Urban Nomads in Edmonton: Moving as a Coping Strategy

A Report Prepared for Boyle Street Community Services
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Boyle Street Community Services sponsored this three-month qualitative research project on causes of homelessness in Edmonton, Alberta. Funding came from the Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Homelessness. The idea for this project was inspired by the Boyle Street's bi-weekly housing intake workshops. The housing workers at the Boyle Street noticed that several people have attended the workshops multiple times, even after they have been provided with affordable housing. Therefore, the purpose of this investigation was to find some of the barriers that keep people from finding and maintaining housing.

The information for this report was gathered through participant observation (hanging out and chatting with people) in the Boyle Street's Drop-In Centre, and by carrying out three pilot and eleven semi-structured interviews (one interview was discarded). Generally, equal numbers of men and women were interviewed, and they came from diverse backgrounds with varying familial situations. Interviewees were first recruited at the housing intake workshops. People who were interested in sharing their experiences with homelessness and had attended the workshops multiple times were the first to participate.

Interviews were semi-structured, meaning that general guiding questions were asked, but the interviewees were encouraged to explore issues that they felt were important, and to share their life histories. Then, interviewees and workers at both the Boyle Street and Women's Emergency Accommodation Centre (WEAC) recommended other people who they thought would be able to provide insight into the causes of repeat or continuing homelessness. Interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed and people were provided with snacks and paid $20.00 for their time. All interviewees have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

The housing staff at the Boyle Street provided a great deal of support and information for this project, as well as people from the winter warming project, Strathcona outreach, Streetworks,

the NiGiNan housing project, and drop-in staff. I also toured the Bissell Centre, the Hope Mission, Urban Manor, WEAC, and the Boyle McCauley Health Centre and the staff at each of these locations provided insight into homelessness in Edmonton. Dr. Cam Wild and his research assistants Lisa Wozniak and Maija Prakash from the Addiction and Mental Health Research Laboratory at the University of Alberta provided technical and general support, office space, supplies, and recording equipment.

Defining Homelessness

Homelessness is a complex and difficult concept to understand. As a report on homelessness by the Parliamentary Research Branch in Ottawa describes, there is a continuum of existing definitions for homelessness (Begin et al.1999: 5-8). At one extreme end, the term "homeless" refers to anyone who does not have any shelter. At the other extreme is the definition of homelessness that is used by the United Nations, which refers to people who are without a home (or who are living in shelters) and to people who do not have access to shelter that meets the basic criteria that is essential for health and social development. The basic criteria include personal security, protection against severe weather, and access to sanitary facilities and potable water, education, work, and health services. Therefore, this definition includes people who are at a threat of becoming homeless, or people who are the "incipient homeless" (Kearns et al. 1992).

> For every homeless person there are probably several others who are currently, either by their own standard or by the standards of the society in which they live, precariously housed. These are people for whom even a small change in housing circumstances can have a dramatic impact. If they are evicted one more time they will literally be on the street; if they or another household member loses a job they will not be able to pay the rent; if another friend or relative comes to stay they will not be able to cope. (ibid.: 280)

Also worth noting is that a person's status as homeless can change. Homelessness is a situation that can be temporary, periodic, or somewhat permanent, and is not a characteristic of

an individual, but is something that s/he has experienced during his or her life. Most people in North America do not lack housing for a long period of time (Begin et al 1999: 7). Usually people experience residential instability, rather than an absolute absence of housing for a long time. This study uses an all-encompassing definition of homelessness, based on the United Nation's definition. Therefore homelessness includes people who are absolutely homeless (without any form of shelter and camp out around the city or in the Parklands), sheltered (staying in impermanent housing or shelters), and those who are at risk of being homeless. Many of the people who participated in this study have experienced each of these statuses and have fluctuated between them throughout their lifetimes.

A majority of the current studies on homelessness have been conducted only when a person is absolutely or visibly homeless (May 2000: 615). The studies concentrate just on the person's current circumstances and the time immediately leading up to the individual's homeless status, rather than looking at the individual's entire life history. In reality, an individual's experiences of homelessness are rarely progressive (there is usually not a single path to homelessness). Rather, a person's experiences with homelessness are episodic, meaning that there are times when they have their own accommodation. Individuals can have been homeless on numerous occasions, but these occasions are sometimes separated by several years of having stable housing (ibid.: 634). Episodes of homelessness do not necessarily increase or get worse with time, and are usually defined by unsafe and poor quality private rental accommodations. "A major influence on the pattern of social life [is] the fluidity of the population" (Hauch 1985:98).

2003 Edmonton Homelessness Study

In 2004 the Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing produced a report on a homelessness study (the principal investigators and writers were Helen Gardiner and Kathleen V.

Cairns). The study's informants identified health problems (which includes disabilities, mental illness, and addictions) and poverty as the primary causes of their homelessness. The study links health problems and poverty to high rates of addiction and unstable employment that results from addictions (2004: 10). The authors claim that 66% of people who were homeless, sheltered, or at risk in Edmonton have addictions. The study also identifies primary individual-level mechanisms of homelessness, which are: loss of developmental assets due to childhood context, loss of resilience due to repeated trauma and lack of social support, and loss of "stake of conformity" and accompanying aspirations (ibid.). Some of these individual-level mechanisms of homelessness will be explored throughout this report.

While acknowledging that addictions and mental illness contribute to homelessness, this particular study will focus on other contributing factors that have been less frequently explored in previous studies. Addictions and mental illness will be given less emphasis as factors leading to homelessness in this study and instead will be seen more so as symptoms resulting from homelessness. As Begin et al. claim,

> [t]here is considerable disagreement as to the importance of substance abuse in contributing to homelessness. Substance abuse does seem to play a role in maintaining the homelessness on the streets, however, by further reducing their employability, eroding their already meagre incomes, and estranging them from friends and families, who would otherwise be more willing to provide shelter and assistance" (1999: 46).

Urban Nomadism

James P. Spradley first used the term "urban nomad" in 1970 to describe a "culture [that] is characterized by *mobility, alienation, poverty* and a unique set of *survival strategies* (1970: 253). Spradley says that urban nomads internalize mobility as part of their social identity and they judge others based on their mobility. People are mobile for many complex reasons, but Spradley feels that the most influential reason for people constantly moving is due to law

enforcement institutions (ibid.: 254). Repeated arrests alienate a person from their family and friends, and with each arrest, a person has to spend more time in jail. Instead of deciding to move to a new place, people are often pushed from their original home due to social pressures (such as not being able to find work or support because of a person's reputation from their criminal record).

In 1966 Oscar Lewis introduced his famous idea of the culture of poverty. He believed that people who are impoverished have a distinct culture (no matter what part of the world they are from). Lewis claims that,

> [t]he culture of poverty is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society. It represents an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair which develop from the realization of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society. Indeed, many of the traits of the culture of poverty can be achieved as attempts at local solutions for problems not met by existing institutions and agencies because the people are not eligible for them, cannot afford them, or are ignorant or suspicious of them. For example, unable to obtain credit from banks, they are thrown upon their own resources and organize informal credit devices without interest. (1996: 395)

Lewis believes that survival traits that poor people use become cultural when their children learn these ways of life and think of them as normal behaviour (ibid.).

Edwin James and Judith Goode elaborate on Lewis' idea of the culture of poverty and say that the behaviours of poor people are direct responses to conditions of poverty (1996: 379). The authors define poor people as those who have no accumulated wealth coupled with low incomes. Incomes are often sporadic, intermittent, and uncertain and located in the bottom sectors of the job market, so that their jobs are often the first to get cut when the economy changes. Most of these jobs are typically heavy labour and/or day labour. Supplemental work often involves panhandling, scavenging (bottle picking for example), or illicit activities.

One of the survival techniques associated with the culture of poverty that James and Goode describe, is high-density occupation of rental units (1996: 381). Several people will stay together in one place in order to decrease their rental costs. People who are poor often do not have the resources to own a home, so renting is their only choice. Often housing standards are not adequate and places are over-priced. The issues of over-crowding (and subsequent eviction), and lack of safe and affordable housing are concerns in Edmonton, and will be explored in this report.

Marginalized populations experience a much higher rate of stress due to housing and a resultant level of mobility than the general population. Marginalized people's main reasons for moving are that they are pushed out due to high cost and over-crowding (Kearns and Smith1994: 125). Young people are more likely to move based on housing stress. Moving does tend to alleviate the stress of inadequate housing, particularly for those people who gain government-assistance based housing. This means that although the act of moving is stressful, if the new place is more stable, people experience an improvement in mental health (ibid.). Interestingly, individuals who moved a lot as children tend to have similar behaviours as adults (Myers1999). Adult children often have the same coping strategies that their parents did, and so marginalized adults often respond to life course transitions with the strategy of moving (ibid.: 872).

Urban Aboriginals and Nomadism

The Aboriginal community in Edmonton (concentrated in the north-central area) is the second largest in Canada (with 30 365 residents in 2001), and is therefore worth emphasizing in this study. According to the Edmonton Urban Aboriginal Accord Initiative's statistical profile of the Aboriginal population, the population of Aboriginal people in Edmonton has been growing 2.5 times the rate of the City's population, due to a high birth rate and migration from reserves into the city (2005). The average earnings and median incomes of Aboriginal people in Edmonton are much lower than the general population, as the Aboriginal community has a higher

unemployment rate and lower-paying jobs, which reflects their reduced access to higher levels of education (ibid.).

Subsequently, the poverty rate among Aboriginal Edmonton is 1.4 times higher than Aboriginal average in Alberta and 2.5 times higher than all Edmontonians. In many neighbourhoods in Edmonton, more than half of Aboriginal people live in poverty. Furthermore, according to the Initiative's study, Aboriginal residents are more mobile than the rest of the City's population and they are half as likely to own their own home. This translates into Aboriginal people in Edmonton being twice as likely to spend over half of their income on rent and almost ten times as likely to be homeless (2005).

Aboriginal people living in urban centres are not a major concern for band-councils, as councils are focused on what they can do for people on their reserves, and it would be difficult for them to approach problems in the city (Buckley 1992: 156). A large number of urban Aboriginals are young, undereducated, and underemployed and these problems are unaddressed because "these people fall in a jurisdictional no man's land"(ibid.). Resource centres are overwhelmed and the federal government assumes only a minor responsibility, and this leaves people with little support or resources.

Christopher Hauch talks about some of the coping strategies that he observed in Winnipeg's skid row area during the early 1980s. A majority of the residents in the area where Hauch worked were Aboriginal, and these individuals would relocate to nearby reserves when necessary (1985: 7). He points out that a lot of what the general public sees as pathological behaviour is in fact adaptive behaviour. For example, people take any work that they can get, which is often day labour (and taking day labour could be seen as unproductive). However, people only take this type of work for short periods of time until seasonal or permanent work is available.

Still, Hauch is very critical of the day-wage labour system in regard to its effect on the inner city residents of Winnipeg (1985: 39). Workers get paid a small amount at the end of each day (minus any deductions for coffee, lunch, and transportation) and this amount is quickly used up by paying for a hostel or a cheap hotel and food. Any money that is left over and any possessions a person might have are often stolen from the individual in hostels or shelters. This system makes it very difficult for an individual to save up enough money for rent or a damage deposit, and because they work, they are ineligible for welfare benefits.

Any money that an individual has is considered to be surplus by their greater community, and is therefore to be shared or taken (Hauch 1985: 41). This egalitarian system makes it difficult for an individual to depart from his or her social network on the street. Sharing is a way of ensuring that others will share with you when you do not have spending money. One way to share is through binge spending, which means that when an individual acquires a large sum of money s/he splurges (often on alcohol) on any community members that are nearby. Hauch relates this distribution of money to traditional indigenous systems of maintain egalitarianism (ibid.: 46). He believes that binge spending protects individuals who come across large sums of money from violence and robbery.

Paul Letkemann, an anthropologist who wrote about his own experiences of living on the streets of Edmonton (and other prairie cities) when he was younger, claims that urban nomads show considerable cultural awareness and diversity (2004: 242). He notes that many urban Aboriginals come from reserves that resemble impoverished urban areas. On reserves, people often live with high unemployment rates and a geographical and cultural isolation from mainstream society similar to what they experience in the city. Most urban aboriginal people's homelessness is sporadic rather than chronic and they tend to hang out in groups that are highly visible while they are homeless (ibid.: 243). These groups seem to have a similar social

organization as traditional hunting bands and anthropologists have noticed similarities in adaptive strategies and ways of thinking between urban nomads and traditional hunter-gatherers.

As Letkemann explains,

> The urban nomads I lived among usually spend their days in subgroups of two to four individuals. These alliances are so flexible that subgroup membership almost never remains the same for more than a few days. They reorganize on the basis of information about possibilities of material resources, as well as factors of past successes or failures, personality, kinship and conflicts. Such seemingly spontaneous daily socio-political organization is described among some hunting bands... The ability to change subgroup alliances is also a commonly recognized social mechanism designed to reduce conflict and create extensive networks within the larger tribal group. Subgroup membership incorporates, yet often cross cuts kinship relations. In fact, most of the conflict I observed was between close kin, who tended towards competitive behaviour, especially involving sexual relationships. (2004: 248)

Many urban Aboriginals maintain links with their home reserves and tribal associations and therefore Aboriginal cultural identity (Letkemann 2004: 246). These links mean that people spend substantive amounts of time visiting or living on the reserves, and are also likely to have been semi-nomadic on the reserves, with a sense of freedom and cultural saliency by 'living off the land'. Many of these people do not have their own homes on the reserve, but stay with friends and family and relocate often throughout the reserve. These individuals act as information brokers, as they have contact with people on the reserves and in the cities, so they can update people on the activities of friends and family members (ibid.: 249).

Letkemann also describes how urban nomads act as community scapegoats (2004: 251). Often when individuals are invited to stay at someone's house, the guest is blamed if the police are called due to any sort of disturbance. The renters of the place realise their precarious positions (they do not want to get evicted), and even if they are the ones who have created the disturbance, they will tell the police that it is the fault of the person staying at their house, and will often claim that the person is staying there uninvited. The police typically believe the story, as the visiting

individual is homeless, and so they put the person in a holding cell. The currently homeless individual usually will take the blame, realising that they are providing a useful service to their hosts. Letkemann observed that as soon as the individual gets out of jail, s/he often returns as a guest at the same place they were removed from the night before (ibid.).

Urban nomads, according to Letkemann, live with the key practices of Aboriginality, such as semi-nomadism, flexible social organization, and sharing (2004: 252). One might suggest that urban nomads are modern day hunter-gatherers, who connect life on the reserves with that of the city. “Even when suffering from substance abuse problems and/or mental illness, these people are not necessarily acting in random fashion. Urban nomads have to be acutely aware of patterns of interaction and sharing, networking and brokering, pragmatic knowledge and means of manipulating situations” (ibid.). Ian Skelton noted that for many of the urban nomads in Winnipeg (he wrote mainly about Aboriginal single mothers), they identify reserves north of Winnipeg as their homes (2002: 137). This means that they see their time in the city as temporary, and that any place that they stay in is just a staging point.

While many urban Aboriginal people are nomadic in a way that is similar to their traditional hunting patterns, not all urban Aboriginals are nomadic. More importantly, not all urban nomads are Aboriginal. People who are disadvantaged tend to move frequently and have episodes of varying degrees of homelessness regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. For example, African American people in the United States have very similar patterns of mobility to those of urban Aboriginals in Canadian cities (South and Deane 1993). The unifying factors for urban nomads is that they have a set of survival skills that are different from those of the dominant population. This does not mean that these skills are wrong, it means that the skills are necessary, well-developed, and learned and people acquire this skills in order to face the various barriers that they have in Edmonton, and other North American cities.

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

Contrary to common belief, urban nomads do not lack life skills; instead they have a particular set of life skills that help them to survive difficult life situations. Certain life skills or coping strategies seem to be characteristic for people who live semi-nomadic lives. By seeing that marginalized people in Edmonton have having semi-nomadic lifestyles and therefore have confined episodes of homelessness, we can begin to understand their distinctive needs and existing sets of survival strategies that make them different from the dominant population. Urban nomads have a wide range of specialized skills that help them to survive, but some of the most apparent skills are flexible social organization (which includes crashing at people's houses), sharing (money, resources, and housing), and mobility (moving often).

Flexible Social Organization and Crashing

Flexible social organization means that urban nomads often do not have one secure support network of people, but have a more fluid and changing support network within the community. This is due to the fact that people are often mobile and have changing sets of circumstances. People often go to people for help who are readily available, or who have the resources at that particular time that enable them to help someone. This often manifests itself as people who happen to have a place will allow family and friends to stay there for indefinite amounts of time. Allowing others to crash at one's place can be problematic, as landlords may not approve and overcrowding can lead to noise and disruptions for other tenants in apartment buildings. However, as noted above, the urban nomad can often provide the service of being a scapegoat for disruptions so that the tenants do not get evicted if there are complaints.

Lucy, an aboriginal woman in her fifties who has lived in Edmonton's inner city most of her life, talked about how she would never turn her family members away if they need a place to stay, even if it meant that she could get evicted. Lucy has three teenage and adult children, some

of whom have children of their own. She lives with her common-law husband in a small apartment, and she often takes in her children and their spouses and children when they need help. She talked about one incident where her teenage sons were living with her and she got evicted because there were rumours that they were selling drugs. However, she and her sons were working night shifts at the time at the same place, and Lucy was sure that they were not selling drugs because she was around them all of the time. Lucy's decision to never turn her family away does not differ from the behaviour of the dominant population in this case, as most people would not let their children or grandchildren stay in shelters or on the street. The difference is that Lucy does not own her own home or have enough money for a large apartment that has spare rooms for guests.

Lucy's son, Paul, who is 25 years old, talked about how on several occasions he has found apartments to live in, but then he has had to abandon them. He explained how as soon as he has gotten a place, friends and family members will come to stay. He would not even contemplate telling them that they could not stay with him, and so he ends up with too many people staying at his house. People party and make a mess while he is away at work, and it gets to the point where he just stops coming home. People come to his place at any hour, even when he is at work, and enter through the windows. Paul does not think of this as breaking and entering, and would never call the police on these people. Paul has also needed a place to stay at times and his mother, or friends and family would not turn him away. In fact, he was currently staying with his sister and her boyfriend and their children, in a place that did not have enough room for him.

Roy, who is originally from Ontario and moved to Edmonton after he got a divorce, came to Edmonton because he has brothers living in the area. He also talked about how family members come to stay with him when they need help. He said,

> My brothers, every single one of my older brothers and my younger brother, at one point or another, has showed up on my doorstep with their bags in hand and said, Roy, help. My dad even once. Actually, my dad showed up. I said, You can't stay with me, Dad. Here, I'll go rent you a place. My brother, Dan, he would – he used to come out three times a year guaranteed and it'd go anywhere from a day to three months. One time he said, I just came over for coffee, and three months later I said, Doug, don't you think you might want to go find somewhere to live about now? Like I'm sort of sick of looking at you. The visit's over, man. Leave, go home. So he went back to his girlfriend. All my relatives, anytime they fight with their woman they're knocking on my door going, Roy.

Another man, Craig, who was in his forties and had grown up in the Edmonton area talked about some of the problems with crashing, and the need for mobility when you are doing so:

> I was with my mother-in-law. And my son moved back in with her, and so there just wasn't enough room. So I just said, okay. I started staying with my sister-in-law who lives in the same building, and she drinks like a fish. And she gets drunk and she starts blaming people for everything. So I just wanted a place to sleep. Got up one morning and said, I can't do this. Because I was having troubles at work training because she'd be up all night. So I just said screw it. I'll go stay at [a shelter].

Connie, an aboriginal women who lives in Edmonton and on a rural reserve, said that:

> My sister…got involved with crack and it kept on coming in and out stuff. People coming in at about four, five o'clock [am]. I just couldn't just say no. I don't know. I wasn't the person that was real mean and stuff like that.

Carrie is an aboriginal 35 year old who is currently staying at a shelter. While talking about her experiences with crashing, she said:

> You know, my sisters and brothers would come over all the time with alcohol, and it's just one big party. [She would get evicted for this.] Now I crash at people's places. I stayed on a friend's couch for three weeks and then someone opened their big mouth and we all got thrown out. Now, I go to [a different] friend's house during the day to get some space from [the shelter].

By looking at urban nomads' accounts of crashing one can see that it is part of a fluid social network of support. People stay with family or friends that have the available resources, and likewise, people stay with them when they have the available resources. The fact that most urban nomads are unable to afford their own homes or large apartment, means that when people come to stay they are overcrowded and at risk of being evicted. Nonetheless, people share their space with others, and expect to be shared with. This system of reciprocity extends to funds, knowledge, possessions, and childcare.

Sharing Funds and Supporting Others

This project began after Christmas, and many of the housing workers were concerned that a lot of people would be evicted January 1st for not having enough money to pay their rent. Social assistance cheques were sent out before Christmas, and workers were concerned that people spent all of their money on gifts, rather than saving it for rent in January. When people have very little money to survive on, extra expenses can be enough to put someone on the street, but why would someone spend on gifts, and not save enough for themselves to subsist? People buy gifts because it is part of a sharing or reciprocity ethic that semi-nomadic people have. If you give now, then someone will give to you when you need help. This form of insurance is used by

traditional hunter-gatherers. When you have meat, you share it, so that when your own hunting is unsuccessful, someone else will share meat with you.

Jennifer, an aboriginal single mother of four, talked about how she has to share, even when she does not necessarily want to.

> Then there's people that try – that are trying to say that they're my relatives, and then I don't even know these people from a – you know, a hole in the ground. But yet they come around and they bum. And you're like, Oh, you know, you have no choice but to give it to them because they're pitiful. Or else they send their kids over to eat.

Sherry is a 34-year-old Metís women who moved to Edmonton when she was fifteen and lived in youth shelters until she got married. She lived with her husband and children for eleven years before leaving with a new boyfriend and living in the inner city. With her new boyfriend, she has experienced several episodes of homelessness and is currently staying at a shelter. To supplement their incomes, she had been working as a prostitute and had recently been violently abused by a John and is now looking for work and her own place. She talks about how she supported her ex-boyfriend in the past:

> He was more of a drinker. We would go to Rosie's every night. He'd sit until three and get drunk, loaded drunk, and I'd have to drag, carry him back almost, you know. So we'd get places and then he wouldn't let me pay the rent because he had control of my money and all of my cheques from Welfare. (Interviewer asked: Did he have a source of income?) No, he got me. That was it.

Roy also talked about how he often supported his ex-girlfriend, even after they broke up, because she had a daughter and he was concerned for the well-being of the child.

> I pay [child] support for this one too, which I know I don't have to but I do. My money it goes into giving them groceries and shit. Like I don't have to give money right – obviously, right this second I'm not going to because she's screwed me up, but once I get back into making money, I'll give her money again just because – just to make sure the kid gets everything the kid needs.

Nomadism and Moving

As mentioned earlier, marginalized people will often move as a coping strategy for housing stress. Housing stress comes in many forms, and is usually related to living in run-down and over-priced places. Moving around is also a coping strategy for not having any place to stay, and many people have a very specific set of strategies for keeping themselves as comfortable and safe as possible.

Sherry talked about her survival strategies for when she is living on the street:

> When I go out at 8:00, 9:00 at night they're full of people here, I'll go to the Hope Mission because I know I'm getting at least a mat to sleep on. In the summertime I stay outside by the Royal Alex, and like by that school across from the Royal Alex, outside in the park. Until it gets cold then you walk around until it gets nice out again in the morning and then you just lay down again and sleep again in the sun. Yeah, you'd find things – like I go to karaoke till three in the morning. I don't drink, but I drink coffee and I sit till three in the morning and then walk around, sometimes check into the hospital if it's cold or raining in the night. Check in and you just make up some illness because I need to sleep there. You're guaranteed four hours before they'll even call you in. So you can sleep for four hours. As long as you have one of these bracelets on your wrist.

Craig talked about how he has moved around all of his life. The longest he has ever lived in a place is two years. He said, “A lot of times I just get bored of staying at one place too. I get – after I've been in some place for a long time it's just forget it, I don't want – I got to get out of here.” Connie, a single aboriginal woman, talked about how whenever she needs to get away from the city (or the troubles that she encounters in the city), she goes to her home reserve:

> I go to [the reserve], to get away from everything. I like being in the bushes. Summer because I go, I don’t know, stroll and walk around in the bushes, or go there to, I don’t know, keep myself busy. I have family over there. I was tired of everything. So I moved back and stayed in Driftpile for three and a half months.

BARRIERS

Marginalized people in urban areas face multiple barriers that keep them from being able to join the dominant population. The coping strategies that urban nomads develop are in direct response to barriers that they may face in any number of combinations at any given time. Interviewees talked about many of the barriers that they face living in Edmonton and below are some examples of what they shared.

Affordable Housing

Most people that were interviewed talked about how they have problems finding affordable, suitable, and safe housing. Sherry talked about some of the problems she faced in trying to get government assisted housing:

> And you try at Capital Housing, well, Jesus, you're looking at a two-year waiting list just to get a frigging house. I’ve been on there for what, six months now. It’s hard to get in there. Especially if you don’t have your kids. If you're by yourself it’s really hard. Yeah,

> and even when you got your kids you got at least six months, seven months of wait. But I want my own place, right, and I usually mess it up. And it's not – like I said, I don't deal dope, I've been clean off drugs for years, I don't want to drink. I just, you know, you just get too high up caught on bills, and you lose your job, and the next thing you know, you're stuck in a shelter because you can't pay your rent because you don't have a job anymore, and you go to Welfare and they want you to go through sixty hoops, and then they'll only give $400. What am I supposed to do? Like, you know, $427. You're stuck in a little room that's half the size of this room [at a shelter].

References

A majority of the people interviewed said that they have no rental references, or no acceptable rental references. If an individual has lived in shelters, boarding houses, or stayed with friends and family, they do not have references from previous landlords. Most landlords require references and sometimes credit checks. If a person has never had a good apartment, they do not have the references to obtain one. This means that they are forced to rent places that do not require references, which are typically run-down, over-priced, and unsafe places.

Slumlords and Boarding Houses

Jennifer talked about how she had to move out of a place because it was making her family sick:

> That place was causing me sickness. Like my son was getting asthma attacks. I have asthma. You know, we can't have animals around us. We can't have – like it was – they had – before the tenants – or before us – before we moved into that house, one of the rooms had smelled like cat pee and it just reeked. Like we were having asthma attacks. We were sick. We were constantly using our puffers. Our puffers – the doctor was

> wondering if we were overdosing ourselves. And I said, No, I said, We keep on coughing and our lungs hurt, you know, each time we have this. Oh, well that's an asthma attack. I said, we realize that, but why – you know. So then they're prescribing us higher and higher doses.

Carrie described what it can be like living in boarding houses:

> You know, rent and leave, boarding home – or, you know, buildings with just certain suites. Rooming house. And he charged an arm and a leg, and he wouldn't fix nothing. Rent was $1,200. So I left there. I even left my clothes. I left everything. I had been there for a year. I always pay my rent. As long my landlord's good to me. We moved a lot.

Sherry shared an amazing experience of how she and her partner had rented an illegal apartment in someone's garage. She also talked about her experiences living in boarding houses and places where the landlord did not fix things on time:

> We rented one place that was a garage. It was once. He turned it into a suite. It was cold in the winter and I had to plug in heaters and it had running water. He actually had set it up and it was just the back part of the house that was just like a store or something. And he painted it up, and made a little own door and there you go. It cost only like $350 a month, or something like that. You'll pay less for a boarding room, but you know, especially when they take your money, right, and everything is broken. I waited one time three weeks for a fridge because my fridge didn't work. Three weeks I had to fight with him, or when I was – even when I was with my common-law, and me and my kids got this house on 97th Street. And it was a beautiful house. But the sewer kept backing up in the basement there. This landlady would do nothing, and she was the biggest slumlord

around. So I stopped paying the rent. She had the nerve, she called the power company and had my power cut off. I had to go and fight with them. She was a horrible woman, and it turned out – like she was labelled a slumlord because she'd get all these houses, rent them to people and do absolutely nothing but collect the money. Yeah, the basement kept flooding. The backyard was just a weed deposit, and I – you'd plug something in, and the thing would go Bzzz. Yeah, it was a pretty rough house.

Jordan said that boarding houses are almost always slums, and that is all he has ever been able to live in. He also talked about how dangerous living in such places can be. He said that because he was Aboriginal, he was unable to find anyone else that was willing to rent to him. He had recently been living in a boarding house and had two strangers come in and seriously assault him (his arm had been nearly severed with a machete). He and his roommate got evicted because of the incident and since he had been out of the hospital, he had been staying in a shelter. Within a month's time, he had moved into another inner city boarding house. He noted that in the summertime he preferred to live outside:

> Well, that's all I've ever lived in is the slums. You very rarely find boarding houses that are, like, top condition – well, unless they're being just built or something. And they're bad – cockroaches. Millions of cockroaches. The bathrooms are disgusting. Living in the inner city, living in rooming houses. It's a very risky lifestyle. You never know who you're going to live next to. And if you ever notice most of these rooming houses are all crack houses. There's always a risk. If it's summer, I'll stay outside. If it's not too cold I'll stay outside. In the bush [river valley].

Location and Transportation

Many people expressed their desire to leave the inner city. For many people wanting a safer life, they said that neighbourhood was pivotal. Also, people who wanted to avoid drinking and using drugs said that it was very difficult to do so living in the inner city. Location also determines the jobs that people can work, as many people with low incomes do not have vehicles and must rely on the city transportation systems. If a job is located on the outskirts, or outside of the city, it may take hours to get there, if one can at all using transit.

Lucy, for example, stressed that her children were always better off and healthier when they live outside of the downtown area of Edmonton. Connie said that she wanted to move to the west end to be closer to her children and to escape her old lifestyle. She said that it was too hard having everyone know that she had been a prostitute, and she may want to start using drugs again if she was around it all of the time. Craig said that he had to quit a job because the location was too far from the inner city to get to it was too difficult to get transportation there:

> I was working with Diversified. I was working with these guys and I quit that job and – It was way in the west end. They had me working from eight to nine at night. Cleaning it up, and it took an hour and a half to get to work and that, and I had to walk. I had to walk a half hour just to get there because there were no bus service. So it just wasn't good enough money.

Discrimination

Discrimination is a serious concern for people when they are trying to find a safe, affordable home. Whether it is based on ethnicity, gender, or disability, discrimination is a major barrier for people who want to find a suitable home in Edmonton. For example, Jordan said,

“Mostly it's like they see me, they see a big drunk Indian walking up the sidewalk. They don't see nothing else. Then I tell them I don't drink and then they still don't believe me.”

Jennifer also shared how she has faced discrimination while looking for a place.:

> It just gets frustrating because, you know, like now that I've dealt with racism – the landlady – my ex-landlord, Carol, she phoned me and told me that this landlady was asking about my nationality. Well, I don't even know if I should rent her the place because she's – she's Native, you know. Where are they from? You know, trying to get all the information and everything. And I got the place because my husband was white. He's a half-breed. And he looked more white than Native.

Another interviewee, Dave, has had problems renting because of his past criminal record. He has a history of drug use and trafficking and therefore the police officers in the inner city know him. When he tries to rent a place, the only thing he can get is a room in an inner city boarding house, and so the local police officers soon find out where he is living. They come and demand to search his place and tell his landlords that he is likely selling or using drugs. This makes it very difficult for Dave to keep a place and has actually gone to court to fight wrongful eviction based on his past criminal activity.

Social Assistance

Another major barrier for people looking for housing is if they are receiving, or trying to receive social assistance. When a person applies for social assistance to pay for rent, they have to have the landlord fill out a form to prove that they have a place. It is the applicant’s social assistance worker who decides whether or not the applicant has to have their potential landlord fill out a form, but most of the time the form is required to ensure that the money will be used for rent. However, landlords will often refuse to fill out the form, because either they do not want

someone who is on social assistance living in their buildings, or because they are concerned that they when fill out the form, the applicant will decide to not live in the building and take the money elsewhere.

Sherry described her problems with social assistance and rent reports:

Well, when you're on Welfare. Like as soon as you tell them now they'll say, I won't fill a rent report until you pay damage deposit. Well, you can't get any money from Welfare without a rent report. So what are you supposed to do? That's why you keep going until you find a slumlord, one who doesn't care, and then he'll fill it out, and you know, and the next thing you know – and like it's dingy and there's cockroaches because that's all they'll rent to you. I already have a plan. I'll work for three paycheques [while staying at WAEC]. It's so much easier to find an apartment if you have a job. Like if you go to someone and fill out an application and say I'm on Welfare, nine out of ten times they don't – they refuse you. And they even passed a law saying that, you know, they can't discriminate but they still do. They just find other excuses.

Jordan also lamented about rent reports:

But then you have to say, I need you to sign this form – for social assistance. And then they say, Oh, we don't do that. And then I can't get the cash. The place I can go get, which I'm not going to get now anyways, but he told me, you give me $50 for a key deposit, then I will fill out your – your rent form. But if you do not give me $50 for the key deposit I'm not going to fill out the rent from. And if I don't got it, who do I go borrow it off of?

Craig also expressed his problems with rent reports:

The problem I'm having, I've got no money coming in at all right now. Can't work. I mean – so before I can get social assistance you have to have a rent deposit. And most of

the landlords out there, as soon as they see that rent form, no, they want the rent first and then they'll sign the rent form. Because too many people go to them, and they sign the rent form and they just take off. And they go do whatever, party on. You know, and so in this area around here especially none of them will sign. They're like oh, I'm not signing that. Too many people I sign them for and I never see them again.

Children

Every woman that was interviewed and who had children said that finding a place with enough room for her children was a problem. Not being able to afford houses, these women have to find apartments that will allow children. The main issue is, however, that landlords insist that each child must have his or her own room, otherwise they consider there to be overcrowding. However, most apartments do not have enough room for women with three or four children, and if they exist, they are likely much too costly. Jennifer, who has four children, said, “It's not even legal for me to have my older one [son] here. This is a three bedroom. My boy sleeps downstairs, my oldest sleeps in the basement 'cause there's a bed down there for him.”

Trauma

In the 2003 Edmonton Homelessness Study, the authors explain that many of the individuals with whom they spoke had “started life in difficult circumstances” (2004: 11). According to their interviews, 66% of women and 35% of men had had a parent die before their eighteenth birthdays. The individuals that were interviewed also had experienced high levels of domestic violence, abuse and neglect during childhood. The people interviewed from this study did not differ, as most individuals had either lost someone at a young age, and/or had suffered from abuse most of their lives. The emotional ramifications of such childhood trauma can be crippling.

The following is some of Carrie's experience with childhood trauma:

Well, I left when I was – I left – I chose to leave when I was 14. I was really rebellious. Well, after my sister was killed my whole family fell apart. I lost a sister when I was 11. She was raped and murdered here in Edmonton. And then I just lost another sister in August, to drugs and alcohol. When my first sister died my mom kind of lost it and gave, you know, us kids to other family members. But I wouldn't do that. I always ran away. If I couldn't live with my mom, I didn't want to be with anyone. No, my sister worked the streets. She started when she was 14. She died when she was 35. So yeah, she was on the street for a long time… When my sister passed away, and I just kind of fell backward. Yeah, well it – it left us no excuse for – but yeah, when my little sister died I kind of just gave up a whole lot of stuff on trying. [Asked for the tape to be turned off here because she was too upset.]

Craig's father was abusive when he was a child, so he moved out at the age of fifteen. He said:

My dad's always been a prick. He used to beat me when I was younger and that. So we don't get along, and if I phone there, when I phone, as soon as he hears it's my voice he doesn't even say hi to me, he just gives the phone to my mom. He won't say hi to me or anything.

Being homeless in itself can be traumatic. Carrie talked about how she becomes unwell when she stays in shelters:

But that's just from, you know, you get a messed up head when you're homeless. And you go on the streets and then you go to a nice good life and then you go back on the streets.

> And working the streets too will fuck with your head. I never slashed until I came in here. I quit slashing when I left here. I come back, now I want to start again. Like I did this. I burn. That's with a hot lighter there. But then I thought, how stupid. I'm not going to let that get me down again, I'm not going back there. I did it for too long. I almost lost my arms.

Violence

Urban nomads appear to be at higher risk of being victims of violence. Their unsafe living conditions and ways of supplementing their incomes can bring them harm. Also, many women end up living in shelters as a result of leaving abusive partners. Several of the woman interviewed said that they had moved several times in order to get away from abusive relationships.

Carrie, who was currently living at a shelter while her children are in foster care (the oldest, a teenager is living on the streets), lived with an abusive partner for fifteen years. She said, "He's an abuser. He beat me up for 15 years. I left him. I phoned Welfare. They picked up my kids, and I left." Jennifer had also recently left an abusive relationship. She explained:

> Yeah, 'cause we had – like I had no choice but to leave him 'cause he's very abusive, right? So we left him. I packed up all my kids and I left him I moved down here March because my ex-husband had located us and we ran away from him again. So yeah, we've been on the run from him practically eight years on and off. Actually, I completed the whole [job training] program. It's just that when I did get a job, my husband came back and then I more or less lost my job because he kept my bus pass from me from attending my job. That's the reason why we moved here in this house is because I was working at the casino. At the time I could afford this place, but now I can't. I got fired on account of him. You know, I even had another job, holy smokes, at Tim Horton's downtown. And I

lost that job too. He wouldn't give me my bus pass, you know? So I was just like – you know, and then 15 minutes before I had to go to work, he gives me my bus pass.

Sherry's boyfriend who had brought her to the inner city had recently left her because he had acquired a large sum of money and said that he did not need her anymore. She said:

> You know, that's the person I loved with all my life. Obviously, I left my husband and my kids for him. So you know, for him to hurt me like that, that's bad. No, he wasn't, but in my mind, you know, he was my best friend, this was my heart. I spent 24/7, right? And you know, there were good times. Like you know, when you have a good laugh, but there were more worse times. So now when I start missing him I just start thinking of all the horrible things he's done to me. Right? Because he'd beat me up and leave me, and I'd go looking for him. Because you know, I did something wrong, I'm so sorry, and I'll never do it again and – you know?

Current Injuries

People with current injuries due to violence or accidents find it very difficult to get jobs, as they face discrimination and complications from their injuries. Therefore, all of the people interviewed who were injured were currently staying in shelters because they had nowhere else to go and very little money. For example, as mentioned earlier, Jordan got evicted after being a victim to random violence. So, after he was released from the hospital, he was forced to stay in a shelter. Craig, who had recently been crashing at his sister-in-law's house, but had left because of her drinking, got hit by a car just after he moved into a shelter. His leg was broken, and so he was stuck in the shelter until it healed and he could find work again. Sherry was also staying in a

shelter because she had nowhere else to go after having being seriously injured from an abusive John. She described the incident:

> Yeah, and like an idiot I went out, you know, thought what the hell, I want a hoot, and before I could buy the hoot I had to buy a date, which is how I broke my knee, and I ended up in the hospital. He was trying to rape me and I was trying to get out, and I fell and my leg was stuck in the truck, and he drove off and dragged me till my leg snapped. Oh yeah, it was hell. And then I laid 45 minutes. Around ten people went by me. No one would call 911 till this guy was coming home from work and I happened to be laying in front of his house, and he called 911. I couldn't believe it. Someone wouldn't even take the time to walk over to a pay phone, hit 911, and I was right behind the police station on 111 Ave. and nobody would take the time just to call the cops saying there was a lady laying there like screaming for help.

Jail Terms

Often when people complete a jail sentence, they have nowhere to go and end up in shelters until they can find somewhere else to go. For example, Roy had been living with his girlfriend, and went to jail for a few months. While in jail, his girlfriend broke up with him, and so when he got out, he had nowhere to go and spent a few days wandering the streets before going to a shelter for help. Emmanual, a young man who came to Canada as a child as a Sudanese refugee, had gone to jail for a month, and described what happened to him as a result:

"The landlord threw all of my things in the garbage. Everything, even the bed, even the TV, even the microwave. All – all in the garbage. I found nothing."

CONCLUSIONS

Not only does Edmonton need more safe, affordable housing located throughout the city, but also the housing that is provided for urban nomads needs to be more flexible to tenants being able to move. Different types of affordable housing would be ideal, so that there are places where people can stay long-term, if that is what they require, but there could also be places where people stay for shorter terms, and then places where individuals can stay for one night, such as existing shelters. The important thing is that people should have access to these places without having to pay large damage deposits for places that they may not be staying in very long, and people should not be punished for not staying very long (as they might be with other forms of assisted housing). This way, as people find that places are safe and that they can still practice their nomadic lifestyles, they may gradually find a more sedentary lifestyle appealing.

Associated with this form of flexible movement, or fluid housing, it would also be useful to provide services such as trauma counselling, health care, and access to transportation. Housing needs to be provided both for singles, and people with many children. In regard to women having to overcrowd in apartments, either larger affordable rental units are needed, or a change in the definition of overcrowding is needed. Perhaps bunk beds in apartments would be sufficient rather than a room for every child. The accepted idea of acceptable space per person ratio in Edmonton apartments limits large families in finding appropriate housing.

M research is needed on urban nomadism. Rather then simply focussing on people's current status of homeless, it would be helpful to learn about people's life histories, and to follow their movements. It would be particularly helpful to follow people home to their reserves and back to the city in order to understand their complex cultural networks and survival strategies.

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