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# The Emergence of Portland's 'Unique' Homelessness: Does the City's Pattern of Compassion Suggest a New Perspective on Poverty?

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The Emergence of Portland's 'Unique' Homelessness:  
Does the City's Pattern of Compassion Suggest a New Perspective  
on Poverty?

by

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## **Introduction**

Homelessness in U.S. cities has long been recognized as a problem of many different origins. Competing ideologies often situate this issue in a treacherous field of morality, personal competency, and politics. The battle amongst the property possessing and non-property possessing has persisted for centuries under a fluctuating economy and cycles of shifting societal values. How societies approach their unsheltered population inevitably leads to important questions of how a community constructs and understands issues of rights, space, and visibility.

In the United States, the overwhelming rhetoric constructing our understanding of homelessness stems from social theories describing a naturalized course of human survival (Marcus 2006). Anthony Marcus, in his analysis of the 1980's homeless crisis in New York City, describes our prevailing notions of the homeless as a form of social taxonomy. Societies organize themselves in categories rooted in imagined similarities or differences. In what Marcus refers to as a "hierarchical human zoology", social groups have consistently found themselves ranked by whether or not they are seemingly strong enough to overcome social, economic, or physical hardship. Other scholars have recognized a pervasive consensus among property possessing citizens which claims extreme poverty to be merely a result of incompetent individuals refusing to fulfill their role in the labor market (Millich 1993, Mitchell 1995, Mitchell 2011, Susser 1996). Oscar Lewis's 1966 'Culture of Poverty' argument claimed that a development of a specific culture among the very poor perpetuated the cycle of poverty. This argument would dominate conservative social theory for decades to come (Kahan 2006), and inform social policy that eventually became commonplace in American society. Prevailing social

controls in our competitive economy paint images of those failing to succeed within it as the root of economic downfall, rather than a symptom of it (Mitchell 2011). Reinforcing these ideas of social hierarchy, despite its questionable ethics, remains the force seeming to propel the homeless into the hands of law-enforcement, policy makers, and those thought to reintroduce order for the common good of society.

This battle appears to acquire a unique complexity in the city of Portland, Oregon. Hosting an increasingly significant unsheltered population, this region has inevitably seen their unhoused dispersing into various public settings, being met with contradicting approaches deserving of further investigation. Though public opinion on the matter has historically ranged from full support to bitter resentment, the city has invariably implemented more lenient policies and programs allowing the homeless to claim rights and space in public. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, in October 2015, the city of Portland officially declared a state of emergency regarding their significant unsheltered population. Certain policies and programs have sparked outcry in several communities, including a recent lawsuit against Mayor Hales' for his safe sleeping policy (Schmidt 2016). These events of public outcry force a reevaluation of how policymakers should approach the issue, creating an ever more complicated climate for the local government to mediate. The visibility of the homeless in Portland seems to exponentially increase as public compassion becomes increasingly strained, yet compassion in the form of lenient public policy, of public assistance in the form of allocated space, income opportunities, and organized public meal donations, is received still more openly than in other U.S. cities facing a similar crisis.

To understand the intricacies of Portland's perspective on homelessness, it is necessary to dissect the roots of how homelessness, the public, and space have been conceptualized in the city with a documented progressive reputation. Portland's services and facilities available to the homeless, as well as the population's long history of advocacy would lead visitors and even long-time residents to believe that Portland's encouragement to accept different walks of life, has indeed, extended to the very poor (Redden 2014). But beneath the surface of this tolerance lies a rhetoric of victim-targeting poverty that has existed for centuries, employed in different ways under changing political and social climates. Portland does not do much to challenge these deeply embedded notions around this particular population, but instead reacts with familiar methods which appear to be uniquely compassionate from a liberal city within an increasingly conservative nation where poverty is repeatedly criminalized. This thesis will attempt to reconstruct a long history of supposedly unprecedented perceptions of the homeless and how these gave rise to Portland's misunderstood homeless crisis. Looking at the homeless crisis simply in terms of number of government assistance programs and grassroots services, as well as overall community perception renders a distinctness around Portland's perceivable homelessness. In evaluating the history of Portland's politics and social atmosphere, it becomes clear how Portland's long history of left-leaning politicians lead to its status as a progressive city. But looking more critically, and specifically, at Portland's treatment of homeless populations reveals more important distinctions around Portland's homelessness and uncovers familiar understandings of poverty and beliefs towards the population that suffers in it. Underneath Portland's veil of

compassion and tolerance, the very same notions that are employed to criminalize the poor are reproduced and normalized through familiar methods of intervention.

This thesis will first explore the appearance of Portland's current homeless crisis, where public assistance in various forms seems to dominate the image of homelessness perceived by the public and the rest of the nation. I then retrace the emergence of Portland's progressive politics, and explore the strongly conservative roots of a now notably liberal city. I will then review how the issue of homelessness has been constructed, reproduced, and understood throughout the last several decades in Portland. This analysis prompted a number of critiques, which I describe in detail with each decade. I draw parallels between the treatment of homelessness in Portland and the treatment of homeless commonly seen elsewhere, arguing that at their very core, these treatments are nearly identical. I conclude with a review of evidence, and prospects for the future of homelessness in Portland.

### **The Appearance of Portland's Homelessness**

Upon crossing the threshold into Portland city limits, the presence of individuals suffering in poverty is marked. Nearly every major intersection hosts a rotating population of people with cardboard signs, requesting anything from money to marijuana. Oregon Live's online map of homeless camp complaints extends to nearly all corners of the city, and even slightly beyond, into the suburbs. Portland's homeless population was estimated at nearly 4,000 people in 2015 ([portlandoregon.gov](http://portlandoregon.gov)), with numbers growing every day. Tourists have noted the high numbers of individuals sleeping on the streets,

performing private activities in public space, and participating in public life side-by-side with wealthier citizens (Oregonian 2016).

### *Visibility*

Portland's homeless-public interaction is clearly distinct from other parts of the region where the homeless are forcefully pushed to the margins of society and out of the public eye. Portland's acceptance of this visibility reveals a peculiarity in their understanding of citizenship, regardless of possession of property. The vast number of services offered by non-profits, local businesses, and members of the community available for poverty-stricken citizens verifies the city's tolerance of their presence.

Sisters of the Road, a nonprofit café in northwest Portland, provides a space resembling that of many locally-owned Portland restaurants, but where people struggling with income, housing, or other issues can join a variety of customers in having a low-cost meal, as well as an option to exchange a few hours of work for a meal. This café, which has existed for nearly 40 years, allows the homeless to participate in activities normally reserved for the middle and upper class, namely, dining out in a restaurant. Located in an area of downtown, this space generates a valuable community resource where the homeless can find relief, and simultaneously partake in public life.

Potluck in the Park, a grassroots, nonprofit organization has held a potluck picnic every Sunday in O'Bryant Square for the last 25 years, a visible public park located in the downtown area of Portland. Run by unpaid volunteers, and entirely funded by community donations, this event serves 400 to 600 individuals in need of food every week (Potluck in the Park 2017). Hundreds of individuals, the majority suffering in extreme poverty,

gather within blocks of major restaurants, boutiques, and hotels, an odd juxtaposition of the very wealthy and the very poor. The number of homeless sharing space with wealthier individuals is particularly concentrated on a weekly basis, with no evidence of severe public opposition.

Street Roots, a long standing newspaper publication specifically addressing homelessness in Portland, has also created opportunities of visibility for the homeless by supporting direct interaction between homeless and other members of the public, on street corners, near storefronts, and in general areas of business through the buying and selling of their publication. This award-winning organization places those suffering from homelessness face-to-face with members of the community, with nearly 500 individual vendors spreading information attempting to bring clarity to the complex issues facing homeless and low-income citizens (StreetRoots 2017). Not only does this transaction bring the individuals in close proximity, but also brings the issue of homelessness to the forefront, compelling the buyer to confront the reality of poverty as it propagates into various issues of the community.

In addition to grass roots programs run by volunteers and nonprofit organizations, Portland also hosts a number of homeless camps founded, run and maintained exclusively by homeless people. Dignity Village, located in northeast Portland is a city-recognized membership-based community housing up to 60 people at a time (Biswas and Diener 2006). This camp has remained in a lot of the city owned Sutherland Yard Recycling Facility for over 15 years (Dignity Village 2017). Right 2 Dream Too, a camp established in 2011, has leased space in a prominent lot in the downtown area where those without shelter can sleep safely and undisturbed (Right2dreamtoo 2016). Right 2 Dream Too has



developed a large presence in Portland, providing space for a significant number of camp setups in the center of Portland's Chinatown. Hazelnut Grove, Portland's most recent homeless camp, had made use of both public and private land in North Portland, with a quiet voice of support from the city (Theen 2015). While these few camps possess a name, code of conduct, important facilities, and recognition from the local government, countless informal groups of houseless campers congregate under bridges, on sidewalks, and on empty patches of land all throughout the city, consistently interacting with the public whether through shared space, shared services, or transactions of some kind.

### *Social Services*

Portland is home to an impressive number of government social services aimed at, or including some sort of program to aid the homeless. The city's website details an array of organizations supporting temporary solutions to different aspects of homelessness. A pilot program, utilizing city owned cargo containers, offers a place for homeless individuals to store their belongings. The program offers bathroom facilities and needle disposal containers, along with secure storage, and has employed formerly homeless individuals. A list of shelters, both year-round, and emergency, are offered to people in need through referral programs and service centers. The city has day services that provide showers, meals, laundry services, and even healthcare on a first come-first serve basis, as well as drop-in centers that offer different groups a place to seek safety, meet their basic needs, and help introduce them into the system of public assistance. Dozens of mental health agencies and medical service centers exist to aid the homeless, some specifically targeted towards youth, or the LGBTQ population. Legal assistance, food access

programs, recovery services are offered by nonprofit and city-funded agencies. Anna Griffin's explores these programs in an article for *The Oregonian* entitled "The 'magnet myth'" where she makes the suggestion that the numerous social and community services offered entice those suffering in poverty, and has lead to Portland's reputation as a magnet for homeless individuals.

### *Local Policy and Government*

The policy and government regulation surrounding homelessness in Portland is often best represented in their lack of enforcement. While the community organizes itself, the government is often reluctant to enforce their camping ordinances. While Portland does host a number of city sanctioned public homeless camps, despite the anti-camping ordinance that is in place in the rest of the city, officials have promised "Portland police will continue to use compassion in enforcement" ([portlandoregon.gov](http://portlandoregon.gov)). When a new homeless camp pops up in an undesignated part of the city, officials have implemented a policy requiring adequate notice allowing the campers time to relocate. After that time, all residual property is held and maintained at a storage facility, whose contact information is offered on the notice. The city has loosened restrictions around RV and car living, allowing them to remain parked for an extended period in designated areas, making this a more realistic option for people who have recently lost their homes (Healey 2011, Vespa 2016). While implementing a streamlined system for citizens to file complaints about the homeless, officials have emphasized that few complaints will warrant city action. The city has been clear in its position that it does not believe homelessness to be a crime, and therefore will only make arrests when dangerous

criminal activity is reported. When Mayor Charlie Hales decided to close the camp at Springwater Corridor, a 21-mile public trail where nearly 500 homeless have set up camp by 2016, the justification came largely from the increasing reports of crime. Despite this being the case, Hales was adamant in his belief that arrests were only to be made as a “last resort,” that “Criminalizing homelessness and sending people to jail because they’re camping in the wrong place is not our first, second, or third choice” (Hernandez 2016).

Portland’s existing appearance of homelessness prompts questions about Portland as a city and how its progressivism has evolved over time. I will now explore the history of Portland as an emerging city to provide insight into how its homelessness has taken shape.

### **Portland as a progressive city**

After reviewing Portland’s current state of homelessness, it is important to understand how the development of Portland as a city has shaped its political and social landscape. While Portland’s emergence as a city very clearly shows how its social and political regime has evolved into what it is today, its path of growth exposes the city’s rather typical American evolution, in which the structure of its social values remains deeply rooted in common beliefs about class, citizenship, and social order.

Portland, in its early stages, was an important player in the country’s logging industry, and ran small ship building businesses that sustained the local economy. The 1940s and 50s saw Portland develop at a rate comparable to other cities of its size around the country, with its politics aligning with conservative ideologies popular at the time. During these decades, however, presence of a strong community is evident. Civic groups

in the form of social clubs, several dedicated towards women and minority groups, began operating as advocates for social services and fundraising for local charities (Johnson 2004). Yet the city remained dominated by white, conservative, Christian males. It was not until the 1960s and 70s counterculture emergence that Portland began to see a real shift in its community values (Abbott 2011). A revolution of sorts came out of a nationwide dissent amongst the youth against the political actions of the U.S. government. This atmosphere of political upheaval acted as a breeding ground for Portland's many grassroots movements.

The model cities program introduced by President Lyndon Johnson changed the course of political activism in the city. Mandating public participation in federal and local government resulted in the formation of local committees geared towards achieving funding for community needs and projects. At the same time, neighborhood associations began to develop in a movement of neighborhood engagement under mayor Neil Goldschmidt (Johnson 2004). The program also had its share of criticism, and prompted strong resentment from African American communities in Portland regarding the inequality they were bound to face under the new plan (Abbott 2011). The question of race became a focal point of Portland's community advocacy, with groups like the Black Panther Party instituting several social assistance programs, and joining other already existing organizations in the fight for equality for the underserved. Riots and protests, both violent and non-violent erupted in many parts of the country, and Portland certainly experienced a remarkable wave of a new kind of citizen engagement. Student protests surrounding the events of the Kent State shootings brought together youth activists to confront powerful law enforcement, while a slightly older generation lead a "middle class

neighborhood revolution” (Abbott 2011). These grassroots movements would eventually lead to the legitimizing of these neighborhood associations, giving them authority in all matters within their geographical boundaries. It was during this time that Portland created “an open door policy that changed the expectation of citizens’ relationship to their local government” (Johnson 2004). This shift would pave the way for progressive politics to dominate the city in the decades to come.

### **A History of homelessness**

The rise of Portland as a major city would allow its homeless politics to be dominated by grass-roots community organizations and a, mostly, tolerant local government. The city’s attitude and policies surrounding their homeless population with shifting values, economies, and politicians, upon initial overview, suggests an unusually compassionate approach from the community, and often local policymakers. But the beliefs underlying this compassion, only serve to reproduce the myth of the homeless as a separate population, fundamentally unlike their middle and upper class counterparts.

Portland’s history of homeless policy, and public perception of it, renders images of a growing city whose battle against poverty is seemingly dominated by a collective sympathy towards a suffering population, however controversial or ineffective their policy may be. How the city has defined that population shifts with each decade, with each turn in the economy, and with each new wave of leadership.

*A Familiar Approach to Homelessness as the ‘Sick and Needy’*

For most of the 1960s Portland's discussion of homelessness was infrequent but typical of most regions in the country at the time. Poverty certainly existed in sufficient numbers, and the city's concentration on urban renewal projects left their untargeted homeless population with few resources. No notable evidence of a specific focus on homelessness existed in public documents or major newspapers until 1967. Detailed in documents discussing the search for the funding of the "Rehabilitation Programs" of 1967 and 1968, the local government is seen taking some of its first steps in addressing people of the city living without shelter. Separate from their housing initiatives, and as an alternative to the few Church sponsored programs in existence, the development of multiple rehabilitation programs and the first ever "Commission on Homeless Men" were reactive measures taken to respond to an increasing number of citizens displaced by economic hardship, specifically in an area of Portland known, at the time, as Skid Road. A letter of correspondence between Mayor Terry D. Schrunk and the associate director of the Office of Economic Opportunity in Washington D.C., reveals that Portland sought federal funding for their "Project for Homeless Men" and was met with suggestions to work more closely with programs and institutions geared towards mental health. A later proposal from the Commission for a drop-in center, outlined a city-sponsored service center that would provide a space for men to bathe, make phone calls, find "appropriate leisure time activities", get referrals to other health and welfare agencies, and serve as a research center for interested groups. The proposal also highlighted research that revealed the primary needs of the homeless individuals served, which included "Relief from the effects of excessive drinking," "minor first aid," and "Diagnosis and referral of more serious illness." Newspaper articles reporting on the drop-in center often discussed

individuals struggling with alcoholism and other social ailments as comprising the population that the center would serve (Olmos 1967, The Oregonian 1968). A 1968 article in The Oregonian also quoted the Multnomah County Hospital, who claimed that the drop-in center would “help in ‘keeping on top’ of the tuberculosis problem.” Each proposal and piece of media surrounding one of the only non-church affiliated programs to serve the homeless highly emphasized the public health problem that seemed to be the most essential to address. This understanding of homelessness rooted in illness and lack of proper care allowed the city to approach the homeless as they would have other poverty-stricken groups over the last few decades. The commission specifically aimed to give aid to those struggling with alcoholism, fathers with families to provide for who found themselves out of work, and other men who could not maintain stable housing for reasons beyond their control (Engdahl 1970). The description of this population stressed the issue of deteriorating health in both the language utilized in public documents and newspaper articles that presented the details to the public. This was nearly identical to the population deemed the ‘sick and needy’ used by religious organizations, who pathologized poverty as an illness requiring a cure. A letter from the Salvation Army to Mayor Schrunk, in fact, shows that these organizations worked closely together, targeting the same population with virtually the same method of care.

### *Homelessness as a ‘Housing Problem’*

In the 1970s the issue around homelessness shifted towards a closer relationship with housing initiatives. A declaration of a ‘housing problem’ came out through an explosion of neighborhood associations publishing newsletters and bulletins voicing their

concerns to the city and community. A Housing Task Force was formed as a response, calling for citizen participation in any form necessary. Multiple agencies sprung up to serve low-income families and persons with disabilities. The Housing Authority began renting hotel rooms out to the homeless (The Oregonian 1973). As tensions on Skid Road, now termed 'Skid Row', grew, a battle between commercial business and low-income housing emerged. Portland's local government gave in to the push from businesses wanting to develop the area, while attempting to answer the needs of the displaced citizens with new services and assistance programs. These displaced citizens represented a population who could not keep up with the pace of the city's growing economy, and who became part of 'the homeless' as a result. The nonprofit Burnside Consortium was established in 1979 to deal with housing issues, alcoholism treatment, offer employment training programs, and coordinate a variety of other services ([centralcityconcern.org](http://centralcityconcern.org)). It was the hopes of Commissioner Charles Jordan that this consortium, along the Public Inebriate Project, more exclusively offering rehabilitation services, would permanently resolve the challenging conflicts arising around Skid Row.

It is plausible that Portland's wave of progressive politics and its struggle to provide sufficient housing during this time granted the city a new perspective on how homeless populations came into existence. The decision to approach homelessness as a matter of housing was likely a result of both rising gentrification (branded as 'urban renewal') and a call from the community for an abolishment of income discrimination that disproportionately affected African American residents. The increase in the number of services the city offered to assist people in finding work and shelter might suggest that officials were beginning to address homeless residents as members of the community



who merely fell through the economic cracks. But the large number of services designed to rehabilitate men struggling with alcoholism, and the multiple publications attributing the rise of homelessness to the deinstitutionalizing of the mentally ill, suggested that Portland ultimately retained its segregation of populations based not only on income, but on overall health as functional citizens. That Portland would deem it necessary to include employment training programs indicates that the city believed the skills possessed by the displaced population were inadequate to obtain consistent work. Projects such as the Public Inebriate Project and the alcoholism treatment services offered by the Burnside Consortium, again, project an image of a population plagued by individual failings, whose downfall, while possibly triggered by an economic crisis, is ultimately a result of their own shortcomings that prevent them from surviving such hardships.

### *The Housing Crisis and Criminalization of Homelessness*

The 1980s and 90s would see a proliferation of housing proposals, program designs, studies on poverty and homelessness and society at large, and bring the issue of unsheltered individuals to the forefront of Portland's social and economic agenda. Under the increasingly popular suggestion of a national homeless crisis (Rubenstein 1985), along with a rising number of public demands surrounding the issue, Portland officials focused on homelessness with a renewed strength. In numerous letters between county executives and even average citizens around 1985, Mayoral candidate Bud Clark stressed that homelessness was a "priority" while other politicians took stronger action to solve the homeless problem.

With shifts in political leadership came new ideas on homelessness. The early years of the 1980s became a time of simultaneous expansion of community services and a harsher approach to the reduction of visible poverty. Mayor Frank Ivancie, who served from 1980 to 1985, and his team of representatives moved to get the homeless people off the streets, and out of view, justifying their actions with the statement,

“We have to pay some attention to the decorum of the city....I don’t want to see Portland, Oregon become the flop house of the United States.” (Heinz 1982)

This blatant admission of Portland’s image-oriented priorities was followed by a city-wide street living ban, prohibiting sleeping on the streets or camping under bridges, in parks, or in a public right of way. Law enforcement argued in favor of this ordinance, citing an increase in crime in these areas, both between homeless individuals themselves, and the homeless and other public. Multiple complaints from citizens had been filed, and police were looking to address this issue without allowing harassment of homeless individuals to persist. Police officials and policy makers defensively voiced concern for the well-being of these individuals. Interviews with journalists showed that police were convinced that street living was not “fit habitation for any human,” when questioned about their opinions on the ordinance (Pickett 1982). This ordinance, in contrast to the city’s previous tolerance, was met with strong opposition from several committees and members of the public. A 1982 article from the *Oregonian*, considered Coordinator of Burnside Community Council, Michael Stoops, and his particularly strong opposition to the idea, the voice for much of the public that felt powerless against city hall. Stoops

claimed the ordinance was unenforceable, senseless, dangerous, and unconstitutional. He advocated for the homeless population, saying that limiting their options for sleeping would not solve their larger problems, and that anybody is at risk for becoming homeless - even politicians. Stoops even went so far as threatening to name new homeless camps after members of the council who voted for the ordinance. A few community players, including Sisters of the Road Café, the Burnside Community Council, and a handful of homeless residents waged a court battle against city council, attacking the ordinance for constitutional violations in the summer of 1981 (Hill 1981). Meanwhile, major and alternative news sources presented the battle of homeless law with various insights. By this time, popular media had begun giving affectionate nicknames to well known people living on the streets. Among these characters were “Gypsy Slim”, “Shopping Bag Lady”, and “Eskimo”. In vaguely detailed accounts of their personal journeys, journalists attempted to humanize a previously faceless population.

“[Gypsy Slim’s] spot is furnished with a small barbecue, bedsheets, plastic tarps, a saxophone, a coffee pot, a guest book and a shopping cart that years ago was able to carry all of his belongings, which now is only the centerpoint in a stack of possessions that police officials say is continuing to spread.” (Heinz 1982)

Other news outlets maintained a generalized description of “hobos” and “tramps” living in “filthy, rat infested hobo camps” (Pickett 1982). With the argument around homelessness in full swing, individual neighborhood associations began to offer ideas and opinions on how to solve the numerous problems surrounding crime, poverty, and

shelter. Many newsletters described the problems around homeless people being related to crime, drunkenness, and panhandling. Neighborhood newsletters reported the formation of a homeless committee in the Sunnyside neighborhood to attack these problems with the help of local authorities. Other neighborhoods believed the homeless battle to be a responsibility of the local government and therefore limited their involvement. This single piece of legislation had divided the city into an ideological battleground. While many community members believed that the homeless in Portland had a right to the city, a strengthening group of neighborhood residents sided with the city's decision to favor the comfort of themselves and their sheltered neighbors over convenience for street living individuals.

This period of tension prompted Portland to reveal a number of its underlying theories around homelessness. It would seem that both those who were proponents of the ordinance and those who opposed it shared a common thread in their beliefs. Both parties maintained that the wellbeing of homeless individuals was of some importance. Both parties did not approve of the crimes seemingly generated by a concentration of unregulated homeless camps, and both parties believed to some degree, that these problems were not easily surmountable. Inside these concerns around safety for both the homeless and non-homeless, were constructions of a differentiated population: poverty-ridden individuals, and the wealthier class who were forced to witness it. Journalistic accounts, in their intention to bring names and faces to a population plagued by anonymity, still situated them in the context of otherness through their use of archetypal characterization. With the acknowledgement that homelessness was not an issue that could be easily overcome, even with strong community assistance and sizable funding, it

would appear that Portland understood homelessness as rooted in something other than a temporary social phenomenon arising from periods of structural changes in economic and housing policies. With neighborhoods beginning to formulate differentiated identities among themselves and their, unsheltered, fellow residents, it is clear that poverty did not merely represent a snag in the economy, but said more about the individuals themselves who seemed to suffer the most from it. The city's disapproval of homeless camping and their right to claim space in the city created an atmosphere under which the population in question became the subject of extremely contentious legislation with much larger implications regarding the rights of Americans, and human rights in general. This effectively marked them as an isolated population representing a particular set of moral issues, largely around personal incompetency and self-perpetuated substance abuse. These notions would endure years of policy revisions and social reform, perhaps becoming the distinct uniqueness around which Portland built its homeless crisis. Portland's tone would shift toward a more sympathetic one, resulting in the branding of Portland's homelessness as particularly rare, but the overarching message that it was Portland's public against Portland's homeless upheld a social structure that would inevitably underlie each future battle around homelessness.

### *Changing the face of homelessness*

By the late 1980s, under the leadership of Mayor Bud Clark, Portland began to loosen its previously strict policies on homeless camping. Suffering from severe federal cuts to public assistance funding, the city was forced to reevaluate its use of resources to help their growing homeless population. In 1986, Mayor Clark introduced his 12-point

plan to address the homeless, a roadmap to guide the city into breaking the cycle of homelessness. Behind this plan was the belief that the nature of the homeless population was changing. Now included in these groups were women and children, deinstitutionalized mentally ill, and at-risk youth. The twelve points contained methods to work with the more diverse homeless groups, housing initiatives, new safety measures, and public participation mandates. Under this program, Portland opened more specified shelters, utilized hotels and foreclosed properties for transitional housing, and established a voucher system that would help serve the most vulnerable populations first. A city sanctioned designated camping area was also suggested as a source of additional shelter. The plan encouraged private employers to hire those in need of transitional employment and created job assistance programs to help the less skilled. But the plan also included an extensive section dedicated to alcoholism, the mentally ill, and the public's discomfort with their presence. It promoted stronger treatment programs for these individuals, charging the City of Portland Office of Intergovernmental Affairs to "give priority to a legislative agenda which includes financing for expansion of substance abuse treatment." But the 12-point plan also implemented ordinances to keep their behavior suitable for the rest of the public. The city council adopted an ordinance to help control aggressive panhandling, and a campaign to change this behavior erected displays throughout the city discouraging citizens to give money to the homeless and direct them to emergency services instead. Among the new liberties the 12-point plan granted homeless individuals, it managed to reinforce the idea that their visible suffering was publically unacceptable.

Mayor Clark promoted an open dialogue between the public, the homeless, and city officials. He dreamed of a city where co-existence would not only be tolerated, but

embraced. He touted his philosophy of shelter as a basic human need, of desires of the community and the homeless to be complementary, and of the power of the community to break the homeless cycle. While it would seem that Mayor Clark attempted to unify the entire population of Portland, he only moderately succeeded in doing so when able to change the face of homelessness being presented to the public. Portland's policy of embracing co-existence did not seem to extend to the homeless population prior to Mayor Clark, and even under his leadership, favored a homeless population that was easily tolerated by the general public, those whose visible poverty did not upset the social order.

The 1990s introduced new strategies for fair housing, a restructuring of shelter systems, and brought new categories of homeless to attention. With the city's housing problem officially transitioning to a housing crisis, Portland became the site of a national Homeless Initiatives Demonstration Program. The city began to reorder their shelter and low income housing facilities. In an attempt to integrate them into the general public, and reduce any concentration of poverty in one area of the city, a plan for diversified neighborhoods was established. This plan would place a variety of income levels in the same neighborhood, challenging zoning ordinances that previously required special needs housing to be a significant distance from residential areas. The plan would move temporary shelters into other city districts, provided that both the current residents and the new neighbors agreed to a 'Good Neighbor Agreement'. The proposal was initially met with limited opposition, but tensions increased among an established community of homeless advocates and business developers, when a long-standing shelter was accused of hosting a drug house, and police raided the soon-to-be closed shelter. Homeless advocates believed businesses to be using law enforcement and Mayor Vera Katz as tools

to promote their agenda. Meanwhile, city commissioner Gretchen Kafoury continued to outline the diverse neighborhoods plan and good neighbor pact. A city was once again divided on how to approach the complications of the homeless problem. Camp sweeps began to occur regularly again, while the city scrambled to find better shelter solutions and meet the demands of homeless advocates. The good neighbor pact reached a breaking point with many areas, and the development of a movement dubbed “Not In My Backyard”, or NIMBY, was embraced by several neighborhoods. The city strove to defeat this notion through community outreach and promoting a dialogue between service providers and community residents, and continued to push their housing initiatives into city planning. Camp sweeps began to be reevaluated, and more citizens expressed sympathy and need for homeless services. But the battle around homelessness would continue to be waged by different parties with different ideas about the poor and their city.

#### *A Decade of Homeless Advocacy*

After years of dispute around the most effective way to address the homeless, the new millennium brought with it some notable changes. While the city’s anti-camping ordinance was ruled unconstitutional by a Multnomah county judge in 2000, police still targeted homeless campers (Pesznecker 2000). The battle seemed to become less about the homeless themselves, and more about what kinds of services and plans would bring them out of homelessness. Complaints from some communities about the presence of homeless people, and the disturbances they brought with them, were still frequent, but the city seemed to acknowledge that these communities were hardly a force to be reckoned



with compared to the vast number of citizens demanding rights and protection for the homeless. The Homelessness Working Group arose out of neighborhoods desiring to come together and advocate for more and better homeless services. A few years later, Portland implemented a 10-year plan to end homelessness that saw success in its early stages. It moved over one thousand homeless individuals into permanent housing and offered them counseling services for life (Dworkin 2007). The homeless problem seemed to have a working solution, and the program gained national recognition at the National Alliance to End Homelessness conference. Critics of the program argued that it was only helpful to those who weren't chronically homeless, and did not prevent homelessness from happening in the first place (Hsuan 2005). Despite these efforts, the struggling population continued to increase, and thousands more remained on the streets. In 2001, after winning a battle against city and public opposition, Dignity Village sprung up and gained status as a nonprofit in a public lot on the outskirts of the city, eventually sanctioned as a tiny house village in 2004. This landmark decision paved the way for the power of homeless groups to contend with the authoritative powers of city hall and neighborhood communities. This decade of homeless advocacy proved progressive for a portion of the homeless population, but did not necessarily bring them to full resident status. While giving few the opportunity for more permanent shelter, the movement did little to change the public's perception of them. The residents of Dignity Village represented a specific demographic of homeless individuals, who were required to meet certain criteria for entry. Many of them work for wages, and are generally drug and alcohol free (Biswas-Diener and Diener 2006). These residents are also committed to contributing to a well-maintained neighborhood and valued self-sufficiency, as outlined

in their testimony for the Portland City Council. This particular group of homeless residents was easy for the public to support, as their own values aligned with many of the public's beliefs about who is worthy of charity and compassion. If the people of Dignity Village were able to work and care for themselves, then the myth of moral failings as the cause of homelessness was forced into reconsideration. But among the many who were still unable to meet the criteria specified by Dignity Village, the myth remained an unmovable fact.

Portland's priorities seemed to focus more on the advocacy groups composed of middle and working class citizens, who were making demands of the city, than on the homeless population they were advocating for. When community members join a movement to stand up against the local government, both the community member's and government's intentions are not immune from suspicion. This battle, which in essence, had only two contenders, appeased the homeless advocates and perhaps the temporarily unsheltered, but did not begin to address the population of homeless individuals Portland continued to treat as a distinctly different group.

### **The Emergence of Portland's All Too Common Homelessness**

Portland's historically powerful community may have made all the difference in creating their unique battle around homeless rights. Under a regime of historically progressive politics, Portland's strong community organization has always been at odds with prevailing social controls. But this is not to say that deeply embedded notions of poverty and homelessness do not exist here. The essential social distinctions that

consistently place the homeless and the poor in groups defined separately from the dominant public are still undeniably in use.

It becomes obvious, in examining the city's polarized population, that conceptions of homelessness discussed widely in the Culture of Poverty argument of the 1960s are maintained by a significant portion of the city's residents. The homeless in Portland are a strikingly visible part of the public. American societies are generally adamant about maintaining segregation of public interaction based on income level or social class (Susser 1996). With Portland's visible homeless suddenly undermining the ideological order, their mere presence reinforces their 'crime' of being poverty-stricken; by presenting a physical image of 'immorality' through their lack of cleanliness, disregard for social etiquette, and claiming of a space which has been designated to a different population. This reinforcement is a manifestation of the already existing construction of the divide between deserving and undeserving poor, but serves the purpose of confirming an acceptable lack of compassion in a public who believes themselves to be law-abiding, and the others criminal. While Mayor Katz's 1993 strategy to create a diversified neighborhood of a range of incomes had potential, the public outcry it sparked only confirmed that residents of Portland were far more concerned with the livability of their own neighborhoods than with the acceptance of a different kind of social existence. The entire NIMBY movement of that decade reveals resident's deeply embedded beliefs that the homeless are a different people, with different priorities, and who do not deserve the same rights as competent citizens. Don Mitchell, in his 2011 assessment of the particular style of homelessness pervasive in American cities, argues that the national culture has encouraged the public majority to classify the entire homeless population as separate

from society as opposed to an integral part of it; that homelessness has been framed time and time again as a threat to the enjoyment of civic space by the deserving public. The NIMBY supporters likely believed that homelessness was not in fact an inevitable consequence of a competitive economy, but instead a short-term problem resulting from faultiness of individuals who did not possess the strength to be part of the workforce, which Mitchell argues will preserve the cycle of poverty by continuing to frame it as temporary. This becomes evident in the large number of residents refusing to participate in community assistance, under the assumption that eventually the problem could be eradicated as these individuals are removed from the public eye and into treatment centers (Dear 1992). In doing so, they cleared the path for their own population to walk freely in spaces they believed they had earned through their position on the economic ladder. Even in more tolerant groups, these notions, though more hidden, are still evident. Neighborhood associations, however compassionate and sympathetic towards the homeless, continued to present the homeless as a population suffering from social ailments that required a treatment plan to cure them. In his study of the 1980's homeless crisis in New York City, Marcus (2006) suggests that underneath concern directed at homeless populations is the desire to "maintain and affirm social caste distinctions." In early policy documents, which place the homeless in the same categories as public inebriates and other street criminals, this affirmation is clear. But even when Portland began to recognize that the homeless population was diverse and mostly non-criminal, their targeted service programs serve to reinforce a pathological conceptualization, maintaining that the homeless are groups of ailing patients that require specialized treatment plans to recover. The city's decision to allow the presence of homeless villages

to persist in public areas does not truly allow the homeless to seamlessly integrate into the general public, but creates an impactful image of a society with visibly different social norms and forms of living. It would appear the Portland's policies are not necessarily aimed at redefining the structure of their society, but would rather work to ease tensions between groups of a locally accepted class system. In upholding these distinct categories of the 'homeless' and the 'general public', Portland has been able to successfully implement solutions by framing them in terms of public expenses, public nuisance, and public health threats. The public, in this sense, is able to regard homeless assistance as a necessity in maintaining their desired social order, under the guise of charitable compassion.

Portland's current community and homeless relationship, and their innovative solutions to housing the homeless are intriguing. Their recently established pilot program to build tiny house villages in resident's backyard has major implications (Harbarger 2017). But is this a reversal of how our society has conceptualized poverty for the last century? Or does this initiative simply possess a novelty that appeals to Portland's progressive social agenda? Has Portland successfully dismantled the walls separating the poor from the non-poor, have they breached the social caste contract, have they found a way to comfortably live and convince others of a collective social existence? Portland, both historically and currently has not hesitated to provide access to job opportunities, or to provide special housing for families and individuals who qualify under a screening process, as well as to implement codes of conduct around behavior and activity. But what does Portland offer those who are unable to work, those who would never qualify or be suitable for housing that mandated a set of behavioral rules? These are the individuals

that perhaps suffer the most during the formation of solutions to homelessness. Those who are close to meeting the economic and social criteria of a working class citizen, and have simply slipped off the economic ladder in a time of hardship, seem to be the face that Portland's homeless policy makers are eager to push to the public. The rebranding of the 'homeless' to the 'houseless', seen increasingly in popular media (Gibson 2013), does not vanquish the pathology around homelessness, but rather epitomizes a shift in the focus of the problem to a population the middle class can more easily identify with. The homeless crisis is rendered more palatable for the public when lines between the categories of 'homeless' and 'middle-class' are blurred. Shifting the language to reflect a more harmless poverty-stricken population effectively bridges a gap between the two categories, but other, less promising members of the homeless category remain as outcasts.

## **Conclusions**

The perception of Portland's struggle with homelessness is compelling in its apparent uniqueness, but ultimately remains a social and legal battle controlled by deeply entrenched philosophies about how society should operate. Portland's historically strong community of predominately left-leaning individuals has branded the city as a progressive, liberal haven, where acceptance and co-existence is thought to be encouraged. But beyond this community lies an entire group of neighborhoods and residents who are uninterested in sacrificing their right to public space for the sake of co-existence. These two groups have waged numerous battles against one another, and against city hall, especially when it came to issues around homelessness. While the

parties seemed to hold opposite views in terms of how the homeless should be treated, and their problems handled, both opinions were rooted in the same destructive idea- that the homeless were, in essence, an inherently separate social group that required specialized treatment by the rest of society. Through changing policies, courtroom battles and advocacy movements, this othering of the homeless population has been consistently reproduced and emphasized by the middle and upper class who participated in them.

While Portland's compassionate image may seem to produce a more effective approach to the reduction of poverty, the city's retention of these social categories will inevitably continue to fuel the fight around homelessness. If Portland follows the path of other cities that have grown into larger powers in the national economy, it will likely find itself unable to adequately solve the significant visible poverty that currently affects the city. It would then see its homeless crisis appear more like that of the 1980s New York City homeless crisis. Under these conditions, Portland's veil of compassion would not only be dismantled, but the city's homeless problem finally revealed for what it is- a population desperately attempting to define its place in an exclusionary social structure.

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