ROUGH SLEEPING AND ENCAMPMENTS

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Introduction

As one walks or drives through most large cities, they will notice people sleeping on sidewalks, between buildings and in parks. Terms for this include outdoor sleeping, rough sleeping, street homelessness and unsheltered homelessness. Sometimes such sleeping takes place in plain sight without apparent effort to be inconspicuous; other times, efforts are made to 'fly under the radar,' so to speak. Such rough sleeping appears to increase in warmer months, is very much affected by the behaviour of law enforcement officials, and is typically an awkward topic of discussion even for homelessness officials.

This chapter begins with an overview of why people choose to sleep outside rather than in emergency shelters, while also shedding light on what characteristics may distinguish outdoor sleepers from those who sleep inside emergency shelters. It then discusses increased vulnerabilities associated with sleeping outside and why we should work to address it. This will be followed by a section dealing with encampments, where people sleep outside in groups. Services and supplies needed by outdoor sleepers will then be discussed, followed by a typology of the various types of local responses to encampments.

Why sleep outside, rather than in an emergency shelter?

Casual observers are often confused when they see persons sleeping outside, on sidewalks, in laneways and in parks. Most members of the general public are aware that there are emergency shelters for those without housing (at least in high-income countries) raising the question: why would some people sleep outside, rather than in shelters?

Major motivations for sleeping outside include:[1]

Insufficient emergency shelter beds. Most large cities in most high-income countries have emergency shelters. However, many emergency shelters rapidly fill to capacity. In some cases, a person has to travel far to access an available bed but they may lack the financial means to make that trip. In other cases, the only available beds may be in a shelter where the person does not feel safe. In some cases, there may be no available emergency shelter beds anywhere in the city.

Rules in emergency facilities. Rules for shelter residents vary enormously, even within cities, depending on which organization runs the shelter. Some shelters insist that residents be sober at all times. Others do not allow couples to stay together, while many shelters do not have policies inclusive of trans persons. Most emergency shelters do not allow residents to bring pets, and most have little if any storage capacity for personal belongings. Further, residents can be barred from shelters for breaking rules; in some cases, a person can be barred from multiple shelters at once.

Theft in emergency facilities. Even a very well-managed shelter cannot prevent most forms of theft. Residents can have money and belongings stolen from them. Older residents and residents with disabilities may be especially vulnerable to theft.

Violence in emergency facilities. Most emergency shelters have large groups of people sleeping in close proximity to one another. While many individuals are cordial with one another, some are not. Many have also been exposed to violence—sometimes in correctional facilities—and bring an edge to their relations with others, especially during stressful moments. Further, various resources (e.g., food, coffee, blankets, pillows, etc.) may be scarce at any given shelter. As a result of these factors, most

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Even a very well-managed shelter cannot prevent most forms of theft.

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[1] This section of the chapter borrows extensively from the following report: Cohen, R., Yetvin, W., & Khadduri, J. (2019). *Understanding encampments of people experiencing homelessness and community responses: Emerging evidence as of late 2018*. Available at SSRN 3615828.

emergency shelters experience both violence and ongoing threats of violence among residents.

Disease transmission in emergency shelters. Emergency shelters have very limited space for large numbers of residents. Further, many residents have poor health and are immunocompromised. Some emergency shelters have private rooms, but most do not. And many emergency shelters have limited hand-washing stations. As a result, disease transmission is common within emergency shelters, a phenomenon that was recently brought to light during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The need for documentation at emergency shelters. Admission requirements differ among shelters, and these differences can even exist within cities. Not surprisingly, some emergency shelters require some government-issued identification as a prerequisite for access; however, many persons experiencing homelessness have lost their identification or had it stolen.[2]

Is there a 'type' that sleeps outside?

Among persons experiencing homelessness, who sleeps outside—as opposed to in an emergency shelter—is not completely random. According to one recent article,

> *there is a particular subpopulation that tends to avoid shelters. Members of this subpopulation tend to be more mistrustful of authority, are resistant to services, and have negative perceptions of shelters...They often wish to avoid the regulations often imposed by shelters including the gender segregation that forces couples to live apart, restrictions on pets, and attendance at religious services...[3]*

The same study found that persons sleeping outside, compared with those sleeping in emergency shelters, had experienced homelessness for longer periods and were suffering from greater vulnerabilities according to the VI-SPDAT assessment tool.

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2 Wusinich, C., Bond, L., Nathanson, A., & Padgett, D. K. (2019). "If you're gonna help me, help me": Barriers to housing among unsheltered homeless adults. Evaluation and Program Planning, 76, 101673.
3 Weare, C. (2021). Housing outcomes for homeless individuals in street outreach compared to shelter. *Journal of Poverty,* 25(6), 543-561. Quote is from pp. 545-546.

Increased vulnerabilities[4]

There is reason to be concerned about the plight of persons sleeping outside. In addition to the fact that they are without permanent housing, other reasons for concern include the following.

> *Living without adequate shelter exposes one to cold weather, hot weather and precipitation, all of which can compromise a person's health.*

Exposure to extreme weather and precipitation. Living without adequate shelter exposes one to cold weather, hot weather and precipitation, all of which can compromise a person's health. Cold weather can trigger frostbite, hypothermia and pneumonia. Hot weather can lead to heat exhaustion, heat stroke, dehydration and skin cancer. And precipitation can lead to fungal infections and other skin problems. It is also worth noting that exposure to both extreme heat and extreme cold can be fatal.

Physical and sexual violence. When sleeping outside, it is unlikely that staffing is provided, making things akin to the 'wild west.' This is especially the case when rough sleeping takes place off the so-called beaten path. Further, some groups of rough sleepers may have an understanding amongst one another that formal law enforcement is not to be called. Sometimes there is gang activity.

Property theft. Persons sleeping outside lack opportunities to secure their personal belongings, which can be especially problematic when they are sleeping or need to leave their sleeping area to obtain food or other supplies. This leaves them vulnerable to theft, as well as removal by law enforcement officials. It can be difficult to prove ownership when filing a police report. What is more, history with law enforcement, such as active warrants, can also create barriers to legal process.

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Risk of fire and flooding. When people sleep outside, they may try to heat their sleeping area (e.g., a tent) or cook food. This creates fire-related risks associated with open flames, unsafe wiring, gasoline and propane; and these fire-related risks are often used as a pretext for the dismantling of encampments by law enforcement officials.[5] People's belongings can also be damaged during flooding.

Lack of healthcare. In order to remain healthy, people need to receive high quality healthcare from teams of health professionals. Seeing a family physician consistently over time, and establishing trust with that physician, is very important. Sleeping outside can make such primary healthcare inaccessible, especially if the outdoor sleeper frequently

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4 This section of the chapter borrows extensively from OrgCode. (2020b). *How to assess and understand large-scale encampments* [Webinar]. Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness.

5 Falvo, N. (2021). *Innovation in homelessness system planning: A scan of 13 Canadian cities.* https://nickfalvo.ca/innovation-in-homelessness-system-planning-a-scan-of-13-canadian-cities/.

moves (possibly relocating in response to pressure from law enforcement officials).

Lack of assistance finding housing. It is important for persons experiencing homelessness to engage in searches for affordable housing. This can include getting on wait lists for subsidized housing and other resources, updating their status on such wait lists, and applying for rent supplements or housing allowances. Sleeping outside, especially in multiple locations, makes it more challenging for a person to undertake all such activities. It can also make it more challenging for program officials to locate persons when resources (e.g., housing) become available.

Lack of income support. While rules pertaining to income assistance vary both across and within countries, having an actual address typically makes receipt of income assistance possible. Program officials often require a home address, and important documentation is typically sent in the mail to recipients. Sleeping outside typically means not having a mailing address.

Not surprisingly, rough sleepers have shorter lifespans than persons living in emergency shelters. In fact, a recent Boston study found the mortality rate[6] for rough sleepers to be nearly three times higher than that of all persons in Boston experiencing homelessness.[7]

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6 Recall from Chapter 2 that the mortality rate measures the frequency of death in a population during a specific time frame.

7 Roncarati, J. S., Baggett, T. P., O'Connell, J. J., Hwang, S. W., Cook, E. F., Krieger, N., & Sorensen, G. (2018). Mortality among unsheltered homeless adults in Boston, Massachusetts, 2000-2009. *JAMA Internal Medicine,* 178(9), 1242-1248.

Encampments

One important reason people prefer encampments over sleeping in smaller groups (or by themselves) pertains to perceptions of safety.

We often hear of rough sleepers sleeping in groups—sometimes groups of hundreds of persons. And we often call such groups of outdoor sleepers *encampments*. Other terms are also used for such groups. According to one recent report written for a United States audience: *"The term encampment is widely used by journalists and researchers to describe these groups, but other terms include tent cities, homeless settlements, and homeless camps."*[8]

One important reason people prefer encampments over sleeping in smaller groups (or by themselves) pertains to perceptions of safety.[9] According the same US report:

> *People who stay in encampments may see them as offering greater safety and protection from police harassment and aggression...and from assaults or the theft of belongings...than if they were unsheltered on their own...Some cities respond to the presence of an established encampment by providing bathroom facilities and other basic services, making encampments seem to be a reasonable alternative to constant moving, threats of eviction, or shelters (p. 5).*

The report continues, arguing that encampments

> *can be found in busy neighborhoods in large cities, isolated rural areas, and everywhere in between. Encampments may be as small as a cluster of 8 to 10 households next to a highway entrance ramp, or they may encompass multiple structures scattered across several acres of parkland or industrial areas. The encampments that are visible to outside observers take many forms, including tents, lean-to shacks and shanties, and groups of cars or vans; other encampments that are not so visible are hidden in manmade infrastructure or natural features.*[10]

8 Cohen, R., Yetvin, W., & Khadduri, J. (2019). Understanding encampments of people experiencing homelessness and community responses: Emerging evidence as of late 2018. *Available at SSRN 3615828.* The quote is taken from p. 1.

9 Cohen, R., Yetvin, W., & Khadduri, J. (2019). Understanding encampments of people experiencing homelessness and community responses: Emerging evidence as of late 2018. *Available at SSRN 3615828.*

10 Cohen, R., Yetvin, W., & Khadduri, J. (2019). Understanding encampments of people experiencing homelessness and community responses: Emerging evidence as of late 2018. *Available at SSRN 3615828.* This quote is taken from p. 21.

Services and supplies[11]

An obvious question that many readers are no doubt asking at this juncture is: what can be done to help rough sleepers, including persons sleeping in encampments? The following services can be very beneficial to outdoor sleepers.

- Drinking water
- Blankets and weather-appropriate clothing
- Food, food preparation space and food storage
- Toilets
- Structures with roofs and insulation
- Bathing, shower and hand-washing facilities
- Feminine hygiene products
- Laundry
- Access to storage (e.g., lockers)
- Garbage, recycling and composting
- Healthcare and pharmaceutical assistance
- Harm reduction supplies and services (including referrals for detox and treatment)
- Staff who can provide informal or formal counselling, referrals and advocacy
- Help with income assistance applications and advocacy
- Housing search assistance
- Job search assistance

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11 This section of the chapter relies extensively on Donley & Wright (2012), OrgCode (2020a) and OrgCode (2020b). See "Further reading" section of the present chapter for full reference information.

Local responses

Just as encampments take many forms, so too do community responses to encampments. According to one American report:

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> *Community reactions to encampments have taken a variety of forms. Some communities send police to quickly clear ("sweep") encampments, with no attempt to provide services or referrals to help people at the encampment find another place to stay. At the other end of the spectrum, some communities permit ("sanction") encampments formally. Local government or community organizations provide running water and places to prepare food and dispose of waste, as well as healthcare and other services.[12]*

A typology of local responses to encampments, consisting of five possible categories of responses, is summarized in Table 1.

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12 Cohen, R., Yetvin, W., & Khadduri, J. (2019). Understanding encampments of people experiencing homelessness and community responses: Emerging evidence as of late 2018. *Available at SSRN 3615828.* Quote is taken from p. 1.

Table 1:

Typology of responses to encampments

Category	Characteristics
Clearance with little or no support	• Notice of pending sweeps provided only a few days in advance, if at all. • Belongings stored for a short period of time, if at all. • Few if any shelter or service referrals provided. • Regulatory or physical barriers erected to secure the site of the former encampment and keep it from being reoccupied.
Clearance with support	• Notice of pending sweeps provided weeks in advance, often by trained outreach workers who have experience working with people experiencing homelessness. • Longer-term storage of belongings available. • Referrals to shelter or services provided by outreach workers, who also accompany the first responders and sanitation crews who clear encampments.
Benign ignorance	• Public officials are aware of encampment but decide to say little or nothing publicly. • No clearance takes place. • Few if any services are provided by public officials to encampment residents.
Tacit acceptance	• Encampments allowed to persist regardless of whether laws explicitly authorize or prohibit their existence. • Longer-term storage of belongings provided by local officials. • Basic services or infrastructure provided, in particular to address public health and sanitation concerns (e.g., portable toilets, showers, and potable water). • Outreach workers may visit the encampment to provide referrals to permanent housing, shelter, and services.
Formal sanctioning	• Encampments permitted by law on public and or privately owned property, though usually only in designated locations. • Rules may govern the size, location, or duration of encampments. • A public agency or non-profit organization may manage encampments. • Infrastructure and public services—e.g., laundry and potable water, common spaces for eating and meeting, lockers for storing belongings (including on a longer term basis), meal services and food donations, job training programs, access to mail and voice mail services—are provided by local officials or volunteers. • Case management may be provided, including assistance applying for transitional or permanent housing and other benefits, appealing denials, and managing funds.

Note. This is a modified version of Exhibit 3, found on pp. 9-10 of Cohen, R., Yetvin, W., & Khadduri, J. (2019). Understanding encampments of people experiencing homelessness and community responses: Emerging evidence as of late 2018. *Available at SSRN 3615828.* Special thanks to Hope Jamieson for suggesting the 'benign ignorance' category.

Conclusion

A considerable amount of outdoor sleeping takes place in most high-income countries. Among other things, it reminds us of the need for more affordable housing with appropriate social work supports (e.g., more Housing First). It also exposes the many shortcomings of emergency shelters, thereby creating considerable awkwardness among homelessness officials, members of the general public and elected officials. Whereas emergency shelters have the potential to 'contain a problem,' keeping homelessness inside and out of view to most, outdoor sleeping is very 'in your face' and forces public debate.

> *As long as there is both a lack of affordable housing and inadequate conditions inside emergency shelters, there will be people wanting to sleep outside.*

As long as there is both a lack of affordable housing and inadequate conditions inside emergency shelters, there will be people wanting to sleep outside. And people sleeping outside are very vulnerable to extreme weather, violence and theft.

Local responses to outdoor sleeping (including to encampments) can vary, depending largely on the local political climate. A considerable range of services and supplies are required by outdoor sleepers. Communities should therefore strive to deliver both as they continue to create more affordable housing.

Further reading

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Olson, N., & Pauly, B. (Forthcoming). 'Forced to become a community': Encampment residents' perspectives on systemic failures, precarity, and constrained choice. *International Journal on Homelessness.*

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About the author

Nick Falvo is a research consultant based in Calgary, Canada. He has a PhD in Public Policy and is Editor-in-Chief, North America, of the *International Journal on Homelessness*. He has academic affiliation at both Carleton University and Case Western Reserve University. Prior to pursuing his PhD, he spent 10 years doing front-line work directly with persons experiencing homelessness.

Acknowledgements

About this project

This is Chapter 3 of a sole-authored, open access interdisciplinary textbook intended to provide an introduction to homelessness for students, service providers, researchers and advocates. Focusing on the English-speaking countries of the OECD, it will discuss causes, solutions, challenges, successes, and innovations in the sector. It will serve as 'launching pad' for people new to the sector, as well as a refresher for experienced practitioners.

In addition to being open access, this book is different from other books in two key ways: 1) by focusing on all English-speaking countries of the OECD; and 2) by providing an overview of recent innovations in the sector—i.e., what's new, and what's working well?—making it useful to practitioners.

- The book's **intent** is primarily to serve as the main textbook for a university course designed for senior-level undergraduate as well as graduate students. It also serves as a resource for senior leadership in the homelessness sector.
- Book's **main themes**: contributing factors to homelessness; health conditions and health care challenges of persons experiencing homelessness; the unique needs of various subpopulations; staffing challenges in the sector; an in-depth examination of innovative practices; and solutions to homelessness.
- Book **objectives**: assist readers in understanding the fundamentals of homelessness; introduce them to both successes and ongoing challenges in the sector; and leave them feeling better-informed, able to make critical assessments, confident and empowered to take action within their own respective spheres of influence.

Table of contents (anticipated)

Target audience

- The book is intended primarily for course use, its primary audience being senior undergraduate students, graduate students and course instructors in English-speaking countries of the OECD. It can also be useful to senior leadership in the homelessness sector (e.g., board members, CEOs and staff).
- The book is intended for courses where homelessness is either the only focus or a major focus. For example, a course on housing and homelessness could benefit from this book. Standalone chapters could also be of great value in various disciplines.
- Some of these courses might be taught outside of the university setting—for example, by the UK-based Chartered Institute of Housing and by its counterparts in other countries, such as CIH Canada.
- The book can be used as either a primary or supplementary text.
- The book is intended to have international appeal, focusing on the English-speaking countries of the OECD: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
- Homelessness is widely researched and quickly evolving, as new approaches to both prevention and response are being developed. Much of the book's content will therefore be new even to experienced researchers and practitioners.

All material for this book is available free of charge at https://nickfalvo.com/. Newly-completed chapters will be uploaded throughout the year. The author can be reached at falvo.nicholas@gmail.com.