

Every night in America nearly 2,000,000 people are homeless. Can archaeology help?



Displaced and Barely Visible: An Archaeological View of Homelessness

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The Problem:

Most homeless people are invisible to us. We may see them on television, sleeping in public, or begging, but we know almost nothing about their daily lives. Can we understand their lives better by examining the cultural landscape of homelessness and their use and distribution of material culture?



Survey Area in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

The Archaeology:

From 2005-2008 archaeological survey documented 61 homeless sites in one square mile near city center Indianapolis, Indiana, USA. We classified the sites into three groups—camps (16), short-term (40), and routes (5)—based on intensity and duration of use, then documented them photographically.

Camp sites: intensive usage for more than a few nights, often with substantive areas for shelter and sleeping, as well as food preparation

Short-term sites: used only for a night or two, or even just for “hanging-out.” Some evidence of sleeping and food usage, but rarely cooking. Any shelters were simple, usually of plastic ground cloth or cardboard.

Route sites: between buildings or along railroads were areas with scant evidence of camping or sleeping, yet evidence that people had been present for short periods of time. Graffiti is often present, some of it ethnic.



Eating is a problem. Donated cans of food often go unused. No one provides can openers (left).



Caching or storing important items is common (left & above).



There is humor and creativity, as in this “hat tree” (above).



Camps in area of weeds and small trees, with sleeping and cooking areas. Many camps have multiple shelters (left & below).



Simple cardboard shelter in a short-term site (right)



From novels, to religious materials, to pornography, people seek a “normal” life (left & below).



Route site with ethnic graffiti (left)



So what?

“When is the right time to do the archaeology of something? At the beginning of the 21st century... archaeological interventions are overtly political, often engaging directly with life’s raw and painful nerves, such as homelessness, social exclusion, war crimes, and reconciliation. ...[W]e have responsibilities towards the communities, individuals, and institutions directly implicated by archaeological work into the recent past in helping them come to terms with the obscured and often painful circumstances of contemporary life. Under these circumstances, archaeology should be socially relevant. It must earn its keep.

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