using the local bus system for brief periods of rest.

I discovered another example of an innovative sleeping practice after spending several hours one day with one homeless man, Jorge. I met him while he ate a free breakfast given by a local charity in a public park. Once he had eaten, we walked to a local library several miles away. Once there, he read for approximately one hour, then got up to use the bathroom. When he returned, his hair and face were washed, he had changed some of his clothes, and he had shaved. He then put his glasses back on and propped his head between his hands with a book situated between his elbows on a desk, looking as though he were reading. In this position, he quietly slept for two hours while the librarian remained oblivious.

Ziggy reported secretly bathing on public lawns through sprinkler systems that were turned on at night and mentioned that, during the summer, the cold water from the sprinklers provided him an escape from Las Vegas's extreme heat. In another variation, Jim, who slept in his truck, purchased a membership at a local gym for fifteen dollars a month. The membership allowed him a locker and access to a shower, bath, shampoo, and clean towels.

Additionally, some homeless men become highly innovative at finding free transportation. Jerry, for example, indicated that he could occasionally ride the bus for free, either by asking the driver to let him do so or by finding valid transfers in garbage cans near bus stops.

Albert discussed learning to jump freight trains from Las Vegas to Los Angeles. These trains run near several shelters:

**Kurt:** We were just talking about jumping trains to get to places. How did you find out about that? How did it go?

**Albert:** Dealing with people out here on the street. You talk to a guy and you say, "Well, oh, man, tomorrow I'm going to L.A." "Going to L.A.? How are you going to L.A.? You just bummed a cigarette from me, how are you going to get to L.A.?" "I'm going to go back there on the track and jump a train." "Oh, yeah? Well, okay. Let's see how that works."

However, other men who discussed jumping on freight trains for transportation noted that the practice is dangerous and illegal.

Although such stories of resourcefulness may seem harmless or even amusing to those who are not homeless, there are several laws in the state of Nevada criminalizing such practices. For example, state laws prohibit individuals from riding freight trains, and in the library where the man washed and shaved his face, a sign was posted warning that those caught bathing or shaving in the bathroom would be subject to arrest and a fine. Similar signs are found in the downtown bus depot restrooms and waiting areas (see figs. 3, 4). Signs prohibiting sleeping in one's car on a public street can be found on Foremaster Street next to St. Vincent's shelter in the homeless corridor (see figs. 5, 6). In addition, the police are not the only ones who take it upon themselves to enforce these laws. In the particular library where Jorge washed and shaved his face, patrons must check out the restroom key from the head librarian, a practice that allows him or her to keep track of who is using the restroom. Once a given man is through using the restroom and returns the key, the librarian may then check to see if the man shaved, for example, by looking for stubble left in the sink (see fig. 7).

The above-mentioned instances are primarily examples of accessing resources, such as transportation and areas for rest and/or personal hygiene, that are inadvertently provided by agencies and others. However, homeless men in Las Vegas are also adept at finding innovative uses for many kinds of objects for the purposes of basic



comfort and survival. Across the United States, for example, the use of shopping carts to store and transport personal and scavenged items may arguably be the homeless person's most standardized use of an object that was intended for other purposes (see fig. 8). Several homeless men I interviewed in Las Vegas regularly carried newspapers and pieces of cardboard with them in order to have something to sit on, a practice that also helped keep their pants clean. In addition, the uses they found for some objects seemed especially appropriate for the climate and culture of Las Vegas. Several men I observed used plastic casino change containers for either storing food or as drinking cups. While these practices do not constitute labor per se, they are designed to save or further stretch a man's already limited resources. In this sense, some men have developed ingenious alternatives to services that others are happy to pay for but that they themselves refuse to pay for or cannot afford.

An analysis of homeless men's use of objects reveals much about the difference in the statuses of their users. For example, a shopping cart typically represents a temporary way to hold items collected in a store that will soon be purchased. Homeless men, however, often use these carts in the way that people with places to live use vehicles, closets, lockers, and wheelbarrows. Indeed, Underwood (1993, 57) found that one group of homeless people referred to shopping carts as "tramp trucks." Similarly, most people with a house or an apartment purchase newspapers for information and discard them once the information has been read. A newspaper for a homeless person, however, is rarely purchased, because others often discard them, and a newspaper tends to have much more practical applications in a variety of contexts. In Las Vegas it could provide a seat cover, a cover for otherwise exposed skin when lying in the sun, a camouflage for personal items left temporarily in an open field, kindling for a fire, covering for car windows when the car is being used for shelter purposes, and other uses never considered by people with houses, because, as the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention. Well-to-do members of society usually use products only for the purpose for which they were specifically designed. Impoverished persons in Las Vegas and throughout the United States are frequently forced

to recognize the multiple uses that might be made of an object, and come to need those things others take for granted or throw away.

## Discussion

The repertoires of homeless men in Las Vegas in their attempts to survive are varied and complex. Although some seemed to engage in primarily one or two strategies, many mentioned having used several different strategies at different times. Within the span of a homeless man's "career," any number of strategies may be required in a variety of combinations. For example, someone who may once have been homeless with a full-time job may eventually be unable to keep that job because of homelessness, leading that individual to adopt other survival strategies better suited to his immediate needs and current situation.

Based on this research and on the research of others (Snow and Anderson 1993), I might tentatively conclude that the types of survival strategies a homeless man adopts might be directly related to factors such as his length of time spent homeless or his resignation at being unable to maintain steady work. To paraphrase Jeff's statements earlier in the chapter, there seem to be different statuses held by homeless men in Las Vegas, and those statuses relate to a man's methods of survival. On the whole, it seemed that men who had been homeless for shorter periods or who maintained regular or semi-regular employment were less interested and less involved in developing alternative subsistence strategies, such as scavenging for food in trash cans, theft, panhandling, or selling plasma, than those who could not work.

Jerome, for instance, told me that he and his friend's panhandling income barely allowed them to purchase food, that they had worked in the past, and that he really wanted to find stable work:

**Jerome:** It's like—averages out where you got to put in a lot of time and probably works out to about four dollars an hour or something like that, and I hate doing it. But I got to eat. I'm trying to get a job right now, my buddy's sleeping over there now. He's going to relieve me.

**Kurt:** Where's he at? He's over nearby?

**Jerome:** Yeah. We're both trying to get jobs. He's worked most of his life, [as] I have. He was a craps dealer, construction worker, cook. I worked at a bakery back East, a factory. I [worked at a] keno [job for] four years. It's just funny the way you can go downhill fast.

That the homeless men in Las Vegas that I met generally privileged work over other forms of income also confirms other ethnographic research findings on homeless men (Underwood 1993, 59–60). In the following quote, a man named Jerry told Jackson Underwood that in order to learn about homelessness, he should try living like those without money or viable employment options. Only then would he discover their alternative survival strategies:

If you come down here with cash in your pocket, you're not learnin' nothin'! That's no lesson. That's NO lesson! The lesson is, is when you don't have a goddamned cent in your pocket. And you're hungry. And that's when you learn. That's when you learn to hit the dumpster. That's when you learn to panhandle. That's when you learn to do all this bullshit. (1993, 59–60)

In several of my own interviews, men would often differentiate between homeless men who would work and those who had developed alternative subsistence strategies. The following excerpt from one interview provides such an example:

**Hector:** I know I'll never push the goddamn cart around.

**Kurt:** So if you see someone pushing a shopping cart around, to you that means something?

**Hector:** No, not necessarily, but they're through. They accept this is what they're going to do until they die. . . . I will work, and I'll—

**Brandon:** He hasn't given up that fire yet.

**Hector:** Yeah, I'm in and out. I'm not on the corner trying to get a spot job [today] because I feel a little weak, [I'm] just getting over the flu. I've been on antibiotics and I just got a penicillin shot. Otherwise, you wouldn't even see me here [in a soup line]

today. That's how there's a difference. These dudes will be here; come back three days from now the same people will be sitting there. I guarantee you I won't be, or him [points at Brandon].

Bill, a recently homeless man who kept a diary for this project, also indicated that individuals who use shopping carts to transport their possessions and who scavenge from garbage cans were different from him. He would consider those activities only under the most "desperate" of circumstances:

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One guy showed up a little while ago with his grocery cart Full of cans baged in sepret grocery sacks the plastic kind and tied in bunddles. . . . I had seen him befor hanging around a McDonaldis down the block. When he got done tying up his Basket to a trash can he reched down and pulled out several cheeseburgers. I wonder if he raded the dumpster after they closed usually the stuff left over they mark and toss. Would I go so far as to wait untill a McDonles closes to raid the trash for a well raped desposed of cheeseburgers? If I was hungry enough, yes, But I wouldn't ever tell of such a desprat move. With this gentelman I do fell it is more of a lifestyle than a desprat act of starvation. (Bill)

Bill's final sentence also seems to indicate that, even among homeless persons in Las Vegas, work is highly valued. Homeless men who cannot work and who use alternative survival strategies are frequently stigmatized by those men who have more recently become homeless.

In general, these interview excerpts suggest that the common assumption that homeless men are lazy or unwilling to work is unfounded. Some men I interviewed simply could not hold traditional employment for a variety of reasons, but many I spoke with seemed desperate to find traditional work. Indeed, many men felt that securing steady employment at a living wage was essential to ending their homelessness. Those who seemed unable to find work were often depressed about it. However, for those willing to work, the condition of homelessness meant that they were facing several barriers in prevent-

ing them from finding and maintaining a steady job in a competitive employment environment such as Las Vegas, where those who are not disadvantaged by homelessness are also competing for jobs.

Thus, those unable to secure steady employment may often end up as long-term shelter residents (who frequently must engage in some form of shelter work in order to stay), may gain Social Security benefits for the elderly, or may eventually experience health problems from street life, entitling them to other government assistance for the disabled. In the meantime, being without friend or family networks (or being unwilling to rely on those networks for assistance), without credentials for gaining government assistance (credentials sometimes also required for charitable assistance), or seemingly without better options, homeless men living on the street might develop scavenging practices when in need of some immediate material goods or services. In some respects, these individuals participate neither in the sector of Las Vegas's postmodern economy based on the commodification of images, entertainment, and experiences nor in the sectors of the city's modern economic system based on the commodification of goods and services. Instead, these individuals' practices seem to parallel those in hunting-and-gathering societies, where immediate subsistence needs drive the collection and at times the manufacture of food and useful objects.<sup>3</sup> However, several homeless men indicated that once a homeless man had taken to scavenging as a major source of subsistence, he has "accepted his fate" as both homeless and unable to find work. Perhaps such scavenging activity may then best serve as an indicator that individuals, particularly those in the underclass, must find innovative ways of somehow securing their material existence once traditional wage employment or government assistance are no longer options, for whatever reasons.

## Crime, Violence, and the Police

Homeless men in Las Vegas face near constant physical vulnerability. After all, being homeless generally means not having a secure, safe place to store personal possessions, to be away from the outside world, and to relax. In their heightened state of vulnerability, these homeless men were understandably wary of the others with whom they shared space, particularly within the homeless corridor. The theme of violence came up again and again in interviews. Earlier Jerry nonchalantly indicated that since becoming homeless he had been attacked and robbed on several occasions. Other men also discussed violence and crime from the perspective of witness, victim, or perpetrator, or from a combination of these perspectives.

The role of violence and crime in the lives of homeless men again demonstrates how male homelessness is both an individual and a social problem. Homeless men at times engage in crime and violence, actions that can be both useful and harmful to them. Homeless men

also are victims of crime and violence, which impedes men from being successful at ending their homelessness or from simply surviving. Since homeless men are victimizers and victims, the role of the police in the lives of homeless men is complex. Because of the city's tourist economy, the police in Las Vegas must often address homeless people as a problem population. At times, the police must manage and control homeless men (as discussed through newspaper articles in chapter 1 and as Jerry indicated in chapter 2). However, the police also have programs to assist homeless men and at times face the daunting task of trying to protect such vulnerable individuals. In this chapter I analyze the personal accounts of homeless men to consider how crime, violence, and the police are important for further understanding homelessness as a social problem.

## Life near the Homeless Corridor

Because of where services for homeless persons are concentrated, homeless men are very vulnerable to crime and violence. In particular, the homeless corridor on the border of North Las Vegas, which houses several large homeless shelters, is dangerous and poorly maintained (see map). More than thirty years ago Hunter S. Thompson vividly described how, even then, this area was strongly associated with crime and vice:

We pulled into an all-night diner on the Tonopah highway, on the outskirts of a mean/skag ghetto called "North Las Vegas." Which is actually outside the city limits of Vegas proper. North Vegas is where you go when you've fucked up once too often on the Strip, and when you're not even welcome in the cut-rate downtown places around Casino Center. This is Nevada's answer to East St. Louis—a slum and a graveyard, the last stop before permanent exile to Ely or Winnemucca. North Vegas is where you go if you're a hooker turning forty and the syndicate men on the Strip decide you're no longer much good for business out there with the high rollers . . . or a pimp with bad credit at the

Sands . . . or what they still call in Vegas a “hophead.” This can mean almost anything from a mean drunk to a junkie, but in terms of commercial acceptability, it means you’re finished in all the right places. . . . So once you get blacklisted on the Strip, for any reason at all, you either get out of town or [you end up] in the shoddy limbo of North Las Vegas . . . out there with the gunsels, the hustlers, the drug cripples and all the other losers. North Vegas, for instance, is where you go if you need to score some smack before midnight with no references. (1971, 155–56)

Thompson’s description shows that the segregation of undesirables away from the tourist attractions on the Las Vegas Strip and into North Las Vegas and nearby neighborhoods has long occurred, beginning in the days when the Mob dominated the city. In a city like Las Vegas, known for vice and corruption, it has long been understood that those who are outsiders in even this immoral environment are dealt with through removal and segregation.

In some respects, Thompson’s description of North Las Vegas is still accurate. Portions of this area, particularly on the outskirts where expansive housing developments are being built, are now prosperous. However, the area near the homeless corridor remains dangerous. The rate of violent crime in North Las Vegas in 1994 stood at 24.2 violent crimes per 1,000 residents, which was double the rate of violent crime in the Las Vegas Metropolitan area in the same year. Although North Las Vegas is also a more integrated area today than it was in Thompson’s era (particularly within homeless shelters in the bordering area), the rate of violent crime in 1994 was found to be the seventh worst in the United States, according to an FBI comparison of 381 U.S. cities of similar size (Riley 1996).

## Violence and the Homeless Corridor

Several homeless men I spoke with also attested to pervasive violence on the streets surrounding the shelters centralized near North Las Vegas. During one interview, Bob, a man who had never witnessed



violence before, described a shooting and other events he had seen since coming to this area:

**Kurt:** I was asking about the environment in North Las Vegas. We're close to North Las Vegas.

**Bob:** Yeah, we're real close. We're right on the corner. There's a Mexican restaurant, Guadalajara. There was an incident that I never thought I'd get close to. There was a drive-by shooting. Two people apparently died. It was about 5:00 in the morning. I was coming out of the . . . dorm, which is like two stories up, and I looked down on this parking lot, and it's Latino/Hispanics. And I could see that they were all ready to meet. It was 5:00 in the morning and the parking lot was full of people. And I saw tail-lights on. All of a sudden I saw a car pull up to a group of people and all of a sudden it sounded like firecrackers—da-da-da-da-da-da! A bunch of shots went off, the car flew over, hit the traffic signal light. . . . I don't know why, but, yeah, I've seen things. The value of life, people, lost any value, from ladies selling themselves for five dollars. I stayed away from it because I don't like walking out there because people get jumped and mugged all the time.

Bob also talked about particular people he knew who were “jumped” near the shelter, or attacked suddenly while walking on the street. Keith described a few similar incidents, but in greater detail and by pointing out the nearby victims:

Since you've last been here, four guys have been jumped on the street. That one guy on the bench—his eye's swollen shut. He got sent to the hospital. That's where he got the bandages [on his elbows]. Had to have stitches. This was just last night, some guy looking for money. . . . An older lady got jumped Wednesday down there. A guy got jumped yesterday, carrying a broken TV. It's like, why don't they rob somebody who has money? Nobody down here has anything.

Keith's final point is one that sociologists and criminologists have studied. People are attacked and property crimes often occur with greater frequency in poverty-stricken environments (and against poor

people) because those people are often nearby, convenient targets for criminals living in the same neighborhoods (Felson 1998). In his study of the “truly disadvantaged,” William Julius Wilson (1987) argued that after affirmative action programs of the 1960s began benefiting upper- and middle-class African Americans living in traditionally African American neighborhoods in Chicago, members of those groups began moving out. Those left behind in such neighborhoods (similar to the predominantly African American neighborhood of North Las Vegas) then started facing both limited employment opportunities and increasingly crime-ridden, violent environments.

Furthermore, simply recognizing that “nobody down here has anything,” as Keith said, does not mean that theft is discouraged or that people will not be afraid of crime and violence in such places. In *Code of the Street*, Elijah Anderson (1999) argues that poor, crime-ridden environments encourage young African American males to take on a threatening demeanor as a survival strategy. Similarly, because the area just outside several shelters in Las Vegas is considered so violent, many men choose to carry weapons for protection. Hector and Brandon, for example, discussed the need to either carry or pretend to be carrying weapons in order to avoid such attacks:

**Kurt:** But there are some things about being out here I would think would be pretty tough. I mean—

**Hector:** It is. Dudes getting knocked upside the head, or sleepin’ outdoors you’ve got to watch it, ’cause guys come by and just jump on you just to do it. Something to do. It happens all the time.

**Brandon:** This is like an external penitentiary.

**Kurt:** Really?

**Hector:** Yeah. Some loose tracks, man. Me, I’m pretty careful.

**Brandon:** I used to stay strapped all the time, then I developed a reputation for being strapped, so now I can walk around unarmed.

**Kurt:** You mean strapped . . .

**Brandon:** Strapped like knife, gun.

**Kurt:** Oh, okay. Got you.

**Brandon:** I'm sorry. For those of you listening from New York, you know what strapped means. So then I developed a reputation for being strapped, and everybody would leave me alone. So now I can walk around unarmed. It's just a mere fact, I can put my hand in my [pocket], "I'll do ya" and they leave me alone. I pull out a comb or a bar of soap.

**Hector:** But your crackheads, they run together. Your jugheads, juicers, your loonies, they're in their own world. So there's a little of everything out here. You've got to be careful all the time. That's just how it is.

Like the young men in Anderson's (1999) study, Hector and Brandon try to avoid violence through the implied threat of violence. Also of note is how Brandon's actions parallel another set of characteristics traditionally linked to masculinity: being strong, aggressive, and/or capable of physical violence. Although homeless men frequently fail to measure up to key criteria used in traditional definitions of masculinity, such as being a self-sufficient provider or breadwinner, some of those same men at times seem to express a hyper-masculinity, boasting of violence or aggression.

In a separate interview, James also discussed presenting himself in a threatening manner for protection:

**Kurt:** Have you ever been attacked on the street?

**James:** There's one time that, well, actually, just yesterday. I was up at [a shelter within the homeless corridor]. And a guy pulled a knife on me. I'm like, "Go ahead, make my day. I'll fucking shove that up your ass so fast." You know? He backed off. 'Cause I hear, as young as I am, you know? And how—I mean, I'm built, you know? I've had, actually, there's a guy that just walked by here with a pickax and shovel. He's scared of me. He's straight scared of me, and I don't know why. Probably because I don't bullshit. You know? I say what I do and do what I say. Out here, if you don't hold your ground, everybody will walk all over you.

Though homeless men are at times presented as failures at masculine roles, James's presentation of self not only served to protect him

but also clearly defines him as masculine—as a “man” despite being homeless.

Not all men I spoke to, though, presented themselves as threatening in this rough area in order to avoid crime and violence. Bill had considered that he might be attacked in this neighborhood as well, but instead of carrying a weapon or developing a threatening demeanor, he tried minimizing his exposure to violence by accessing social services near the homeless corridor only during daylight hours. He would leave the area at dusk, sleeping outdoors in another part of town, sharing space with other homeless persons who seemed vulnerable:

**Bill:** But I don't like the idea of, I'm just a skinny little white boy. I don't like the idea of being here late. I've gone around, and I know where to get a job, right? I went out to some exclusive neighborhoods, and I've found certain parts out there and kind of scoped them out, and I found this one that's way out there. There's a place where I can be left alone.

**Kurt:** Yeah?

**Bill:** But actually, I got to know this one guy, out a long, long, long ways, and he told me where he sleeps, and this is out on those benches, right? And he was right. It's like nobody bothers anybody. I mean, you'll see women over there, young girls.

**Kurt:** And this is the one on Charleston?

**Bill:** Right. Right by Valley . . . Hospital. Yeah, but it's not like they're moving in. It's just like a place to go where nobody will bother them.

**Kurt:** So there's a few people who know about it, but it's not like that. [I point toward a shelter.]

**Bill:** Right. Yeah, you know, I can't be stuck on this side of town after dark walking around with a backpack. You know I just, I just can't.

As Bill notes that “women” and “young girls” frequent the area where he sleeps, gender also appears important in his discussion of his survival tactics. By indicating that he is a “skinny little white boy,” he seems to question his own masculinity and with it his ability to sur-

vive in the homeless corridor. His strategy, therefore, has been to use the services of the homeless corridor during daylight hours but then to sleep at night in an area that is deemed safe, even by homeless women and girls.

Keith also noted that, out of concern for his safety, he intentionally limited his presence in the area where the shelters are located, particularly after dark. "You ain't got no freedom after dark down here. None," Keith told me. "My boss picks me up here [at a shelter] in the morning and drops me off [here] at 3 PM. I just stay here [inside the shelter]. Especially because of the cops kicking everybody out of the parks at night now. It's a jungle out there."

Keith's response to the situation is, not gendered, but perhaps more like that of a child with a curfew. His actions also parallel the idea that charitable shelters sometimes cause residents to experience "the terror of feeling radically demoted in the age grading system" (Goffman, in Stark 1994, 556). In this instance, however, Keith does not seem to think that the terror of being treated like a child in the shelter compares with the terror that would face him outside.

## Shelters Used to Avoid Violence

During my interviews many men said that, for them, the shelters in the homeless corridor were an important refuge from potential street violence. Indeed, Albert said that one man (whom I described in a previous chapter as having been attacked) had refused to stay in a shelter despite being advised by others that it would be safer than being on the street:

But, you know, the guy, they told him, "You ought to sleep here" [in the shelter], and he said, "No, no, I'm going to sleep up there" [under the bridge near the shelter]. He came back twenty minutes later, [with the] whole side of his face just caved in. Called an ambulance for him, and he said, "Why didn't you come sleep here?" "Oh, I didn't want to sleep in there."

Mark also told me that, based on his experience in both environments, the shelter seemed much safer than the streets right outside:

**Kurt:** Do you feel like there's violence in the shelter?

**Mark:** There is very little violence within the walls of the shelter. There is very little theft here, which is surprising. There is verbal abuse, but I have seen very little physical violence. The street twenty feet behind me is a totally different story. This is almost a haven from the violence. You know, you cannot come in here drunk; if you start a fight, you're gone. And there are people that are dependent on this place, so where else are they going to go? So people don't steal, they do their jobs, and they don't start fights.

From Mark's perspective, then, the rules of the "total institution" of this particular shelter seemed designed not just to control the clientele, as Goffman (1961) argued, but also to keep the men safe from the violence surrounding them.

Other men also believed that the shelters were generally safer in part because they tried to screen for weapons. Phillip carried a weapon for protection in the neighborhoods of North Las Vegas and in the homeless corridor, but as he noted in the following interview excerpt, he had to give up his weapon to shelter personnel in order to stay:

**Kurt:** Have you encountered violence since you've been here in the shelter or on the streets?

**Phillip:** Not here in the shelter, but on the street several times.

**Kurt:** Can you tell me about that? What happened to you?

**Phillip:** Oh, people try to take something you've got, and you've got to stand up for yourself. Me, myself, when I came in [to a shelter], they took my baby away from me, which is a buck knife I kept on my belt. And if you're going to carry a knife, you can't be bashful in pulling it and using it, 'cause if you are, you're going to get hurt real bad. If they know you mean business with it, they'll usually back off. . . . [T]hey got some stuff . . . before I started carrying a knife.

**Kurt:** You started carrying a knife after you got on the streets?

**Phillip:** Yes. I never carried a knife before. I didn't need it before. Raising cattle you don't need a knife, and if you did, it's always in the truck [laughing]. You didn't carry it on you.

Phillip's comments indicate that the rules of the shelter conflicted with his desire to keep a weapon that could protect him once he has left the shelter for the day.

Although weapons were supposed to be confiscated upon a man's admittance to a shelter, men at times tried to evade this policy. Men I spoke to occasionally tried to carry into the shelters other objects, such as screwdrivers, that could serve as weapons if needed. However, shelter staff members generally were vigilant about preventing men from bringing any personal property into the shelter area, often requiring men to place personal objects into lockers just outside the shelters.

Such screening of those requesting admittance is not always perfect, however, and some men manage to bring "real weapons," such as knives, into the shelters and threaten others. Therefore, some men I spoke with felt the need to carry makeshift weapons, even within the shelters. Three different men repeated stories of a serious attack in one shelter. Because of a lack of information on dates, times, and the characteristics of the attacker, I am not positive that these three stories are about different attacks. However, the variations in the places within the shelter where the attacks occurred, in the first interview with Bob, in the second interview with Phillip, and in the second interview with Griffin, lead me to believe that there were at least two separate incidents being discussed:

First interview

**Kurt:** Have you seen any fights or . . . violence in the shelter?

**Bob:** Yeah, I had someone pull a knife on me in the soup line. I used to work the soup line, and they go in in rows of fifteen. I stopped on the fifteenth guy, apparently he was a crack guy, and I said, "You're going to have to wait." And he came back. He said he was going to get me, well, at the end of the soup line. Here it is almost 1:00 and no one's there, I'm talking to an old-timer, and the guy came from behind and grabbed and put a knife in me. And this old-time black man that I'd know, he talked the guy out of leaving me alone. After that I don't even do the soup line.

That's why they brought me in here. I've seen a lot of threats. I haven't seen but a couple fights.

Second interview

**Kurt:** I know this neighborhood is kind of rough sometimes. How controlled is it in the shelter itself?

**Phillip:** There's a lot of security around. They usually watch all entrances and exits. I haven't really seen a whole lot of tension, I've seen a couple of guys get in . . . arguments, but most everybody—and I've seen it on the inside and the outside—usually everybody gets along, everybody just kind of does their own thing and nobody gets bothered. However, a couple of weeks ago there was a fight in the back by the kitchen, and some guy got cut pretty bad. He got his face sliced. But really that's no different than on the street or being in school and fighting the bully or something like that.

Third interview

**Griffin:** You've got to be really careful talking to people. I watched a guy get forty-six stitches in here. You've got to be really careful what you ask them.

The third man, Griffin, also told me of another violent episode and reiterated that I should be careful when approaching men for interviews in the shelter. He further indicated that there was safety in numbers in the shelter and that the men sometimes worked together to calm someone who is angry:

To give you a small incident, a guy in the back was getting really violent. I walked up, talked to him, and you'd be surprised how many street people intervened. As long as you treat people with a little respect, you've got no problem.

Despite the fact that the shelters seemed safer than the streets surrounding them, I was surprised at how often men claimed that the shelters reminded them of prison. Such descriptions reinforce the previous discussion of how charitable institutions in the homeless



corridor at times resemble total institutions, such as prisons or mental hospitals (Goffman 1961). As James phrased it:

You know, it's just—it's funny. It's almost like prison. . . . I was talking to my friend about that the other day, and he agreed with me. I mean, you got the same bullshit, people telling you what to do. The only difference is you can come and go basically as you please.

Also noting the similarities between the shelters and prison, Jeff found it ironic that those who ran one shelter were once in charge of prisons and often treated the homeless men there like criminals:

We need an administration, more important than anything else, we need administrators who are in touch with the homeless people, who know what it's about, who may have been there themselves at one time, who are pretty much compassionate with them. Now, the guys we have now used to run prisons, so they run this place like a prison. They have no idea what it's like for homeless people. They know what prison's like. We're not a business. We're not lawbreakers. We're not felons. I've never committed a crime in my life. [But] they treat us like that.

The reason a shelter may be run by former prison administrators, however, again seems related both to how shelter administrators seem to have designed the shelter and its bureaucracy in ways resembling total institutions like correctional facilities (see chap. 4) and to the unpredictable nature of a few men inside.

## The Violence of Some Homeless Men

Although most of the men I encountered claimed to have been victims of violence, some men in the shelter seemed less innocent than others. In their overview of sixty different studies of homelessness from across the United States, Shlay and Rossi noted that more than 40 percent of homeless men have spent time in jail, prison, or both (1992). Unfortunately Shlay and Rossi did not break down what per-

centage of homeless men served sentences for violent as opposed to nonviolent offenses.

Not fully knowing the violent backgrounds of men they house also poses a problem for the shelters, which must typically make a decision to accept a man with very little, if any, information about him. Some men might not even possess identification cards of any kind, cards which on the street are understandably hard to keep from being lost or stolen.

Dirk noted that the Las Vegas Police Department focused on men without proper identification as potential lawbreakers and would threaten to hold any man without identification for days:

All's I got is a health card, and the Las Vegas Police Department forced me to get that because I didn't have no real picture ID and they were threatening to put me in jail. They give me three days to get it. Salvation Army Social Services gave me a voucher to go get it and I got it, and then they come back three days later, which I wasn't expecting them to come back, I just thought it was a threat to get some ID, but they were dead serious about you get an ID here.

Two factors inhibited shelters from screening users better: 1) a lack of identification for some men, and 2) the expense of running even a simple criminal background check, even on those who had ID. Additionally, most homeless men seek immediate shelter; there is no time for extensive checking. For these reasons, men who have violent histories may enter the shelter unbeknownst to the staff. In general, most local shelters seem to give all men a first chance but may later exclude those who become violent once admitted.

Sue, a social-service provider, indicated that because there is such a diverse mix of men and because shelter life can be stressful, she occasionally witnessed violence in her shelter. However, she also believed that because of the relatively few incidences of violence, "I have to tell you we've really been fortunate from my perspective. This is like a hotbed, this is like all kinds of potential could occur."

On occasion, I would encounter in a shelter a man whose background was exceptionally violent. Sam, for example, described several

fistfights with family, police officers, and others occurring throughout his lifetime:

Well, I'm sixty-two years old, and I'm in excellent shape. I had a prostate problem for a while and I cured that myself. The doctor wouldn't do it. He wanted to cut me so I—I don't trust doctors. I'm a real iconoclast. I usually call myself a misogynist, iconoclast, misanthrope. I don't think of myself—even back in the days when I was beating my kids I never thought of myself as a bad person. I was just doing what I thought was right. I finally got off caffeine after—despite I was fifty-four years old and I fought a cop and whipped him, and six cops came in and I held them off for a while. 'Cause I black out. I just go into a—I black out sometimes. I see red sometimes, like a person's face is encircled in red and I just pound it and pound it. When I got off of caffeine after they beat me up and I was older, and this was before the fight on the Thanksgiving weekend. So between 1989, the fight, the cops, and in 1994, the fight with my kids, I had really mellowed out as I got off of caffeine.

Sam's example shows that some men have a higher potential for upsetting the fragile balance of shelter life through spontaneous violence. Since the shelters tend to restrict such violent behavior, men who themselves have a history of violence might be restricted from them. Marty, who had spent more time inside prison than out, described a lifetime of taking violence for granted:

**Marty:** I spent four years and six months in [unintelligible] State Nevada, Supermax, on a twelve-year sentence. This is my third time in prison. As of the age of sixteen, I've been out on the streets maybe about four or five times. I never been out on the streets since the age of sixteen, and I'm twenty-eight now, for a year in my life, man. I serve[d] twelve years of a life sentence for attempted murder. I used to be a drug dealer, and an ex-gang banger.

**Kurt:** How did you come out to Las Vegas, because you mentioned you're originally from California.

**Marty:** Used to be a dope dealer. There's a lot of money out here, transport. The guy I sold to tried to rob me. That's how I wound up in State Nevada twelve to life, attempted murder. We wrestled over his gun, shot him in the neck three times. He's paralyzed from the neck down.

Fremont Street, the Pueblos Projects, Naked City, West side Vegas—everybody knows me, man. My street name is [removed], a boxer. Been boxing all my life, man, AAU golden gloves, semi-pros, Nevada State Penn, third place, Chino State Penn, third place, you know? Susanville, first place.

**Kurt:** You've got a lot of experience boxing.

**Marty:** I love boxing. It's my game. Actually, I don't have to ask nobody for nothing. I'd come out and take it, but I can't do any more time. . . . I gang banged, and in prison, I had four or five male prostitutes at one time. And I lived like a king in prison. The reason why I lived like that in prison is because, it's all I knew man. I run prostitution rings in prison. I'm a Crip. I'm a Crip from birth.

Marty reveals that, although he was imprisoned for good reasons, unless a man like him receives rehabilitative training in jail or prison, he might be as unable to integrate into society as he was when he was first sentenced. Such a lack of skills can only promote further crime and/or homelessness. Without transitional programs specifically designed to help someone like Marty, such men with violent pasts might well try to access shelters.

Violence was a theme that ran throughout some men's interviews, indicating that some men calculated the risk of encountering violence and considered how to deal with it both in and out of shelters. James, who was not using a shelter when I interviewed him, also stated that he needed to be ready to attack others at a moment's notice, in part to protect himself and in part to occasionally rob people while he earned money through prostitution:

**Kurt:** Have you ever been worried [about working as a prostitute]? Has anything ever happened?

**James:** No. Well, I'm a third-degree brown belt in Kempo, so it's just like, I mean, I've been sliced in knife fights, I got scars like all over my body. I know how to take care of myself. Usually, if somebody wants, you know, to do something I don't like, they usually end up getting hurt and I take all their money. They don't know me from Adam, you know? I mean, I usually give them a fake name, you know, or use my middle name. If the opportunity presents itself and they're that naive, I'm going to take it, you know? . . . I get propositioned all the time. Sometimes I take it and sometimes I don't. It's got to feel right. You know, it just—it's got to feel right, you know? And depending on the money, you know? Sometimes I even carry a weapon with me, and I set it on the table, "You try anything, it's going up," you know, wherever, I don't know. You know, "I'll slit your fucking throat."

In James's case, his actions while engaged in prostitution mean that sometimes he appears as a victimizer, while at others times he appears as a (potential) victim. In all of these situations he appears to have thought hard about the role of violence in relationship to his survival.

The statements of other homeless men also made it difficult to clearly differentiate victims from victimizers. Brandon, who also declined to stay at local shelters, mentioned his several run-ins with the police, only some of which he was willing to discuss on tape:

**Kurt:** So you've been harassed by the cops?

**Brandon:** Not as much as I harass them.

**Kurt:** Okay.

**Brandon:** 'Cause if they come and mess me with me, I'll have the gall to mess with them back, instead of saying, "Well, yes, sir; yes, I'll move." I don't want them to have the opportunity for me to turn my back and them to knock me out or something. That has happened to me also. I've had a cop that hit me one time and broke his thumb and gave me battery, and I had to serve six months' arrest.

**Kurt:** What started that?

**Brandon:** I don't know. I really don't.

Some men, however, seemed to clearly be predators. Spirit, mentioned earlier, was also a former convict with a history of aggression. Although he squatted in an abandoned building far away from the shelters in the homeless corridor, he also intimidated and extorted rent from other squatters in the complex. His success at intimidation and extortion may well indicate why some homeless men who thrive on violence and/or crime may refuse to stay in shelters.

Although the vast majority of the men I spoke to did not seem violent, others warned me that even those who did not seem violent at first might unpredictably become so. Griffin told me a story of one such man, who seemed to have succeeded in leaving the shelter but later became vicious. "A guy came here from California. He left for two months and then he came back, and he was a completely different person. He was clean-shaven and well dressed. We [later] found out he had stabbed his wife." Griffin's example could be used to show both the potential stress created by his not knowing the violent potential of those around him, as well as the potential effects that being homeless has on men who later grow violent.

Men, therefore, may use shelters in part as a way of avoiding victimization by those like Brandon, Spirit, and Marty, who do not use shelters because their practices would not be tolerated on the property. Ironically, however, nonviolent homeless men often have to go through high-crime and high-violence areas, such as areas within and near North Las Vegas, in order to access shelter services. Those who are required to turn in their weapons for the duration of their stay at a shelter and who have yet to discover how to hide real or makeshift weapons on their persons may then be defenseless both within the shelter and in the surrounding area.

## Criminalizing Homelessness

Several of the homeless men I interviewed said that they had failed to report crimes of violence. Because so much crime among homeless persons goes unreported, few studies have been concerned with the victimology of homeless men. As Pamela Jackson (1994) wrote, criminologists studying victimology have often focused on white, middle-

class members of society and not on the victimization of minorities and groups like homeless people.

Usually the homeless men I spoke with did not think the police cared much about homeless people, but instead thought that the police often stereotyped them as law violators or potential criminals, based simply on their poverty. These statements from my interviews in Las Vegas correspond with a previous study by James Spradley (1970), who found that police in Seattle often labeled male homeless alcoholics they would encounter as lawbreakers and at times would arrest them on trumped-up charges, degrade them through name-calling, and steal their property. Faced with the authority of the police, the homeless male alcoholics in these situations often felt they had no recourse and so began to think less of themselves as their powerlessness became apparent.

Chapter 1 presented articles that focused on the increasing criminalization of homeless men in Las Vegas, as well as on how homeless persons are at times targeted as the primary perpetrators of petty crimes in areas like downtown Las Vegas. Earlier, Jerry described his less-than-sympathetic encounters with the police in Las Vegas. Although at times he said that “the cops don’t bother you,” he also said that in the Fremont Street area security patrols constantly ordered him to move on. He mentioned that he had received tickets for loitering at the downtown bus depot, since he was not there to catch a bus (see figs. 9, 10).

During one group interview conducted at a shelter in the homeless corridor, several men told me about having experienced what seemed to be harassment by the police and the types of charges they faced.

**Kurt:** I should ask too, what have your experiences been with the police here in Las Vegas? I’ll go around in a circle. Hank first.

**Hank:** Homeless people get arrested at the bus station for defacing a hamburger. You take a pickle off and you don’t put it in the trash can, you’re defacing the hamburger. If you fuck with one of the pigeons up there, you know, that’s the state bird; you’re going

to jail for that. You go anywhere around those casinos up there and you just look around. Like drinking beer—the tourists walk up and down with beer and shit like that. But like I say, let someone be dressed like this [points to himself] and walking down the street, your ass is going to jail. That's the experience with the police in this town. . . .

**Stan:** I've been arrested. Here's a bunch of tourists walking across the street—this is before the Fremont Experience was there, it use to be Fremont Street, you could drive on that street, cars coming up and down it. And I'm standing on the corner dressed like this [appearing to be homeless], there's a whole bunch of tourists walking across the street with drinks in their hand and everything. And I walk right behind them. And they [arrested] me.

**Hank:** Yeah.

**Kurt:** For public drinking? For what charge?

**Stan:** Jaywalking. Of course, I gave them a bunch of shit after that and I went to jail, but that's my fault.

**Adam:** I've been spot-checked twice. I got drunk and I passed out once, and I got spot-checked. And I told them that I was going to the [Working Shelter] and they let me go. One time a warrant came up for jaywalking in Laughlin, which are the same cops, Metro, the same ones are in Laughlin that are here, but they won't take me ninety miles for a jaywalking ticket, so they let me go.

**Stan:** But if they get you here, you're going to jail.

**Kurt:** If they get you here, you're going to jail?

**Stan:** Then [in jail] you got like fifty-five guys in a little square sleeping on the cold floor. And you're there for four days before you can see the judge.

**Hank:** They prey on homeless people, like I'm saying. These police here come to the parks, like this one on Washington? The one right here on Owens and shit like that. They come and try to give you a trespassing ticket for being in a public park. Have you ever heard of shit like that in your life? A public park. But they



prey on you. They don't want you lingering, they'll do anything to keep your ass from mingling with the tourist.

The trespassing citations Hank refers to in the previous statement are indeed given out at public parks near the homeless corridor, but because the parks had at that time been recently redesignated as "children's parks." In August 1999, the *Las Vegas Sun* ran an article on the development of new ordinances redesignating what were once three public parks into children's parks in the city. The article quoted one neighborhood resident who said she was keeping her children away from Ethel Pearson Park on Washington and D Street because "I don't want them near people drinking" (Neff 1999). The article then said that the City Council had recently approved a resolution to make Pearson, James Gay, and Fitzgerald Tot Lot parks in West Las Vegas children's parks, a designation that allowed only children and their adult companions on park grounds. The article quoted civil libertarians, who said that the redesignations seemed a convenient way for local leaders to remove homeless men from public space without seeming to violate their civil rights.<sup>1</sup>

At another point in the above group interview, these homeless men also discussed their belief that, in Las Vegas, homeless men might be the focus of a form of "profiling" by police as well as local people involved in the tourist industry. The men contended that anyone who does not look like a tourist is subject to harassment:

**Ken:** The worst part of it too is out there on those streets you're subject to harassment, not only by the cops. It's like, one of the things I've understood about Vegas is profile. Like a lot of people like to [think of profiling based on racial characteristics such as being] black, white, or whatever. I tell you, man, if you don't look like a tourist, act like a tourist, they don't want you in this fucking town. Even the people who work here. They don't want you here. What they want you to do is come in this town, bring a suitcase full of money, leave it and get the fuck out. That's what they want. That's the name of the game here.

**Chris:** The name of the game here is you bring a suitcase of money and you win, they'll comp you to death; you lose it all,

“Get the fuck out and don’t come back until you have another suitcase full.”

**Ken:** That’s right. Until you have another suitcase. Exactly. So what happen[s] is that if you take someone from here [a local shelter], and there’s a group of guys—and you see them. They look like tourists, they get up in the morning, they shave, they look like tourists, they walk uptown, and they do fine. They rob the fucking machines blind. Come back here and sleep. All right. You walk up there and you’re dirty and you’re a little stinking and you need a haircut and you need a shave, you’re probably on your way to jail. . . . Eighty-five percent chance.

**Kurt:** Have you been approached for that?

**Ken:** No, because I know the game. What I usually do is, I got my little shirt on, my little shorts on, got my little thing, got my little case on. [I look like] Joe Tourist.

**Kurt:** Uh-huh.

**Ken:** All right? And I do okay. But everybody does not have the ability to do that. And when a cop approaches homeless guys, they get arrested for messing with a pigeon. People think that’s a joke, but that’s the truth.

**Adam:** Shoo a pigeon away and they’ll take you to jail.

**Chris:** No, impeding the flight of a pigeon.

**Ken:** Exactly. My roommate got arrested—we lived across the street from a Circle K. He got up in the middle of the night, 10:00 or 11:00 at night, decided he was going to walk over and get a pack of cigarettes and a beer. He’s got his flappers on and shorts on. They stopped him. I have no idea why they stopped Walter. He didn’t have any ID. He went to jail. He says, “But I live right there. There is my window.” Walter says, “I’m out there yelling, ‘Ken, Ken, Ken.’” “Shut up or we’re going to take you to jail. We’ll run a charge on you.” I come out, “What the fuck happened to Walter?” He’s gone two hours. He just walked out to get a beer.

**Kurt:** Without ID. Just without ID?

**Ken:** Without ID. Where else in America does that happen? Any casino town.

Ken indicates that in “any casino town” those who are visibly poor and homeless present a problem undermining the tourist economy, one that is often managed directly by the police. Through their discussion of being arrested on dubious charges and experiencing discrimination, these homeless men indicate that, in casino “towns” like Las Vegas, they are not wanted. For these men, the police serve as a constant reminder not only that they have failed at traditional economic roles but that they are also now less-than-citizens in Las Vegas.

## Discussion

Here I have considered violence and crime in the lives of homeless men, as well as the role of the police in their lives. While some homeless men participate in violence, it is not always clear if such acts are rooted in aggression or are simply techniques of survival. Others I interviewed frequently decided to escape from the violence of the streets near North Las Vegas by staying primarily in shelters and by traveling quickly back and forth to more economically viable parts of the city during daylight hours. The police also seem to be caught between assisting and simply managing homeless men, practices that frequently result in homeless men feeling that they must stay within the homeless corridor despite feeling unsafe there.

The ramifications of homeless men staying in the homeless corridor go beyond fearing for their safety. During part of our interview, Jeff specifically mentioned that even though the crime and the dilapidated environment near North Las Vegas would probably not cause a larger man like himself physical harm, feeling trapped inside a barred shelter in such a neighborhood might well affect a homeless man’s overall self-esteem:

**Jeff:** Once you drive to North Las Vegas side, it’s like going into Watts, or going into South Central, or going into Harlem. . . . I just moved somebody into a new house up on Washington Boulevard. And when he drove us down here he was surprised as shit not knowing that he was four miles away from the poor side of town. He thought he was getting a nice house in the suburbs,

and he was driving us back here, and he was like “Shit,” you could see the expression on his face, he was going, “Fuck, I didn’t know I was this close to the shit house.” But it’s true, if you’re stuck in this part of town, you start assimilating yourself to it. You become part of it.

**Kurt:** You start assimilating?

**Jeff:** Yeah. For example, once in a while you see a guy here walk out and go to work in a suit and tie. He’s a different man. For a small time, he’s got self-respect back, he’s got his ego back. He’s going out and he’s doing a job. Then he comes back here and he gets his suit off, he puts on his jeans and T-shirts again, he becomes a homeless man. It’s like he’s on a prison furlough. Go out for a couple hours and be human.

**Kurt:** It’s like the bars on the door [the shelter’s front door is similar to a jailhouse door made of black metal bars].

**Jeff:** Exactly, it’s like a fairy tale. Did you ever hear the fairy tale where the princess is turning into a swan, and she comes back as a princess when moonlight hits, and then when the sun light comes up, she turns back into a swan? It’s the same thing here. Somebody comes up and he wears a suit and tie to go to work, and for eight hours you feel like you’ve made it, then you come back here and you’re scum again. You get that suit off, get the T-shirt on, and you’re behind the bars again. You’ve turned back into the animal.

Jeff’s reference to a popular fairy tale seems to parallel the notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy. While many impoverished individuals in and near North Las Vegas are unable to secure a living, they are aware that others in Las Vegas and in Clark County are experiencing unprecedented growth and economic development. If people living in an impoverished area come to feel worthless, marginalized, and excluded from opportunity, such conditions may also translate into human life in that area itself having little value.

It is difficult to determine precisely how many homeless men are victims of violence and how many are victimizers. However, the segregation of homeless men away from glittering tourist areas and

into one of the lowest income and most violent neighborhoods in Nevada may well turn nonviolent homeless men fearful and defensive. Such stressful conditions certainly cannot help these men end their homelessness.

Homeless men also have an awkward relationship to the police in Las Vegas. Several homeless men indicate that police officers typically must enforce the criminalization of homeless men and their segregation away from community and tourist areas. Homeless men also seemed aware that this latter role of the police is crucial for reproducing the tourist economy of Las Vegas, but that what could be called the harassment of homeless persons also does little to help destitute men improve their condition or even survive.

## Recent Developments

In July and August 2001, Las Vegas mayor Oscar Goodman presented an unusual and controversial solution for addressing the problem of homeless men in his city. Goodman proposed that an abandoned prison in Jean, Nevada, approximately thirty miles from the city of Las Vegas, be used as a shelter. While the plan was criticized by civil libertarians and homeless advocates alike (Moller 2001d) and mocked by some in the local print media (Silver 2001), Goodman seemed earnest in his proposal. In one local newspaper article Goodman said, “They could have all of the social welfare facilities they have now.” The article indicated Goodman believed that by moving homeless people to the air-conditioned property he could achieve his goal of clearing out the homeless corridor (Moller 2001d). In another article, Goodman said that turning the prison into “a homeless city” would “solve a lot of the homeless problem, [and] the issue of being able to develop downtown with having all the homeless there. From a hu-

manitarian point of view, it solves all needs” (quoted in Silver 2001, 7). Because such “humanitarian” suggestions were poorly received, Goodman found himself having to defend his ideas frequently in 2000 and 2001.

Goodman’s suggestion followed a long series of public debates beginning in 2000 that have involved him, other local politicians, and local advocates for homeless people over what should be done about homelessness in Las Vegas. These debates from 2000 to 2001 represent recent examples of how the problem of male homelessness in Las Vegas is interpreted in the local media and in public policy. These debates are important for two reasons. First, homelessness has generated much controversy of late in Las Vegas because of politicians’ public concerns over homeless people and newspaper reports contrasting politicians’ views of homelessness with the conditions faced by homeless people. Second, after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Las Vegas saw an enormous, immediate drop in tourism and tourist revenue, causing approximately ten thousand people in the city to lose their jobs within a week. After September 11, debates about homelessness took on a new meaning because it increasingly became apparent that homelessness could be anyone’s problem after only a few missed paychecks.

## Debating the Homeless Corridor

Soon after he became mayor of Las Vegas, Goodman began trying to address homelessness as a public policy issue. In 2000, Goodman began to question whether centralizing services for homeless persons in the homeless corridor was a good idea, and he criticized his immediate predecessor, Jan Jones, for having created the corridor. Goodman’s criticism, however, was not made out of advocacy for homeless people, relegated to a poor and dangerous part of town. He instead questioned why the city of Las Vegas, the budget of which he was ultimately responsible for, should be paying for the services provided to the entire valley’s homeless persons—including those of Henderson, North Las Vegas, Boulder City, and other southern Nevada municipalities. A *Las Vegas Review-Journal* article in December

2000 reported that homeless people trying to access social services in the more upscale residential city of Henderson (a suburb of Las Vegas) were being given bus fare by Henderson officials to travel to the homeless corridor in Las Vegas. Goodman attacked such actions, feeling Las Vegas was being taken advantage of by other communities. In the article former mayor Jones defended the development of the corridor in Las Vegas, stating, "It was an area of town that seemed to meet the needs, and that's what started it. Once one (shelter) was approved, because of 'nimby' [not in my backyard] and everything else, it was all going to stay in that corridor" (quoted in Moller 2000).

As discussed in the introduction, the homeless corridor was initially developed to centralize services for homeless men in Las Vegas. The homeless corridor was part of a strategic, multi-jurisdictional, and multi-agency plan for addressing homelessness. Homeless men throughout this book, however, have indicated other problems with the use of the corridor to address their homelessness. Those problems include: that the corridor allows homeless men to be removed from tourist and residential areas (the "not in my backyard" phenomenon mentioned by Jones); that the corridor isolates homeless men from more viable economic areas; and that the corridor is in a dangerous area that often exposes homeless men to potential violence.

Goodman primarily saw the corridor as a problem for his city and the city's budget because the corridor's placement within his city meant that Las Vegas alone had to pay the costs of services for the region's homeless men. Having to support homeless people was a particularly vexing situation for the mayor, who gained popularity before and after his election by presenting himself as pro-business and pro-tourism. As noted throughout this book, the presence of homeless men in Las Vegas often works against the interests of tourist businesses, and it seemed to bother Goodman that although homeless men undermine the tourist economy of the city, other areas within the Las Vegas Valley seemed to be encouraging homeless persons to come to his city for services. Meanwhile, other politicians in Las Vegas went further than Goodman to eliminate homeless persons from their districts. In 2001, City Councilman Lawrence Weekly sought to have homeless persons physically removed from a portion of the



homeless corridor that lay within his ward, a previously discussed “Tent City” near the Union Pacific Railroad tracks.

## Moving Homeless Men Out of the Corridor

A *City Life* article from May 2001 reported that on May 9, Councilman Weekly went for a walk on the railroad tracks where Tent City was then located, a walk that was promoted as “a media event, his show-and-tell for those who don’t believe him when he says something’s got to be done about the mess in his back yard” (Walters 2001, 18). The point made by Weekly echoed that of Goodman: the homeless people in his ward come from all over the Las Vegas Valley and were even given bus tickets to get there. But while Goodman was primarily objecting to the City of Las Vegas being the primary provider of services for the valley’s homeless people, Weekly’s objection to homeless people in his ward was based on the blight those people presented to his constituents. In the article, author Heidi Walters paraphrases Weekly, who says his constituents near Tent City “are tired of the vagrants spilling over from the shelters into their streets and bushes, and onto the tracks” (Walters 2001, 18). Such comments on “the vagrants” seem to present homeless persons as outsiders in Las Vegas, even in the communities where they are frequently sent to live.

Several articles in the summer of 2001 in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* also reported on the notice given to the owner of the property where Tent City stood to clear the land, followed by the removal of homeless persons from the area by police officers in July 2001 (see chap. 1). A *Las Vegas Review-Journal* article dated October 28, however, reported that the removal of homeless persons from Tent City had only caused the problem to relocate: nearly two hundred people moved to open spaces near Foremaster Lane and Main Street, for example. The article reported that people had begun camping “on the sidewalk and in parking lots near an abandoned auto shop and numerous ‘No Trespassing’ signs” and that a row of makeshift huts and tattered blankets protect sleeping bodies on cardboard mats just inches from traffic” (Casey 2001n). The article claimed that while

the clearing out of Tent City initially resulted in homeless persons dispersing around the Las Vegas Valley, by October many homeless persons had begun returning to the homeless corridor, primarily to access social services. However, the article also noted that by October 2001 the social services for homeless persons in the corridor had been sharply curtailed, despite the presence of more need. These trends occurred for two reasons. First, in 2001 some shelters in the homeless corridor faced ongoing problems with funding. Second, after September 11, 2001, donations to local charities decreased while more Las Vegans became vulnerable to homelessness after local unemployment rates surged in wake of the terrorist attacks (Casey 2001n).

In the following section I will outline how some shelters faced ongoing problems with funding before September 11. I will then discuss the aftereffects of September 11 on both shelter funding and the city's homeless population.

## Debates over Funding Shelters

Problems with the ongoing funding of shelters in 2001 focused primarily on MASH Village, a clearinghouse of social services for homeless persons and the primary sponsor of a winter tent that in the past had housed 250 homeless men in the corridor. In May 2001, Goodman was reported to have had several disputes with Reverend Joseph Carroll and his company, svdp Limited, over contract negotiations regarding the MASH Village property in Las Vegas (Walters 2001). A five-year contract, which had begun in 1994, was supposed to allow MASH to purchase its ten-acre site from the city for one dollar, with a stipulation that by 2001 MASH was to have raised five million dollars in donations. However, the charity was unable to raise even half of the money. State and city funds for MASH Village had also ended by the time Reverend Carroll met with the mayor in May.

According to a May 12 *City Life* article, Goodman and Carroll were negotiating the future of MASH Village, "but egos and misunderstandings clashed, leaving Carroll with the impression, he says, that the Mayor was trying to force him to serve the homeless outside the city limits" (Walters 2001, 18). In the article Carroll then speculated

that both Goodman and Weekly were interested in decentralizing homeless services. Although the article indicated that MASH would continue striving to keep its shelter open, it seemed that Carroll was not in a position to negotiate over the fate of his shelter. The city seemed uninterested in supporting a key charity helping homeless males and also appeared to want to make it difficult for those men to survive there using charity.

Carroll was facing increasing hostility from politicians who no longer wished to supply charitable support to help homeless men within the city. Based on Mayor Goodman's earlier criticism of former mayor Jones for creating the corridor and the statements Goodman would make later in July and August 2001, it seems that Goodman did not simply want to decentralize services for homeless persons in Las Vegas (as Carroll thought) but wanted to centralize them in a former prison thirty miles from the city. Goodman, in essence, wanted to create a concentration camp for the homeless persons of Las Vegas (Silver 2001).

On June 9, 2001, however, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that Carroll's organization had received a donation of fifty thousand dollars from Station Casinos, which would allow him to keep the Crisis Intervention Center at MASH Village open for one year. Carroll also indicated that other programs would be kept open until 2005, but that because of a lack of funds, some other services for the indigent would be temporarily reduced. According to the article, Goodman received the news "with cheers," but the article also noted that "before shaking hands with Goodman, Carroll alluded to his frayed relations with the mayor and county officials" (Casey 2001i). Although the mayor seemed to be in favor of others besides the city supporting charity for the homeless people, it also seemed that the mayor and the reverend were in disagreement over how to best help homeless people.

In July 2001, Carroll seemed to further alienate the mayor and county officials when he filed notice with the federal government to acquire the U.S. Post Office Building in downtown Las Vegas (Moller 2001c). Goodman was incensed by Carroll's bid for the building be-

cause Goodman had spent approximately two years lobbying to have the building declared surplus property so that he could transform it into a downtown cultural venue. Once it was declared surplus property, however, the building became open to applications from non-profit agencies and local government, and Carroll expressed interest in the site. Although it seemed the mayor's and Councilman Weekly's stances in May were both directly and indirectly causing homeless persons to leave the homeless corridor and Tent City, and that Carroll did not at that time have negotiating power with the city, Carroll seemed to gain some leverage by announcing his bid to take over the post office building. Carroll said that the bid was intended primarily to give him a bargaining position in his negotiations with the city of Las Vegas and that he was not necessarily interested in transforming the building, which was once nominated to be included in the National Register of Historic Places, into a homeless shelter. Despite Carroll's interest, however, the mayor claimed that, ultimately, the building would be his (Moller 2001d).

Eventually the squabbling between politicians and Reverend Carroll was addressed through the development of a grant that requested other municipalities and local businesses provide additional support to help Las Vegas charities. By August 4, 2001, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that a proposal soon would be made for a grant challenging cities in southern Nevada to raise part of the \$562,949 needed for MASH Village to reopen its winter tent for homeless men. Commissioner Erin Kenney made the proposal and told reporter Juliet Casey that it sought a regional approach to addressing the shelter needs of the valley's homeless people by requesting governments in southern Nevada to contribute funds in proportion to their percentage of the county's population (Casey 2001m). MASH officials said the money would help operate the tent from September to April, as well as help provide air conditioners.

The plan for various southern Nevada governments and businesses to help pay the costs immediately received criticism. Alan Feldman, spokesman for the MGM Mirage, declared that "it's too much money for too few people" and that the tent "only helps men, not women

and children” (Feldman quoted in Casey 2001m). Feldman seems to be making the distinction between “innocent” and “guilty” homeless persons that is often used to privilege charitable support for women and children over the support of men. In the article Henderson mayor Jim Gibson said that the grant should be based, not on the percentage of the population of an area, as originally proposed, but on the percentage of homeless persons found within those areas based on a 1999 UNLV study (Casey 2001m). Although not entirely satisfactory to all city officials involved, the grant was approved, according to a report on August 8, 2001, in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Casey 2001d). By August 16, reporter Juliet Casey of the *Review-Journal* wrote that southern Nevada governments had not responded to the grant’s challenge, frustrating MASH Village officials. Casey noted that “several cities have said they already pay county taxes for social services and don’t want to pay for the homeless problem in Las Vegas” (Casey 2001h).

Political debates continued to hinder the funding of the MASH winter tent that would hold 250 men. On September 6, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that city officials delayed a proposed action to make a \$191,000 contribution to the \$562,949 grant proposed by the Clark County Commission to reopen the winter tent (Casey 2001g). Goodman said that he wanted to wait until after a September 13 regional homelessness summit “to decide whether the shelter would be an effective way for the city to address homeless problems” (Casey 2001g). During the meeting, the mayor also made distinctions between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor: “My philosophy is that as a city we’re going to do everything to help those who want to help themselves and those who can’t, like the mentally ill,” while also saying that able-bodied homeless persons who choose not to work to end their homelessness “have no place in the city” (Goodman quoted in Casey 2001g). Councilman Gary Reese, by contrast, opposed any further contributions by the city to help homeless persons, saying, “We have done our share, and the more we have done, the bigger the problem has got” (Reese quoted in Casey 2001g). Although Goodman’s comments might seem charitable to at least some

homeless persons in the city, Reese indicates that the best way to address the problem of homeless people in Las Vegas is to avoid funding charity altogether.

Goodman and Reese together display a frustration with an increased number of homeless persons coming to Las Vegas. Through Goodman's indication that those who will not work to end their homelessness do not deserve to be in the city, he sidesteps the issue that Las Vegas might not have enough jobs available that could pay a living wage for all homeless persons. Goodman admits that some homeless persons, like the mentally ill, require charitable assistance. However, Goodman also characterizes the first problem with other homeless people as laziness, not only blaming them for their homelessness but also implying that they should not be allowed to stay in the city. Reese, by saying that "the more we have done, the bigger the problem has got," is arguing that charitable assistance in Las Vegas is not the way to end homelessness. Instead, says Reese, the presence of charities in the city means that more homeless people have come, and perhaps the best way to end homelessness in the city is to stop providing charitable support that homeless people need to survive.

By October, MASH Village had ended its attempt to obtain the downtown post office, in part because the building required seven million dollars in renovations in order to meet city building codes (Moller 2001b). However, forgoing the attempt to acquire the post office did not help MASH Village persuade city officials to give the organization the \$95,000 it would need to open its winter emergency shelter. The mayor said he could not believe that men, women, and children were now "sleeping on top of one another" on Main Street and Owens Avenue (Goodman quoted in Moller 2001b). He also noted that even if the winter tent had received funding, it would only provide "shelter for 250 guys, and there [would still be] children sleeping in the street. We haven't solved a damn thing" (Goodman quoted in Moller 2001b.). Here Goodman is implying that the presence of homeless children anywhere in the city means that they should always receive charity before homeless men. Making implicit reference to his desire to differentiate the "deserving" from the "undeserving" poor

allowed Goodman to skirt the issue of funding a tent that would have given homeless men a relatively safe and warm shelter in the coldest months of the year.

The increased visibility of homeless persons of all types in the city by October 2001, as well as increasing political debates over whether to fund the MASH Village tent and who should pay for it, both appear directly related to the results of the September 11 attacks affecting local tourism and the local economy.

## Debates after September 11 about Homelessness

On September 14, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that the region held its first homeless summit, organized by the Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition Homelessness Task Force. The eight-hour meeting included homeless persons, politicians, service providers, and advocates, and resulted in plans for continued meetings over the next six months (Casey 2001e). The meeting raised several important issues that were reported in the article and included statements by Cort Ryallis, a homeless man, who explained that shelters needed to have less-restrictive hours so that homeless men could take advantage of Las Vegas's extensive late-night employment opportunities. Ryallis also indicated that homeless men in the city could use better public transportation to access employment opportunities.

The summit occurred only days after the September 11 terrorist attacks, and at that point the ramifications of the attacks on the tourist economy of Las Vegas were not certain. However, by September 29 the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that thousands locally had become unemployed, including ten thousand local casino workers (Casey 2001q). By October 1, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that as many as fifteen thousand full-time casino jobs had been eliminated since the attacks and that, based on the estimates of local economist Keith Schwer, every casino job lost would result in the loss of another job elsewhere in Las Vegas within the following six months. It was then predicted that the total unemployment rate in the region would jump from the then-current rate of 5.1 percent to 8.7 percent (Berns 2001). By October 6, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported

that the state had taken ten thousand more unemployment claims since the terrorist attacks; expressed differently, the number of claims had doubled within weeks (Morrison 2001).

By the late October meeting of regional leaders of the homelessness task force, other problems regarding local homelessness had become apparent. MASH Village had recently been forced to move 150 people from MASH's sidewalks for traffic safety reasons. On October 25 the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that the shelter would still not be able to open its winter tent until December because of inadequate funding. Furthermore, the article stated that since October 1, the Salvation Army had reduced its emergency 190-bed facility to only 60 beds because local donations had significantly declined following the terrorist attacks. Although Goodman said he anticipated that the valley's homeless population would be increasing, he also maintained a hard line against what he perceived as the "undeserving." In addition, Goodman presented a new scapegoat for the increased homelessness in his city. Goodman claimed that he had it on good authority that law enforcement officials in Salt Lake City, which would be host to the 2002 Winter Olympic games, had begun giving that city's homeless persons bus tickets to Las Vegas. According to the article, Goodman also said that Las Vegas would help those "who can't help themselves and those who want help" (Casey 2001f). However, as far as homeless people "who are able-bodied and still refuse services and refuse to integrate into society, Goodman said he 'would like to kick them as far away from Las Vegas as possible'" (Casey 2001f). Here again, Goodman seems intent on drawing distinctions between two types of homeless persons and does not recognize that both groups have an equal right to live in Las Vegas. In the passage, he also physically threatens homeless people he feels have no right to be in the city.

During the meeting of regional leaders of the homelessness task force Goodman also suggested increasing police patrols within the homeless corridor, a suggestion that was met with criticism by American Civil Liberties Union of Nevada executive director Gary Peck (Casey 2001f). The suggestion indicates that while Goodman hesitates to spend money on charities helping homeless people survive in



Las Vegas, he is in favor of funding police directed to socially control homeless people. Other regional leaders, however, focused on developing more positive suggestions to help homeless persons. After local leaders reviewed a report summarizing the results of the previous month's homeless summit, community leaders praised and promoted other proposals, including "keeping people housed, especially those leaving hospitals, prisons and jails, and children leaving the foster care system" (Casey 2001f). Also by October 26, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that officials for the state of Utah and Salt Lake City had become critical of Goodman, denying his allegations that Utah was busing homeless people to Las Vegas. Instead of focusing on the problems of homeless persons in his city, Goodman indicated that he might attempt to track local bus records to either confirm or deny the report that Utah might be bussing homeless people to Las Vegas (Casey 2001k).

Days after the meeting in late October of regional leaders of the homelessness task force, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* was reporting that the number of available beds in the homeless shelter had further dwindled and that, after the clearing of Tent City, as many as two hundred men and women were camped on Foremaster Lane and Main Street within the corridor (Casey 2001n). Because homeless persons themselves clearly were not causing the lack of funding for the MASH Village winter emergency shelter tent, the reductions of donations to local shelters after September 11, or the recent layoffs due to a lack of tourism, police captain Cliff Davis was quoted as saying that the local police would not be arresting those individuals engaged in "life sustaining activities" like sleeping, eating, and sitting (Casey 2001n). Davis also commented that MASH officials had recently asked for his help in clearing the people off their sidewalk because their proximity to speeding cars presented an immediate danger. Here it seems that the mayor's refusal to help fund charities for homeless people began putting the police in an awkward position, charged with carrying out his orders but also facing a lack of will (and possibly a lack of resources) to treat all homeless persons as criminal.

In the October 28 article, state ACLU director Gary Peck was quoted as saying that homelessness in Las Vegas posed "an immediate crisis

of significant proportions” (Casey 2001n). This quotation followed a discussion of the mayor’s long-term proposals to address homelessness, which included setting up a regional trust fund, creating four new shelters for mentally ill persons within a year, and encouraging the governor of Nevada to increase outreach to homeless people who are mentally ill. By focusing on long-term proposals, the mayor again sidestepped development of more immediate solutions. Linda Lera-Randel El, a local advocate for homeless people, agreed with Peck that more immediate solutions were needed and further stated that local officials assisting homeless persons and the terrorist attacks were only part of the reason for an increase in local homelessness (Casey 2001n).

By November 8, 2001, however, local homeless persons and service providers received some good news: the city council gave \$51,000 to MASH Village so it could open its temporary winter shelter a month early. The November 8 *Las Vegas Review-Journal* also reported that “the funding was part of a larger allocation that includes \$50,000 for Las Vegas police to increase their presence in the homeless corridor and \$100,000 to start a regional Homeless Trust Fund” (Casey 2001o). An additional \$33,000 was given to assist several agencies already providing shelters and services for local homeless persons. The total response, then, represents an increased effort to provide charitable assistance and a multi-jurisdictional response, as well as increased efforts to police homeless people. While the planned allocations provided some immediate relief to address recent problems, local politicians still had mixed reactions to it. Expressing what seemed to be a change from previous newspaper reports on his view of homeless people, Councilman Lawrence Weekly, who voted for the plan, told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* that “there is no way I can . . . act as if [homelessness] doesn’t exist and act as if this couldn’t happen to me or someone in my family” (Weekly quoted in Casey 2001o). However, Councilman Gary Reese, who voted against the plan, stated that “I feel we’re just flushing money down the toilet” (Reese quoted in Casey 2001o).

Weekly seems to express awareness that, because of Las Vegas’s considerable dependence on tourist revenue, more people working in

the city after September 11 had become vulnerable to declining wages (through reduced work, tips, contracts, or commissions) or job loss and that those people could become homeless. When he indicates that he could no longer act as if homelessness “couldn’t happen to me or someone in my family,” Weekly is expressing awareness that homelessness is not simply the result of personal character flaws but can result from or be exacerbated by particular social conditions. Weekly seems to recognize that rates of homelessness can also be related to social-structural factors, such as an area’s overall economy.

Ironically, the November 8 article indicated that Mayor Goodman agreed with Reese but nevertheless voted with Weekly to approve the allocation. Goodman initially said that “the more we build, the more they come” (Goodman quoted in Casey 20010) while expressing fears that his recent charitable actions to assist local homeless persons might also cause the city to get a reputation for being soft on homeless people, eventually causing even more homeless persons to come to the city. At another point during the meeting discussed in the November 8 article, Goodman expressed his ongoing intolerance of able-bodied homeless people who would not work and referred to panhandlers as despicable. He made reference to a nineteen-year-old man whom the entire council had just viewed on a videotape shown by Weekly as an example of homeless people living in the homeless corridor. Goodman indicated that the man seemed able to work, at which point Weekly mentioned that the man had lost his job after September 11, triggering his homelessness. After Weekly’s explanation, Mayor Goodman said, “ok, I want to help him” (Goodman quoted in Casey 20010).

Mayor Goodman’s stance on how to best help homeless people, I argue, is the result of his own ignorance about the social dimensions of homelessness. By stressing personal culpability without acknowledging the importance of the social context in which homelessness occurs, Mayor Goodman often ends up “blaming the victim” at best and verbally demeaning or threatening the victim at worst. The aggressive posturing by the mayor toward “able-bodied” homeless men, however, does nothing to change a multitude of problems that homeless men in Las Vegas face as they simply try to survive.

Outside of emphasizing the creation of additional programs designed to assist mentally ill homeless persons, Mayor Goodman's primary policy toward homeless men consists largely of sound bites designed to threaten and intimidate. Every gesture of compassion he makes, such as developing programs to help mentally ill homeless persons, is seriously undermined by other statements that stereotype homeless men, by his requests to the police to enforce the criminalization of homeless persons, and by his insistence that he can quickly determine which homeless men are "guilty" of poor character and thus "deserving" to be removed from his city.

In my conclusion I suggest that, although I find Mayor Goodman's approach to addressing the problem of homeless men in his city to be immoral, his tactics and ideas once made perfect sense given his pro-tourism orientation and the culture of the city. However, it is debatable if such tactics will continue to work in the future. I also consider what a more moral and reasonable social policy toward homeless men in the city might be.

## The Word on the Street

Throughout this study, I have presented information on male homelessness in Las Vegas, drawing from my interviews with homeless men and homeless service providers, participant observation of homeless men in various settings, and content analysis of local newspaper articles. My findings indicate that male homelessness is clearly a major problem in Las Vegas that presents a serious challenge to the community and its tourism-based economy.

Male homelessness is both an individual and a social problem. The case study of Jerry, a homeless man with whom I spent a long and personally trying day, reveals both his personal problems and the difficulties he had securing food and shelter in Las Vegas, and even such basic amenities as a restroom. The interview data I collected from other homeless men further specify both the individual and social reasons for male homelessness in the city, as well as the challenges

these men face in coping with both daily survival and finding long-term solutions for their problems.

There is a commonly held view that homeless men are fully to blame for their homelessness. People tend to ask particular questions that blame homeless men for their plight, questions that focus on their addictions, mental-health status, willingness to be employed, or seeming enjoyment of homelessness. However, such perceptions have at best limited explanatory power. While some homeless men in Las Vegas embody these problems, others do not. Additionally, all homeless men in Las Vegas experience a social environment that, in significant respects, hinders them from ending their homelessness. Even the civic programs and charitable institutions devised to help homeless men often end up playing a dual role as part of the city's ongoing attempt to "manage" homeless people by helping to produce a sanitized environment that will make the city more appealing to tourists and residents, but will not necessarily help homeless men find a permanent solution to their predicament. As I hope the examples I have presented in the book demonstrate, the tendency to blame homeless men for their homelessness makes it impossible to understand how particular social and administrative contexts might actually contribute to and exacerbate their poverty.

Moreover, the popular belief in individual responsibility for male homelessness in Las Vegas allows citizens to ignore the problem and not address the need for a solution. Statements from local politicians reflect the popular belief that homeless men in Las Vegas largely have themselves to blame for their condition. Some politicians—and other commentators—make distinctions between the "innocent" and "guilty" homeless, but such distinctions are of little use in understanding the host of problems related to and causing homelessness, and they are too easily used to justify or deny funding charities that help homeless persons. Such a view ignores the fact that homeless men need broader social support, not deportation from the city, as Mayor Goodman proposed in the summer of 2001.

It is important to note that it isn't just a few local politicians who argue that homeless men have brought homelessness upon themselves.

People of all social backgrounds throughout the United States hold this view. The idea that homeless men are responsible for their homelessness is so insidious in our culture that even recently homeless men tend to believe it and frequently engage in stigma management as they attempt to avoid being labeled as “homeless.” It is only through living as a homeless person that many men gain an understanding of the ways that homelessness can continue despite a man’s best efforts to end it. Together, my research on popular views of homeless men and the actual experiences of such men in Las Vegas shows that homeless men must not only grapple with not having shelter, but also with prejudicial views about their condition and moral judgments through which all of their behavior is interpreted.

Male homelessness in Las Vegas will continue and probably increase. Support for this expectation comes from statements by Mayor Oscar Goodman and Councilman Gary Reese, as well as from the comments of Jerry and other homeless men quoted in this study. Male homelessness also seems likely to persist simply because the city has continued to grow since I concluded this study. In 2001, Mayor Goodman said that “the more we build, the more they come” (Goodman quoted in Casey 20010), seemingly referring to both the increased growth of the city and the increasing presence of homeless men there. Also in 2001, Councilman Reese argued that further contributions by the city to help homeless persons were counterproductive: “We have done our share, and the more we have done, the bigger the problem has got” (Reese quoted in Casey 2001g). When I asked Jerry about the future of homelessness in Las Vegas, he said, “In time you’re gonna see a lot more homeless people here.” Finally, not one man I spoke to throughout the course of my study believed that the male homeless population in Las Vegas would soon diminish, despite these same men expressing regularly how difficult it was to survive while being homeless in the city.

Recent developments indicate that the visibility of the problem is also increasing. Las Vegas newspaper articles and other media reports indicate both growing public concern and a considerable range of attitudes about male homelessness. From 1996 to 2001, media representations of and political rhetoric about homeless men sometimes

expressed sympathy, sometimes fear, and sometimes a combination of these. The 1996 murder of an international tourist foreshadowed the criminalization of certain homeless practices, such as panhandling on the Las Vegas Strip. Some newspaper articles from the late 1990s consider what should be done about the presence of homeless men in tourist areas like the Strip and Fremont Street, while others focus on what should be done about homeless men in mixed-use (residential and commercial) areas such as Bonanza Road. In the late 1990s, media representations of homeless men like those on Bonanza Road showed them as people who simply needed help, but who also could turn volatile, harming others. Articles on male homelessness since 2000 describe the funding problems of charities that serve homeless men, and describe murders and assaults on homeless men in the city. Recent cutbacks in social services for homeless people have left many living on the streets, and their increased visibility in the city prompted a call by Mayor Goodman for a crackdown on crime by homeless men, which resulted in more local news reports on homelessness.

Las Vegas now seems to be at a crossroads, facing a very public dilemma with regard to homelessness. Mayor Goodman's changing response to the question of homelessness over time illustrates the nature of this dilemma. The mayor has at times stated that he would like to help the "innocent" homeless and "kick" the "guilty" homeless "as far away from Las Vegas as possible" (Casey 2001f). At other times, he recognizes that as homeless people keep coming to the city (regardless of whether they are "guilty" or "innocent"), they will continue to undermine the city's tourist economy and tax the city's social welfare and charitable resources. The mayor seems unhappy that the city of Las Vegas contains a homeless corridor providing social services from which other jurisdictions throughout the Southern Nevada region benefit. He and other politicians in the city would like to see services for homeless people curtailed, but they also recognize that media reports about poor people in life-threatening situations on their streets, be they "innocent" or "guilty," make uncharitable politicians appear uncaring and might be damaging politically. The popular mayor was elected based on his pro-business and pro-tourism



stance, and early in his administration he proposed turning an abandoned prison in Jean, Nevada, into a center for homeless people from Las Vegas. After September 11, 2001, however, the mayor seemed to recognize that tourist-industry employees in Las Vegas had become increasingly vulnerable to homelessness. His previous policy that promoted “blaming the victim” and segregating homeless people away from the city seemed to give way to a view that male homelessness is not a problem that can be removed from the city or blamed entirely on homeless men. After September 11, 2001, it became increasingly clear that previous attempts to hide the problem of male homelessness or to blame homeless men exclusively for their condition were no longer working.

If Las Vegas does not act to address the social dimensions of male homelessness, the continued visibility of the problem will endanger the city’s tourist-based economy. Evidence for this conclusion comes from Sue, the homeless service provider I quoted in chapter 4, who noted that support by the local tourist industry for the creation of homeless shelters located away from their resort casinos represented “a good business decision.” If the city becomes known for having a sizable homeless population, and if social support is not enacted to help ameliorate the suffering of these people, Las Vegas will endanger its future as a popular tourist attraction.

The presence of homeless men in the city shatters the carefully constructed illusion that Las Vegas is solely about “fun” and “entertainment.” As homelessness becomes more visible, the efforts of politicians and business owners in Las Vegas to hide this blemish on the city’s image could become more frantic. However, the tensions between the city’s self-promotion as a happy, carefree destination and its effort to conceal its homeless population could ultimately be counterproductive. The image will continue to attract both tourists and homeless people, and both groups will face disappointment and disillusionment. Las Vegas can no longer “contain” the problem of male homelessness in a homeless corridor, just as it cannot control its media and the media of other regions that keep revealing the increasing problem of homelessness. Therefore, it is important that the city

end its cycle of denial and repression, and take a more active stance in helping homeless men.

A basic conclusion of many homeless advocates in the United States is that “the homeless problem will not be solved until a comprehensive plan of housing, services and income maintenance is put into place” (Stoner 1995, xiii). Although national steps need to be taken to address this problem, Las Vegas could easily be at the forefront of more regionally oriented programs to help homeless men end their plight. The economy of Las Vegas, rooted largely in gambling and tourism, emphasizes service-sector employment. The city requires armies of workers to do everything from cleaning rooms to preparing meals, from servicing machines to serving customers. It would make far better sense to increase job-training programs in the service industry and provide training and living support to local homeless persons than to segregate them to economically disadvantaged areas. It would also make far better sense to provide homeless men with viable, affordable housing options than to continue criminalizing the practices they adopt simply trying to survive.

Also, we must recognize that not all homeless men will be able to take advantage of such options. As male homelessness appears to be increasing in the city, some men, to be sure, will have significant personal problems. Men who might have been homeless in other areas, or who might have serious problems such as addictions, mental illness, or other disabilities that could easily lead to homelessness, continue to come to the city. Some of these men are attracted to the hedonism promoted throughout the city and like being able to engage in activities such as legal gambling and round-the-clock alcohol use. These men may become trapped in the city, unable to gain enough resources to leave. Although some might eventually find a way to move on, many are at risk of long-term homelessness in the city. They are often stigmatized and dismissed by men who are more recently homeless, they often experience long-term unemployment, and they frequently end up doing just about anything to survive, as evidenced by the example of Jerry.

Jerry exemplifies the need for Las Vegas to develop more com-

prehensive plans to help various types of homeless men who experience different problems. For example, a range of shelter options, from night-by-night shelters to more comprehensive, assisted-living programs (and open during different parts of the day) would better serve this diverse population. At the time of this writing, one charitable institution discussed in this study has completely renovated its property to include a variety of shelter options (from a night-by-night annex to studio apartments) and on-site services (from a clinic to a job office to an immigration and naturalization office).

Supporting such institutions is one alternative to denying the problem of male homelessness in Las Vegas and attempting to repress it. As the number of homeless males in Las Vegas is likely to increase, I am hopeful that this research will encourage the city to enact a more humane and charitable approach toward homeless men. The city's future as a popular tourist destination might depend, in part, on its response.

## Appendix 1: How I Conducted Field Work

The environment where services for homeless people were provided in Las Vegas did not breed trust among strangers. I had to figure out a way to meet and interact with the men there if I was to find out about homelessness in Las Vegas. Like other researchers who conducted face-to-face research on homeless men, I needed to enter into this environment and to fit in to a degree that enabled me to meet men who could tell me about their lives.

I would usually dress in jeans, an old T-shirt, and a worn out, eight-year-old coat when I traveled to the homeless corridor, which I most often did by city bus. The coat I wore had several pockets where I kept my mini-tape recorder, spare tapes, spare batteries, a journalist's notepad, and a pen. I also carried several copies of my Informed Consent Statement, which I used to both tell the men about my research and to follow the guidelines for conducting research with human subjects as a student at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and as a professor at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

When I first arrived in an area where homeless men would hang out, such as any one of the many chain-link fences near the shelter where men would sit before their shelters opened, I would usually just take up a spot and wait. I often did the same thing when I went into the shelters to conduct interviews. I would not just introduce myself to the first person I saw. I had learned from my qualitative research classes that a researcher has to be careful about entering into a field. I felt it would generally be best for me to hang out quietly for a while, observe the situation, and eventually introduce myself to a man.

Waiting for homeless men to come to me did not always work perfectly. Once while I was waiting by a chain-link fence, trying to get my courage up to talk to any of the destitute men nearby, a man came along with several small boxes of orange juice, the kind that you might find packed in a child's lunch box. He was handing them out to all the men on the fence. As he tried to hand me a box, I attempted to

explain to him that I was not homeless. I was there to do research on homeless men, and I did not want to take away a nutritious drink from someone there who could truly use it. The way that I was dressed, though, combined with my unlikely story, made him think that I was just being prideful. After I told him my research interest, he said:

Yeah, and I'm the president. Come on, man. You think you're too good to take my juice? If you was really a student at UNLV, you wouldn't be out here sitting with all these homeless guys, you'd be sitting in your warm dorm room. Don't act like you're above it, like you're better than us. Now, don't say anything, don't talk, I don't want no conversation, just take the damn juice.

I was surprised by his response and confused at his unwillingness to accept my explanation. As he stood in front of me holding the juice, I took the path of least resistance: I took it from him and began drinking.

Despite several men turning down my requests for interviews, several others said they would be happy to talk to me. After meeting a man I might want to interview, I would show him a copy of my Informed Consent Statement. This form had been reviewed and approved by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Department of Sponsored Programs. The University of Nebraska at Kearney Institutional Review Board also approved a later version. I created this form to gain the written consent of those I wanted to study. As a researcher of human subjects, making sure that one has the consent of the people researched is one of the most important aspects of ethical social science practice. After the men read the form (or I read the form to them), I would discuss any part of it where they wanted further explanation.

The beginning of the Informed Consent Statement explained who I was and the focus of my research. It stated my name and that I was a student or employee in the Department of Sociology at the University. One version read:

I have decided, because of personal interest, to research homeless men in Las Vegas to learn more about their practices, activities and values. I will also study how services for homeless persons are provided, observe homeless groups, interview individual homeless men and people who provide services for homeless men. These interviews will take place primarily at or near where services for homeless men are located.

The form also stated the dates I would be conducting my research.

The form disclosed that the results of the study would be presented in conference papers, articles, and a book-length written report, which would eventually be published and available for public reading. I offered to provide a copy of these writings to any participant who would like one. I also stated that any comments or suggestions about this study before it was completed would be appreciated.

Providing a copy of the report to the homeless men I studied sounded good in theory, but it was not easy to accomplish in practice. Generally, homeless men are mobile, and therefore I had difficulty tracking down most of the men after we first met. At times, years would pass between when I first interviewed a man and the completion of my written report. Even when early drafts of reports were finished quickly, it was difficult to ask the men to read long academic reports and give me comments when they were often busy simply surviving. In the end, I gave copies of my dissertation to the staff of a charitable shelter where I conducted a number of interviews and said I would like to hear from anyone who had comments on my research. Because no one responded, I have relied on the verbatim statements of the men and service providers I interviewed, the observations I made, and the emergence of key themes (including how they became homeless, their responses to local shelters, and the role of the police and violence in the men's lives) to organize my findings.

My Informed Consent Statement also stressed that participation in the study was voluntary and told the men that their names would be changed in my final written work to ensure their confidentiality. I also listed my home phone number and the phone number for the Office of Sponsored Programs at the University of Nevada, Las

Vegas, or the University of Nebraska at Kearney, depending on my affiliation at the time. Each man who saw the form would then, if interested, sign or initial it.

I did not use the Informed Consent Statement in all aspects of my direct observation of homeless men. For example, I would sometimes just act as a simple observer so as not to interfere with unfolding events or conversations. In order to avoid causing any harm to anyone involved in the study, I changed all the names of homeless men, shelters, and any social-service providers I directly studied.

Often I would only be able to conduct an interview with a man once, talking to him for a half an hour to two hours, only to never see him again. Occasionally a man would allow me to spend the better part of a day with him, or I would see him and talk to him informally several times after our initial interview. In one instance, a man named Bill kept a journal for me for two weeks, documenting his day-to-day experiences and thoughts while homeless.

In several respects, these men allowed me to understand the problems they faced in the greatest depth and gave me the most detailed insights into what homelessness in Las Vegas was like.

## Appendix 2: List of Interviewees, 1995–1999

The list below indicates the names I have given to the men I interviewed and some of their basic characteristics, including their race or ethnicity, their approximate or exact age (depending on if they told me or I had to estimate), and where they were living or the circumstances under which I met them at the time of the interview.

1. Bill           Caucasian male, late 20s, shelter user
2. Jeff           Hispanic male, early 40s, shelter user
3. Griffin       African American male, late 40s, shelter user
4. Kent         Caucasian male, late 20s, shelter user
5. Fred         Caucasian male, late 50s, shelter user
6. Bob          Caucasian male, early 40s, shelter user
7. Clyde        African American male, early 50s, shelter user
8. Kenneth      African American male, 39, abandoned-building user
9. Spirit        Caucasian male, early 40s, abandoned-building user
10. George      Caucasian male, 28, shelter user
11. Jerry        Caucasian male, 53, transitional living program user
12. Sam         Caucasian male, 62, shelter user
13. Ziggy        African American male, late 30s, camper/shelter user
14. Jorge        Hispanic male, late 50s, sleeps outside
15. Jim          Caucasian male, early 50s, sleeps in truck
16. Keith        Caucasian male, mid 20s, shelter user
17. Albert       Caucasian male, mid 30s, shelter user
18. Ronald      Hispanic male, mid 30s, shelter user
19. Hector      Hispanic male, 45, breadline user
20. Brandon     Hispanic male, early 20s, breadline user
21. David        Caucasian male, early 40s, camper/breadline user
22. Marty        African American male, 28, shelter user
23. Phillip      Caucasian male, late 30s, shelter user
24. Mark        Caucasian male, mid 30s, shelter user
25. Juan         Hispanic male, mid 30s, shelter user



26. Karl African American male, early 50s, shelter user
27. Roy Caucasian male, late 40s, shelter user
28. Jerome Caucasian male, late 40s, sleeps outside
29. Tyrone Caucasian male, early 50s, shelter user
30. Steve Caucasian male, early 50s, shelter user
31. Paul Caucasian male, early 40s, shelter user
32. Donald Caucasian male, late 40s, shelter user
33. Alex Caucasian male, late 30s, shelter user
34. Larry Hispanic male, late 30s/early 40s, shelter user
35. Tim Caucasian male, 46, shelter user
36. Hank African American male, 50, shelter user
37. James Caucasian male, 21, sleeps outside
38. Matthew African American male, late 40s, shelter user
39. Rick Caucasian male, 44, sleeps outside
40. Lloyd Caucasian male, 57, sleeps outside
41. Greg Caucasian male, 52, shelter user
42. Dirk Caucasian male, 45, shelter user
43. Andrew Caucasian male, 41, shelter user
44. Frank African American male, 39, shelter user
45. Stan Caucasian male, late 40s/early 50s, shelter user
46. Chris Caucasian male, early 50s, shelter user
47. Adam Caucasian male, mid 20s, shelter user
48. Ken African American male, mid 50s, shelter user

#### Non-homeless persons interviewed

49. Sue Caucasian female, late 30s (service provider)
50. Becky Caucasian female, late 30s (service provider)

# Notes

## INTRODUCTION: INTERPRETING MALE HOMELESSNESS

1. There were three additional, pragmatic reasons I chose to focus exclusively on homeless males in this study. First, I needed to limit the scope of my study: the homelessness of women and children are important and complex enough topics to deserve other in-depth studies. Second, as a qualitative researcher and a male, I found it easier to access shelter facilities for homeless men in Las Vegas, in part because homeless shelters for women in the city also serve as places of refuge for women facing domestic violence. I found women's shelters in Las Vegas had far stricter rules concerning visitors, particularly male visitors, on their property. Third, men constitute the majority of homeless persons in Las Vegas and are more often presented in newspaper accounts of homelessness in the city of Las Vegas than are women.

2. This brief overview of the history of Las Vegas cannot do justice to many of the important details regarding the city's development. For far more thorough accounts, see Reid and Demaris (1963), Venturi, Brown, and Izenour (1972), Moehring (1989), and Gottdiener, Collins, and Dickens (1999).

3. Television shows include CBS network's *CSI* and NBC network's *Las Vegas*, and movies include *Go*, *Play It to the Bone*, *Swingers*, *Con Air*, *Mars Attacks*, *Showgirls*, *Honeymoon in Vegas*, *Leaving Las Vegas*, *Vegas Vacation*, *Casino*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and a remake of *Ocean's Eleven*, to name only a recent few.

## CHAPTER 1. POPULAR INTERPRETATIONS OF HOMELESSNESS

1. In order to consider how the Las Vegas community might tend to interpret homelessness, I began with the idea that the ways in which media such as newspapers, posters, and mass mailings present an issue can be studied to show how people are encouraged to think about that issue, or what some sociologists call the "social construction" of an issue (Best 1995, 6–7). Those researchers who assume that "media activity can be conceptualized as [a] framing activity that defines and constructs social reality" (Bunis, Yancik, and Snow 1996, 390) are sometimes called social constructionists (Spector and Kituse 1977). The focus of constructivist research on social problems like homelessness is on the way that key claims about particular social problems are made, who gets to make them, the manner in which a particular problem is defined, and how it might best be

addressed (Best 1995, 6–7). By considering how various non-homeless persons in Las Vegas socially constructed the problem of male homelessness through convenience sample of reports on particular events, debates, and sentiments expressed in local documents from 1996 to 2001, I can show that the manner in which homelessness is addressed is largely a function of how it is defined, especially on a local level.

2. A sheriff's card is a work card that is required for anyone wanting a job at a liquor or gaming establishment in Nevada. It documents and licenses all those who work in the gaming or liquor industries and necessitates going to the police department and providing proper documentation such as a driver's license, birth certificate, or immigration papers. The applicant must pay a fee, and is interviewed, photographed, and fingerprinted. The police can deny an applicant a card or revoke it for a range of reasons, including having a previous criminal history or outstanding warrant of arrest, insufficient or false documentation, or having had a sheriff's card in the past that was revoked.

## CHAPTER 2. TALKING TO ONE HOMELESS MAN IN LAS VEGAS

1. I have changed all the names of the men I interviewed. For a complete list of the names I gave the men for this study and information on their race and ethnicity, their approximate or exact age (depending on if they told me or I had to estimate), and where they were living or the circumstances under which I met them at the time of the interview, see appendix 2.

2. For an in-depth look at how I met the homeless men I interviewed and how I conducted my fieldwork, see appendix 1.

3. I have changed the names of three shelters in this study. I call these Working Shelter, Addict Shelter, and Religious Shelter. A detailed study of these shelters appears in chap. 4.

4. Details about the Informed Consent Statement can be found in appendix 1.

## CHAPTER 3. CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF HOMELESSNESS

1. Although I could have done a similar survey of homeless men in Las Vegas and their characteristics, I decided not to for two reasons. First, surveys work best when they are collected from a random sample of a population of a known size. The problem with using survey research to study homelessness is that, in most large cities including Las Vegas, the population of homeless people is always changing, making the findings from such surveys questionable. To paraphrase Mitch Snyder, a noted advocate for homeless persons in the United States, try-

ing to count homeless people in most major metropolitan areas is like trying to count the grains of sand on a beach as the tide goes in and out.

The second problem with studying homeless people using survey research is that since survey-based research involves asking respondents a pre-formed set of closed-ended questions, the approach does not allow the researcher to fully investigate all the possible dimensions of the topic; spur-of-the-moment questions following a interviewee's provocative answer are not encouraged in survey research. Therefore, I thought it would be more useful to have open-ended conversations with homeless men in Las Vegas that allowed them to explain in their own words the reasons for their homelessness. I helped clarify my understanding of respondent's answers by summarizing out loud what I thought the respondents had said, or asking them for clarification. I gained further insights by asking other questions based on their responses. However, in reporting the results of these interviews the question later became, How can I reproduce their explanations succinctly, in a readable format, and still retain the voices of homeless men? Although I devoted most of chap. 2 to my interaction with Jerry and his story, I wanted to do more than transcribe all of my interviews with homeless men. Therefore, in the following chapters, I chose to develop recurring themes, within which I have placed short interview excerpts as examples.

2. Rowe (1999), a professional social worker, noted similar patterns of behavior by the mentally ill homeless persons he interviewed for his study.

3. *Deinstitutionalization* refers to the nationwide release of mental patients from mental hospitals with the invention of psychotropic drugs and an increased emphasis on civil rights occurring in the 1950s and 1960s.

4. In a later chapter I will discuss some of the men's behaviors such as scavenging that, although seemingly bizarre to some, at times constitute survival strategies.

5. Other researchers have noted that racism appears to be an important, yet under-analyzed, contributing factor to increasing homelessness (Blasi 1994; Stoner 1995).

#### CHAPTER 4. HOMELESS SHELTERS AND SQUATTING ON THE STRIP

1. This pattern of codependency over time between some homeless persons and the institutions they use that provide shelter has also been noted in other qualitative studies of homeless persons. In particular, see Snow and Anderson's discussion of "institutionally adapted straddlers" (1993, 55) and DeOllos's study of homeless families' use of shelters (1997).

2. The powerlessness some men feel in shelters, whose rules at times stress reforming the individual and at other times stress maintaining order, are also discussed in Wright (1997). Wright notes that homeless people who use shelters frequently feel they cannot afford to openly question any rules lest they be labeled “undeserving” (1997, 215).

3. This is an often-noted requirement of skid row missions. For other discussions of this practice, see Snow and Anderson (1993, 92) and Wiseman (1970).

4. Because Alan and Roberto were not interviewed for this project, they are not included in the list of interviewees, found in appendix 2.

5. Because our interview did not last thirty minutes, I did not include Chuck in the list of forty-eight men I officially interviewed for this project.

6. My interview with Hiro also did not last thirty minutes, so I did not include him on the list of forty-eight men I officially interviewed for this project.

## CHAPTER 5. OTHER SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

1. Other studies (Hoch and Slayton 1989, 132; Snow and Anderson 1993) have noted that poor people generally want to work in traditional employment categories for wages. As one homeless man I met said, “Lots of homeless people I meet are hard-working people. They just can’t get ahead.”

2. Although most homeless men I spoke to did not mention theft as a source of income, several expressed concern over being the victims of theft, crime, and violence. In chap. 6, I will further discuss crime and violence as commonplace in the streets of the homeless corridor.

3. One study of homeless campers residing under a bridge in Los Angeles (Underwood 1993, 84) also found their activities to be more like those engaged in by hunters and gatherers: “The hill [to the camp] only takes a few steps to ascend, but it seems larger, partly because it symbolizes the transition zone between different ways of life. . . . It takes but a few steps and a shrug to get from the high technology of jet, cellular phone and fax to the stone age technology of hauling firewood on foot for light, heat and cooking. . . . With its scavenger economy and its rich social life, life under the bridges was similar to that of stone age hunters and gatherers.”

## CHAPTER 6. CRIME, VIOLENCE, AND THE POLICE

1. Stoner (1995) provides an excellent survey of lawsuits that have been brought against cities in the United States that have criminalized the use of facilities such as public parks by homeless persons.

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