Understanding the growing problem of homelessness

For Valentine, social geographies is " The study of social relations and the spatial structures that underpin those relations". Critically assess how such an approach may help to understand homelessness.

For Valentine, social geography is " the study of social relations and the spatial structures that underpin those relations" (Valentine, 2001). Social geography covers a vast range of ideas and subjects; it looks at the inequalities in society such as sex, class, ethnicity and disability which are missed in other fields of geography (Johnston, 2001). One of the most important topics is the study of how people interact and use the space around them. These classifications and social markings make's us what we are and how we are seen by others (Jackson, 2005). The ideas which Valentine thought described social geography can be shown through the issue of homelessness. This essay will look at: what homelessness means, social relationships within homelessness and spatial structures within homelessness.

Homelessness is becoming an ever growing social problem. The obvious definition of homelessness would be simply a person without a home, but it could also be seen as a " condition" where someone is ejected from society because of a lack of relations within a social structure (Chaplow in Bahr, 1973). Valentine has outlined different categories of homelessness. There is official homeless, where people are recognised by the state and have applied for housing. Single homeless is people who have no legal rights to housing and live on the streets. Hidden homeless are people that are not officially recognised by the state and living with friends or in other precarious situations. Protohomeless are people who could become homeless in the

future due to their current circumstances (Valentine, 2001). These definitions from Valentine already show there are more social issues behind the issue of homelessness than first appear. The growing number of homeless people can be shown through a 58% increase in people in Scotland (between 1989/90-1999/00) applying under the homelessness legislation (Scottish Gov't, 2009). It is believed that every night in England up to 500 homeless people sleep rough on the streets (Crisis UK, 2006) and that 10, 000 people will do this over the course of a year. The largest majority of people sleeping rough is made up of young males, up to 52, 000 young people were found to be homeless by local authorities in England during 2003 (Crisis UK, 2006). There are a number of common factors seen as the cause or lifestyle choice of the homeless, which often comes as a stigma to some of the homeless population. The next section will look at how social relations can often be the cause of homelessness.

Valentine claimed that " social relations" are a fundamental concept of social geography (Valentine, 2001). Social relations are about how different people/groups interact with each other and the bonds/relationships they form. Relationships (small or large) in society can have big effects on people. This can be shown through the example of domestic violence (small scale) compared to Local Authority Tolerance towards the homeless (large scale), both issues can have equally important effects on individuals.

Domestic violence is seen as one of the route causes of homelessness. It is the second most common crime in the UK, one incident is reported every minute (Womens aid, 2009). On average 1-2 women are murdered each week at home by male partners and 63% of women aged 30-49 cite

domestic violence as the key reason for their homelessness (Crisis, 1999). Although the vast majority of domestic violence is targeted at women, men are also at risk. Especially those who are: young, old, frail or have disabilities.

The home is often associated with the ideas of security, comfort and family, this has not been the same throughout history. It was only in the late 19th/early 20th century where the home was separated from the work place. This new lifestyle changed the role of the wife and gender relationships (Madigan, 1990). Behind the closed doors of private homes there are no prying eyes or means of protection, the home could alternatively be associated as a place of violence and secrecy. The breakdown in relationships within the house such as couples (through domestic violence) or between family members (especially young members) leads to people being forced or choosing to leave the home. Family conflict is a main cause of homelessness amongst two thirds of homeless young people and 86% of young homeless people are forced out of their home, rather than leave on their own will (Crisis, 2006). Once the social relations breakdown and people are on the street, they are consumed by the stereotypical image of the homeless.

The homeless are associated with drug and alcohol culture, mental illness, crime and violence, for example ½ of those who sleep rough have been to prison (Crisis, 2006). These views are primarily meant for the street homeless, the visible homeless population which only make up a small proportion of all the homeless. However these images which are the face of

homelessness often are unfair on a number of people and create a new problem in the way of tackling a much larger issue (Ravenhill, 2008).

The state and public can see the homeless as not worth helping, due to these stereotypical associations. One example of a state approach towards the issue of homelessness is the *anti-bum ordinances" in America where local authorities tried to rid homeless populations by displacing them to neighbouring cities. In other areas of America authorities were seen to be punishing the homeless. On a cold winters night (30th December 1987) in Miami, 41 homeless were arrested by police in order to uphold there policy of no sleeping on the streets. The state was seen to be cleaning the streets of " the unsightly presence of homeless individuals" (Baker, 1990). Both these examples show the poor social relationships between the homeless and the state, the issue was in most cases not treated fairly or just passed onto another person.

The idea of the state moving the homeless away from the city streets links into the idea of NIMBYISM (not in my back yard), creating a spatial structure where the homeless are not wanted or don't fit in anywhere. This idea of NIMBYISM relates especially to residential and business areas, as the presence of homeless could reduce housing prices and create security concerns. The homeless don't fit into the spatial pattern of the city, seen as a nuisance or an eye sore. It is however important that homelessness is not just seen as an urban issue.

Rural homelessness is an almost hidden issue from society and is often not even pictured when regarding the subject of homelessness. In rural England

the number of homeless grew by 30% from 2002-2004 (Countryside Agency, 2004). It is an issue which is growing larger in the UK as people adopt new spatial structures of living. People are moving out of urban areas into rural areas, these are often wealthy families looking for the rural idyll (the more glamorous view of the countryside). In 2003 only half of those who purchased property in the countryside with land attached were farmers (Countryside Agency, 2004). There is a growing lack of affordable housing for rural locals, due to this structural switch and a lack of planning for the future in the countryside. This rural homeless population are normally forced to stay in cars or make shift camps/shelters, exposed to the elements. One of the most common outcomes of rural homelessness is known as " sofa surfing" where people move between staying with different friends. This group is often unrecognised by the state, therefore not creating the attention needed to spark help. Like the street homeless the make up and social associations of the rural homeless are the same. The majority of the rural homeless are also between the ages of 19-25 and there are large associations still with drugs, alcohol, crime, mental health and suicide. Where ever the homeless populations are they face much the same issues and stereotypical associations.

The issue of homelessness can be extensively examined by looking at the social relations and spatial structures within the topic. Through homelessness it can be seen that social relationships affect how people are treated and viewed in society. This concept can be applied to many social geography issues such as gender and ethnicity. For homelessness however these relationships are vital in understanding how some people have

become homeless (through the breakdown in family relationships), how the public view the homeless (as drug addicts and thieves) and even in how the state approaches dealing with the issue. The study of the spatial structures of homelessness shows us how the homeless use space. This could be creating there own new homes, creating conflicts through NIMBYISM and it also lets us explore aspects like the rural homeless. Homelessness often does not fit into the social structure of cities; there is no room or will to accommodate the homeless. The issue of homelessness is a complicated one, but can be summarised as a complex structure of social relationships and issues of the use of space.

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