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# RADIO HOME: GIVING A VOICE TO THE HOMELESS IN SPOKANE, WASHINGTON

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*RADIO HOME: GIVING A VOICE TO THE HOMELESS IN SPOKANE,  
WASHINGTON*

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A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement

for the Degree

Master of Arts in Critical GIS and Public Anthropology

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By

Aaron R. Bocook

Spring 2017

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Homelessness is a damaging and chronic problem, often mischaracterized simply as a problem with an individual—being without permanent shelter—resulting from a set of bad traits and choices. However, a deeper understanding of homelessness is not focused solely on the experience of being homeless, nor is it focused on a word referring to the qualities of un-housed people, but instead is a social condition—a set of social relations and structures that reflect how housed society understands those who lack shelter (Mitchell, 2011). In fact, much of the public’s perception of homelessness is that it’s a lifestyle of choice (Ravenhill, 2008). The discourse and stigma attached to homelessness and its surrounding problems (addiction to drugs and alcohol, mental illness, unemployment) are deep and pervasive, and generally result in the criminalization of homelessness, and temporary fixes to the problem rather than a search for understanding and lasting solutions.

Using the medium of local radio, and focused in Spokane, Washington, this project’s goal is to disseminate useful information about the structural nature of homelessness and the destructive neo-liberal political processes that seek to criminalize the things that homeless people need to do to survive. Titled *Radio Home*, the proposed radio program would engage on air the people that serve, represent, or otherwise interact with Spokane’s homeless population. These would include representatives of shelters, food banks, meal sites, faith based organizations, Spokane’s Community Court, and members of the Spokane Homeless Coalition.

Most importantly, this project seeks to give a voice to the homeless population through a series of pre-recorded interviews to be aired podcast style on the radio program. Hopefully, hearing these humanizing first-hand testimonies of being homeless combined with theory and literature on the topic will help to soften the stigma and stereotypes attached to the problem.

## CHAPTER II

### Methods

If this project had to be reduced to a singular concept, that concept would be community engagement. The process of community engagement suggests that there are different ways of learning, different ways of teaching, and even different ways to achieve tenure and promotion (Whiteford and Strom, 2013). The goals of applied anthropology and other applied social sciences (in this case, public anthropology) fit well with the principles of community engagement: a belief in reciprocity, respect for various cultural and social differences, a commitment to making positive change, and the application of anthropological theory and methods outside of a classroom setting (Whiteford and Strom, 2013).

The ultimate goal of this project is to spread information about the structures that cause homelessness, and to share stories from the homeless, in their own voices over a specific geographical area (in this case, the Spokane area), with the hope of changing minds in regard to the stigma and stereotypes surrounding homelessness. However, there was also an underlying practical purpose for the project, with a few simple goals which pertain to me, and what I would have to offer my community upon its completion. These goals were:

- 1.) Build a project that could potentially benefit the community.
- 2.) Find a community partner willing to back the project
- 3.) Implement the project.

The first step was the most complex, as it changed several times due to numerous obstacles, including injury, severe illness, public health quarantines, practicality for potential

community partners, and the existence of deadlines. Long before it became complicated, there was the basic idea of community engagement. I had to examine a community need, and build a project based around this need. Though homelessness as a topic and a social problem has been well studied, its structural roots are often ignored in public discourse, resulting in a public perception that it is a lifestyle of choice (Ravenhill, 2008). In other words, much of the general public may not even be aware of concepts like structural violence, or structural causes of a phenomenon like homelessness, and rather blame it on a problem with the person (Mitchell, 2010). Having a public that is better educated on the issue could be a benefit to someone experiencing homelessness. How could these ideas be spread?

About a year ago, a professor and I were discussing the concept of a podcast, or even a radio show that featured homeless voices. Originally, we talked about a sort of “day in the life,” type show, in which the recording device would follow a homeless individual through an average day, capturing candid experiences, as well as responding to interview questions. With my training as both an anthropologist and a journalist, I thought conducting interviews worthy of broadcast was something I could manage. However, considering the time and energy needed to make a project like that work well, the idea evolved into a shorter, one-time interview wherever the subject felt most comfortable, sometimes still including the sounds of the setting, complete with the ringing telephones and background chatter that was ultimately broadcast on the radio.

I was approved by the EWU Institutional Review Board to conduct 25 of these interviews. I will refer to this group from now on as Interview Group A. Out of a total of 22 interviews that were solicited either by me or by a subject who was aware of and interested in participating, I only managed to actually meet with and record an interview with five individuals. Though I had many lengthy conversations and gained much needed perspective from all the

people I talked with, only the stories from the five individuals who agreed to read and sign the consent form were formally interviewed and recorded. Two interviews were conducted in my own home. One interview was conducted at a subject's home (this subject had been a homeless teen, leading to several bouts of homelessness later in life), one in an obscure pizza parlor, and one on the street. The two interviews in my home were with subjects that I knew. I actually interviewed one of them twice; once for the chapter of this thesis titled "Invisible," and again for *Radio Home*. The in-home interview was also someone I knew. The pizza parlor interview was someone I met through the internet, and the interview on the street, I just happened to have my interview materials with me and met an interested person while walking around downtown.

Early on in this project, I gained permission from Catholic Charities Spokane to use both their House of Charity and St. Margaret's Shelter as a source for interview subjects, and as interview locations. Just as I was ready to start interviewing last fall, the House of Charity had an outbreak of norovirus. The whole facility was quarantined, complete with white tents surrounding its perimeter. Instead of interviewing in the shelters, I decided to ask each interview subject if they had ever stayed at a shelter or other temporary housing.

At the same time, I was working on "Invisible: Homeless in Spokane," (Chapter IV) as a directed study, a series of in depth stories about the portion of the homeless population that is not included in any official count; the many homeless families with children who are doubling up with relatives, people who simply don't report their situation, or don't experience homelessness for a long enough time to be a part of an official count. This portion of the homeless population going uncounted not only makes the official numbers smaller, but also directly affects the amount of funding received by agencies seeking to help the homeless (HUD, 2017). Although a change in the structure of our government, economic systems and financial institutions may be

the ultimate solution to homelessness, there is still an absolute need to fund services for those currently experiencing homelessness.

The difference between the “Invisible” interviews and the *Radio Home* interviews was how the questions were asked and recorded. The “Invisible” interviews, while sticking largely to approved interview protocol, contain more follow up questions for clarity and detail, giving the resulting stories more detail and depth. For the purpose of being broadcast on the radio, the *Radio Home* interviews are one question at a time, asked and recorded separately to make easy to digest chunks of audio. During the recordings, I kept notes on what topics the subject was covering for each question. This was extremely helpful while building the episode that aired; instead of re-listening to every recording, I could see what the subject talked about for any question. The other purpose for recording the interviews this way was for ease of storage and extraction. Each file I recorded was trimmed, and sent to a secure email folder divided by the pseudonym of the subject, and question number. Within each file, I transcribed my notes from the interview to see the topics that each question covered, so for future episodes, whatever the topic was, I could quickly scan through the files for a subject who was talking about the topic at hand. Although there was only one official episode of *Radio Home*, this method of filing and storage worked beautifully.

There was also a second interview group for *Radio Home*, made up of people in Spokane who provide a service to, represent, or otherwise interact with the homeless population. I will refer to this group from now on as Interview Group B. Interview Group B would have been the guests on the show, had *Radio Home* become a full time show. Only one guest was interviewed live on the radio, Ryan Olerich, Chair of the Spokane Homeless Coalition (referred to as SHC for remainder). The SHC is made up of over 460 individuals representing more than 150 agencies,

meal sites, churches and ministries committed to helping those in need in the Spokane area (Spokane Homeless Coalition, 2017), making them a great resource for someone doing a project like mine. To match the number of interview subjects in Interview Group A, I conducted off-air interviews with hypothetical members of Interview group B. I interviewed individuals from Union Gospel Mission, Priority Spokane, and Spokane Low Income Housing Consortium, all representing their organizations at the SHC monthly meetings. I also interviewed an individual from The Orion Project who does not attend SHC meetings. During the months I was conducting these interviews, I was also focused on my next goals; finding a community partner, and implementing the project.

## CHAPTER III

### *Radio Home*

I first reached out to KYRS in reference to this project in December, 2016 when I filled out their online application and clicked submit, though, I've been aware of them for years. A friend of mine hosted a hip-hop show on the station over a decade ago, and I've been a fan of a show of theirs, *Sonic Trash*, for a couple of years now. In winter quarter 2016, my program's community engagement class had KYRS volunteer coordinator Tay Sanders as a guest. I talked to Tay about possible volunteer work that resulted in my band playing one of a series of benefit concerts for the station on the Saranac building rooftop. I liked the station a lot, had made meaningful contacts with a few of the people who volunteered there, and thought my idea for a show would be a good fit.

KYRS began as an idea called Thin Air in 1999, when activists in the Spokane community learned that the Federal Communications Commission planned to open public airwaves to low power FM stations. These "LPFM" stations were 100 watts or less, had to be non-profit and non commercial, and had limited rights compared to full power public and commercial radio stations (KYRS, 2017). Thin Air became a formal project for a local non-profit, Citizens for Clean Air, in 2000, and has been broadcasting in Spokane since the fall of 2003. KYRS achieved its own 501(c) 3 status in 2007, and became a full power, non-commercial station in 2011, broadcasting with 6,800 watts and reaching as far north as Kettle Falls, WA.

The station relies on volunteers and donations to sustain their programming, with the mission of "providing programming to diverse communities and unserved or underserved groups, [and providing] a forum for neglected perspectives and discussions on important local, national and global issues, reflecting values of social, economic and environmental justice,

peace, human rights, democracy, multiculturalism, freedom of expression and social change” (KYRS, 2016, 2017).

The station’s proposal process was fairly straightforward:

- Proposals must be submitted in writing; either by e-mail or by postal mail. Proposals are ranked on programming needs.
- If a proposal is accepted by KYRS, the candidate is invited to come to the station for an interview.
- The candidate must successfully complete the interview and training process before the show itself is approved for broadcast.
- All programs are the property of KYRS.
- KYRS cannot accept proposals from groups or organizations, only from individuals.

Based on the station’s mission, and the content I was proposing, I assumed my show had a good chance of being picked up. After submitting the application, I received a reply a few days later from KYRS Program Director Meredith Jeffries thanking me for my interest in the station, and asking that I give them four to six weeks to review the proposal. All I could do, for at least a while, was sit and wait.

The 2016-2017 school year had already been rough. A friend of mine died in an ATV accident just as fall quarter started. A few weeks later, I hurt my back and was confined to my bed for most of the month of October. For most of November, I was conducting interviews for “Invisible,” a directed study that would become a presentation at the 2017 Northwest Anthropological Conference, as well as a chapter in this thesis. While my radio show proposal was being reviewed, I kept working on interviews, and took a side gig as an exam proctor. In early February, while proctoring an exam to just under 150 WSU pharmacology students, I was

exposed to the norovirus, the very illness I was trying to avoid at the Spokane House of Charity. The next day I spent nearly eight hours in the emergency room being pumped with IV fluids and anti-nausea medication. I was covered with a hot blanket and given an orange popsicle for dehydration. I was so weak and tired for the next two weeks that I accomplished nothing. It was nearly a month before I could focus on this project again.

I still had not heard from KYRS. I sent a follow up email after the said time had passed. I spoke with Martin Faulks, the host of *Sonic Trash*, to see how long the process took for him, and how long he thought it should take. He agreed it was strange I had not heard back from the station yet. He said that just before I had applied, long time program director Michael Moon Bear had stepped down to do underwriting full time. Meredith Jeffries had taken his place, but had just had a baby around the time of her initial response, and took time off from work. This left Dana Matthews in charge, who was sifting through months worth of work left by the two previous program directors.

I decided to go down to KYRS in person to see if there was someone I could talk to directly. I went on a night I knew Martin Faulks would be there, as he was my best contact at the station. He introduced me to a few other station volunteers. We all talked, I told them about my show proposal, and they all said they would bring it up when they saw the appropriate parties. Finally, after waiting for most of December, all of January, February, and March, I got an email from Dana Matthews in mid-April about meeting up to talk about the show.

My follow up email had indeed been overlooked in the transition of program managers. Dana Matthews reviewed my show proposal, and discussed it with some of the other station staff and volunteers, including Jesse Quintana, host of KYRS show *The Science of Poverty*, and they

agreed on what should happen. Both Dana Matthews and Jesse Quintana thought that a show featuring homeless voices was worthy of being broadcast on KYRS.

However, *The Science of Poverty* covered some of the same ground. I was also transparent with the station; I intended to use the radio show as a part of my master's thesis. I was planning to graduate soon, and would be seeking a full time job. Rather than re-arranging their schedule and training someone who suddenly may not have time to perform the duties of a KYRS host, they thought that allowing me to take over their pre-existing show for one episode, as guest host, would serve me and the station better.

Luckily, this agreed with a suggestion from EWU Institutional Review Board Chair Dr. Sarah Keller, that for the purpose of this thesis, only one episode of *Radio Home* needed to be produced. Ideally, I would have chosen to host at least three episodes, so that the most compelling one or even a compilation could be used for the thesis.

The episode of *The Science of Poverty* featuring the *Radio Home* segment with me as guest host was set to air on KYRS Thin Air Community Radio Saturday, May 6, 2017, at 4:00 p.m. I met up with Jesse Quintana the Friday before to edit the audio files that were going to be played on the radio. I waited outside the station in the sun. I could see Jesse walking up the sidewalk, a shortish guy with a little moustache, squinting at the sun through his glasses, wearing oversized headphones and a backpack. He is a very friendly guy, but I can tell he unapologetically sizes up anyone who says they are out to help people. We sat and edited the files for language that broke FCC regulations, and long dead spaces in the audio. We arranged them neatly on the desktop for the program director to convert to the necessary format and put them into a playlist.

I had made an outline for all 55 minutes of the show, complete with an extra question if there was time left over. While we were editing, I noticed there was a time error on one of the files, but I thought it had already been trimmed for dead air. When I got home, I looked through my files, and compared them with the files I sent to Jesse. One of the files I sent, the one with the time error, was actually the wrong file. I sent Jesse an email and a text message.

Jesse asked me to be at the radio station at 3:30 p.m., 30 minutes before the show aired. I was about 40 minutes early, because sometimes getting in can be difficult. And I was right; the elevators were turned off because it was Saturday. I had to be let in through a secure door that led to two flights of stairs up to the KYRS studio. Jesse was up there already. We went back down to find Ryan Olerich, Chair of the SHC and my guest for *Radio Home*. We all went back up the two flights of stairs and talked about what we could and could not say on the radio, and how the show would proceed. I brought up switching out the file, and he said we would be unable to do this. The computer programs we needed to access could only be accessed with director passwords, and there was no director there on Saturdays. It happened that this file was one that never needed editing. I retrieved the file from my iPhone via my *Radio Home* email account, and when the time came, played it full volume with my phone speaker pressed to the microphone.

Once we were sitting around the sound board, wearing headphones with microphones in front of our faces, I got nervous for the first time. Jesse assured me that something else would indeed go wrong, and that we would be fluid. After introducing the show, Jesse handed the show over to me. I launched into an overview of the project; listening back, it sounded nervous and rushed. I introduced Ryan Olerich and asked him the first question, about his involvement with the SHC, and its goals and mission. The whole first part of the show demonstrated to me, and I'd imagine to the audience, that I have never hosted a radio show before. I felt like I was speaking

too quickly, and moving forward without discussion or retort. When I asked Ryan the first question, I didn't say anything back. I just continued to the next part of the show. I remember thinking we were going to run out of time.

The next part is what I was most interested in. I finally got to put the voices of the homeless men and women I interviewed on the radio. I introduced Michelle, one of the earliest interviews I conducted for this project. Hearing her and my other interview subject, Scott, on the radio was a very rewarding experience.

Their stories about becoming and being homeless were much different. Michelle had been struggling to get by while balancing work, classes at EWU, and her 18-year-old twins moving out for the first time, and ended up being homeless unexpectedly for nearly two months before finding a safe, livable apartment that accepted her Section 8 housing voucher.

Scott had been homeless on and off since his teens, living with various relatives and couch surfing, but was chronically homeless for about seven years later in life. He started using drugs in his teens, and was addicted to hard drugs for most of his time being homeless, often committing petty crimes to survive. At the time of our interview, Scott had been stably housed with his mother for about a year, and was clean from hard drugs for nearly a year and a half.

This was also where Jesse's prophecy of something else going wrong came true. The audio files that we spent the previous day meticulously editing and ordering to be put into queue were not the ones in the playlist. The program director missed that we had the polished files lined up neatly on the desktop, and instead extracted the raw files from the hard drive and placed them into the queue instead. So, the first time there were a string of profanities, Jesse and I both had the classic "oh shit" look on our faces when our eyes met. Luckily, there is a safeguard against

breaking these Federal Communications Commission regulations. It's called a dump button. There is an eight second delay on live radio, so if something like this happens, it deletes the previous eight seconds. To the listeners, it just sounds like the radio went out for a split second, and it catches back up to the live feed already in progress. But for the sake of these people having their stories heard, missing eight seconds was a blow. Jesse hit the dump button three separate times during the show. He assured us it would be fine, since it wasn't our fault personally. On the recorded version of the show, the files have been re-edited and are intact.

After Michelle's story, I hit Ryan Olerich with a tougher question, dealing with the structural nature of homelessness, particularly if he knew if any group that is part of the SHC was working on the structural roots of homelessness. I designed this question for a multiple reasons. I knew if I kept hosting this show, eventually I would have a guest who had a background of studying theory on structural violence, and how the structure of our capitalist economic system worked. But, I also knew a lot of guests would lack that background, and have a different idea of what was meant by "structure" in the question.

Ryan talked about Priority Spokane, the non-profit for which he serves as Executive Director. What Priority Spokane does is good. They examine several big problems in Spokane, decide which of these problems should be the "priority," research the problem, and implement projects that work towards solutions. Their current focus is to help stabilize the lives of homeless children, and children who are at-risk of becoming homeless from kindergarten to 8<sup>th</sup> grade and their families in Spokane County. Priority Spokane believes that through their projects in these high-needs schools, they can prevent future trauma to students and their communities (Priority Spokane, 2017). The organization helps parents maintain jobs, and even provides job training and additional education, all things Ryan said he considers to be at the "root" of homelessness.

So, in Ryan Olerich's and Priority Spokane's understanding, preventing people from becoming homeless by providing these services is helping to dismantle a part of the structure that is the cause of homelessness.

I disagree with this. Again, I don't think what they are doing is bad. Preventing homelessness from occurring through providing job training and education may be more than just a band-aid fix, but it is actually still just fighting against the structure. It is teaching people strategies to survive within the structure, and not actually attacking the root of why a person or family must struggle just to stay employed and housed, and not actually working to change the structure that creates these needs.

The next question was big, and I don't think there is a correct answer, but the answer given by a guest says a lot about their or their organization's thinking. Is homelessness a problem that can be solved? Ryan's initial response was to question the meaning of the word "solved." He said he has seen individual lives turned around. He said he thought housing first model is key; provide housing before any other needs are addressed, which gives a person the time and stability to solve other related problems, like addiction or mental health rather than just focusing all of their energy on just surviving. He also told the story of a man he knows who has chosen to live in the woods and won't go back to normal housing.

So, ultimately, Ryan said no, that he doesn't believe there is a solution that includes every person being housed, but that we can work on all of the problems related, and work on prevention, and that this approach will go a long way in solving the problem. His answer gave a clue to his organization's knowledge of structure. It is a practical stance to take with our current economic system, which produces homelessness. Also, the examples he gives are almost

exclusively through the lens of homelessness being a problem with the individual; not being able to keep a job, not having sought an education or advanced job training, or making the choice to live in the woods, which actually reinforces another stumbling block in the way of finding real structural solutions to homelessness, that it is a lifestyle of choice, and problem with the individual, detached from the holistic nature of the problem (Ravenhill, 2008, Mitchell, 2011).

The last question for Ryan was another one I intended to ask all my guests, which is how the people of Spokane can help out. I asked this in all of the additional interviews I conducted, too, and the answer, barring detail, was universal. Volunteer. Many non-profits don't have adequate funding. They need people to help out. Another important part that Ryan added was to simply ask organizations what they need, pointing out that what we may assume is one of their needs actually isn't. Sometimes a shelter doesn't need food donations. Sometimes they need socks and underwear, or feminine products. This could be considered a sibling question to one asked of the homeless in my interviews, which is what services are missing in Spokane. Eventually, one of my goals with this show was to compare what services are available, and what services the homeless say are missing. It would be a good opportunity to make sure the homeless are getting the services they need, or if a service truly is missing, find an organization that is able and willing to provide it.

Like all projects, *Radio Home* needs a fairly heavy handed critique. I think that the problems with the show, at least the problems I'm responsible for, could be solved by just continuing the show; getting practice, and learning better interview techniques. I would imagine there will always be broken FCC regulations, incorrect files, and using an iPhone in an unintended emergency capacity. But, here is my critique of the show, and especially of my performance.

First, I needed to calm my nerves. As mentioned, I started off speaking way too quickly, which eventually decreased the length of the show by nearly 13 minutes. Even though I made a minute to minute outline and a script, timing myself at home, while I was calm, was not adequate compared to having hands on experience with live radio. Second, I didn't engage my guest after his responses, which makes for boring radio. There should be at least some conflict. Especially after the questions about structure, I should have been prepared to have a meaningful exchange. And, it got worse. I totally backed off, because I could tell Ryan was feeling some pressure. I conceded to his point on preventative measures—or even teaching people to survive within the structure—being synonymous with working to change the structure. With practice, and conversations with those more experienced with myself, I may have instead introduced an idea to him that was contrary to his response, just to see what he thought about it. Whether he agreed or disagreed, a theory containing important information would be heard live on the radio, and a discussion could begin.

Again, I think with more practice, my training as a journalist and my background in social theory would start to reveal itself. Finally, I need to critique the medium itself. It is possible that having a show like this on KYRS Thin Air Community Radio could be equated to the old cliché of preaching to the choir. It's fairly safe to say that many of the listeners of KYRS are at least left leaning, and are probably knowledgeable about social issues. The show could still possibly educate these people on some in-depth or very specific aspects of a problem, but overall, a show like this may better achieve its goal as a podcast posted to social media, or some other public platform that is able to reach a wider and more diverse audience.

Even though I was only able to host one episode, I managed to fulfill my three goals. I built a project, I found a community partner, and I implemented the project. It could be

improved. I was invited by Jesse Quintana to come back on the show anytime I wanted, and to reach out to him with ideas in the future. Most importantly, even with three separate eight second audio dumps, I still managed to get homeless voices heard on the radio for nearly 17 minutes of the 41 minutes and 40 seconds that the show aired. To me, that was its success.

## CHAPTER IV

### Invisible: Homeless in Spokane

The definitions of homelessness are seemingly as many as its causes. It is defined practically by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as “individuals or families living in a place not meant for habitation, safe haven or emergency shelter, transitional housing, or is being evicted within a week with no subsequent residence identified (HUD, 2016).” This covers much of the visible homeless population, as well as a large part of those we don’t see; those living in transitional housing, and people who could become homeless at any time. It is safe to say most people’s definition of homelessness, or perception of homeless people, deals with the visible homeless. The U.S. Department of Education more broadly includes “those who are unstably housed or doubling up with other families (Department of Education, 2016).”

The problem with these definitions is the same problem we have with how we count our homeless population. To receive federal and state funding for homeless services, every year Spokane and other cities are required to conduct an annual Point-In-Time count, or “PIT” count of persons experiencing homelessness during the last 10 days in January (City of Spokane, 2016, HUD, 2017). Despite our best efforts, people get left out.

These more invisible homeless, combined with the transient nature of the homeless life (living in cars, not checking in with or living at shelters, those with jobs paying to live in motels, etc.) make it very difficult to get an accurate count of just how many homeless there are, even in smaller cities like Spokane (Beck, 2015). This chapter is a collection of examples that deal with this phenomenon precisely, the invisible homeless of Spokane.

In the fall of 2016, while the Spokane Homeless Shelter was quarantined due to a norovirus outbreak, and I was recovering from a back injury, I still wanted to work on my approved research in some capacity. “Invisible” first started as a directed study intended to reflect on the times I have been homeless, and to hear the stories of two friends of mine who had been homeless. This spring, a portion of this reflection and research was presented at the 2017 Northwest Anthropological Conference, and now all three stories are included as a chapter in this thesis. While reflecting on my own experience, it occurred to me that I was never homeless long enough to have been aware of the PIT count. I never reached out to any organizations for services, or stayed in a shelter. I assumed some of my friends who had been homeless may have had the same experience. And there were probably even more people who needed services and either didn’t get them, or were ashamed or embarrassed to receive help.

My hope is that these stories testify to the actual size of problem of homelessness in cities like Spokane. Relying on one-day PIT counts, generally the sum of those living in shelters, (981 individuals reported January 28, 2016) (Morley, 2016) is an inadequate way to estimate the number of homeless living in Spokane, but what better way do we have? Even though a better method of counting the homeless population could generate more aid money, the structures that cause homelessness are still not addressed. Within these stories, I have also analyzed, through the lens of literature, the structural problems that got me and my friends into this situation, again, with the hope that if stories like this were shared more often, people would not only be satisfied for short term band-aid solutions, but instead would seek lasting structural changes to combat problems like homelessness.

### “Have You Ever Had Microwaved Turkey?”

The first time my friend Lee remembers being homeless, he was six years old. It was only for one day, but the experience stuck with him. It was 1986, and his mom married a man she had met just a month earlier. Instead of a traditional honeymoon, the new family got in the car and drove to Tijuana, Mexico. It was a cheap trip for them to take. Lee remembers his mom and new stepdad talking about discounted cigarettes and the promise of a fun day for everyone.

Along the way, the newlyweds got into a fight. At a gas station near the border, while the family was out of the car, Lee’s stepdad drove away, leaving him, his mom and younger sister stranded. They hitchhiked back to Orange County, and stayed in a crisis shelter for the night. After that, they moved out of their Huntington Beach apartment and into Lee’s grandmother’s house in Anaheim. His great grandparents also lived there, and from time to time, his uncle, making the three bedroom house seem very small. He remembers sharing a room and a bed with his mom and sister until they could afford a place of their own.

Ages six to 16 were a mix of stability and chaos. They would have an apartment for awhile, then his mom would write a few bad checks and they would have to leave. At one point, they stayed in Ensenada, Mexico, with the same stepdad who left them stranded at the border. They moved back to California within a year.

It was 1997. His mom had re-married. They had stopped paying rent at their apartment in Garden Grove and were facing eviction. With Lee’s new stepdad facing jail time due to pending drug charges, he made the choice to flee the state with his family. With no destination in mind except “far from Orange County,” they hit the road in a U-Haul rented under a bogus name, making their way up I-5. They stopped in Portland, Oregon, in Seattle, Washington, and then

headed east on I-90. Their car broke down in Sprague, Washington, about 35 miles outside of Spokane.

There was no way they were going to stay in Sprague. They had spent their entire life in and around L.A., and were completely unfamiliar with the setting of rural Eastern Washington. Lee's stepdad had been a tow truck driver in California. The mechanic in Sprague said there were lots of jobs like that in Spokane. It wasn't a huge city like L.A., but it was a metropolis compared to its rural satellites. They were just about out of money, and decided to make Spokane, Washington their default new home.

They had no friends, family or connections in Spokane. For the first two months, their family, including two adults, two children, a dog, a ferret, a rat, and three cats, lived in a cramped room in a weekly rate motel next door to the Hells Angels clubhouse on Sprague Avenue. They celebrated their first Thanksgiving in Spokane eating microwaved turkey.

What the mechanic had told them was true. Lee's stepdad got a job as a tow truck driver right away; his mom got a job doing dispatch for the same company shortly after. They got a house just a few blocks away from the motel a few days before Christmas. Lee and his sister were settling in, and after missing over two months of school due to the move, they enrolled at Lewis and Clark High School, and started class just after the New Year.

His parents had steady work, and were making okay money. They worked out a rent-to-own deal with their landlord, moved into another house just a few blocks away, and started renting out the first house. Things were going well until their tenant started to fall behind on rent, forcing the family to pay their own rent, plus the agreed upon rent-to-own payments. They had also filled out paperwork to start purchasing the second house, thinking that moving into

property management would be more lucrative than the punch-the-time-clock lifestyle of the towing industry.

Not long after signing the paperwork, they became aware that they were victims of a scam by the owner of the second property. A new Fred Meyer was being built on the site, and their entire block was scheduled for demolition. Their landlady had kept a close eye on the house, taking down the City of Spokane notices to vacate while the family was at work and school. When the houses around them were vacated and boarded up, they realized what was happening. Finally, they were at home when a final notice to vacate was served. They had no choice but to leave the property.

Lee said he remembers thinking the Fred Meyer was a good thing; the East Central neighborhood was a food desert, with just a handful of convenience stores, and Sonnenberg's, a tiny local grocery store. Even with the Fred Meyer, located on the south side of the freeway, it was difficult to get to from the north side of the freeway without a car. Only a couple of north/south streets and walking bridges have connected the freeway-divided East Central Spokane neighborhood since I-90 was completed in the 1960s.

With a tenant still in the first house, they had nowhere to go. It was back to the motel. Lee said he remembered seeing people living in the alleyways in his neighborhood back then, and thinking that even though he didn't have a home, at least he and his family were fortunate enough to afford a motel room. It wasn't long before they got into another house; this time in Spokane's West Central neighborhood. Around this time, Lee and his younger sister found out their mom and stepdad had been secretly using methamphetamine.

This was the beginning of the breakdown of their family. His mom was using drugs, but was trying to keep it a secret, but his stepdad started openly smoking methamphetamine in the house. There were drug dealers living with them. Lee said he will never forget watching a man cook cocaine into crack rocks on their kitchen stove.

One day he came home to find his mom unable to stand, lying naked in her bedroom in a puddle of vomit, mumbling incoherently. He thought she might be having an overdose, and called an ambulance. His stepdad was using drugs so heavily he couldn't handle the situation and left the house. The paramedics found that his mom was actually in diabetic shock; she had unknowingly developed diabetes, thinking its symptoms were related to her drug addiction. She also had an abscess on her leg from using dirty needles, and had to have surgery to remove a significant portion of the muscle from her inner thigh.

Since his younger sister was still minor, a social worker got involved. While his mom was in the hospital, his stepdad had spent all of his own money on drugs, and there was no food in the house. He and his sister were given food stipends worth \$11.00 per day each through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a program of Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, which they could only use at the cafeteria in the hospital where their mom was. His mom was in a coma for 11 days, and was in the hospital for a total of 40 days. For awhile, social workers were checking on him and his sister every day to make sure they were okay. Were they making it to school? Did they have enough to eat? His stepdad visited the hospital a few times, but was mostly out of the picture. Lee and his sister were staying at the house alone, though according to the state, their stepdad was home too. They were mostly hanging out at the hospital anyway, where they knew they could get food.

When Lee's mom was released from the hospital, his stepdad came back home, too. He had lost his job and was still using drugs, while she had gotten clean in the hospital. They got into a huge fight, resulting in his arrest and charges of domestic violence. TANF said they would cut off assistance, including rent assistance, if they didn't separate. They had already fallen behind on their bills. A furniture company had come by to repossess items that had been defaulted on.

With his stepdad gone, things actually started to seem better. His mom was waiting for disability insurance, and in the meantime programs like TANF and Spokane Neighborhood Action Partners (SNAP) were helping with rent and energy bills, and they were also receiving state food benefits. Even with all of these programs helping, though, they were still barely getting by.

Eventually, the housing assistance was cut off, and they were evicted. For the third time, they were back in a motel. This time was worse than before. The motel was more like a collection of small cabins on Sunset Highway, just outside of downtown Spokane, right where Geiger Boulevard branches off and heads towards I-90. The rent was cheap, which was reflected in the condition of the property.

Lee only spent a few nights there. The busses that ran up Sunset were infrequent, and the motel was a four mile walk from downtown. At barely 18, he spent his nights on friend's couches, occasionally at his girlfriend's house, and depended on programs like Volunteer of America's Crosswalk for food. Eventually his mom got another apartment, and he moved in. This was the last time he would live with her.

His stepdad moved back in, too. They didn't have any assistance, and couldn't keep work. They were both using drugs again. His mom was actually still getting child support; there was money to pay rent and bills, but it had all been going to drugs. Lee described his first few years in Spokane as a never ending battle to have an apartment, keep the bills paid, and have food to eat.

When they were evicted this time, Lee promised himself he would never be in that situation again because of his mom and stepdad. His sister had an apartment with her boyfriend, and he was invited to move in. He got a job in a restaurant, first doing dishes and prep work, and eventually being moved up to line cook. It was 2001, the beginning of a new century, and things were stable in his life for the first time in years.

I met Lee in early 2002. He was selling marijuana to the drummer in my band. He had been selling marijuana for the past few months to make ends meet. He had moved out of his sister's apartment and into his own apartment next door. It was a one bedroom with no furniture, not even a bed. He slept on a pile of blankets on the floor, and actually spent very little time in his apartment. He lost his job at the restaurant, and started falling behind on rent. It was a very familiar situation for him. He tried to talk to his landlord about the situation, but got evicted for being one month behind on rent. He decided to throw a party before leaving the apartment, and asked my band to play. He told me all about his mom and stepdad, and how they had come up here from California. We all thought it was so cool that he was throwing a party before getting kicked out of his apartment.

It was no surprise when I got a call from him asking if I had a couch he could sleep on for a few nights. I had just turned 19, and was still living with my mom. I said it would probably be

okay, but I had to ask her first. He was afraid she would say no, so he asked if he could just sleep in my van instead, and I said that was okay. When my mom found out he was sleeping in my van, she invited him to come inside. This was the very last time he would be homeless. Our house was pretty big, and there was an empty bedroom that she offered him until he got back on his feet.

He lived with us for about six months. Both of us got jobs and saved our money. We moved out of my mom's house in the fall of 2002. We lived in a house with various roommates for about three years, but eventually moved out and moved on. I still talk to him almost every day. I was the best man at his wedding. He's been married six years now. They have a baby daughter, and a home that they own.

It is easy to blame Lee's parents for the chronic homelessness of his youth. Unaddressed or criminalized drug-fueled behavior was an affliction in his family, making it difficult to stay afloat, even in the economic boom of the mid 1990s. Even when his parents managed to keep steady work, their bouts of homelessness and heavy drug use were often sparked by losing a job; for whatever reason the job was lost, it is evidence of the phenomenon of homelessness being a permanent and necessary part of the U.S. economy (Marcuse, 1988, Mitchell, 2011). They would be rehired once there was a need for more workers, or once they were willing to play by the rules by taking drug tests. The stigma of being homeless also made them willing to spend all spare cash on living in costly motel rooms, rather than face the shame of staying in a shelter that may kick them out for being high, or the possibility of ending up in trouble for the criminal act of sleeping on the streets (Mitchell, 1997). The act itself of coming to Spokane was essentially an act of banishment; in order to escape harsh punishment for a minor drug infraction, Lee's stepdad decided leaving the area was the best choice. Once they arrived in Spokane, with no

permanent shelter or money, they were still, as a family, banished from what the public would consider a normal life (Beckett, 2010).

Being homeless as a child, especially with the additional burden of attending school, is bad enough while it is happening, but the experience also puts youth at higher risk of becoming homeless later in life, at a higher risk of drug and alcohol abuse, and higher risk of being exposed to sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS (Sloane Et Al, 2012). It is also a prime example of the inadequacy of PIT counts, demonstrating the great disparity between visible and invisible homeless (Beck, 2016 Morley, 2016). A recent example from 2014 showed a PIT count of 1,149 for total homeless in Spokane, while self reporting showed a total of over 3,000 homeless students. Yes, that is just students. The largest percentage reported doubling up with friends or relatives, but hundreds were living in shelters or on the streets (Beck, 2016). Lee and his sister both said they had a lot of trouble in school due to their parents' lifestyle, leading to both of them being removed from public high school and enrolled in alternative schools, and to Lee dropping out and later earning a GED.

Though Lee eventually found stability in his life, there are predictors that made him more likely to become homeless once he was an adult not depending on adults to care for him, or at least to see homelessness as an option; not ideal, but still a solution to a problem. Constantly moving, breaking with old relationships and forming new ones, changing schools, witnessing and being subject to the affects of violence and drug or alcohol abuse can all contribute to a pattern of homelessness later in life (Philipps, 2012, Ravenhill, 2008).

### “It Was a Sticky Situation”

I met my friend Michelle in 2011. She brought her twin boy and girl, who had just turned 13, to an orientation for a study abroad trip to Spain through Spokane Falls Community College. She was older than the rest of the group by nearly a decade, but that was kind of the normal community college experience.

She was living in the Tri-Cities at the time, and was learning Spanish to better communicate with the growing Hispanic population of Southeastern Washington. She was older than the rest of our group by nearly a decade, but that was pretty normal for the community college experience. Her ultimate goal was to transfer to a four year university to earn her bachelor’s degree, which would hopefully lead to a meaningful career.

She had her life together in 2011; she was divorced, but she had a home for herself and her kids, she was starting school, she had a good job, and child support to supplement her income. In 2016, just five years later and only a few credits away from graduating from EWU, she found herself homeless.

In the fall of 2015, her kids were starting their senior year of high school, and both planned to go to college. She spent the year taking extra shifts and saving child support money, knowing when her kids turned 18, that source of income would be gone. Her kids going to college also meant she no longer needed her three bedroom house; she could save money by moving into an apartment.

For her own education, Michelle had relied on working as much as she could, and federal financial aid. Like a lot of students, she was afraid of taking out student loans because of the

debt. So, like many Americans, when money was tight, she started using credit cards for day to day purchases like food and gasoline. After awhile, the debt started to pile up. She spent her kids' last year of high school trying to pay off this debt.

Even though she was cutting it close, she felt pretty secure about her transition from being a mom with kids at home, to being on her own. She qualified for housing assistance, which she said was actually a pretty tricky process. She was stunned that she wasn't allowed to have savings as part of the qualifications! Also, the voucher could only apply towards housing that is pre-approved, or from landlords who are willing to accept it.

In May of 2016, she put down a deposit on an apartment in Cheney so she could be close to school, making it easier to finish the few credits she had left at EWU. She double checked with Spokane Housing Authority to make sure everything was in order with the apartment, and with her own finances. She paid for her background check, and was just waiting to be approved.

The process seemed to be taking a long time. Nearly three months had passed. It was August now. Her kids had just turned 18, and she no longer had child support to fall back on. It was just about time for her to move, and she still hadn't gotten a move in date for her new apartment. She called the inspector from the housing authority, and found that the management company in charge of her application had not submitted her paperwork. The company had told Michelle that they had an appointment set with the housing authority inspector, but the inspector informed her that they had never made an appointment.

So, Michelle got the paperwork she needed from the property management company, and filed it with the housing authority herself. When she finally heard back from the company, they said the apartment, the one they had already taken her deposit on, was over her approved pricing

guideline and that as a matter of company protocol, she would not be allowed to pay the difference out of pocket, and would not be able to live there.

Even the Spokane Housing Authority did not understand the decision. There was a leeway of nearly \$100 granted to her for these exact circumstances, which was enough to cover the difference. She never got a straight answer on why she got denied by the property management company. By then, she was so tired of dealing with them that she gave up on trying to get that apartment. A final “NO” decision came just five days before she needed to be out of her house. She had nowhere to go, and she couldn’t stay. She had given her notice to move nearly a month earlier, and another family had already paid a deposit on the house.

It didn’t matter anyway. The housing authority only approves one bedroom per person, so with her current rent of \$1000 per month, no assistance, and no more child support, she wouldn’t have been able to afford her own house anymore. She called dozens of rental companies looking for one that would take the Section 8 housing voucher, and was having no luck. This was a new experience for her; when her husband left 10 years earlier, and she was an unemployed mother with two young children, she had not had any trouble finding a place to live with a voucher.

Even at that time, she didn’t use the voucher for long; she quickly got a good paying full time job working at a bank, and took over the rent herself. It was frustrating to deal with this new situation after thinking for months that all the pieces were in place.

The day came to leave her house. She put most of her stuff in a storage unit, but she didn’t have anywhere to go. She was about to start school again, and was working two part time jobs, so she couldn’t leave Spokane. All of her family was in the Tri-Cities. She was

embarrassed by her situation, and didn't want to tell any of her friends what was going on, so on that first night, she slept in her car.

During this time, she was still looking for apartments in both Cheney and Spokane that would take Section 8. She did find a few apartments in Spokane that would take it, but the conditions were far below what she was used to; some of the units she described as being absolutely run down. One ground level apartment in West Central Spokane actually had a hollow-core interior door being used as an exterior door, the floor was bowed from water damage, and one of the front windows was fully broken out. The manager told her she could put up a blanket or curtain, and he would "get to it" before the month's end. The apartment had a door that led into another apartment where another tenant lived; it didn't lock, but it had been painted shut. The manager said it "should be safe." The whole time she was viewing the apartment, Michelle said he was bragging about purchasing the building very cheap, and about how much money he was going to make after the improvements were complete.

Other problems she found at pre-approved apartments were filthy worn out carpets, broken and cracked windows, worn out kitchen and bathroom fixtures, and apartment managers who told her up front they were going to raise the rent if they did repairs, which would then exceed her limit for the housing voucher.

At one point, she hit it off nicely with a potential landlord. It was a two bedroom duplex in Cheney, in her price range. She said the two of them were chatting and joking around, laughing, and having a good conversation, but the moment she asked if he accepted Section 8 vouchers, his tone and body language changed. After that, he refused to even look at her

employment history, rental history, or even let her file a background check. She was denied on the spot.

It was the end of summer in Spokane now. The days were still bright and warm, but the nights were cold. She had a comforter and three pillows in the car, and slept with her front seat reclined. In her mind, sleeping in her car was going to be a few days, maybe a week long thing. It could possibly be fun, like camping. Two weeks max. She parked at closed restaurants, in grocery store parking lots, near parks, anywhere that was well lit so she felt safe. She started her car sometimes at night to have the heat on. She went without regular showers, and only had a couple of changes of clothes. It got harder each day to feel presentable for work. She was afraid people would notice she was wearing the same earrings every day. She was spot cleaning her clothes and taking sponge baths in sinks in grocery store bathrooms. And, as an African American woman, she said she worried a lot about not being able to take care of her hair the way she was used to. She was hyper conscious of everything. But, she was still hopeful that she would find an apartment soon.

Just before she became homeless herself, Michelle said she had actually been doing her best to help some homeless people near her work. There had been a few people sleeping under a nearby bridge. She worked at a restaurant, and sometimes the cooks would throw away the last of the soup at night, so she started taking it. She filled up as many containers as she could with the soup, packed up some napkins and spoons, to-go cups of hot tea, and dropped them off in tightly tied plastic bags.

One night just a few weeks later as she was falling asleep in her car, almost out of gas, afraid to turn the engine on for heat, an empty soup cup on her dash, when she realized that she

was the people she had been trying to help. Before then, she said she had felt like she was doing such a good thing. Now that it was her, she second guessed her good deeds. At that moment, she didn't want anyone to bring her anything. She didn't want anyone to see her. She didn't want anyone to know that this was where she was at in life. She felt ashamed and embarrassed. She felt invisible, and she wanted to be invisible.

Many times, she said she cried, and prayed for Jesus to help her. It was a turning point for her situation; she fully realized it was real, and not a fun short term adventure. She didn't understand how she got there. She planned ahead. She was smart. She was putting herself through college. She had a car. She had a job. She actually had two jobs! Even with two part time jobs, as a student, she couldn't work enough to have adequate savings, or make enough money to get a place she wanted. With two jobs, she still qualified for food stamps and a housing voucher. Two jobs, almost done with college, and still living at poverty level. It was the U.S.A., and it was 2016! She couldn't believe it. She asked herself "How?" But, still, it happened.

After a few weeks of living in her car, she decided she would tell a couple friends about what was happening, and see if she could use the shower, and maybe sleep on their couch. A close friend of hers lived at his dad's apartment, and they said she could stay with them as long as she needed. They didn't ask for any money for rent or bills, and told her not to worry. For Michelle though, doubling up with a friend was still not an ideal solution. She was used to living in her own home, and the lack of personal space and privacy started to affect her mental health.

The apartment was well lived in by two single men. The bathroom was filthy. The tub had a stained-on dirt ring. The dishes were piled up. There was dog hair covering everything, and Michelle had allergies. There was constant sneezing, coughing, and mucous build up. Her sleep

schedule was messed up because of clashing work schedules. There were the smells of unfamiliar foods and laundry soap. A lot of little things started adding up. She was grateful for a place to stay, and she did her best to make the apartment clean and comfortable, but it was just not home.

Finally, after six weeks of sleeping in her car and on couches, Michelle found a small one bedroom apartment that accepted her housing voucher. It was in Cheney so she could be close to school and near the highway so she could quickly drive to Spokane for work. The day she moved in, she looked at all her boxes of stuff, all the furniture, the dishes and knick knacks, jewelry cases she hadn't seen in six weeks, and just sat on the floor and cried.

She thought of her kids. It was the first time in 18 years she had lived without them. She walked around her new apartment in just a robe, and went to the bathroom with the door open. She realized that it was the little things she had missed the most, and she thanked God for those.

Sadly, stories like Michelle's are common. In 2013, The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) estimated that 58,000 college students were homeless on campuses nationwide (Ringer, 2015), not counting those in Michelle's position; off campus, living in their cars, couch surfing, or otherwise not reporting their situation. The past decade saw record attendance to four year institutions in the U.S., mostly due to increased enrollment of low income students. Unfortunately, low income and first generation students are graduating at lower rates than their higher income counterparts, mostly due to the struggle of hidden costs of college, like affordable housing (U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD 2017). Without support from family, low income students are forced to either work, take out loans, or both. There are some federal, state, and non-profit programs that attempt to help some students in

need, especially foster children and homeless students, but in general there is a lack of aid going to this niche, and a broad gap in research that makes the connection between affordable housing and student success (HUD, 2017).

It's quite likely that Michelle would have had trouble finding affordable housing whether she was a student or not. Pretty much since its implementation, F.D.R.'s New Deal vision to provide decent stable housing for those in need has been dismantled, gradually destroyed by mismanagement and underfunding, and neglected by voters and taxpayers (Goetz, 2013). Furthermore, despite laws against discrimination in housing, low income individuals who identify as African American, like Michelle, often have little choice but to live in public housing (Goetz 2013), or, also like Michelle, to search for landlords and apartments willing to accept housing vouchers like Section 8, and who will do anything they can to squeeze tenants for every last cent they can, while making as little improvement to the property as possible (Harvey, 2009).

What was really the problem? The next example more fully illustrates that situations like this are a sign of the times. In the past few decades, society has been conditioned to look at homelessness primarily as a reflection of personal choice, disconnected to labor and housing markets, or to turns in the economy (Mitchell, 2011). With the exception of the Great Depression, there is still wide public discourse that economic explanations for homelessness are not the primary cause, or even that there is no economic factor, but instead that homelessness is a problem brought on by untreated mental illness, indulgence in or addiction to drugs and alcohol, and a refusal to accept hard work as the price for a decent (and housed) life. I had to find out the hard way that this is not the case.

### “I Thought I Just Had Bad Luck”

I've been homeless twice in my adult life. Both times, it seemed like a combination of stupidity and poor planning on my part. Knowing what I know now, it is no wonder that both of the time I was homeless came within a year of each other, both directly after the world wide economic crisis of 2007, and the depression that followed.

In the summer of 2007, A little less than one year before I became homeless for the first time, life seemed pretty secure. I had a job. I had savings. My girlfriend and I had lived together for about two years, splitting the rent and bills. Everything was in order. Then we broke up, and she left. I was stuck with all the rent and bills. We had been sold the American dream, but now it was only affordable with at least two people footing the bill. I was stressed both mentally and physically to the point that it affected my job.

I worked in a local pizza parlor, and made just above the Washington State minimum wage. I worked 35-40 hours a week plus tips. It was a decent job, but there were downsides. It was a small, family owned company with a very small crew. There was not a lot of wiggle room with the schedule. Already overworked employees, like me, were expected to cover shifts when needed without exception. Saying no would lead to getting your normal hours slashed. I got into an argument with my manager over closing on my day off after having worked 14 days in a row, but I agreed to do it anyway. About two hours before closing, I told the crew that I didn't care who closed, but that someone was closing for me. I took off my apron, and went home. I showed up for my shift the next day, and was told that walking out on a scheduled shift was considered quitting, and that I was no longer welcome. I didn't fight for my job. And, since I technically quit

according to company policy, I wasn't eligible for unemployment, even though I felt like I'd been fired.

I blew through my savings. I probably had around \$1,000 combined in checking and savings, which seemed like a lot until I had to use it. It took care of about a month of rent and bills. A friend of mine said he could get me on his house painting crew. I didn't have any experience with this, but I took the job anyway. It only paid once a month, and was physically brutal; waking up at 5:00 or 6:00 am, working until the late afternoon or early evening, often in the hot sun, carrying heavy 30 foot extension ladders, leaning, kneeling, being on your knees, repetitive motions that destroy the body, and all for not much more than what I was making at the pizza parlor. I still lived alone, so nearly all of my check went to rent and bills.

I also had a dog. A friend of mine, Billy, had just gotten a puppy, and he agreed to come over each day and hang out with my dog while I was working. He didn't have the same worries as me. He was his own boss. He sold marijuana. I told him I was okay with his job as long as he wasn't selling weed out of my apartment. Everything was going pretty good. I wasn't putting any money back, but I had a handle on things. My dog was taken care of, and my bills were paid.

Then, the fall came. I specifically remember the last day I painted a house was November 10<sup>th</sup>. It was cold. Then, I got laid off. This time, I didn't have any savings to fall back on. I sold my entire collection of vinyl records for \$1400. Again, this was about enough money to take care of one month's worth of rent and bills. In desperation, I went back to the pizza parlor to beg for my job, which somehow worked. I pled with my boss, told her that it had all been a misunderstanding, and that I had been under a lot of stress, and felt overworked at the time. I had learned my lesson, and I promised that sort of thing would never happen again. I got my old job

back. I seemed to be in this back and forth, good luck/bad luck world. I was just waiting for the next bad thing.

In the spring of 2008, more bad luck came. Billy and his girlfriend broke up too, except he was the one who had to leave. It was her apartment, and she kept it. He was seasoned at this game, though. He had couch surfed since we were in high school. I watched him bounce around between his mom's basement and friend's houses for years. So, when he asked if he could crash at my place for awhile, I was fine with it, again, as long as he wasn't selling weed out of my apartment. We were best friends.

We decided it was time to get our lives together, and we both took placement tests to sign up for some community college classes. We had just started a new band and were planning on getting a house with our drummer. A co-worker of mine owned a house, but she wanted to move into her boyfriend's house and rent her house out. We jumped on the opportunity. It was about a month before we were going to move. I had put back a little bit of money to pay my third of the deposit, and was counting on getting my deposit back from my apartment. Someone must have known we were about to move. They also must have known that Billy was selling weed, and that he was storing it at my apartment. About 3:00 am one morning, three men wearing black ski masks bashed the off door handle to my apartment with a rock, and robbed us.

Really, they robbed him, and neutralized me. I woke up when I heard shouting, and got out of my bed just in time to see someone was in my room, and that they had a pistol pointed at me. I didn't have time to yell, to fight, or anything. Right out of a dead sleep, I got hit in the face with the pistol and was knocked out. I woke up a few seconds later to the sound of footsteps running down the gray concrete apartment stairs. I looked up, and Billy was standing there, his

head split open with a gash about five inches long from just behind his hairline to the top of his eye. They took all of his marijuana (I'm not sure exactly how much, but it was multiple pounds) and hit him over the head with his bass guitar. His new girlfriend (it had been a few months since his breakup) had been staying the night, and the men had grabbed her and threw her against the wall so hard her entire side from her ribs to the bottom of her hip was deeply bruised. We never found out who did it.

Dealing with the police was just as scary as being robbed. The state gives authority to the police to kill at will without much fear of punishment. They responded to reports of a gun, called in by one of my neighbors. They showed up in full riot gear: assault rifles, shotguns and helmets. They had an assault rifle pointed at me as they swept my apartment. They threatened to kill my dog if she got out of her kennel, but shouted "Don't move!" when I attempted to secure the door to her kennel. There was blood everywhere from Billy's head. As I was repeatedly asked the same round of questions in different order, they all passed around a digital camera with pictures of Billy's wound. "You can see this kid's skull!" one of them said while chuckling. Billy had been taken away in an ambulance right away. They didn't seem too concerned about my pistol whipped face, even though I couldn't see out of my left eye from all the blood and swelling. My answers satisfied them. They told me this was a classic "Hit 'em and forget 'em," and that I shouldn't be too worried about them coming back.

I abandoned my apartment. Billy's girlfriend and I gathered a couple of important things, and drove to her house. I didn't sleep. I called my boss at about 6 a.m. and admitted what had happened, and asked if I could take a couple of days to figure things out. I called all the local hospitals looking for my friend. None of them had anyone registered with his name, except the people at Deaconess, who said they couldn't give me that information. On a hunch, I drove to

Deaconess just as he was being discharged, with a shaved head that now had about 15 metal staples holding the wound closed. I called my co-worker who was going to rent us her house, and asked if we could store a few boxes of our things in the basement until we moved in, and she said it was fine. We called another friend who had a big truck, and asked if he would help us move some stuff, telling him cautiously about the circumstances. Everything lined up. A little good luck mixed in with the bad. Except now, at least for a month, we were homeless.

Billy stayed at his girlfriend's house. I didn't know what to do. I was shell shocked. Totally drenched in PTSD. I didn't want to call my mom or sister and tell them what happened. I stayed a few nights at Billy's girlfriend's house. I slept in my van a few times. I took showers when and where I could, left my dog at friends' houses, eventually called my mom and sister and told them what happened, stayed with them a few times, and had them watch my dog a few times. It was a blur. I kept going to work. I jumped every time a door slammed. I didn't fully trust anyone. It could have been almost anyone who robbed us! It had to have been someone we knew, so who could I trust? The psychological aspects affected Billy even more, since he was the actual target. He made lists of names, and why or why not that person would rob him. It was a crazy, scary, unbelievable time. Sure, we both had made some stupid choices, but the outcome was something neither of us had thought would happen.

When we finally moved into our house at the end of a month, I didn't even reflect on the month of being homeless. It hadn't even occurred to me that this type of transitional phase was homelessness. But for many people, that's what it is. And it can become chronic. Housed, then temporarily homeless. Housed, then temporarily homeless. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Now that I have reflected, I dismiss that it was my own stupidity that created this situation. Is selling weed stupid? Yes. Is letting a friend who you know is selling weed stay with you stupid? Yes.

However, both of those choices were survival strategies. Billy had actually tried many times to get and keep a job, but it seemed an impossible task. I needed someone to help with bills and take care of some domestic things for me so I could keep my job. I'm sure we weren't the only people doing stupid things to avoid being broke and homeless, and probably not the only ones to fail, either. I thought that was the end of it for me, but I was wrong.

The next year was pretty good. Billy found a part time job. We had our band. We were recovering from the trauma we had both experienced. This traumatic experience, at least for me, led to putting community college on the back burner. Even though we never found out who robbed us, but time gave us a much clearer picture of who didn't rob us. True friends reveal themselves in times of crisis.

I was getting less hours at work now, making it more difficult to save any money. I had a credit card that I used when I had to. Things were okay. After just less than one year of living in our house, my co-worker/landlady told us that she wanted to move out of her boyfriend's apartment and back into her house. She gave us 30 days notice, the minimum in Washington State. I had very little money saved. I called my sister and asked if I could stay with her for a month or so and store my things in a spare room she had while I saved up enough money to get an apartment. I had a plan. I felt alright. Things were coming together. Our band had booked a few out of town shows, and we managed to work everything out so that we would leave town a day or two after we moved out of the house. We put all our guitars, amplifiers and drums in Billy's mom's basement and practiced during the day when she was at work. Then in the spring of 2009, one year after moving into our house, we had to move out, and I was homeless again.

The first time I experienced homelessness was way different. It was a lot shorter, and though the setup was structural, it was triggered by traumatic experience. This time was longer, slower, and seemed way more complicated. I was dating someone. Even though I had my sister's house to store my things and spend the night sometimes, I stayed at my girlfriend's house more. Then her roommates started to have a problem with my dog. So, my girlfriend and my dog started staying more nights with me on the floor in a spare room at my sister's house. My girlfriend, Lauren, was a student at Gonzaga University, and school was just about to end. Her summer was going to be spent doing the Semester at Sea program, which seemed so crazy to me; She was about to spend \$10,000 on one term of school, I never even managed to become a community college dropout. So when June came, she left.

My sister's landlord became aware that my dog and I had been staying with her, and said the dog had to go. He ended up agreeing to let my dog stay till the end of June in I paid him \$100. Another problem solved, short term. I started sleeping in my van more, but it was summer and becoming unbearably hot.

After we got back from playing in Seattle, Olympia, and Portland, my band broke up. Billy had developed an addiction to pain killers after getting his head split open, and had kept it hidden from all of his friends. Then I found out he had stolen from his mom to support his habit. He also stole all of the band money we had from playing shows. It was getting bad. Then, our drummer told us he was joining the Army, and simultaneously, our guitarist announced he was moving back to his hometown of San Jose, California. Billy took our drummer's drum set from his mom's basement and pawned it. Then he stole my guitar and sold it. I was done. This was my best friend since high school! I saw him once or maybe two times in the year after that. He went

back to couch hopping, and continued to abuse pharmaceutical drugs. I heard that after that his addiction got worse, to the point where he was using whatever drugs were available.

Meanwhile, my mom was moving out of her house into another house she owned. When her dad died, she inherited some stocks, which she sold to buy a couple of houses to rent out as part of her retirement income. One house she rented to my brother, his wife, and their kids. The other she had rented to me and a few friends for a couple of years, but decided to rent it instead to a family we knew whose house had burned down. Eventually, they moved out, and another tenant moved in. He stopped paying rent, and she attempted for months to evict him. After several failed attempts to evict him herself, she got a lawyer to send him an eviction notice. When he received the notice, he attempted to burn the house down, and was charged with arson by the City of Spokane. My mom's home owner's insurance covered the house for the arson, resulting in a complete remodel. She decided to move into the remodeled house, and to sell the one she was living in. I asked her if she minded me staying at her old house for awhile, at least until she got it on the market.

She agreed, but it was still over a month until she was moving. It was the middle of summer now, and I was running out of options. The van was just too hot. I bounced around from couch to couch, staying with whoever would let me have my dog at their house. My sister decided she was done with her landlord, and asked our mom if she would rent her old house instead of selling it. Our mom said yes, but that it would have to be short term, because she still intended to sell it.

Permanently living with my sister, her two year old son and her dog was not something I wanted to do. So after my mom moved out, I moved my mattress and few boxes of belongings

in, pretty much squatting until my sister moved in. I had the electricity put in my name so I could have an air conditioner. Then my sister moved in. It started to feel more like a home. I paid my mom \$125 for July and another \$125 for August. I don't know what arrangement she had worked out with my sister. I was still working about 25-30 hours per week, and with very little to pay in rent and bills, I was able to finally save some money. With a fake rental history and a few hundred dollars, I got a cheap apartment near Chief Garry Park in East Central Spokane. I sold my guitar to pay for two classes at Spokane Falls Community College.

A couple days before school started, Lauren came back from Europe. For the first time in months, I felt like my life was coming together. Had I finally started to make good choices again? Maybe—but I was the same person all along! I was capable of making good and bad choices. Life should not be that tight. A bad choice here and there should not put you out on the streets. So, what was it?

What I perceived as my bad luck, stupidity or just poor planning were symptomatic of a problem that I did not cause, but was rather dealing with, unknowingly, along with many other Americans. Since the 1970s, more was being demanded of workers. Borrowing increased. Credit card debt soared. Real wages were stagnant (Wolff, 2012). For the poor, there didn't seem to be a way to get ahead. For the upper classes, lust for a short term profit turned quickly into what could better be described as gambling rather than investment. Asset backed securities (ABS) and credit default swaps (CDS), literally investing in other peoples debts, became the new norm (Wolff 2012). Selling “the other guy” down the river fell flat on its face in 2007, with the exception of some of the largest banks, who were bailed out due to their size, claiming that if their “too big to fail” banks failed it would be the end of the system (a system which these types of banks and other large corporations helped create by systematically dismantling New Deal

policy after WWII). This was the largest scale economic crisis since the Great Depression, but me and my ilk had no FDR to lean on, no sweeping social reform. Instead, the poor were greeted with a trickle down of austerity and blame (Mitchell, 2011.)

Nearly a decade has passed, and not much has changed. I'm still broke. I still have to strategize carefully to stay housed and keep my bills paid. I still live paycheck to paycheck. If I was given a 30 day notice right now, the amount money in my savings account is not going to save me. One false step and I could be sleeping on someone's couch again; before the last couple of years, I had no idea that couch surfing or doubling up with relatives made me or my friends homeless (Mitchell 2011, Beck, 2016). I've had the privilege of being able to reflect on what happened to me a decade ago. Education has been an enlightening experience for me. It showed me that my experience is not unique. In fact, I've learned that a lot of poor people are simply unaware of the hand being dealt to them by the rich (Wiesman and Smith 2011). The poor have essentially been forced to buy into the myth that being in this state (poverty), whether housed or unhoused, is somehow a result of individual choice (Mitchell, 1997, 2011). Education became my plan as a way out, but a lot of people just don't see that as an option, nor do they see another way out. What about them? What are they to do? I guess all most of us can do is sit in the heat, invisible, waiting to see what happens.

## CHAPTER V

### Results

Defining what constitutes meaningful results in a project that is humanistic, or that could even be considered a mode of social activism rather than scientific or data driven, can prove difficult. One result that is certain is that when a show such as this is broadcast, it does reach listeners. Perhaps even more so in this case; I actively advertised this specific episode of *The Science of Poverty* on social media, as an announcement to nearly 150 people at the Spokane Homeless Coalition, and in conversation with many friends, co-workers, and family members. This specific episode was also specially advertised on KYRS, shared on social media by KYRS, and by *The Science of Poverty's* own social media.

There is no way to actually measure the numbers, but, due to the extra advertising, this episode most likely had a higher than average listenership. Though getting an accurate count of the true number of listeners can be difficult, we know at least that the number of radio listeners cannot exceed the population of the station's broadcasting area, but KYRS, along with most radio stations, can be streamed live on the internet. So, it seems the true testament to listener numbers is the fact that the station runs entirely on listener donations, and has been broadcasting in some capacity for nearly 20 years.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a general critique of the medium of socially conscious local radio is that most of the information being disseminated is spreading to people who may already have at least some knowledge of the topic being discussed, or at least are predisposed to agreeing with the points of views expressed by hosts, guests, and station board

and staff. This means discourse resulting from shows like *The Science of Poverty*, or special segments like *Radio Home* is likely to be contained to a relatively limited group.

However humanistic in nature *Radio Home* may be as a project, as the show progressed, the information in the raw interviews from both Group A, and Group B, could be turned into meaningful data to be displayed in a hard science style.

For example, in Group A, made up of people who are or have been homeless, I looked at the factors that contributed to homelessness, and whether or not the subject had ever stayed in a shelter. The former has been well studied in Spokane, including an excellent example from the Spokane Regional Health District that shows how many people have self reported what specifically caused them to become homeless. The latter is to build, over time, a critique of the Point in Time or PIT count ( see previous chapter) being a reliable method of measuring a homeless population, especially when critical funding depends on these counts. None of the five individuals I interviewed from Group A had ever stayed in a shelter, or were ever a part of a PIT count.

For Group B, made up radio guests (or in this case, one guest and four potential guests), I asked each person whether or not they had themselves ever been homeless. Only one out of five had been. If the show was able to keep going, more patterns like this could emerge, opening the possibility for this project to be the genesis of several separate research studies.

## CHAPTER VI

### Discussion

Like most cities in the U.S., Spokane has tried its best to make its homeless population invisible (Mitchell, 1997, 2011). For example, the city spent millions in the last couple of years on the Division Street Gateway Project, which while claiming to be a beautification project “intended to reverse the previous state of neglect and reflect some of the desirable qualities that attract people to Spokane” (City of Spokane, 2015) and admitting that this high traffic freeway on-ramp and exit is the “first and last impression of the community” (City of Spokane, 2015), the reality of the situation can be heard in the discourse created by the community and local news outlets. News reports with headlines like “Gateway Project Not Quite Fixing Panhandling Problem” (Ditzler, 2015) require no deep reading to understand the real reason why projects like this are implemented. Concrete islands covered with sharp rocks, and a three foot high wall directly abutted to the street and topped with a row of black metal spikes doesn’t exactly spell beauty.

Spokane City Council President Ben Stuckart actually changed his vote in 2012 in favor of anti-panhandling laws (he had previously been opposed to these laws) due to feedback from local non-profits and homeless services, who assured him that “those people” aren’t using their services (Prager, 2012); a continuation of the historical division between the “deserving poor,” those who behave themselves in a socially acceptable manner and were grateful to receive charity, and the “undeserving poor,” typically working aged men who live on the streets and refuse to enter shelters or rehabilitation programs (Mitchell, 2011). Anti-panhandling ordinances

have been in effect in Spokane since 2012, and have even been amended so that fundraisers, such as the Spokane Guilds' School penny drive and the local firefighter Fill the Boot campaign would not be in violation, while still specifically excluding typical panhandlers (Prager, 2012). A Sit and Lie ordinance has been in effect in Spokane since 2014, which effectively takes away the right of the homeless to simply exist in public spaces, where their presence may drive away business. These are all laws, ordinances, and projects which attempt to "control behavior and space such that homeless people simply cannot do what they must do in order to survive without breaking the law" (Mitchell, 1997).

Spokane is not alone, either; since the 1990s there has been a resurgence of these types of laws in cities across the nation, making it illegal loiter, to camp or sleep in public, urinate or defecate even if no public restrooms are available, to beg from anyone getting in or out of a car, near automatic teller machines, after 8:00 pm, or within six feet of any storefront (Mitchell, 1997), and incidentally, it is illegal to sit or lie on sidewalks. Basically, the message to the homeless is, wherever you are, don't be there, and whatever you're doing, stop doing it.

If *Radio Home* were to continue, topics like this could be discussed over the airwaves, helping to guide public discourse in a way that is critical of ordinances like sit and lie, and projects like the Gateway Project. While it is obvious that the public and media sees through this description, and are well aware of these projects are designed as anti-panhandling and anti loitering measures, they are sold with the guise of beautification, and are costly to tax payers. It would be interesting to have a guest from city council to explain the lack of transparency in the Gateway Project's goals, and discuss possible alternatives.

At a Spokane Homeless Coalition meeting last year, Ben Stuckart announced that he plans to overturn the city's sit and lie ordinance; the number of citations and bookings dropped from 59 people in 2014, to 15 in 2015, to only 2 last year (Thomas, 2016). In 2016, a new beautification project was started near the Monroe Street freeway entrance, intended to "reduce crime in the area and provide visual interest for passing vehicles" (Fisher, 2015). Even when the politics surrounding this type of project are honest, it more often than not invents crime rather than preventing it (Mitchell, 1997). On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, 200 homeless men who had been sleeping at the Spokane House of Charity all winter were turned out into the streets due to a lack of funds (Alexander, 2017).

Stories like these keep coming out. Homelessness will always be a problem until its structural causes are well known, examined, discussed, and the structure itself is changed. Although *Radio Home* did not become a permanent show on KYRS, there is still a need for this type of medium to exist for the sake of community discourse. *The Science of Poverty* is helping to fill that gap for now, and I have been invited back anytime I have a new idea for an episode. And I will be back; until the structure is changed, someone needs to be talking about it.

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