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This is Sanctuary Land: Chicago's Homeless Shelters and Uptown Tent City

**Project description**

This thesis builds off of interviews with former members of Chicago's Uptown Tent City to add to our understanding of the homeless community's relationship with the shelter system. It finds that many individuals were either barred or alienated from shelters due to often-necessary rules and restrictions stemming from concerns about residents' safety and shelters' limited resources. Tent City grew as a response to shelters' inadequacy by a community in search of more autonomy and agency. The community was quickly forced to adopt many similarly restrictive rules to protect residents and ensure the encampment's continued existence; however it also provided its members with potent political agency to advocate for their needs. Some recommendations are made on making shelters more accessible, but the necessary nature of many of the shelters' exclusionary regulations reveals the need for cities to recognize homeless encampments as inevitable and to harness their political potential by collaborating with residents to respond to their needs.

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*This is Sanctuary Land:*  
Chicago's Homeless Shelters and  
Uptown Tent City

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# Chapter 1:

## The Project

### 1. Background: Uptown Tent City

On September 17, 2017, Chicago police officers, Streets and Sanitation employees and teams of journalists watched as two dozen homeless individuals packed their belongings, picked up their tents, and left the bridges they had been living under for as long as two years.<sup>1</sup> Located in the neighborhood of Uptown on the North Side of Chicago, virtually within sight of Lake Michigan, the Wilson and Lawrence Avenue overpasses had been home to a homeless encampment since 2015, often referred to as Tent City. Well-known to residents and visitors to the neighborhood, the settlement gradually drew more and more attention as its members organized, with the help of advocates, for the right to stay at Wilson and Lawrence, for an end to police harassment, and for the right to eventually move to a permanent home.

From the onset, the relationship between Tent City and the City of Chicago was tenuous. Many of the residents had been homeless for a long time before moving to the viaducts and had had an extended – and not particularly enjoyable – experience of Chicago’s shelter system. A number of those who lived at Tent City intentionally left shelters, such as Cornerstone Shelter just a few blocks away (see Fig. 1), in order to move in under the overpasses.

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<sup>1</sup> Elvia Briscoe and Tony Malagon, “Uptown Tent City Homeless Move West of Viaduct as City Plans Renovations,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 18, 2017.

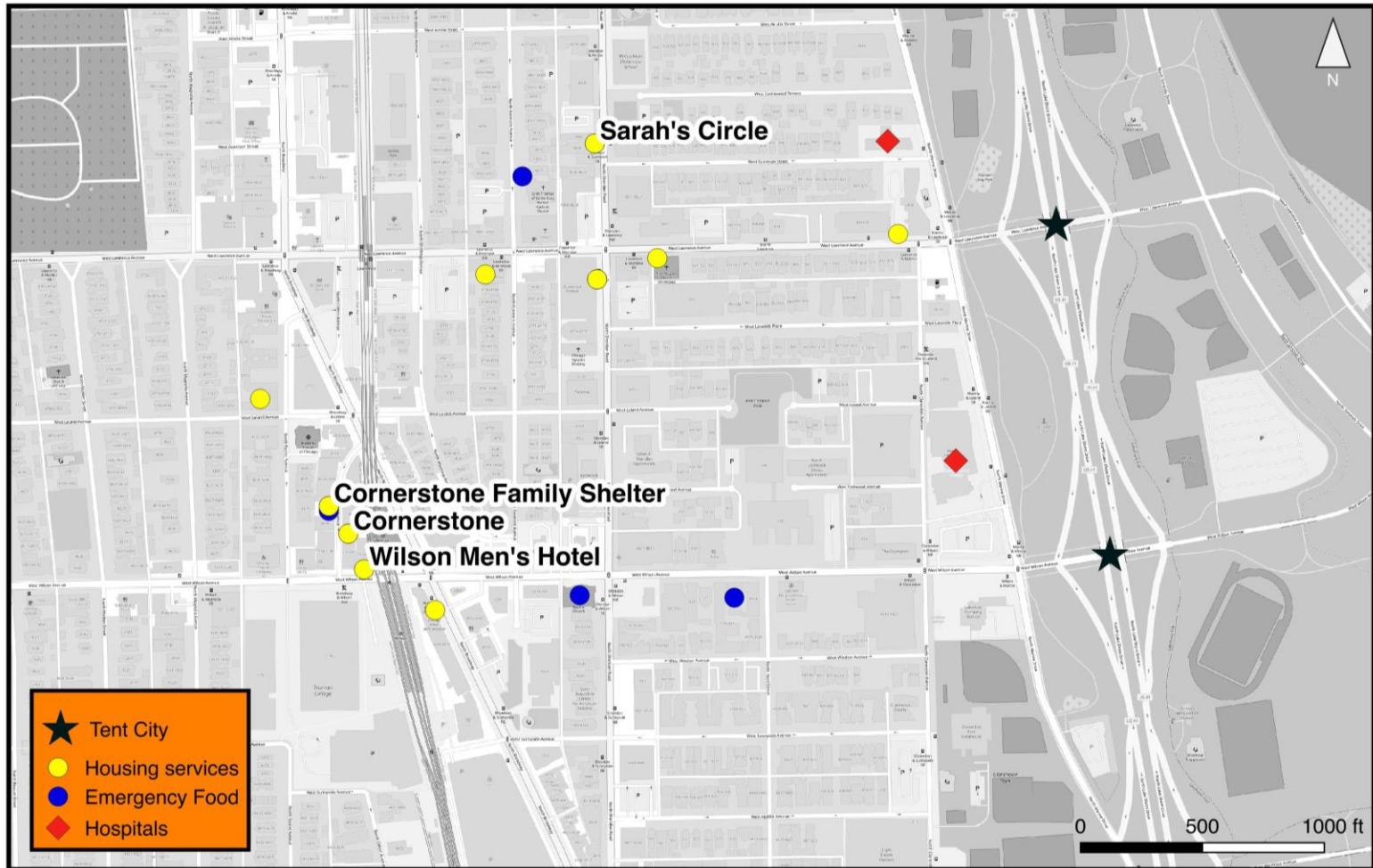


Figure 1. Uptown Tent City sits in a neighborhood, Uptown, home to many homeless services. (Map by author)

Local newspapers marveled at the level of organization and cooperation among members of the Wilson and Lawrence community. The community was closely knit, and residents shared resources, looked after each other's belongings and took turns keeping watch at night or sweeping the sidewalks.<sup>2</sup> Despite all this, however, conditions were far from ideal under the overpasses. As is apparent on Fig. 2, even under the bridges residents were exposed to the cold and rain. Abuse from passers-by was common,<sup>3</sup> while bathrooms and other amenities were difficult to access.

The community organized to improve its living conditions, staging protests and lobbying the city; one of their first successes granted them access to Chicago Park District facilities. In April 2015, residents and their advocates at the Coalition celebrated the establishment of the Chronic Homeless Pilot, which provided an initial 53 individuals with permanent housing. Yet officials made it clear that they did not want Tent City to remain under the bridges.

Residents of the encampment were distraught but not surprised when city officials notified them that they had 30 days to pack their things and go. The reason was one that not even their fiercest advocates contested: the overpasses needed to be renovated. Out of over 26,000 bridges considered structurally deficient in the state of Illinois, the Wilson and Lawrence overpasses, both built in 1933, are respectively the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> most traveled— and the oldest to make the list.<sup>4</sup> The bridges' old age and state of disrepair were easily apparent even to the layman, as can be seen on Fig. 3. For the safety of the more than 100,000 cars that used that part of Lake Shore Drive every day, important structural work needed to be done. However, the City planned to add bike paths on the sidewalk under the overpass in the process – a move that would make it impossible for the displaced community to return.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Odette Yousef, "In Uptown Tent City, Do Your Part Or Get Kicked Out," *WBEZ*, January 17, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Josh McGhee, "Life Under The City's 'Structurally Deficient' Bridges," *DNAinfo Chicago*. March 8, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> "National Bridge Inventory: Illinois," The American Road & Transportation Builders Association, accessed October 31, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Wisniewski, "Homeless Group Close to Suit over Bike Path Plan in Uptown," *Chicago Tribune*, August 21, 2017.





Figure 2. Residents did their best to make the Wilson viaduct more livable, though it evidently offered only limited shelter. *(Picture by Nancy Stone for the Chicago Tribune)*



Figure 3. That the Lawrence viaduct was declared structurally deficient in 2017 came as no surprise to anyone who had walked near it. *(Picture by Josh McGhee for DNAinfo)*

This was to be the beginning of a pitched media and legal battle between the residents and the City of Chicago. The former successfully lobbied for 19 more of their members to be rehoused in unused units provided through the Chronic Homeless Pilot – but approximately 40 still remained. The City offered them spots at Pacific Garden Mission, a large shelter some 7 miles away<sup>6</sup> – but they wanted more. For weeks, a majority of them refused to leave unless they were all given access to permanent housing; residents and advocates shut down Lake Shore Drive and risked arrest to draw attention to their struggle.

In the end, however, the remaining residents had no choice but to take what they could carry and leave the overpass. They relocated as a group just a few yards west, but were greeted by more police and sanitation workers who quickly made it clear they could not stay there either.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, after trying several more locations and being expelled from each, the community split up to escape police harassment and individuals scattered; media attention quickly dissipated. Of the two dozen former residents of Tent City, many returned to life in shelters. Some are rumored to have found other ways to access permanent housing. Others are simply missing.

## **2. Research Question**

The aim of this thesis is to use Tent City as a foil to pinpoint the failings of Chicago’s homeless shelter system and to identify possible improvements. To do so, it seeks to first understand what caused individuals to move to Tent City, often from homeless shelters. What conditions were they fleeing and, conversely, what specifically drew them to the encampment? This discussion identifies ways in which shelters fail certain residents.

The second part of this thesis seeks to understand the way in which Tent City functioned: once they had moved to the Wilson and Lawrence Avenue viaducts, how successfully did residents organize to meet their own needs? Answering these questions helps single out ways for the shelter system to draw on Tent City as inspiration for

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<sup>6</sup> Marwa Page and Marissa Eltagouri, “Construction Can Proceed That Will Displace Homeless in Uptown Tent City, Judge Rules,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 15, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Briscoe and Malagon, “Homeless.”

improvements, while also pointing to certain issues common to both which may be difficult, even impossible to address. This part also highlights the potential value of integrating homeless encampments into anti-homelessness policy through a tolerant and collaborative approach.

The majority of this study is based on interviews with former residents of Tent City, as well as local advocates, government employees, and housing and employment service providers. Existing surveys and ethnographic studies helped complement this data.

### **3. Literature Review**

Scholars of the rise of chronic homelessness in America trace its origins to structural changes in the economy over the last several decades, with the disappearance of industrial jobs, as well as policy decisions such as the erosion of affordable housing and the broader dismantling of the welfare state.<sup>8</sup> Much of the recent literature dealing specifically with homeless encampments in American cities follows in that vein and rejects the view that tent cities are merely modern-day (and temporary) slums created by the Great Recession of the late 2000s, similar to the Hoovervilles of the Great Depression.<sup>9</sup> Instead, authors point to explicit policy decisions that caused the reappearance of tent cities in America well before 2008.

One group of authors focuses on the changes that took place in the American homeless provision system over the past 20 years. Herring and Lutz look back to the Clinton administration's shift toward the paradigm of the Continuum of Care, which mandates wraparound services for shelter residents in order to rehabilitate them and prepare them for an exit from homelessness. Those mandatory services exist as either "workfare requirements," such as job training or public service, or "medicalized requirements" around mental health and substance abuse.<sup>10</sup> The authors blame these

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear, *Malign Neglect: Homelessness in an American City* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Chris Herring and Manuel Lutz, "The roots and implications of the USA's homeless tent cities," *City* 19 no. 5 (2015), 689.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 696.

service requirements for some homeless individuals' decision to avoid the modern shelter system, which many find infantilizing and demeaning.

In this they are joined by Marcuse and Sparks, who criticize the alienation produced by the shelter system since the Clinton era. According to them, the Continuum of Care's emphasis on solving homelessness through such individualized services means "conflating an economic problem (homelessness) with a set of medical and behavioral issues" that are not in fact closely related.<sup>11</sup> Marcuse asserts that the root causes of homelessness in America lie solely in access to housing and income. As such, homelessness is a systemic issue that can only be solved through systemic change. The Continuum of Care, however, focuses on what Sparks calls "the personal pathologies of the homeless."<sup>12</sup> Fix homeless people's flaws, the Continuum of Care seems to say, and they can regain housing. Marcuse calls this focus "specialism": homelessness is made out to be an aberration, an unfortunate exception due to personal circumstances rather than a flaw in the system.<sup>13</sup> The focus on personal faults of homeless people – the system's "medicalization and personalization" – thus shifts the blame from the structural causes of homelessness to individual failings.<sup>14</sup>

Sparks goes on to highlight the way in which the mandated services and required treatments of the modern shelter system lead to feelings of dehumanization and alienation on the part of residents. In modern shelters, homeless people are made out to be "broken, defective and deviant"<sup>15</sup> and become passive recipients of care that is administered by experts (therapists, social workers, etc.). They are set apart from the rest of society, marked as lacking certain skills that they would need to live normal lives. Homeless individuals in shelters are thus doubly alienated: experts define their flaws, which make them incomplete members of society, at the same time as they determine the cure. This alienation pushes some shelter residents toward tent cities.<sup>16</sup> According to Sparks, if homeless individuals are leaving the shelter system and its mandatory rehabilitative

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<sup>11</sup> Tony Sparks, "Neutralizing Homelessness, 2015: Tent cities and ten year plans," *Urban Geography* 38, no. 3 (2017), 352.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 350.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Marcuse, "Neutralizing homelessness," *Socialist Review* 18, no. 1 (1988), 88.

<sup>14</sup> Sparks, "Neutralizing Homelessness, 2015," 350.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 349.

<sup>16</sup> Tony Sparks, "Broke Not Broken: Rights, Privacy, and Homelessness in Seattle," *Urban Geography* 31, no. 6 (2010): 842-862.

programming, it is because they are seeking to “reclaim the dignity, agency and autonomy that make them human” in homeless encampments.<sup>17</sup>

This study will use Chicago’s Uptown Tent City to evaluate Sparks’ claims about homeless people’s relationship to shelters regarding autonomy and agency. To what extent are homeless individuals in Chicago leaving shelters because of a sense of alienation and infantilization? How much of this is due to the specific policies of the Continuum of Care? Sparks’ claims further beg the question of how well homeless encampments compare to the shelter system, leading to an analysis of the way Tent City functioned as a community, what it offered its residents and what pressures it had to respond to in order to exist. The goal here is not to prove or invalidate Sparks’ conclusions, for the simple reason that each of the works published regarding homeless encampments in the U.S. is centered on unique case studies, each with their particular socio-political context. The aim, rather, is to use Sparks’ emphasis on the search for autonomy and individual agency as a backdrop for this present exploration of Tent City.

This thesis will be distinct from much of the American literature concerning tent cities, which mainly covers case studies from the Western United States (Denver<sup>18</sup>, Fresno<sup>19</sup>, Seattle<sup>20</sup>). A majority of authors deal with encampments’ interaction with specific policies targeting them. Langegger and Koester thus explore the impact of Denver’s systematic ban on camping in public space, while Mitchell looks at how police have interacted with legalized encampments in cities like Ontario, CA.<sup>21</sup> This case study, on the other hand, is closer to that of Jessie Speer in that Chicago does not have specific laws – either repressive or indulgent – specifically targeting homeless encampments.

The importance of individual agency leads to a focus on Tent City’s role as a political entity. Authors like Smith<sup>22</sup> and Mitchell<sup>23</sup> write that homeless communities are

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<sup>17</sup> Sparks, “Neutralizing Homelessness, 2015,” 353.

<sup>18</sup> Sig Langegger and Stephen Koester, “Invisible homelessness: anonymity, exposure, and the right to the city”, *Urban Geography* 37, no. 7 (2016): 1030-1048.

<sup>19</sup> Jessie Speer, “The right to infrastructure: a struggle for sanitation in Fresno, California homeless encampments”, *Urban Geography* 37, no. 7 (2016): 1049–1069.

<sup>20</sup> Sparks, “Neutralizing Homelessness, 2015.”

<sup>21</sup> Don Mitchell, “Tent Cities: Interstitial Spaces of Survival.” *The Aesthetics and the Politics of the In-between*, ed. Andrea Mubi Brighenti (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2013), 65-85.

<sup>22</sup> Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996).

politicized by their very existence in public spaces, yet Sparks emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between “active participation and mere presence in public space.”<sup>24</sup> This study follows his lead in analyzing the explicitly political acts of Tent City residents.

Two additional texts provide useful frameworks to analyze the way Tent City functioned as a community. The first is Forrest Stuart’s book *Down, Out, and Under Arrest: Policing and everyday life in Skid Row*. In his study of the residents of Los Angeles’ Skid Row, Stuart explores what he calls “cop wisdom.”<sup>25</sup> Marginalized individuals and communities, subject to regular and aggressive interactions with police, develop strategies to anticipate and preempt police intervention. These strategies can take the form of “prepolicing,” whereby communities preemptively enforce rules and laws before police intervene.<sup>26</sup> In this way, police shape the culture of the communities they patrol, forcing them to “perceive and manage the territorial stigma of the neighborhood.”<sup>27</sup> This text proves useful discussing Tent City’s relationship with police and the rules that the community enforces.

The second text is Tim Cresswell’s *In Place Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression*, in which he offers an interpretation of expected behaviors in space, and how transgressive behavior can translate into political resistance. According to this critical geographer, place is space imbued with social meaning and behavioral expectations. Dominant ideologies produce place and their appropriate behaviors and in turn “place reproduces the beliefs that produce it.”<sup>28</sup> Normative uses of space must be “created, produced and defended from heresy.”<sup>29</sup> Alternative uses of space risk threatening the appropriate uses generally agreed upon by society: those acts constitutes transgression or, if done intentionally, resistance. Cresswell’s position helps examine the political significance of Tent City’s existence, its interaction with other community actors and institutions, and its political actions.

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<sup>23</sup> Don Mitchell, *The Right To The City: Social Justice and the fight for public space*. (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Sparks, “Broke Not Broken,” 846.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 181.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Tim Cresswell, *In Place Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 16.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 9.

#### **4. Data Collection**

The bulk of this study builds on conversations with former residents of Tent City. I was able to contact them through the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH), an advocacy group that has retained close ties with many residents even after the end of the encampment. Once I had met some of the 40-odd individuals CCH counted as long-term members of the community, I was able to get in contact with their friends and acquaintances by phone, email or social media. Some of them still live on the streets, others in shelters; others were able to access permanent housing.

I led six semi-structured interviews of former residents of Tent City between November of 2017 and February of 2018. I sought to get as in-depth an insight as possible into their personal experience living at Tent City and being part of that community, their motivations to move there, and their views on the shelter system. I also spent time with parts of the Uptown homeless community, mainly attending mass outdoors at the Church Under the Bridge, a weekly ceremony organized by a suburban pastor.

It is necessary to introduce several caveats regarding this research approach. First and foremost, there was no way to ensure that the group of individuals I interviewed represented a random sample of Wilson residents. I was limited first by the selection of individuals whose contact I was given by CCH – people who service providers believed would be willing and able to speak to me – and those people’s social networks.

This was compounded by difficulties contacting certain individuals. CCH often had several different phone numbers for one Wilson resident. Though many homeless people today have cell phones, their usefulness is limited by individuals’ ability to pay for a phone plan. Many former Wilson residents acquired phones for free through government programs, but those come with a limited number of minutes. Additionally, many homeless individuals (especially younger generations) used email and social media, either on a smartphone or a computer, but the usefulness of these modes of communication was limited to times that people had access to Internet – most often through free Wi-Fi. Finally, even when I managed to establish contact with a former

resident of Tent City and decided on a time and place to meet, there was no assurance that the meeting would happen. Persistence, an open mind, and lots of free time were necessary for me to successfully establish contact with everyone.

There is no way of assuring, therefore, that the lived experiences I recorded were representative of the broader Tent City community. It is possible, for instance, that I was only able to contact individuals who were the least negatively affected by the dislocation of the Tent City – those who managed to maintain contact with homeless friends and advocates. My only recourse to address this issue of representativeness was to speak to as many people as possible.

Beyond the difficulty contacting individuals, there are few means of verifying the accuracy of many of their claims. My interlocutors might be tempted to hide elements of their life or exaggerate perceived slights on the part of the police, shelters or other service providers. Additionally, it may be that some elements of life at Tent City were misremembered or tainted by nostalgia – interviews took place between two and five months after Tent City was dismantled. I did my best to verify what I could from other interviews or written sources.

The approach taken to social and welfare policy analysis in this study, however, makes the subjectivity and potential bias of the information gathered less of an issue. Indeed, I am particularly interested in analyzing the impact of anti-homelessness (or sometimes merely anti-homeless) policy on homeless communities. This impact is in large part predicated on how it is experienced by target populations, which legitimizes the use of subjective perceptions of policy in my analysis. Thus, the goal of governmental action matters less than how it is perceived.

I also conducted interviews with individuals whose professional lives intersect with homelessness, in Uptown and elsewhere. These included a case manager at Cornerstone Shelter, a lawyer for the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, the local alderman's chief of staff and an employee at one of Chicago's largest workforce development agencies, Cara.

Extensive use of local journalism complemented my fieldwork – and compensated for the fact that I was unable to explore Tent City while it was in place. Most helpful were the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the now sorely missed *DNAInfo*. I was



also provided with the results of a demographic survey of Tent City residents conducted by CCH, which looks into why residents did not live in shelters. Finally, existing ethnographies of homeless populations by Peter Rossi and Snow and Anderson provided a baseline against which to compare present findings.

The goal in undertaking this research is to explore the ways in which Chicago's homeless populations deal with the situation they live in, and to make policy recommendations to help improve their lives. Above all else, however, it is to provide a little more space for the former residents of Tent City to tell their story and for at least some of the humanity, love and resilience that I encountered to reach the reader. Homeless individuals deserve to be heard because it is mostly through them that we will produce the best policy results. To quote Sparks:

“Until the homeless are regarded as the experts in the formation of policies that most directly affect their lives, they will not ‘inhabit’ the spaces in which they live.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Sparks, “Neutralizing Homelessness, 2015,” 354.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Shelters and Residents – Inevitable alienation?**

There was nothing easy about living under the viaducts. People moved there for a variety of different reasons – some by choice, others less so. Many residents of Tent City had experienced the shelter system, some for years; the decision to leave "the inside" for the street constituted a significant trade-off. Leaving the shelter meant giving up on a number of important resources – primarily a warm lunch, a bathroom, and a bed. In exchange, Tent City residents gained access to a supportive community, a base for political action, a valuable sense of autonomy, the right to sleep with their dogs, or the ability to do drugs in bed. They all made their choice a rational one.

Residents made Tent City work – in fact, they organized, shared and protested quite successfully to access the resources that they needed. Yet it is always important to avoid the pitfall of idealizing their living conditions, which sometimes comes across in positive newspaper stories or radical literature. One can well laud the family-like bonds of the community, the amazing resilience of individual residents and the inspiring solidarity that links many homeless – however, it is important to keep in mind the words of one former resident, Keith, who lived under the Wilson viaduct for the last few months of the encampment: “No one misses living under the bridge.” Tent City was a last-ditch solution: a response to extreme poverty, an unsafe environment, and an unsatisfactory shelter system. Residents moved to Tent City for many different reasons; many of them chose it over a nearby shelter, but none of them chose it over stable housing.

Few of the former residents spoke fondly of their time in shelters. Many had amassed extensive experience with living in various institutions. Shelters can be restrictive, sometimes infantilizing, even scary. Yet here again, nothing is so simple and clear-cut as to say that shelters are bad, and that their former residents hate them. Of all my interlocutors, Keith was one of those who criticized the shelter system most vehemently – indeed that was his reputation with other residents of Tent City. After four years spent sleeping in shelters, he "could not take it anymore" and decided to move his belongings under the Wilson viaduct. A week after he and I spoke, however, Keith also

launched a Christmas fundraiser for nearby Cornerstone Shelter (see Fig. 1) on his Facebook page. Abdul, the recognized leader of the community at Wilson, speaks fondly of Cornerstone and his case manager, Jeremy – saying he would not be where he is without them. Shelters are central to any city's response to homelessness, and they played an important and even positive role in the life of most of my interviewees, even those who chose to leave.

Some of my interlocutors never made it to a shelter in the first place because they would never be accepted there. Carol, a former resident of both the Wilson and Lawrence viaducts, who was featured extensively in the columns of the *Chicago Sun Times'* Mark Brown, lost her small one-bedroom apartment five days before Christmas of 2016. To outsiders, Carol has two distinctive traits: she uses a large electric wheelchair, and she does everything with her two dogs, Chiefy and Bella. Her handicap alone might have stopped her from gaining access to a shelter bed. Pacific Garden Mission in the South Loop, for example, requires that its residents be “ambulatory (able to eat, shower and physically move throughout the building without assistance).”<sup>31</sup> That never came into question, however, because Carol knew from the start that no shelter would accept her dogs – and there was no way she was leaving them behind. Carol left her apartment and moved directly to the Lawrence viaduct.

The rules and restrictions that shelters impose on their residents vary widely from one shelter to another – depending on their funding, mission, and resources. Cornerstone Shelter in Uptown houses 350 people every night, with separate wings for single men, single women and families with children. The families are provided with rooms; women sleep in bunk beds; men sleep on mats on the floor of a gymnasium. Jeremy, a case manager who has been at Cornerstone for over two decades, claims that they try to be as open as possible, offering a space to anyone who needs one. Yet they find themselves restricted in this by limited resources, stipulations attached to their funding, official agreements with the City of Chicago, and political pressures.

Uptown is home to a multitude of homeless shelters and service providers (see Fig. 1), a situation which can create tensions in the neighborhood. When neighbors of the

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<sup>31</sup> Pacific Garden Mission, “Pacific Garden Mission – Policies and Programs 2017 (Quick Reference Guide),” June 2017 (unpublished internal document).

men's shelter complained to the local alderwoman about residents spending their time on the street at night, for instance, Cornerstone was forced to introduce an evening curfew. When the shelter used the top floor of its family shelter to offer rooms to three dozen elderly men, the new alderman disagreed. He pointed to agreements between the City and the shelter to justify that that space was meant for families only – and so the old men made way for families. Such are the political pressures that shelters have to contend with when setting their own internal policies.

Cornerstone's response to local political pressures goes beyond regulating the behavior of its residents, in fact. According to Jeremy, shelter staff needs to be proactive in the community in order to push back against its negative reputation. They thus attend local CAPS meetings – regular events that bring together community leaders, police, and local residents to discuss issues in the neighborhood – to actively protect their institution and residents from being blamed for nuisances. This highlights how shelters perceive the potentially existential threat of a bad reputation in the community, a perception that informs their resident rules and regulations.

Not all shelters operate the way Cornerstone does; in addition to outside pressures, many privately operated shelters function according to the mission of the organization that founded them. Pacific Garden Mission is the largest private shelter in Chicago, with up to 2,000 beds, and defines itself as the city's “oldest continuously operating Gospel rescue mission.”<sup>32</sup> Its programs exist to prepare homeless individuals to “become fully functioning followers of Christ”<sup>33</sup> and as such, daily attendance of the shelter's religious services is mandatory for those who wish to reside there. The Salvation Army follows its own mission of rehabilitation through work, meaning that those who receive its assistance must participate in daily, unpaid work programs.

A majority of the rules that a shelter's residents must follow are nevertheless determined by concerns around space, efficiency, and collective living. Lunch and dinner must be served at specific times for everything to run smoothly. Cornerstone's mats must be rolled up and put away every morning so its men's shelter can become a gymnasium again. Many of these rules, and others that we will see in more detail, are inevitable or

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<sup>32</sup> Pacific Garden Mission, “Our Mission,” <https://www.pgm.org/who-we-are/our-mission>.

<sup>33</sup> Pacific Garden Mission, “Policies and Programs.”

necessary. This is obviously the case for Carol's dogs, Chiefy and Bella. For a shelter to accept dogs, it would need to institute checks for shots and fleas, separate places for those who do not want to be near them, and protocols in case of fights. This does not mean that some shelters are not sympathetic to the dogs' homeless owners. In fact, Jeremy lists four instances of Cornerstone agreeing to house dogs (though only in a room, separate from other residents). This included an autistic child's service dog and, after Tent City was displaced, Chiefy and Bella, who remain there with Carol to this day.

Along with dog owners, other categories of homeless people were barred by Cornerstone's rules from accessing the shelter – with less leeway for exceptions. Chief among those were registered sex offenders, whom Cornerstone legally cannot host because its residents include families with children. Other Tent City residents who had spent time in shelters had been personally banned from returning, often for acts of violence or theft – shelters have zero-tolerance policies for actions that make other residents feel unsafe. They are also strict against drugs and alcohol on premises; Jeremy cites a particular clause in Cornerstone's zoning which forbids it from taking in individuals with substance abuse problems.

Certain residents of shelters find themselves targeted by rules that are more arbitrary in nature – unavoidably so. Shelters almost always separate residents by gender: some, like Sarah's Circle near Lawrence Ave (see Fig. 1), only accept women while others house them in separate buildings as Cornerstone does. This situation negatively impacts childless heterosexual couples. Most of those I spoke to who had spent time at or around Tent City recalled couples electing to live under the bridge as a way to sleep together. Jeremy regretted seeing this happen – but what alternative was there? Couples could not share a bunk bed, even less a mat, and all the rooms went to families with children. One can hardly criticize Cornerstone's choice to prioritize providing shelter to homeless children. Similarly, who would complain that single homeless women, patently more at risk on the street, have beds while the men sleep on mats on a gym floor, rather than the other way around? These uneven housing situations are inevitable consequences of legitimate policy priorities.

However, they also highlight the fact that the line between people being officially excluded and their own decision to avoid shelters is blurry at best. After all, couples

might have agreed to sleep in separate locations (some undoubtedly did). But then, dog owners might also abandon their pets and substance abusers their drug habits. The fact that a rule merely feels exclusionary, that certain individuals feel targeted and inconvenienced, can sometimes be enough to drive them away from the shelter.

In some instances, potential residents even avoid the shelter because of a rule that is not in fact on the books. In a survey of 27 Tent City residents done by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, four mentioned having a criminal background or a warrant out for their arrest as one of their reasons for not living in a shelter. Yet Jeremy is adamant that Cornerstone does not check residents for warrants – nor is the shelter necessarily obligated to act if they discover one. Employees understand the precariousness of their clients' situation and their occasional run-ins with the law, and are willing to accommodate anyone they deem not to be a risk to other residents. Nevertheless, homeless individuals on the run from the law understandably prefer to tread with caution around public institutions.

Tent City residents often report another, even more striking situation: that of the acquaintance who lived in a shelter and then found a job, which caused them to lose their shelter, which caused them to lose their job. Everybody seems to have met someone in that situation, and the catch-22 they describe speaks as much to Chicago's homeless shelter system as it does to the current job market for unskilled laborers. Shelter residents, often under-qualified, with spotty work histories and sometimes criminal records, do not have many options as to the type of employment they pick. Many work 'temp' jobs, occasional labor paid by the day in construction or packing. Those who are able to find a stable job may be forced to work late nights, 'third shifts' sometimes far away in the suburbs. Their schedules then unfortunately end up at odds with shelters' strict hours and early curfew. A full two years after last sleeping at Cornerstone, Keith still sounded bitter as he described the steps he would take before in order to sleep at the shelter. *Show up at 7 a.m. to claim your bed for that night. Be in by 9 p.m. to make the curfew. Miss your bed after you signed up, and you're locked out for 7 days.* Today, Keith works at a downtown supermarket until 10 p.m. If he were still living at Cornerstone, it is unsure whether shelter employees would let him in by the time he got back from his shift – and his are by no means the most inconvenient hours. Keith claimed to have seen shelter residents try to

hold down third shift jobs that got out much too late to be let into the shelter, and go without sleep for a few days. They never lasted long in their jobs.

This type of situation is not necessarily codified by shelter rules. Shelters may try to be accommodating, letting someone in a few hours after curfew when possible. Mark, who lived under both the Lawrence and Wilson viaducts, remembered someone being told to find somewhere else to live, but blamed it on a particular shelter employee rather than institutional rules. Staff discretion constitutes a gray area that can sometimes work in particular residents' favor, but this sort of arrangement is not very stable. Program managers at Cara, a large workforce development agency based in the West Loop, cited multiple incidents of a shelter (or a single staff member) deciding that it had been bending over backwards for too long to accommodate one resident's hours – and that it was time for them to “graduate” from the shelter system. Cara routinely warns program participants of the difficulties of working a third shift while living in a shelter, going so far as to recommend finding a couch to crash on instead.

As heartbreaking as such stories are, it is hard to imagine a better solution for shelters. If Jeremy let in a single man after hours, he would be sure to wake up the other men in the gymnasium – and that person would still have to roll up his mat and vacate the gym in the early morning with everyone else. Sometimes, when a family room is empty, Jeremy lets certain people get in late and sleep into the day; but that only lasts until the next needy family arrives.

The idea of a *spatial mismatch* in today's low-income job market has been established in sociology for decades.<sup>34</sup> Factory and low-skilled jobs have slowly left America's inner cities and moved to the suburbs. With most transit lines designed to bring workers from the outskirts to downtown, low-income residents in the inner city face complex transportation issues to access employment (residents of both Cornerstone and Tent City did in fact travel to the suburbs for work). For our present discussion, one might now suggest the concept of a *temporal mismatch*: many jobs accessible to shelter

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<sup>34</sup> John Kasarda, “Regional and Urban Redistribution of People and Jobs in the U.S.” paper prepared for the Committee on National Urban Policy, National Research Council, October 1986, 37.

residents are late at night – but the system they are housed by functions according to a regular 9-to-5 schedule. *Regular*, here, does not apply to many low-income job hours. Individuals working late-night shifts are thus not explicitly barred from staying at shelters, but the rules that shelters enforce are such that they might as well be. That was enough, at the very least, for Keith to decide that moving under the bridge, and giving up on ready access to sanitation and a warm meal, would be better for him to find a job.

However, Keith's complaints, as well as those of many other Tent City residents, went beyond the difficulty finding a job as a shelter resident. The common theme in many of my conversations can be summed up in the words of Sparks as a struggle to regain “agency and autonomy.”<sup>35</sup> Many former residents of Tent City took issue with Cornerstone's curfew – regardless of whether they were employed or not. Having to be in at a certain time and asleep before 10 felt to many inconvenient and infantilizing. Mandatory programs were also the targets of their complaints: Keith disliked having to meet with a caseworker regularly to talk about his future plan. Mark called the Salvation Army's work requirements a ploy to give them free labor. Yet others could not stand filling out intake paperwork.

Many of these requirements are put in place in accordance with the modern Continuum of Care view that homeless individuals need more than just shelter: they need services to support them and help them exit homelessness. The discussion here is not of the merits and efficacy of these programs – some may in fact be helpful to participants. It is their mandatory and one-size-fits-all nature which is alienating to many Tent City residents. Some, like Mark, even recognize that these programs might be helpful at another time in their life, or for someone else. For now, though, he “never felt [he] needed that.” My interlocutors' words echoed Sparks' description of the alienation from the shelter system that results from this focus on individual flaws. In discussing the requirements of transitional, as opposed to emergency shelters, Mark claimed to be turned off by their “exclusivity.” Abdul questioned the programs' efficiency: “Structure never helped anyone produce anything.”

The role of these programs and requirements in driving away potential shelter residents does not necessarily depend on how effective they are – merely on how

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<sup>35</sup> Sparks, "Neutralizing Homelessness, 2015," 353.



individuals perceive them. The intake forms that new residents need to fill out are required by the City to inform Chicago's federally mandated Homeless Management Information System: a database shared by homelessness providers to track individuals' progress, demographic trends, etc. For Jeremy, having residents fill them out constitutes a cumbersome but important process, necessary for individuals and institutions to gain access to government resources. Even the early-morning sign-in is necessary for Cornerstone to predict how full they will be that night. Yet he recognized that certain homeless individuals might be fed up with the process. Some, like Keith, accepted it for years until they finally could not stand it anymore. Others might not have the psychological capacity to fill out forms and answer personal questions. Jeremy did not hold it against any of them.

We have reached the most delicate part of this discussion. It is easy to point to specific rules that exclude certain segments of the homeless population. One can comfortably suggest a way to solve the problem by removing those rules. Or, if the rule can be proven to be necessary for the shelters' operations, then perhaps nothing can be done – but at least it is clear-cut. Things get much more complicated when, on the contrary, people leave shelters not because of an objective factor (their spouse, their pet, their work hours) but based on their own – perhaps flawed – perception of a service. The policy world struggles to deal with people reacting in seemingly irrational ways when a service is offered to them. And yet, how people respond to policy is central to its success.

Five of the 27 Tent City residents surveyed by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless said they could not access shelters because of their criminal history; three were locked out by the curfew; two wanted a place to sleep with their spouse. However, the majority of those surveyed (15) claimed to avoid shelters because of what they feared to find there: violence, theft and filth. Those conditions do undoubtedly exist, but one might question at what rate. The City requires its shelters to be vigilant to prevent bedbug infestations, while Cornerstone enforces zero-tolerance policies regarding violence and theft. Jeremy described the community at Cornerstone as a tight-knit, welcoming group, very much akin to some of the relationships that developed under the bridges. Having watched Jeremy's interactions with both shelter and Tent City residents, I have no doubt that he knew and loved both communities – and that he was telling the truth. His claims

do not conflict with the enthusiasm with which Abdul showed off the shelter, or with Keith's Christmas fundraiser. Many – perhaps most – Cornerstone residents may feel safe and welcome at the shelter. Nevertheless, if even one person finds themselves unable to break into that community, or if they experience violence at the hands of those Mark calls “soup-line gangsters” – then who can blame them from staying away from shelters at large? Nova, who filled the position of Janitor under the Lawrence viaduct, is a short, middle-aged man with a walrus mustache. He used to sleep in shelters until he caught bedbugs one night at Pacific Garden Mission. He did not explicitly blame the shelter system – in fact he could tell he had gotten them from the man who lay on the mat next to him. Nevertheless, Nova has not slept at a shelter since. Who can blame him?

The decision to leave the shelter system entirely after a traumatic experience might appear irrational. How could someone feel safer living on the streets than in a shelter? Was Nova any healthier sleeping in parks rather than at Pacific Garden Mission? Yet this changes nothing about the fact that one bad experience can be enough for an individual to avoid the shelter system for good. From the shelters' perspective, there is no obvious answer to this kind of problem. They can increase security, improve sanitation; but often they are already doing as much as their resources allow. Yet regardless of the shelters' reaction, regardless even of whether their new living situation proved in reality to be safer or cleaner than the shelters, Keith, Nova and many others found an answer to their problems at Tent City.

Rules and conditions in Chicago's shelters led to many residents being excluded, to some of their preferred behaviors and habits being banned, or to their simply feeling excluded or unwelcome. Significantly, this third instance appears to have had at least as much of an impact in driving people away from shelters as any other. It is important to note that this is not a new phenomenon. Peter Rossi's team led surveys of Chicago's homeless population in 1986 and looked into people's attitudes concerning shelters. The results they produced even then support much of what I learned during my fieldwork in Uptown. Fear of violence and theft at shelters was a top concern among those homeless individuals who chose to live on the street, followed by a lack of freedom and sanitation issues.<sup>36</sup> Usefully, Rossi included the results of surveys from individuals living on the

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<sup>36</sup> Rossi, *Down and Out in America*, 102.

street and those living in shelters in two different categories. Attitudes surrounding shelter conditions differed between them, with sheltered respondents 10 to 15 percentage points less likely to mention violence, filth and loss of freedom.<sup>37</sup> This observation supports Jeremy's claim that the Cornerstone community does not represent the same thing for everyone: some may feel fine in shelters, others not.

Rossi went on to highlight common characteristics of homeless individuals who chose to live on the street over a shelter. He found a high correlation between a respondent living on the street and their being “shabby and unkempt,” “incoherent and confused” and at least somewhat depressed.<sup>38</sup> These observations tie in well with New York City Mayor Ed Koch's perhaps less thoroughly researched 1985 claim that homeless individuals who avoided shelters “are not in full possession of their faculties.”<sup>39</sup>

Both these comments were directed at all homeless individuals who left the shelter system – not only those who chose to move to an encampment. Beyond that, my field research is not comprehensive enough to respond definitively to these characterizations. It is entirely possible that I simply did not meet those former residents who were more psychologically vulnerable and less able to be sociable.

Given those caveats, many of my interlocutors were able to present their move from the shelter system to Tent City as a rational decision – a decision, at the very least, in which they understood the trade-offs involved. The main advantages of living in a shelter were access to food and hygiene. Keith described the struggle of finding a place to wash himself – at nearby shelters, public buildings or friends' homes. As Mark emphasized, “homeless people actually have a standard of cleanliness. Just because you're homeless doesn't mean you have to be a bum.” This example highlights the awareness that my interlocutors had of the drawbacks of leaving the shelter. They knew what they were giving up on and could describe the precise reason they moved to the bridges. An outsider might of course question the underlying rationale – the sense of priorities that is laid bare by the trade-offs they consented to – but the move was informed and justified, according to their own experience of homelessness.

The findings here support Sparks' and Marcuse's critique of the modern shelter

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 104.

<sup>39</sup> Snow and Anderson, *Down on Their Luck*, 329.

system. Reacting to living conditions in which they felt stripped of their autonomy, many individuals moved to Tent City to regain some amount of control over their own lives. Those who, like Keith, left Cornerstone to avoid curfews and mandatory meetings with their case manager sought to regain control over their time and schedule, to regain a sense of predictability. In a shelter, he told me, “you're not sure what will happen.” Couples who found a tent to share under the bridges were also reclaiming autonomy they lost in the shelters. In fact, Mark's description of what he felt he needed from a shelter accorded very interestingly with critiques of the modern shelter system. He claimed he needed only “a place to lay, store [his] stuff and make [him]self presentable and go out and find a job.” His ideal shelter was thus much closer to the pre-Continuum of Care, freer, more accommodative shelter system. This type of statement tends to support Sparks' critique of the modern shelter that, unlike its predecessor, infantilizes and alienates its residents.

Yet my interviews point to a sense of alienation that goes even beyond Sparks' and Marcuse's attack on the modern shelter system. In leaving the shelters, Keith was not only looking for more independence to go out and find a job; he was also choosing with whom he was going to live. He cannot have known, nor even realistically liked every one of the dozens of other residents of Tent City. And yet, one of the points he made about sanitation at shelters is that “others don't take care of themselves. We took care of ourselves.” This comment echoes Nova's unfortunate experience at Pacific Garden Mission, where one unwashed neighbor gave him bedbugs. It also points to what Snow and Anderson refer to as “associational distancing”<sup>40</sup> and Loïc Wacquant calls “secondary marginalization.”<sup>41</sup> It is the attempt on the part of members of marginalized groups to distance themselves from certain other members of that group to escape stigma. It is Mark's difference between “homeless” and “bum,” Keith's distance between the unwashed shelter resident and the Tent City family.

Moving to Tent City constituted a means for Keith to have some control over whom his community was made up of – a level of agency he lost by living in the shelter, but unrelated to the Clinton reforms and the Continuum of Care. Long before the policies Sparks criticizes were put in place, shelter residents had already lost control over who

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, 216.

<sup>41</sup> cited in Stuart, *Down and Out and Under Arrest*, 132.

slept next to them.

For that matter, the alienation and loss of autonomy and control that Tent City residents were looking to escape did not stem solely from the shelter system. Along with Carol, Abdul was the only other resident I spoke to who did not move to Tent City from a shelter (although he did live at Cornerstone for 13 years). Before moving to the Wilson viaduct, he and his wife Paula had been staying with friends and relatives. Nearing 50, Abdul was done being sleeping on other people's couches, not having his space, owing favors – he wanted his own space. In fact, not long before Tent City was shut down, he turned down offers by Paula's sister and daughter to host the couple in their homes – he wanted to keep the privacy that he had gained at Tent City. Unrelated to the shelter system, therefore, Abdul's very condition as a homeless man already stripped him of the agency and control he wanted to have over his private life – and he sought to regain some of it at Tent City.

The picture of Tent City that my conversations with former residents painted was of a place where people sought to regain control over their lives. The shelter system had robbed many of them of a feeling of agency – and this was often unavoidable. Mostly justifiable policy priorities led to rules that excluded or disadvantaged certain groups, while residents' own perceptions and expectations exacerbated their feeling of alienation. Moreover, this feeling did not stem solely from the neoliberal policies that Sparks criticizes, nor even from living in a shelter specifically. Homeless individuals sought at Tent City to lose a sense of alienation and powerlessness which stemmed from their condition as homeless in general.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **Autonomy in Action – Tent City and its residents**

#### **1. “This is sanctuary land” – Tent City as autonomy from shelters**

Looking back on the months she spent under the bridges, Carol stated, “this is sanctuary land.” Likely upwards of 200 people lived at Tent City at one point or another, and there were often more than 60 residents at any given time. Many of those who could not or would not stay in shelters were welcomed under the bridges. Though people often remained quiet about their past, residents knew some of their neighbors were sex offenders. Others had arrest warrants to their name or had been personally banned from one of the city's shelters. Many residents used drugs or alcohol; indeed, one former resident estimated that over a third of Tent City residents used crack or heroin while over half were heavy drinkers. Behavior that would not have been possible at Cornerstone – shooting up, even lighting a casual joint – was accepted as long as it was not destructive. As Thom, the ‘Mayor of Tent City’ in charge of the Lawrence viaduct said, “anything people did in their tent, that was O.K.” Abdul was his counterpart under the Wilson viaduct, and espoused the same philosophy.

Several couples shared tents. Carol's dogs became staples of Tent City. Before Carol was able to find a large enough tent to fit her wheelchair, Bella would sleep with her head outside the tent, keeping an eye on it. Most residents became familiar with Chiefy; one man even liked taking him with him to panhandle – the dog made more money that he did.

Those who worked, finally, could leave their belongings behind with the knowledge that they would be watched after. Not many of the residents worked. Adam was a friend of many at Tent City who decided one day (for religious and political reasons) to quit his job and move under the bridge; he counted 6 people with part-time jobs. According to Thom, they were 8 or 9, most of them paid to hold signs or hand out flyers. When they left for work, they had to tell Thom they would be gone and leave their tent unlocked for him. This made it possible for him to move all their belongings out from under the bridge when City workers came, armed with brooms or power washers,

for the semi-regular cleaning of the viaducts.

At base, therefore, Tent City afforded residents the autonomy and freedom they wanted, whether that was the autonomy to get to work whatever their hours, or the freedom to shoot up in their tent. In that respect, the community made up for shelters' greatest flaws in the eyes of many: their restrictive, sometimes exclusionary rules. Indeed, to those who wanted nothing more, it filled the role that Mark outlined for his ideal shelter: a place to sleep and store one's things.

Tent City also provided an invaluable resource many residents had missed in the shelter: a support network. According to Keith and Mark, the community was like a family – they all knew and looked out for each other. Thom described both bridges together as “one neighborhood with two blocks.” For so many who had had unpleasant experiences in shelters, this was quite a change.

This is not to say there were no tensions, of course, but when I asked about them Carol dismissed my concerns; what community had none? As an older woman on her own in a wheelchair, she did not fear for her safety: “somebody would always stand up for me.” Everyone I spoke to, in fact, residents as well as visitors to Tent City, made sure to mention the speed with which fights would be broken up. Diane, a lawyer for the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless who introduced me to members of the community, claims to never have felt in danger when she visited clients under the viaducts. According to Jeremy of Cornerstone, in communities like Tent City rife with poverty, stress, and drugs, the violence can get more extreme – but the forgiveness and generosity is more extreme as well.

Tent City also provided its residents with another type of agency that did not exist in the shelter system: the ability to have some control over whom they lived with. Under the viaducts, residents had a say in whether new arrivals were given a place to stay. Not only would prospective residents have to ask Thom or Abdul for permission, but any member who had a conflict with them, anyone who knew them as having “a history of causing trouble,” as Mark described, could object to their moving in.

In order to present a viable alternative to shelters, however, Tent City needed to offer its residents more than just freedom or autonomy. It also had to compensate for what shelters had to offer that residents gave up on in moving there. To begin with, the

bridges alone hardly constituted adequate shelter, even compared to Cornerstone's men's gymnasium. They did little to stop the wind, the cold, the snow – the concrete walls and ceilings themselves dripped with rainwater (see Fig. 2). The first thing that Tent City offered its residents therefore was, appropriately, a tent. The community received tents from outside groups, friends and activists. When a new resident was taken in at Wilson, Mark was in charge of giving them one of the extra tents he stored in his own.

Significantly, the community sought to provide people with the type of tent they needed: couples could hope for a two-person tent at least. When Thom invited Carol to move in under the Lawrence viaduct, he could at first only give her a tent large enough for her and her dogs. Amazingly, he was later able to procure a tent large enough to fit the chair as well. Tents were hardly luxurious and only did so much to fend off the cold and the wet by themselves, but they provided a vital starting point as people gradually furnished them with mattresses, blankets and even propane-fueled space heaters.

The community under the viaducts used other means to make their environment a livable alternative to shelters, organizing to guarantee some measure of sanitation and safety, and to ensure residents received the resources they needed. Tent City's visibility, both in person and increasingly in the media, led to an impressive influx of donations from all over Illinois and Indiana, if you believe Abdul. People drove by to give food, clothing, water bottles, even propane and camping cookers. Mark described the donations as “mountainous” – so much so that the Wilson viaduct needed a Furlough Team in charge of bringing extra donations to Thom at Lawrence. Carol described setting up a table she called the Oasis with bottles of water and some food; other homeless individuals who slept in the parks on the lakeshore could take what they needed.

This steady flow of donations was complemented, when necessary, by other means. For a time, the Salvation Army distributed warm meals from a truck just a few blocks away. The neighborhood also touted several nearby food pantries and soup kitchens, often run out of churches (see Fig. 1). Thom also described using his own money to buy propane for heating and cooking at Lawrence after receiving a grill. Residents who received Social Security, Disability or other types of welfare were expected to pay for gas and food, as would those who made their own money. Abdul used his LINK food stamps to buy rice, which he cooked for everyone on the Fourth of July, with the beef and using



the field burner that had recently been donated. Thom, finally, recounted selling a former resident's abandoned bicycle for \$10 – the money went to coffee on a cold morning.

This level of organizing paints a rosy picture of a functioning and supportive community. However, as in any community – and perhaps more than in some – there were those who did not participate. Some were too old or sick to participate; others were too high, or simply did not care. Nearly everyone, in fact, mentioned the ones who did not help. “There are those,” Carol would say. As long as they did not cause trouble, Abdul would simply leave them alone – “that's just the way they were.” Yet for Carol, even they were good people. When a storm flooded the street under the bridges, she recalled everyone getting together to sweep the water out.

Some residents' lack of participation undoubtedly caused tensions; the bitterness and resignation was palpable in Thom and Abdul's voice when they spoke of it. Yet two elements are worthy of note. However much Thom dismissed those who used drugs rather than help as apathetic junkies, my interviews made it clear that there was never a strict separation between those who got high and those who helped out. One woman, for instance, smoked crack to the point that she got in violent arguments with Thom more than once. Yet at the same time, multiple former residents described her active help in the community. She would often cook for others and help give out food – according to Keith, “she was like a mother to” residents. When she and Thom ran into each other at Pastor Paul's Church Under the Bridge in January 2018, they hugged.

The other significant observation is that everyone was given access to donations regardless of whether or not they participated. This includes those who were too busy getting high, but it is particularly important in the case of those who might not otherwise have been able to take care of themselves. Some individuals were so ill they hardly ever left their tents, but their neighbors would make sure that they still received food every day. Mark remembered calling a “wellbeing check” on someone who had not come out in a while, before having them transported to a nearby hospital. Diane, the lawyer from CCH, sincerely believed that some of these individuals would not have been able to make it on their own in a shelter. Certainly, those who could barely walk likely would not have been allowed to stay at Pacific Garden Mission or other shelters with similar rules. In fact, Diane doubted that some of them would have been able to survive if they had even

been given housing outside of Uptown.

No matter how well the community organized, hygiene remained one of Tent City's limitations. To wash oneself, there were sinks in Park District buildings, but no showers; the Broadway Armory in Edgewater has showers available from 6 to 8 p.m. on weekdays. Women could use Sarah's Circle's showers and laundry room (see Fig. 1). Some of Carols' friends would wash their clothes in the lake, or pay sheltered friends to use their facilities. Nevertheless, Tent City sought to maintain as clean an environment as possible. Wilson had a Cleaning Detail; Lawrence had a Janitor. They made sure to clean not just the sidewalks – they swept the street as well.<sup>42</sup> Perishable donations were discarded if unused so as not to attract rats. The nearest buildings were a block away from Tent City but the surrounding area provided no cover for bathrooms, as can be seen on Fig. 4. Residents thus had to set up rudimentary bathrooms in a corner of each bridge – buckets for urine, surrounded by trashcans for privacy. When a woman was using the buckets, residents made sure to stop passers-by from using the viaduct until she was done. For anything other than urinating, however, people had to find other ways; some used portable toilets in their tent, others went to Park District buildings. Carol complained that many of the nearby businesses locked their restrooms to non-customers.

Tent City thus provided to many the freedom and autonomy they lacked in shelters, while organizing collectively to ensure that everyone accessed the resources they needed. Tent City remained far from perfect of course. Sanitation was a daily struggle. Chicago winters were extremely hard when the propane started running out. Despite security, things went missing if they were not kept in a tent – guards could be bribed to look the other way. Bicycles never lasted very long under the bridge.

It is important to remember that residents' recollections of safety may not be entirely in tune with reality. The Alderman's chief of staff described bloodied Tent City residents coming into the office complaining about being bullied and robbed. Certainly I was told of instances of violence, though Thom and Adam described them as being caused mostly by people from outside the community.

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<sup>42</sup> Odette Yousef, "In Uptown Tent City, Do Your Part Or Get Kicked Out." *WBEZ*. January 17, 2017.



Figure 4. Tent City at Wilson Ave was clearly isolated from its immediate neighbors.  
(Map from Google maps, annotated by author)

Yet for our purposes, that is slightly beside the point. Life on the streets is hard; violence is rife and one is very exposed to aggressors, whether from within or without the community. If shelters experience episodes of violence, there is no reason to believe that Tent City would not as well. Without discounting the gravity and danger of some of the violence that may have occurred, it is difficult to believe that all of my interlocutors could downplay how prevalent it was and still declare feeling as safe as they said. Nevertheless, the phenomenon at play here is precisely the converse of what occurred in shelters: opinions on communities vary. Some people were able to find a home, a welcoming family in Tent City just as others could at Cornerstone.

The viaducts were home to a city, a community, a family where homeless individuals found autonomy and agency away from the shelters. Like any city, community or family, however – like any shelter even – Tent City did have rules and restrictions by which its residents needed to abide.

## **2. “There's some things we gotta do” – Rules, restrictions and democratic functioning at Tent City**

As we have seen in the first part of this thesis, the very rules and restrictions that pushed shelter residents toward Tent City were imposed as a response to pressures the shelters were subjected to. There was the responsibility to protect shelter residents by guaranteeing a level of safety, sanitation and calm. There was the need to use limited as efficiently as possible. Finally, there was the need to respond to political pressures from neighbors and local politicians, which posed a sometimes-existential threat to the shelter's continuing operation.

These pressures are not unique to homeless shelters: Tent City found itself subjected to them as well. The community thus developed a number of rules to protect its residents and provide them with adequate resources, as well as guarantee its own survival against threats of expulsion by the City. Describing why he decided to take charge and enforce communal rules at Tent City Abdul's summed up those pressures: he was tired of the fighting, the hoarding, and “the City spitting on our name.”

Tent City needed rules to protect residents against violence and theft. According to Nova and Diane, erstwhile Janitor and Head of Security respectively, people came to steal or bully the residents under the Lawrence viaduct almost every day. Abdul claimed that before he took charge at Wilson and began enforcing stricter rules, “people come down here and do what they wanna do because we let them.” The community thus adopted a strict, zero-tolerance approach toward troublemakers, which began with residents’ ability to veto prospective residents’ move. Thom, the Mayor of Tent City, cited two major crimes that would get a resident thrown out from under the viaducts: stealing, and threatening to burn down the tents, along with attacking another resident. In this respect, Tent City residents were subject to the same strict rules as in the shelters, with each community intent on protecting its members. It is important to note that Tent City’s selective acceptance of new residents meant that certain types of individuals were locked out from under the bridges, as was the case with shelters. In this instance, however, they were disqualified not by their criminal history or substance abuse, but by their personal history with existing residents.

Leaders at Wilson also sought to protect residents’ sleep. In a context in which several former residents described the difficult conditions under the viaducts at night (with people sometimes revving their engines in front of the tents to wake up homeless folks), Abdul set up a Drunk Patrol. It consisted of volunteers with radios keeping an eye on who was getting drunk or high. This allowed them to be proactive and avoid conflict if someone became noisy or rowdy.

Tent City also enforced rules to respond to the second pressure it faced – that of limited resources. The need for resources to be distributed efficiently and equitably meant that sharing was an obligation, not a choice. Under the Wilson viaduct, Abdul’s Reception and Furlough crews made sure it happened; at Lawrence, Thom had a storage tent and kept more provisions in the room he rented at the Wilson Men’s Hotel (see Fig. 1). He knew, too, which residents received welfare checks and who made money, and would make sure they participated in communal purchases. Tents, despite being distributed freely to those who needed them, remained a valuable communal resource, which led Thom to enforce a “seven day rule” – if a resident left the bridge for any reason for longer than a week, they would have to warn Thom. If they failed to do so, their

belongings would be thrown out, and the community would repair and reuse the tent. This type of rule ensured that everyone had access to a minimum of communal resources, and sought to limit conflict.

The third and final pressure that Tent City had to contend with was the political pressure that manifested through the presence of Chicago police officers and Streets and Sanitation workers. When Abdul expressed concern with the City “spitting on [their] name,” he did so out of more than simply communal pride – he was fully aware of the risk that Tent City ran by projecting a negative image to the City. The Lawrence and Wilson viaducts represent the main access points to Montrose Beach and the lakefront for thousands of Uptown residents and their children. The space under the viaducts was narrow and had to be shared by residents and those walking to the lake (see Fig. 5). Complaints could spell trouble for the community: it was anger on the part of neighbors of Cornerstone Shelter, where Abdul spent 13 years, which had forced the shelter to institute a curfew. Tent City was very vulnerable to police intervention. If officers wanted a reason to fine residents, all they needed to do was walk under the bridge and give someone a ticket for drinking or urinating in public. Despite the community’s efforts at creating a discrete bathroom corner behind a barrier of trashcans, it still counted as public urination – a violation that Thom claimed once earned him a \$600 fine.

Residents knew that there was a risk greater than mere ordinance violations and fines – the risk of displacement. Describing the state of Tent City early in his residency, Abdul states: “The City’s problem with us being here was it was always nasty and dirty.” They knew that unsanitary conditions under the bridge provided an excuse for the City to send in cleaning details, as it did with Streets and Sanitation’s regular and disruptive power washings. Residents and advocates saw those as prompted by more than concerns for hygiene – the power washings were meant to harass residents into leaving.



Figure 5. The narrow pedestrian space under the Wilson viaduct highlights the potential for conflict between residents of Tent City and passers-by. (*Picture by Nancy Stone for the Chicago Tribune*)

If Tent City gave a reason for the police to intervene, therefore, it ran the risk of threatening its continued existence under the viaducts. According to Thom: “Our main thing was we didn’t want cops under the bridge.” This led the community to adopt rules that stemmed from what Forrest Stuart, in his book *Down, Out and Under Arrest* calls “cop wisdom”<sup>43</sup> – the community anticipated police’s reaction, trying to see the world through government’s eyes. Abdul thus imagined what the alderman might say to the mayor – “Look at them, they’re a bunch of animals.” Tent City leaders managed and policed the space under the bridges using the police’s presumed criteria – to quote Mark, “A lot of things that were not approved of were not approved of because they generated complaints.”

This type of “prepolicing”<sup>44</sup> translated into a rigorous control of Tent City’s appearance – what Mark called avoiding “bad PR.” It began with communal efforts to keep the viaducts clean, the Janitors and Sanitation details, the discrete bathroom. Of course, much of the emphasis on hygiene was motivated by individual efforts at self-care and protecting one’s self-esteem. Communal cleanups, however, were explicitly aimed at projecting a – literally – sanitized image of their space to the outside world.

Community leaders could do little to force residents to actively participate in cleaning efforts – a direct consequence of the freedom many sought at Tent City. However, the community imposed strict rules on specific behaviors that threatened its survival. “If they caused trouble that would draw heat” on Tent City, residents could be disciplined or excluded, according to Mark. This explains the community’s attitude regarding drugs: “Anything people did in their tent, that was O.K.” to Thom. Substance abuse in public, however, was unacceptable, as it might attract police.

Naturally, rules could be motivated by this type of external focus at the same time as internally focused concerns for residents’ wellbeing. This includes the ban on violence, whether against residents or members of the public – be it the woman who began throwing bottles at passing cars or the man who attacked Joe and Mark. Concerns about police were central to leaders’ thought process: Abdul cited the fear of police Incident

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<sup>43</sup> Stuart, *Down, Out and Under Arrest*. 22.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, 181.



Reports when he recounted expelling 12 residents in his 17 months under the viaducts – for drinking, stealing and gangbanging.

Stuart describes policing as a powerful force that “generates and regenerates the cultural context of impoverished neighborhoods.”<sup>45</sup> Certainly, that is the case here: the constant threat of governmental intervention likely constituted the single most important factor influencing Tent City’s functioning and geography. It dictated the community’s actions (what was acceptable where), its aesthetic appearance (how clean it had to appear), its spatial organization (the discrete bathroom corner) and even its membership (it could not accept any minors for fear of attracting DCFS). The threat of police action thus placed the most important limits on residents’ individual freedom. Those who had left the shelter system because of its strict rules and come to Tent City in search of autonomy remained subject to restrictive rules necessary for the community’s functioning and survival.

Yet the difference between the two contexts still lies in part in the level of autonomy: Tent City as a community had greater leeway in dealing with infractions than shelters, while residents themselves retained more agency regarding what rules were applied. Indeed, shelters’ response to conflict is often limited to either issuing a warning or banning someone (for a few days or indefinitely). Under the bridges, however, there was another option, which grew out of Tent City’s organization as “one neighborhood with two blocks;” Abdul referred to it as “trading bodies.” When a resident caused problems under one bridge that did not necessarily warrant expulsion, Thom and Abdul, in charge of Lawrence and Wilson respectively, would sometimes agree to have them transferred to the other bridge. When Carol got in one too many violent arguments with Thom, she ended up moving, with Abdul’s assent, to Wilson. Today, she and Thom are still friends: the conflicts between them would not have justified kicking Carol out of Tent City altogether. The possibility for her to move to Wilson – away from Thom’s short temper but to where Abdul’s notoriously stricter leadership might keep her in check – provided a welcome alternative.

This practice provided Thom with a way to avoid dealing with some more rowdy or argumentative residents whom Abdul could handle more easily. However, the

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, 26.

exchanges were not unidirectional. Fully aware of the pressure he was placing on Abdul by sending him bad apples, Thom made sure to send him residents he deemed to be good elements as well. What developed thus became a carefully calibrated exchange of bodies aimed at preserving a social balance under each viaduct.

Just as Tent City thus enjoyed greater leeway than shelters in handling conflict, its residents also retained more agency thanks to a roughly democratic decision-making process. Abdul consulted Wilson residents regularly. He instituted weekly House Meetings, to discuss and vote on rules and roles, and gave House Elders (who predated him under the bridge, yet often were younger than he), the last say over everything. This consultative process was very important to Abdul, who claimed, “The people’s the ones making those rules.”

However, the community’s democratic functioning had obvious limitations, which are highlighted by a comparison of Thom and Abdul’s very different leadership styles. Abdul was a popular leader, and though he may never have been elected directly, his natural charisma, care and authority were such that I never heard his leadership being questioned. However, there was another, important dimension to his leadership: he was much more likely than Thom to resort to violence.

Abdul never rejected this charge: violence is necessary on the streets to impose order. He viewed his beating of one particularly violent resident as a watershed moment in asserting his and Thom’s authority. He claimed to have acted for the good, and on behalf of, the community by enforcing rules decided upon collectively (and Mark’s account of the weekly House Meetings concurs). “I wasn’t running the viaduct; *they* were running the viaduct,” Abdul would repeat. Yet, despite his effective embrace of a mostly democratic style of governance, the fact remains that his leadership often was – perhaps needed to be – repressive in nature. In fact, he freely admitted that he often “acted like a warden” to protect residents as well as the community’s image. This candid assertion reveals communal pre-policing as a repressive, as well as protective, practice.

Thom, on the other hand, was explicitly elected Mayor of Tent City. Yet he had a harder time garnering resident support for communal tasks and operated in a more isolated fashion – likely due as much to his less charismatic persona as to his reticence to use violence. Instead of organizing the type of security and cleaning details Abdul took

so much pride in at Wilson, Thom relied on a limited number of individuals: Diane as Head of Security, Nova as Janitor. He described picking them because they were among the few to help him. Diane was the only one who stepped up and defended him during a fight early in his tenure.

At the same time, his way of running the viaduct appeared less democratic, less consultative than Abdul's. He held much more infrequent House Meetings and had a more tense relationship with residents, who sometimes questioned his authority. They once elected Adam as head of Lawrence in his stead while he was away (a role which Adam immediately refused). On the whole, residents accepted Thom's prominent leadership role, though they sometimes seemed rather to tolerate it. Yet the tenuous nature of his leadership became most apparent in times of conflict.

Though Thom sincerely believed he acted in the community's best interest, his failure to secure support from many residents meant that he was constrained in doing so by his limited use of violence. One couple was notorious for getting into violent, drug-induced and, worst of all, public arguments. Yet it took months, according to Adam, for Thom to finally kick them out. It was assumed he feared the final confrontation and lacked the support he might have wanted.

Another incident proved more tragic, when Thom claimed a vocal minority of Lawrence residents confronted him over the storage tent he controlled. They did not trust him to distribute communal resources equitably and accused him of hoarding; he accused his dissenters of wanting to sell those resources for their own drug habit. Yet because of his isolation, Thom caved to the pressure and opened up the communal tent, only for it to be looted, he claimed. Perishables had to be thrown out after they left the tent's coolers.

It was not easy, therefore, for Tent City to maintain a democratic mode of functioning, the outcome depending on leaders' willingness to support a consultative process, as well as on their ability to enforce it. Even the ideal of democratic participation and decision-making did not always have the best outcomes – as evidenced by the previous anecdote. Moreover, the relatively rapid turnover among Tent City residents led to the culture under the bridge changing. Thus, elections, rules and modes of functioning that were agreed upon by all were challenged by subsequent generations of residents.

In sum, Tent City provided its residents with more autonomy than shelters, but that was still limited by rules meant to protect residents' wellbeing, ensure the efficient use of scarce resources, and protect the community's survival as a whole. While residents did have more say in communal rules than in shelters, the decision-making process' inclusiveness remained unstable, depending to a large extent on the charisma and benevolence of individual leaders.

There is one aspect of Tent City which did afford its residents more autonomy and agency, however, and that is in the realm of political activism.

### **3. "Give us a home or leave us alone" – Tent City as political agency**

Tent City from its inception was intimately tied to political activism. The viaducts themselves garnered public attention in Chicago even before the community known as Tent City existed. In the summer of 2015, the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless accused the City of violating homeless individuals' state constitutional rights by displacing them and confiscating their belongings to make way for the 35,000 people expected to attend a Mumford and Sons concert on the lakefront.<sup>46</sup>

Since Tent City came to be, it had close links to homeless rights activist groups like Uptown Tent City and ONE Northside, who provided residents with tents and other donations – and kept doing so throughout the community's existence. These groups, along with the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, also advocated for, and organized with, residents seeking better conditions and shelter. Thom claimed that he moved to Tent City in February 2017 after North Side Action for Justice asked him to help. Though he has been known to give different reasons for his move to Tent City, political action was certainly at the center of his leadership at Tent City, and he was only one of a number of residents who focused their efforts on organizing their community for better living conditions.

In fact, Tony Sparks' concept of autonomy and agency in homeless encampments as opposed to shelters is most salient as it relates to political activism. I argue that

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<sup>46</sup> Mina Bloom, "Ahead of Mumford and Sons' Chicago Show, Homeless Cleared from Viaducts," *DNAinfo Chicago*, June 16, 2015.

residents of Tent City acquired the most agency and power in organizing collectively, first forcing different political actors to accept and respect the community's existence under the viaducts, and then using their presence to advocate for permanent housing. That is not to say that all residents organized or were politically active – the point rather is that Tent City afforded all its residents the ability to take advantage of their increased political agency and advocate for themselves.

On the topic of homeless individuals' political participation, and the political significance of the spaces they inhabit, Sparks, in his essay "Broke Not Broken: Rights, Privacy, and Homelessness in Seattle," criticizes academic works which rely too heavily on "the equation of the visibility of bodies in public space with their political participation."<sup>47</sup> In other words, though he recognizes the significance of homelessness' visibility to the public and its impact on political action and discourse, he believes that homeless individuals' presence alone is not enough to speak of political participation: they must first have "control over the purpose and meaning of [their] presence."<sup>48</sup>

This emphasis on political agency and intentionality ties into Tim Cresswell's distinction between transgression and resistance. In *In Place Out of Place: Geography, ideology and transgression*, Cresswell deals with the social construction of place. Put simply, the sidewalk exists as a geographic space which society has imbued with characteristics and behavioral expectations: it is a place to walk, a place of passage. Every time we interact with a place in accordance with its normative use – every time we walk or stand on the sidewalk – we reinforce the sense that this normative use is self-evident and necessary. Places as socially delimited spaces are thus reproduced every day and their specific socially accepted definitions are reinforced.

When an individual uses a place differently than what is accepted – when a homeless individual is sleeping on the sidewalk – they are being transgressive. For this transgression to become political, it requires intentionality. A crowd of activists using the street for a protest rather than as merely a place of passage is intentionally not following its normative use: their transgression of socio-spatial norms becomes resistance. "Intentional transgression is a form of resistance that creates a response from the

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<sup>47</sup> Sparks, "Broke Not Broken," 846.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 850.

establishment – an act that draws the line on a battlefield and defines the terrain on which contestation occurs.”<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, this act of resistance can have a long-term impact on the way that place is experienced and used. Since place needs to be constantly reproduced and its normative uses reinforced, if a space is used differently often enough – if a resistant use is imposed onto the public’s understanding of a location – then that new use can become accepted and thus normative: “If enough people follow suit, a whole new conception of “normality” may arise. [...] The consumption of place becomes the production of place.”<sup>50</sup>

The following account of Tent City’s political action, builds on the ideas of both Sparks and Cresswell. Homeless communities’ political action must rely on more than presence: it requires political awareness and intentionality. This same intentionality is what makes Tent City’s use of the viaducts more than merely transgression – resistance. This resistance has the goal of eliciting a response from authorities – and the potential to impose a new accepted use of space in doing so.

Abdul’s description of his thought process in convincing the community to take care of its image reveals a deeper goal than Tent City’s mere survival: “We can force the City to help us but there’s some things we gotta do.” We see here that political goals – political *intentions* – are inherent to Tent City’s organization, that imposing political demands comes almost as a logical conclusion of convincing the City to recognize and accept Tent City’s existence.

Tent City’s leaders thus led political organizing efforts to assert the community’s right to remain under the bridges. These took the form of intentional transgression – resistance – even in the face of obvious threat of action on the part of the City. A significant example of this has to do with Streets and Sanitation’s regularly imposed power washings of the sidewalk under the viaducts, which required the entire community to move their belongings out from under the bridge on Fridays at 7 a.m. as of September of 2016. When these cleanings continued into the winter, over 40 residents of Tent City refused to comply. According to Diane of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, they

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<sup>49</sup> Cresswell, *In Place Out of Place*, 23.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 165.

invited advocates and members of the media to be witness to their refusal to move their belongings soon after Christmas. They leveraged the visibility thus gained to speak to officials and declare that they would not agree to these washings if the temperature was below 40°F or if it was raining. In doing this, they asserted their right to exist in the space under the viaducts. Moreover, they positioned themselves as political actors with the power to negotiate with City officials, and forced the City, in the form of Streets and Sanitation, to recognize their ownership over the viaducts – and thus, at least in part, the legitimacy of their use of that space.

Residents of Tent City similarly worked to increase their visibility to advocate on other topics. They put on press conferences to defend their image in the media and voice their demands. When City workers put stickers on tents and belongings, saying that they would be discarded unless removed within 7 days, residents organized a press conference in nearby Margate Park, which allowed them to meet with the mayor’s office – thanks to efforts from allied advocacy groups – where they asked for their property to remain untouched. At another such meeting, it was determined nearby Park District bathrooms would remain open and accessible to them.

All these actions constitute, in Sparks’ terms, intentional political participation. According to Cresswell’s framework, they are more than mere transgression – which homeless individuals commit daily simply by living on the street. Rather, Tent City residents resisted by engaging in uses of public space that differed from socially expected behaviors. They did this actively seeking a response by authorities and “defin[ing] the terrain on which contestation occurs”<sup>51</sup> – their right to property, to sanitation, to dignity.

Through intentional political actions and media presence, Tent City forced different political actors to recognize its presence and accept it. Already, activists and advocacy groups recognized and vocally defended residents’ right to exist under the viaducts. Abdul described donors coming from all over the region because of Tent City’s established and stable location: “People came to help us because they knew we was there.” Their donations included tents, grills and other cooking equipment: large, heavy equipment that signified that the community was there to stay. Streets and Sanitation and Park District workers agreed to change their rules in order to accommodate Tent City’s

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 23.

existence. Police visited the viaducts with warrants and asked Thom for help finding suspects – thus implicitly recognizing him and other residents as legitimate actors in the Uptown community, further reinforcing the normalcy of Tent City’s presence in the social and geographic landscape of the neighborhood.

All these social and political actors in Uptown came to accept Tent City as a stable element of the neighborhood and treated its residents, sometimes begrudgingly, as legitimate political actors. According to Cresswell’s framework, they thus implicitly accepted Tent City residents’ use of the space and participated in reproducing it in ways that only reinforced its legitimacy. Residents’ consumption of public place under the viaducts became production of place: a place homeless people were able and allowed to sleep, to eat – to live.

The main goal of Tent City’s political activity was not to live indefinitely under the viaducts, however. Most residents viewed Tent City, at least in part, as a means to an end: as a way to access stable housing. This attitude comes across in Abdul’s justification for the community’s image management rules: “We can’t convince people to give us something if we destroying what we got.” Tent City needed to exist as a clean, organized community not only in order to remain under the viaducts, but for its residents to be in a position to demand access to stable housing from the City.

Recounting the final month of Tent City in September of 2017, Keith described the community’s housing goals. Staff from Cornerstone, aware of the impending construction under the viaducts, tried to convince remaining residents to claim a spot before it filled up for the winter. The residents refused, however, because they did not want to “desert one another” – they wanted to stay together and keep fighting for “a place we can call home.” Yet Keith also emphasizes that when a resident was offered permanent housing, no one would turn it down. These statements reveal a clear sense of priority: remaining with Tent City’s community was more important than the heat and amenities of a shelter even as displacement became inevitable; but the main reason to stay was to organize, and permanent housing remained the focus and goal of residents’ actions.

Organizing for housing played a central role in Tent City’s communal organization. Thom emphasized that his House Meetings at Lawrence were “always



about housing.” These came on top of weekly visits by the activist group ONE Northside, which sought to help residents organize. Thanks to protests and press conferences, the community reached its first victory in April of 2015, when the City of Chicago launched its Chronic Homeless Pilot, a housing program meant to provide 75 Tent City residents with permanent housing (not enough for all, but an impressive start). The residents alone did not achieve this victory; the idea was pitched by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, which organized the first meeting between social and political stakeholders. Yet according to Diane, the Coalition lawyer, residents were present at every public meeting on the issue and spoke up about their right to be selective about the location of housing, and to refuse those areas that made them feel unsafe or isolated. The program soon granted 53 residents of Tent City access to permanent housing – which is unlikely to have happened without the same political pressure.

Residents also led political actions themselves, pushing their allies to participate in support. This was particularly true after the community received its final 30-day eviction notice from the City, providing residents with a new sense of urgency. Abdul described it as his new “purpose” to make as much noise as possible, to show the public the humanity and desperation of Tent City’s homeless residents.

They did so by organizing a ‘tent-in’ protest outside City Hall, where they also delivered demands: that all current residents of Tent City be housed before construction and that plans be modified to preserve space for homeless people under the viaducts. Under the bridges and during House Meetings, politically active residents and leaders made sure that as many residents attended the community’s actions as possible. In August of 2017, residents insisted on organizing their largest action yet. After inviting reporters, they took their protest onto Lakeshore Drive – literally above the viaducts that housed their community – and shut down the highway. Four protestors, including one current and one former resident, were arrested amid chants of “Give us a home or leave us alone.” This type of action is all the more impressive in light of many homeless individuals’ difficult relationship and experiences with police.

In the end, the City did not fulfill residents’ demands that all be given housing before construction began – while a district judge refused to grant Coalition lawyers’ request to delay work. Still, they accomplished a great deal. Abdul had kept an eye on the

Chronic Homeless Pilot and noticed all vouchers had not been used; he argued vehemently with city officials that all unused vouchers benefit Tent City residents. As a result, a total of 75 individuals from the viaducts received permanent housing.

As the deadline for Tent City's eviction loomed nearer, some residents gave up and left – for shelters, other bridges, or unknown areas. On the fateful final morning, 16 residents remained. They had fought to the end and not received housing. Abdul claims that “a lot of people didn't get housed because they didn't fight all the way” – among them the more apathetic drug addicts of Tent City. This claim is dubious; accessing housing did require effort and self-advocacy, but there was also a lot of luck involved. Even as Abdul believes he was given housing to silence him, Thom himself was one of those who remained without housing until the very end. Nevertheless, Tent City's political activism had garnered sustained media and public attention – and allowed dozens to access permanent housing.

The realm of politics and activism truly constitutes the area where residents' search for agency, which Sparks describes, became reality. Tent City provided a base for residents' political participation by creating a supportive and active community; by fostering ties between the community and allies; and by allowing the community to fight for collective goals. All residents (physical and mental illness notwithstanding) had the ability to gain a measure of political agency and control over their own fate through political organizing. Governmental acceptance of Tent City's reinterpretation of the viaducts as places to live, eat and sleep in the long term was not permanent, of course. Yet the City's renovation plans, which made homeless individuals' return impossible by adding bike paths on the sidewalks, reveal the need for the City to destroy and transform the space under the viaducts in order to counter the community's reinvention of it as a place of residence.

Naturally, much of the political action depended on the influence and drive of particular leaders and individuals – Thom and Abdul both saw organizing for housing as their personal mission. One might question how much political activity would have taken place with less politically leaders. It is also true that many actions included outside groups of activists, organizers and lawyers. The alderman's office is quick to accuse these outside groups of being the main instigators of Tent City's political actions.

However, few political struggles are fought and won only by the groups that are directly concerned, without outside help and support. In fact, the participation of so many different advocacy groups was related to the unprecedented level of visibility Tent City drew, and their support only increased residents' level of political agency.

# Chapter 4:

## Lessons Learned

### 1. Conclusion

This study of Chicago's Uptown Tent City was centered on two main questions: What pushed individuals to live under bridges rather than in homeless shelters? And how did the conditions and community under the bridges compare to the shelters they sought to replace? These questions pressed for an evaluation of, a response, and a complement to, the work of Marcuse and Sparks, who identify the modern homeless shelter system – based on the Continuum of Care – as the source of residents' dissatisfaction and alienation. Homeless encampments, according to Sparks, existed to provide residents with the autonomy and agency they lost in shelters.

Many of Tent City's residents left the shelter system because of strict rules and restrictions. Some were explicitly banned, while others chose to leave because of inconvenient or alienating (though not intentionally exclusionary) measures. Significantly, many of those rules are readily justifiable, if not inevitable. Shelters struggle to protect the health and safety of their residents, to ensure that limited resources are used efficiently, and to contend with hostile political and community pressures.

Feelings of alienation are often tied to elements of the modern emphasis on individualized treatment of homelessness – the neoliberal approach Sparks criticizes. However, homeless individuals' sense of loss of control over their life cannot be attributed solely to the Continuum of Care: much of it stems simply from the lack of privacy and agency that comes with homelessness. Moreover, many negative impressions of shelters do not necessarily line up with reality. Far from invalidating residents' feelings about shelters, this last point merely highlights the difficult conditions shelters face. Whether it is due to modern, alienating rules or to negative perceptions, many of the factors that drive certain individuals to leave the shelter system are largely inevitable.

Tent City stood in contrast with the shelter system because of the level of autonomy and freedom it offered its residents. Nearly all those banned from shelters were

welcome, as were their habits. In addition to providing more autonomy than shelters, Tent City provided a community that organized as much as possible to compensate for what was missed out on at shelters: food, shelter, and sanitation. Significantly even those who were too weak to take care of themselves (and may very well have been too weak to survive in a shelter) were looked after.

However, the amount of autonomy that residents enjoyed was in fact limited by a set of rules that were sometimes as strict as shelters'. Indeed, the community had to deal with the same tensions as shelters: protecting residents' health and safety, sharing scarce resources and, most importantly, anticipating and preempting police intervention. Residents did, however, have a say in what rules were applied. Overall, community members retained some of the autonomy and agency that Sparks claims they sought, though it was more restricted than at first glance. The extent of democratic decision-making and collective implementation of rules, on the other hand, remained unreliable.

Sparks' idea of homeless encampments as providing residents with more agency than shelters is at its most salient in terms of political participation. Tent City provided its members with a base to be politically active by intentionally protecting their community's image and asserting their right to use the space under the viaducts. Through relationships with allies and stubbornness and direct action facing the City, Tent City forced actors throughout the Uptown community to recognize and accept its use of space, normalizing its presence and participation in local political life. This allowed the community to demand permanent housing from the City. Residents gained in agency over their lives as the community's political advocacy, supported by its allies, led to increased visibility and certain very tangible successes in rehousing residents.

## **2. Policy Implications and Recommendations**

This discussion leads to possible policy implications relating to the way homeless shelters function, as well as to the way local governments interact with homeless encampments. Homelessness, of course, is a much broader and more systemic problem, which can only be addressed significantly through equally expansive shifts in policy on a national scale. To truly address homelessness in the United States, it is necessary to

tackle housing affordability in a context of concurrent governmental disinvestment in affordable housing and rapidly concentrating wealth in major metropolitan areas. Gentrification, renters' rights, transportation, but also incarceration, access to mental healthcare, and stable employment – all are topics that must be seriously examined and acted on for homelessness to decrease in the United States.

It is clear that the level of policy addressed here can do little more than ameliorate the symptoms of those seemingly intractable systemic issues. With that said, this level of policy – at the level of a city, neighborhood or individual shelter – is also the one that is most susceptible to short-term change. Furthermore, the relative insignificance of that change compared to the number of homeless people in the country disappears from view when one considers the level at which the vast majority of Americans interacts with the topic of homelessness. Through this study, I got to know individuals, in their helpfulness and good humor, their personal stories and tragedies, who were failed by the system writ large. They were failed collectively by federal policies – but their individual situations can be solved by well-designed local policy.

Not all observations made at Tent City are necessarily generalizable. Tent City grew out of a particular political and social context – in a city with relatively little experience handling such large, organized encampments, and supported by active, connected advocacy groups. The outsized influence of leaders like Thom and Abdul in driving organizing and political action may also mean that the community's political participation is unique and not necessarily reproducible.

#### **a) Shelters**

Shelters' main struggle boils down to inadequate resources. The solution to the predicament of many of the individuals whose stories we heard earlier thus has to do with increasing resources: more space, more staff, more time, etc. Unfortunately, this is commonplace in the world of social policy and not easy to address, with Illinois only starting to recover from a budget crisis that negatively impacted almost every homeless provider in the state.<sup>52</sup> As such, merely calling for more funds does not go very far, and

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<sup>52</sup> Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, CSH, Housing Action Illinois and Supportive Housing Providers Association, *The State Budget Impasse is Causing Homelessness in Illinois*, 1.

even if additional funding existed, it would still call for prioritizing certain programs or populations over others.

One such population is that of the employed sheltered homeless. Working one's way out of homelessness may not be realistic for the majority of Chicago's homeless individuals – but it is morally abhorrent that those who do attempt to work be hindered in their efforts by an inflexible shelter system. Resources would be well used to set aside space for those who work odd hours, so that they might access sleeping quarters whenever their work requires – including during the day. This should go hand in hand with a citywide protocol for shelters to accommodate residents who can prove employment. They would also benefit from increased communication and coordination between housing and job development non-profits and agencies. Workforce development agencies could share their views on, for example, how long it might take a newly employed shelter resident to become independent enough to leave.

One major difficulty surrounding that proposal is the fact that many of Chicago's homeless shelters are privately run and some are entirely privately funded. This explains the different rules and policies they implement, some of which are particularly alienating for residents (e.g. on the topic of religious services). The City should leverage its financial and political power over all shelters to ensure that a baseline of non-discriminatory practices is agreed to. It should not, however, mandate exclusionary practices. Shelter employees are best placed to determine whom they can house without endangering their community, and they should have the discretion to accept people who struggle with substance abuse if they believe they can do so safely. Ideally, of course, addressing substance abuse problems should not be shelters' jobs, and larger-scale, more expensive steps should be taken to ensure that all those who need it have access to adequate treatment and care. For the time being, however, responsibility falls to the shelters.

The above suggestions notwithstanding, we are forced to recognize that many of the rules that exclude homeless individuals from shelters are inevitable, sometimes caused by blanket policies enforced at a much higher level – such as Illinois' homogenously restrictive policies regarding sex offenders. Additionally, little can be done that is not already in place to address residents' fears regarding shelters, which may

appear irrational. Some of those fears, in fact, stem from the fact that shelters accept individuals who do not function well in a community. This last point suggests that whether shelters strengthen or loosen their selection standards, there will always be some who are driven away by the move. Discouraging as such an observation may be, policymakers must recognize the limitations inherent to the shelter system.

### **b) Homeless Encampments**

Because many limitations of shelters' exclusionary practices are inevitable, we must recognize that some individuals will necessarily end up on the street rather than in a shelter. As such, Tent City should be seen as a complement to shelters.

Because some people will always choose to leave shelters for their own reasons, policymakers must recognize the impact that individuals' preferences have on the successes of the shelter system and proceed accordingly. One may not condone their decision, but that will not change the fact that these people are living on the street. This goes hand in hand with recognizing the consequences of policies that aim to radically punish individuals for their moral failings. If we as a society believe that sex offenders should be stigmatized for life, or that convicted felons should forever lose access to public housing, then we must accept our collective responsibility in condemning them to living on the streets.

The only alternative to allowing encampments would be to take them down. Unfortunately, the story of Tent City shows us how the dismantling of a homeless encampment plays out: there is uncertainty and stress; people are hospitalized and lose touch with their support network. In its report *Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments*, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) claims that forced dispersal "is not an appropriate solution," making it harder to provide residents with services and possibly leading to the creation of new encampments elsewhere.<sup>53</sup> Nothing good comes of dismantling a homeless encampment for those who live there. Though homeless encampments are far from ideal, they provide improved living conditions that must be taken advantage of, not destroyed.

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<sup>53</sup> United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, *Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments* (August 2015), 2.



Tolerating homeless encampments also allows for local government and agencies to include members of the homeless community in conversations about police action and the encampments' future. Tent City's agreements with Streets and Sanitation and the Park District suggest the potential for effective understanding and collaboration between a homeless encampment and government. We have seen the power of the community's pre-policing strategies – what if the rules thus enforced were bred through conversation and agreement with government, rather than by fear?

In its report, USICH calls for local governments to incorporate the community's voice and sees leaders as valuable partners.<sup>54</sup> Input and communication would allow for the diverse group of residents to voice their needs and advocate for themselves. As a matter of fact, that is precisely what happened at Tent City – but only thanks to the community's political activism. Local governments must embrace this participation, this potential for political action and representation. Far from making the encampments permanent (which USICH does not favor), increased collaboration should in fact precipitate effective, long-term rehousing solutions similar to the Chronic Homeless Pilot program – the impetus for which came not from government, but from the residents of the homeless encampment themselves.

Homeless settlements develop organically in response to inadequate long-term housing solutions; they are a symptom of broader institutional failures. Cities' first priority must be to find housing for all the residents of the encampments. In the meantime, they must work with residents to agree on needs, on goals, and on the community's way of functioning until the rehousing happens. The dismantling of Uptown's Tent City exemplifies how this process cannot be allowed to end. The goal must always be housing but, in the meantime, working with homeless encampments represents cities' best course of action, if a flawed one.

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

## Appendix

### List of Interviews:

<b>Diane O’Connell</b> (Chicago Coalition for the Homeless)	November 2, 2017; January 9, 2018
<b>Keith</b>	November 11, 2017
<b>Carol</b>	December 8, 2017
<b>Mark</b>	January 11, 2018
<b>Thom</b>	January 14, 2018
<b>Nora Vail</b> (Cara Chicago)	January 18, 2018
<b>Jeremy Nicholls</b> (Cornerstone Shelter)	January 18, 2018
<b>Nova</b>	January 21, 2018
<b>Diane</b>	January 21, 2018
<b>Abdul</b>	January 26, 2018
<b>Tressa Feher</b> (Chief of Staff, Alderman Cappleman)	January 29, 2018
<b>Adam</b>	February 3, 2018

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## EDUCATION

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### **The University of Chicago**

*Bachelor of Arts in Geography, Bachelor of Arts in Public Policy*

GPA: 3.85/4.00

Honors: Merit scholarship, Dean's List (2014-15, 15-16, 16-17), Rosenzweig Scholar, German Proficiency Exam.

Chicago, IL  
Expected 2018

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

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### **Prof. Emily Talen**

*Research Assistant*

Chicago, IL  
June 2017-August 2017

- Drafted synthesis of thorough literature review of Central Place Theory and Demand Threshold Analysis.
- Built on findings to calculate population thresholds around retail in Chicago using ArcGIS, QGIS and Python

### **Center for Spatial Data Science**

*Research Assistant*

Chicago, IL  
June 2017-August 2017

- Supported development of sample data website for CSDS and website for Geography department.

### **United African Organization**

*Intern, Community Interpreter*

Chicago, IL  
January 2016-June 2016

- Assisted 30 African immigrants with applications for citizenship and reapplying for unemployment benefits
- Drafted and translated documents on immigration law, impacting 50+ clients per week
- Provided administrative support overseeing client database and communication

### **Affinity Community Services**

*Community Analyst*

Chicago, IL  
January 2016-March 2016

- Designed registration process to form database of 2,000 beneficiaries for use in grant applications
- Researched best practices to craft surveys for program participants satisfaction evaluation

### **Accenture Creative Team Case Competition**

*Case Consultant Competitor, Winner*

Chicago, IL  
November 2016

- Won competition examining mental illness treatment in Washington Park
- Collaborated with 2 teammates on research of community-based mental health treatment best practices
- Presented implementable plan to increase community capacity, reaching 200-500 individuals

### **Projet de Rénovation Urbaine et Direction de Proximité**

*Research Intern*

Strasbourg, France  
August 2015-September 2015

- Collected data on local schools innovation, neighborhood demographics and best practices in education
- Synthesized findings into policy recommendations to promote social mixing in 14 neighborhood schools
- Presented report to community leaders and department team fixing 5-year strategic priorities

## LEADERSHIP ACTIVITIES

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### **United Against Inequities in Disease**

*President*

Chicago, IL  
November 2015-Present

- Facilitate weekly board meetings coordinating recruitment, fundraising and event planning
- Plan logistics of meetings and communication with youth nonprofit and mental health providers
- Coordinated survey of 150+ residents for Community Health Needs Assessment
- Lead implementation of trauma-informed mental health trainings for partners' staff