

# Housing Patterns of Homeless People: The Ecology of the Street in the Era of Urban Renewal

## What is this research about?

This research addresses the conflict between the homeless population and the recent return of middle and upper class suburban residents to the city center. It examines the social consequences that arise when suburban expectations of privacy and freedom are brought to the traditionally public spaces of the city centre. It also investigates the exclusionary practices utilized both against and by the homeless population.



## What you need to know

Many middle and upper class households moved to the suburbs after World War II, leaving the downtown core to be occupied by lower income households, including homeless people. The suburbs provided both an escape from the “problems of the city” for those who could afford a car and a home, and a place for them to exercise their individual freedom in the form of private property. However, with gas prices and traffic congestion on the

rise, and long commutes between city centre employment and suburban housing, downtown living became more desirable for middle-class households. This led governments and developers to “clean up” the downtown to provide a more attractive environment that appeals to middle-class households. This is known as urban renewal, a process that can have seriously negative effects on homeless populations who are increasingly being pushed out of public urban spaces.

### ARTICLE SOURCE

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### KEYWORDS

homelessness, community, urbanism, redevelopment, gentrification

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## HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research can be used to encourage new ways of addressing urban conflict between different groups by focusing on similarities instead of differences. It suggests that typical approaches to addressing urban conflict have not been effective because they tend to be authoritative in nature in an effort to manage the homeless, and thus must be changed. By addressing shared goals and objectives in a collaborative manner, policy makers, service providers and the general public would benefit from the experiences of the street homeless population.

## What did the researchers do?

The researchers compiled and interpreted data from over four years of field research in the city of Birmingham, Alabama. They also conducted in-depth interviews with service providers, local researchers, homeless people living in shelters, city officials, police officers, local business owners, religious leaders and community activists. They then examined the literature that has been written on urbanism, gentrification, and street homelessness.

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## What did the researchers find?

The return of the middle and upper class residents to the city centre has not translated into a willingness to share space with those who are homeless. The researchers found that homeless populations nearly always end up on the losing end of contests for urban space. As public space in the city centre becomes more privatized, homeless people have less space to carry out their daily activities, thus pushing them further from neighbourhoods that are being reclaimed by middle-class households. The passing of new zoning by-laws (ordinances), and the enforcement of those already

established, target homeless people who are forced to carry out private behaviours in public spaces. Interestingly, the researchers also found that homeless populations, like other groups, both desire and actively create organized communities of their own. As such, they tend to exhibit these same exclusionary practices when building community as do the comfortably housed population. Informal hierarchies are formed, and explicit rules and limitations on who is allowed to live in, and even visit, certain areas are established amongst street communities.



### ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

**Jason Adam Wasserman** is an Assistant Professor of Bioethics at Kansas City University of Medicine and Biosciences. His research interests include bioethics, medical sociology, doctor-patient communication, homelessness, and ethnographic methods. Jeffrey Michael Clair is Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for Social Medicine at University of Alabama at Birmingham. His research interests include homelessness, doctor-patient communication, and qualitative research.