

Making Sense of NIMBY: poverty, power and community opposition to homeless shelters

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Local citizens mobilizing in opposition to the presence of homeless people and services is increasingly common in communities across the United States. Such "not in my backyard" politics have often been understood as resulting from prejudice, bigotry, or misguided understandings. I argue for an analysis of these social movements through considering how particular strategies and practices come to seem "natural" to social actors while other possibilities are effaced. Analyzing these "common sense" reactions thus must entail examining the interplay between discursively made representations of homeless people and historical, class, and power dynamics that impact on people within particular communities. [Ethnography, homelessness, inequality, NIMBY, Massachusetts]

A PUBLIC MEETING IN Northampton, Massachusetts to announce the location of a winter homeless shelter turned quite contentious on August 19, 1998 as nearly one hundred and fifty citizens voiced concerns and opposition to locating the program on city land in a predominately upper-middle class area of the city. For the second time in as many years organized neighborhood opposition quickly coalesced to oppose the shelter. Neighbors came to the meeting with a lawyer already in place while their statements portrayed the vast majority of homeless people as mentally ill, dangerous, chemically addicted, lazy, or as potential criminals and vandals. As in many communities across the country, political turmoil and increased animosity between groups of city residents resulted from this effort to find an acceptable location for services for homeless people. These events in Northampton are far from unique. In fact, several recent studies document "not in my back yard" (NIMBY) efforts as an increasingly popular response to homelessness throughout the nation (Laws 1996; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty

1997, 1995; Takahashi 1998; Werner 1998).

A decade of widespread implementation of neoliberal efforts to provide services to "help" homeless people coincided with eight years of what has been widely proclaimed as an area of unprecedented economic growth and prosperity. Despite the "strong" economy and the implementation of a range of "helping" practices administered to homeless people, homelessness and requests for housing assistance continued to increase during recent years.¹ Local governments and community members are responding to the continued growth of homelessness. Unfortunately, despite the lack of resources adequate to meet the needs of homeless people, widespread public support for political movements aimed at decreasing systemic inequalities, which are a root cause of homelessness, have been largely absent. Many of these citizens and policy makers are not striving to implement measures aimed at less exploitative or living wages for the 30–40% of homeless people who are employed and still can not afford housing. Nor are they working toward creating more affordable housing units or working to ameliorate other systemic inequities such as structural racism and sexism related to producing homelessness. Instead, local governments and community residents continue to be more likely to attribute homelessness to shortcomings within homeless people themselves. Consequently, the most vocal and organized community mobilizations appear to be aimed at preventing the location of services for homeless people in "their" neighborhoods. In this paper I draw upon ethnographic research in Northampton to argue that the policies and practices related to economic growth and prosperity for some people in the late 1990s combined with dominant individualizing neoliberal discursive conditions have helped both to produce increasing hunger and homelessness in the United States and to produce what are characterized as NIMBY responses to homelessness in local communities.

Making Sense of "NIMBY"

THERE ARE MANY POSSIBLE WAYS of understanding practices commonly classified as NIMBY. In analyzing local opposition to human services, often social scientists have largely focused on the beliefs and public perceptions about homeless services and homeless people (Henig 1994; Dear 1992; Gilbert 1993). Similarly, many homeless people and shelter employees I have spo-

ken with represent the opposition to services or shelters as resulting simply from either selfishness or misguided, prejudicial stereotypes. In that vein, a report by the U.S. Conference of Mayors argued that local opposition to homeless services is largely the result of "hostility and fear, based often on ignorance" (U.S. Conference of Mayors 1993:19) while the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty argued that "not in my back yard" (or NIMBY) efforts "are the result of misinformation that could be remedied through education and communication" (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 1995:vii). These understandings are somewhat supported by studies showing that a number of arguments are repeated in multiple settings. For example, opponents of homeless services frequently argue that the service will attract homeless people from other places, cause property values and businesses to decline, cause traffic and crime to increase, and cause the quality of life to deteriorate (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 1995).

This may very well be a partial explanation, but I have come to believe that the NIMBY phenomenon should be understood as a much more complex phenomenon than simply selfish or uninformed beliefs and responses by residents. As the nation is becoming increasingly more segregated in terms of race and class (Massey and Denton 1993) NIMBY politics and their corresponding attitudes are increasingly becoming understood by critical social scholars as embedded within broader changes in the political economy and that have positioned even communities that appear to be relatively stable on very tenuous ground (Gibson 1998; Takahashi 1998; Takahashi and Dear 1997; Lake 1993; Rose 1993).

Such research has considerably enhanced our understandings of why NIMBY responses to homeless services are increasingly so widespread. Yet, what is left largely unexamined is an analysis of precisely how such attitudes and understandings come to make sense to people. As Lois Takahashi has argued, we must also consider "what social relations contribute to evaluations that persons and places have less value and are considered 'abnormal'" (1997:907). Drawing on Takahashi's analysis, I suggest that it is necessary to analyze the constitutive effects of everyday practices and public discourses on producing particular subjectivities and dominant understandings about homeless people if we hope to make sense of NIMBY politics. In order to understand these social movements, scholars must consider how particular strategies and practices come to seem natural to social actors while other possi-

bilities are effaced. Analyzing these “common sense” reactions **thus** must entail examining the interplay between discursively **made up** representations of homeless people and historical, class, and power dynamics that impact on people within particular communities.² As Timothy Gibson, drawing upon the work of Stuart Hall and Antonio Gramsci, details in his study of efforts by citizens in a mostly white-working class neighborhood in Philadelphia to oppose racial integration in order to understand such oppositional efforts, it is imperative to examine the ideological resources people have available from within their particular social milieu, in order to help them sense of the conditions of their existence. Gibson writes, “the kinds of ideological resources we use to **make sense of** daily events and experiences will go a long way in determining whether we actively work to change or to reproduce existing social relations.”(1998:142). Utilizing a similar theoretical framework, this paper seeks to make sense of what has been characterized as the NIMBY response to homelessness through an ethnographic analysis of a specific case study—the efforts of a group of neighbors in Northampton, Massachusetts to oppose the location of a winter emergency cot program in their neighborhood during 1997 and 1998.

In this study, I analyze how and why some people organize opposition to shelter services. In particular, the paper explores what types of understandings about homelessness are embraced both by those who support and those who oppose homeless services. I ask, how do people come to understand homeless people in these particular ways? How is it that particular strategies and responses come to make sense to people while others do not? In addressing such questions, it is vital to understand the interconnections between activists’ practices and their knowledge about homelessness and homeless people.

The combination of a number of methodological tools was utilized in addressing these questions. I conducted ethnographic research in and around the homeless sheltering industry in Northampton from 1993 through 1998. This research examined the practices and languages that homeless advocates and service providers have used in responding to the growth of homelessness in the city. I analyze homeless advocates’ participation in public meetings, planning task forces and shelter routines in addition to examining written documents. I also used reports from the city planning department, county government, Census Bureau, and Department of Labor as sources for data regarding the political-economic context within which the local debate is being played

out. Interviews were conducted with shelter staff, volunteers, homeless advocates, city officials, homeless people, and neighbors of the shelters.

This data was supplemented with both viewing of videotaped recordings of public meetings and a month of further targeted interviews with public opponents and supporters of the shelter's placement which took place during the summer of 1999. During this time, one of the lead neighborhood organizers also provided me with access to public and private documents written by some of those who were lobbying against the shelter. These texts included letters to governmental officials, petitions, letters to the editor of the local newspaper, and correspondence pertaining to the legal challenge to the shelter's location. These documents provide for a clearer account of what people actually did and wrote at particular moments rather than what they might have recollected or found it appropriate to say during later interviews. Finally, I conducted a textual analysis of public representations of homeless people found in such documents as pamphlets, shelter statistics, shelter newsletters, guest editorials in local newspapers, and fundraising brochures produced by homeless service providers.

A Progressive Community?

WIDELY PROCLAIMED AS ONE OF the more progressive communities in New England, with a thriving downtown, and a mayor and city council quite active in supporting HUD's "continuum of care" concept while providing a broad array of homeless services, the city of Northampton, Massachusetts was the scene of much public conflict and consternation regarding the placement of a winter emergency homeless shelter in 1997 through 1999.³

Northampton, the home of Smith College, with a bustling downtown of locally owned businesses in the heart of a vibrant academic setting, is seen as a model of how to overcome the effects of deindustrialization.⁴ The city is also widely recognized as a "progressive" community, especially in terms of the relatively large, openly lesbian population. Yet, beneath the surface, there is another side to the city. Like all of New England, Northampton has undergone significant economic restructuring in recent decades. One impact has been the loss of 40 percent of the manufacturing jobs in the county since 1980. These have been replaced

largely by lower paying jobs in food service and retail trade. These trends are expected to continue as a 1999 study by the National Priorities Project found that 61 percent of the jobs with the most growth in Massachusetts paid less than what they defined as a living wage with 42 percent of those jobs paying less than one-half a living wage (National Priorities Project 1999).

As wages have stagnated for many citizens, income inequality has increased rapidly since 1970. When adjusted for inflation, the poorest 20 percent of state residents saw their income decline by 2 percent during this period while the wealthiest 20 percent of the population experienced a 60 percent increase in income. This ramplantly spreading inequality has increased even more rapidly since 1980 with even the middle 20 percent of the population seeing their incomes decline by 4 percent while the incomes of the wealthiest 20 percent increased by 18 percent (Bernstein et al 2000). At least in part as an outcome of these trends, many people are living on the margins of economic viability. A 1999 study by the Massachusetts Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Project found that an estimated 300,000 Massachusetts citizens (almost 25 percent of the state citizens) made too much money to qualify for federal assistance, but did not make enough money to pay their bills.⁵ The situation in Northampton was found to be slightly worse than that for the state as a whole, with 28 percent of all families in the city making less money than they needed to make ends meet (Brown 2000).

Like many communities, Northampton also suffers from a lack of affordable housing units. As the studies by HUD indicate, the availability of affordable housing has failed to keep up with requests for services nationally as the number of people on waiting lists for housing assistance continued to increase between 1996 and 1998, during the height of the economic boom (HUD 1999). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, rents increased faster than income for the 20 percent of American households with the lowest incomes as the consumer price index for residential rent rose 6.2 percent between 1996 and 1998 (HUD 1999). This situation is especially acute in Massachusetts. In Northampton, the mean rent for a one-bedroom apartment was \$706 in 1997 with an occupancy rate of over 95 percent. A study by the National Low Income Housing Coalition found that 44 percent of renters in Northampton were unable to afford market rate rents in 1999 for a two bedroom apartment. To do so as renters would have to earn \$15.26 per hour working a 40 hour week to pay for an averagely priced rental unit in the city (Dolbeare 1999).

In Massachusetts, over one million eligible families compete for 100,000 subsidized housing units or vouchers. Additionally, gentrification has resulted in the loss of many affordable housing units. The city of Northampton, for example, currently has approximately one-half the number of single-room-occupancy units that existed in 1970. Moreover, rent control was voted out of existence in Massachusetts in 1995. Combined with an economy that has created unprecedented wealth for some people, these forces have resulted in rental costs, housing prices, and assessed housing values skyrocketing throughout the state. A volunteer at the shelter described the local housing market as follows: "This market is so hot that people are offering more money for housing than the buyer is asking and they pay it in cash."

This economic and political restructuring has also resulted in an increasing rate of homelessness in the city for over a decade. In the late 1980s, homelessness increased in Northampton to the point where community pressure began to be placed on the city government to resolve the problem. In 1990, a tent city was erected in a downtown park where homeless people camped and lived for several months. Soon thereafter, local advocates, homeless people, and church officials organized a building takeover on the grounds of a soon-to-be-closed state mental hospital. Negotiations ensued which eventually lead to the creation of a twenty-bed shelter in 1990. For the next two years, the existing shelters were able to accommodate most requests for shelter. However increased numbers of homeless people during the winter of 1992 began to place a strain on existing resources. A variety of responses to the overflow problems were developed; these eventually resulted in the establishment of a city wide planning group whose stated purpose was to develop a long-term plan for ending homelessness in the city. The group was also charged with the responsibility of alleviating the immediate shortage of shelter space, resulting in the development of a sixteen-bed winter, emergency shelter.

Beginning in the winter of 1994-95, this shelter, staffed largely with volunteers, rotated between different church basements from November through April. The shelter operated in this manner for three winters. Meanwhile, the volunteer community group also searched for a permanent, downtown location for the shelter. Unfortunately, even with three years of searching, this committee was unable to locate an affordable building anywhere within the city. Finally, during the summer of 1997, many of the churches which had been hosting the rotating cot shelter announced they would not participate the following winter, for reasons ranging

from thefts in the churches and excessive pressure on church facilities to a concern that the program was not doing enough to solve or decrease homelessness.

After several months of frantic searching by community volunteers, a space available for rent was finally located in Ward Three of the city in August. Ward Three, a section of town which is predominately lower-middle class, seemingly made a perfect setting for the shelter. Located in the southwestern corner of the downtown area, bordering two of the main streets and extending to include the former farmlands of the lush Connecticut River Valley, the area features two streets with a few large, Victorian houses now mostly owned by educators, artists, lawyers, and doctors surrounded by an area of small businesses, social service programs, and much smaller homes. These smaller houses made up a working class neighborhood of older, mostly Polish, ex-farmers and ex-manufacturing workers. These are people and professions that have seemingly been left behind in the prospering new Northampton of boutiques, galleries, and up-scale restaurants. Additionally, a designation of this neighborhood as the working class and "ethnic" part of the city has a long history as some older residents of the neighborhood told stories about having always been seen as "the wrong side of the tracks" by those connected with Smith College at the other end of Main Street. Consequently, there was also a long history of placing social service programs in that section of the city, especially in the 1970s and 1980s with the closing of the state mental hospital. This area of the city was already home to many social service facilities, a methadone treatment program, and most of the remaining single room occupancy units in the city. Thus, the location was seen to provide easy access to the resources of the downtown for the homeless people using the program.

A few days after signing the lease, the city planning department and the social service agency overseeing the cot program called a public meeting to discuss shelter policies and norms with neighbors. Much to their surprise and dismay several dozen neighbors spoke out against the location. This opposition shocked the mayor and shelter administrators because, unlike communities throughout the nation, this was the first public sign of any opposition to homeless services of any type in the city. Many city residents had understood the lack of opposition as one of many indicators of the liberal, progressive nature of the city.

Shelter administrators and city officials responded to the opposition by holding public meetings and other "educational efforts."

The goal of these events was to educate community members regarding the "truth" about homelessness. Current and formerly homeless people with the "best" jobs and the most education were handpicked and put on display as models of "good, hard-working" homeless people who had been "reformed" and "saved" by the shelters. The expectation was that opposition would dissipate once the neighbors were informed about the success stories produced at city shelters. However, these efforts still failed to assuage fears. As one woman stated, "Nice stories of redemption can't alleviate our fears." When these efforts failed to alter the public's perceptions and the opposition to the shelter, many homeless advocates became even angrier at what they saw as simple bigotry and discrimination. When the city and the agency opened the shelter despite their opposition and concerns, further protests ensued. Eventually, virtually every resident of the neighborhood signed a petition opposing the shelter and a lawsuit was filed arguing that the shelter violated local housing codes.

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Despite the turmoil, the shelter operated that winter while a search continued for a more desirable, permanent site. On August 19, 1998, a public meeting chaired by the Mayor was held to announce the location of the shelter on city land in a different neighborhood, a predominately upper-middle class area of the city. This meeting was even more contentious than that of the previous year. Nearly 150 citizens voiced opposition to the proposed site (Parnass 1998). Several speakers stated that the shelter would bring drunken people into "their" neighborhood and would increase crime and vandalism. These neighbors came to the meeting with a lawyer already in place and portrayed the vast majority of homeless people as mentally ill, dangerous, chemically addicted, lazy, and not really a part of their town. Eventually, as fate would have it, the upper-middle class residents of this neighborhood were spared from the shelter as toxic waste was found on the proposed site. In result, in October of 1998, it was announced that the shelter would once again be placed in the same building back in Ward Three. Many neighbors were outraged and once again responded with organized protests.

Shelter administrators, volunteers, and city planners had searched for three years to locate an affordable space for the shelter within the city. They proposed two different sites, only to be met with organized neighborhood protests. Both of the proposed sites resulted in threats, lawsuits against the city, thinly veiled racism, organized political campaigns against local politicians seen as supportive of the shelter, petitions, and anger and outrage

throughout the city (Cameron 1997; Kerstetter 1998a; Kerstetter 1998b; Loisel 1997). Despite a severe shortage of shelter beds, decent paying jobs, and affordable housing units, citizens in this “progressive” community had organized to publicly oppose the location of this shelter for the second consecutive year.

How do we understand these collective efforts to oppose the shelter? To most of the homeless advocates, homeless people, shelter staff, volunteers, and city planners I’ve worked with, the answer was clear. They attributed the opposition to parochialism and bigotry, selfish concerns with property values, misguided fears about increased crime, and misinformation on the “truth” about homeless people. My research suggests, however, that while these may certainly be a part of the story, they are only a small part of a much more complex situation. This is made especially clear when looking at the explanations, articulations, and practices of those neighbors who organized to prevent the shelter from locating in Ward Three.

When I spoke with neighborhood activists and read the lawsuit, petition, and correspondence they shared with me, a much more complicated picture began to emerge. Some of the opponents of the shelter did characterize homeless people as alcoholics, drug addicts, mentally ill, or criminals. As the local city council representative told me:

It is common-sensical to say that it’s going to be not so pleasant to have facilities in your neighborhood where people are under a lot of stress. Whether the stress is because of their alcohol dependency or drug dependency or just downright bad luck or ill health or whatever. People like that aren’t so stable, it’s hard to keep track of them. Occasionally they may be erratic people. A fair number of our homeless, what is estimated at between 50 and 80 percent of the homeless, are people who have mental health problems. Those are not your ideal neighbors.

Additionally, people referred to past negative experiences with homeless people. Homeless people were accused of entering neighbors’ garages and homes and of creating other problems when residents of the shelter were not allowed in due to drug or alcohol use on a particular night. For example, one woman told me, “On the nights that the cot shelter was in our neighborhood, we can correlate that, either that night or the next morning, with incidents of

minor vandalism, of entry into our houses. I mean, there was a long list of problems which were systematically ignored.”

However, several of these neighborhood activists insisted that this was not just a case of NIMBY politics and strongly resented their being characterized as uncaring and bigoted. When I interviewed the woman who played the lead role in the opposition, she began the interview by stating, “First, there certainly was a NIMBY reaction, but that’s partly because we’re used to housing or giving shelter to all kinds of programs, people in half-way houses, we have tremendously high numbers of single-room occupancy places, so, we’re used to them.” As another neighbor insisted, “NIMBY has been used as a flag to turn off protest, to shut people down instead of really listening to people . . . it becomes a battle tool on the part of people who don’t really pay attention . . . to say, ‘Oh well, that’s just a NIMBY response, we don’t have to take that into account.’”

Several of the leading organizers of the opposition to the placement of the shelter had lengthy careers as educators as well as long histories of activism in progressive social-justice movements. They especially expressed frustration that such commitments could be dismissed as they were now labeled bigots for organizing opposition to the shelter. For example, while I was interviewing her during the summer of 1999, the lead organizer of the opposition still expressed profound sadness at this characterization. As she related, “I lost a friend down the street who insisted that I was just a bigot. And, I have a long history of not being a bigot. I have been an activist all my life.” She felt that the biggest surprise to city officials and shelter administrators was that liberal residents of the two streets in the neighborhood with large Victorian houses spearheaded the opposition. She pointed out that these were mostly university professors, artists, teachers with long histories of liberal activism. I asked if she could tell me a little about her history of activism:

I started out in the peace movement in the ‘40s . . . I worked on the Rosenberg committee for years. And, I was one of those who picketed the bands when it was still a six day work week to get the five-day week. I’ve been around. I belonged to the American Labor Party for a long time . . . I came back here. Retired. And, I found a neighborhood that was fragmented and I wanted to do something about it. So, I began hosting block parties. I’ve done as much as I could.

I asked, "So, to be condemned as a caricature of the opponent of a homeless shelter in the community is the same as being an ignorant, bigoted, selfish person?" "It hurt. I'm a teacher, an editor, a humanist." Similarly, many of the shelter opponents argued that they have been supportive of efforts to "help the homeless" in the past. Several of those who signed the petition and reportedly donated money towards the lawsuit apparently had also donated money to past shelter fundraising efforts, had volunteered at the cot shelter in previous years on the nights it was held in a neighborhood church or had volunteered at a soup kitchen which had previously been located in that neighborhood. The city council representative for this region of the city explained:

Our part of town is, I think unquestionably, the part of town that has the most diverse population in terms of ethnicity, in terms of race, in terms of socio-economic background. And, by and large, this neighborhood has been incredibly welcoming of diversity. And, that's another thing that just makes the neighborhood outraged when we are accused of being intolerant and bigoted.

Opponents of the shelter emphasized repeatedly in their public articulations, private communications, legal efforts, and petition language that they were not against homeless people or homeless shelters, but emphasized that they simply opposed this particular shelter in this particular location. In fact, the petition expressly stated that the residents fully supported two existing shelters in the community as "bona fide city projects" (even though both were operated by private social-service agencies) that were helpful to both the city and homeless people. If they supported the other shelters and were not bigots or prejudiced against homeless people, how did they explain their concerns with the proposed shelter? Was it simply that the shelter was going to be located in their neighborhood?

In looking at the lawsuit that ten neighbors of the shelter filed, they expressed a concern with both the suitability of the particular building for housing people and with the quality of care being offered at the winter cot shelter. The building that was rented was zoned as a commercial structure located in an industrial zone. The program received a permit because it was slated for educational purposes and thus exempt from the zoning codes. Neighbors of the shelter, however, argued that no education actually happened at the shelter as it was run mostly by volunteers who fed and talked

with homeless people with very little professional staff presence throughout the night. Although not wanting to appear to agree with the opponents of the winter shelter, several staff members at other shelters in the city confirmed the validity of these sentiments. In fact, my observations while doing fieldwork at one of these shelters established that it was routine for the winter shelter to send their clients to seek help from the staff at other city shelters during the day. Similarly, volunteers and the one staff member at the winter shelter routinely called the professional staff at the more established emergency shelter for assistance with problems during the evenings. However, as those shelters were already understaffed, the overworked staff could offer very little tangible assistance.

As one woman explained to me, it was the inadequacy of the proposed shelter to actually help homeless people deal with the problems that the sheltering agency claimed were the causes of their homelessness that she found offensive. As she put it:

We also objected on the basis that the permit had been granted saying that this was for educational purposes, which was nonsense. It started at seven at night and ended at seven in the morning. You could hardly call that educational. They were also to be transported at seven in the morning into the middle of the city in the middle of the winter and we felt that was cruel and unconscionable. We also minded the fact that so much money was being put into this, what we considered an inadequate and inappropriate response to the plight of the homeless. It's this kind of superior, upper-middle class benevolence that really chills me. It's so snobbish. It's simply charity and I'm opposed to charity.

She went on to explain how she felt:

The shelters haven't really been of assistance. The problems have not been addressed. The problems are low wages and inadequate housing. It's clear if you just walk through the middle of town And what about families? It's families who lose their housing. Well, we're not a very good society are we?

Other opponents frequently articulated a similar sentiment; they were not opposed to homeless people. What they objected to

were more and more homeless programs that seemed to be doing very little to actually decrease homelessness.

The location of the shelter, however, also did come up as a major concern in both my interviews and in opponents' prior articulations. Here again, several of these activists made a clear effort to distinguish that it was not that they were against providing social services in their neighborhood. They emphasized that what most concerned them was the apparent "dumping" of a disproportionate number of social-service programs in one neighborhood instead of being scattered throughout the city. As an opponent of the shelter location argued, "There's been concern of the behavior of not all homeless people, not all people who occupy single-occupancy places, but of some . . . It was because of the density of the placement of 'unfortunates' in our particular ward. It was not that we objected to the homeless themselves." The concessions these neighbors tried to negotiate from the city government included a commitment that the shelter would not return there the following year, a study of where social-service programs were located in the city, and a more open process for making such decisions.

A mapping of the location of social-service programs throughout the city that was completed the following year indicated that there was some validity to this argument. The vast preponderance of social-service programs were located in two neighborhoods in the city, one of which was the four block area surrounding the chosen site for the shelter. Meanwhile, many of the upper-middle class areas of the city housed very few programs. In part, however, this was undoubtedly due to the cost and availability of rental units in various regions of the city. However, the uneven political clout that different city neighborhoods possess also may have contributed to these programs being located in Ward Three; at the very least that was the feeling expressed by activists working against the shelter location.

Moreover, changing economic conditions have clearly contributed to homelessness in the city. For example, I found that approximately forty percent of homeless shelter residents in Northampton were employed during the late 1990s, but their wages were simply insufficient to meet the basic cost of living in this area. Political-economic restructuring has also contributed to the current overflowing homeless shelters in the state despite its booming economy. Some people have done quite well in the new Northampton. These changes, however, have also contributed to feelings of unease and insecurity felt by many city residents which manifest themselves in multiple ways, one of which, I would sug-

gest, is a feeling of being unwanted and viewed as unimportant in the community. These feelings then fueled the neighborhood opposition to the placement of the shelter in their neighborhood.

Many of the opponents of the shelter's location articulated feelings of being unwanted and outdated workers who have no place to live, work, or shop in the new "progressive" Northampton. As one opponent of the shelter described the city:

I am not fond of our becoming a huge boutique. I don't like the fact that it's becoming so expensive I'm glad people are prosperous and that the arts are flourishing, but I don't really like what's going on . . . I go to town and bread costs three dollars a loaf . . . and pasta is what, three or four bucks a pound or something. It's, it's not a town for people of modest means. You have to shop on the outskirts and we all hate that.

This sentiment is fairly wide spread among those neighbors of the cot program who have worked and lived in the community for fifty or sixty years and now see themselves as nobody in the eyes of city administrators. Several supporters of the shelter expressed similar sentiments. As one woman told me, "Old timers, people who have lived here a long time don't like the direction that Northampton has gone."

As one neighbor stated, "We're worried, we're scared. We are not ashamed of trying to defend our homes." Their homes, which are now worth more than ever before, are the only assets many of these working-class citizens possess. As one of the leaders of the opposition to the homeless shelter explained, "The solution to this problem will come in when all of the old Polish families are forced to sell their homes. Once the new rich move into this neighborhood and gentrify it, we won't have any more social services placed here because they'll be listened to in city hall."

To many of the neighbors it was not surprising that their neighborhood was chosen as the location for the cot shelter. It was simply one more example of how decisions affecting their lives and their neighborhood were being made by those with more wealth and power in the community. One woman stated, "It's not surprising that the Elm Street, the Smith College crowd is trying to foist something they wouldn't want in their neighborhood on us. They've done it all along." Another neighbor voiced similar sentiments, "There's a traditional legacy of opposition between this part of town and the Smith College sort of educational, professional classes in town." A similar sentiment was expressed over

and over by opponents of the shelter. Almost everyone I spoke with relayed a story about their neighborhood's being looked down upon by those with more money and political power and that the city chose to site the shelter in their neighborhood because they were considered unimportant.

One of the organizers of the opposition told me:

We were told that the reason they were placing the shelter here on Hawley Street was that nobody lived here. And that is the very edge of the Polish community here in town. And we were absolutely outraged at that statement which implied . . . a blindness, that the Polish are nobody. That this is an unimportant neighborhood Of course, that's why it was chosen. And, don't think that people here didn't know that.

Likewise, the local city council representative for the ward who played a major role in organizing the opposition stated:

They kept saying that we were so prejudiced, but they chose a site where seventy percent of the abutters and the abutter's abutters were old Polish people, old Polish Catholic people. I mean, they would have been hard pressed to find another location in town that demonstrated that kind of prejudice. Of course nobody lived there. Those people don't count.

Yet, all of these concerns were marginalized, silenced and not addressed by proponents of the shelters or the city government. They continued to emphasize how opponents were uncaring, bigoted, and uninformed. Several neighbors in Ward Three read this as further evidence of a lack of democracy within the city and felt that the NIMBY caricature was used as a way to silence or marginalize discussion regarding broader, systemic inequality in favor of what several opponents described as "feel good charity by the Elm Street/Smith College crowd which is patronizing to homeless people".

So, in speaking with the organized opponents of this shelter in Ward Three, it became clear to me that issues of class and power in the community played a role in producing the NIMBY reaction. Here were people who felt devalued and disempowered politically, marginalized economically, and, thus, inequitably targeted in an undemocratic way for the placement of social-service programs in their neighborhood. They felt disempowered by the belief that

most of their representatives in city hall devalued their worth, that city administrators and service providers were interested in only more shelters and not in working on housing or wages, that their broad concerns were characterized simply as NIMBY politics, and that practices by service providers indicated an arrogance and unwillingness to work with neighborhood residents. This helps us to understand some of the political-economic stresses which may have helped produce their oppositional rhetoric and practices instead of, for example, attempting to collaborate with homeless people to address systemic inequities locally and regionally. Yet, it doesn't really help us to understand why it appeared as "common-sensical" to oppose homeless people and the homeless shelter while there is no evidence of any widespread effort to oppose any of the many other social programs which were previously placed in this neighborhood. For that we need to examine representations about homeless people or how discursive imaginings about homelessness and homeless people also helped produce NIMBY practices.

Representations and Imaginings

MY RESEARCH INVESTIGATING THE relationships between knowledge about homelessness and homeless people and community members' responses to homelessness, suggests that much opposition to this particular shelter can be traced to popular understandings and imaginings of homeless people as pathological and deviant. Many neighbors stated that their opposition was based on the inadequacies of this proposed program to actually help treat the range of pathologies they had come to believe characterized many of the shelter guests. More importantly, I suggest that the "well-meaning," vocal proponents of the shelter often working within the local sheltering industry may have actually helped reproduce and reinforce such images of pathology through their representations of homelessness in newsletters, appeals for funding, statistical record keeping, press releases, and similar discursive documents.

Interestingly, among all the people involved in the homeless shelter controversy, I could discern little difference between those who supported the shelter and those who opposed it regarding fundamental causes of homelessness. A few people on both sides discussed the importance of systemic inequities, yet most supporters

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and most opponents still described many local homeless people as homeless because of mental illness or chemical dependency. As the city council representative for Ward Three stated:

People aren't stupid. They know that the majority, or at least half, of the people who are homeless are having mental health problems. That's out there in the literature, it's in the newspapers all the time . . . And often they have multiple problems. You have people who are mentally ill who have substance-abuse problems. That's a standard pattern. You have people who are having problems who are self-medicating. Alcohol is a big problem.

Several neighbors expressed similar understandings of homelessness being caused by substance abuse or mental illness. They additionally stated they opposed the shelter due to a concern that the largely volunteer staff would be unable to adequately cope with these problems arguing that a professional, trained staff was necessary to ensure safety. As one opponent put it, "Well, there certainly were genuine homeless who were bankrupt or whatever, but so many of them are really people who were addicts or just don't know how to deal with their own lives or are just really just hangers on. And they do need assistance, but they need it seriously." She argued that the volunteers were incapable of coping with some of the problems, "With the drug addicts, with people who arrived really drunk."

In fact, while not admitting this in public, even the more trained staff working at other city shelters expressed similar views. Most of these staff members understood, when I relayed that even though I had worked in shelters for close to ten years, I could somewhat sympathize with some of the neighbors to the extent that, if I had a choice, I would not want to live next door to a homeless shelter or any other situation where a group of relative strangers, many of whom are under much social stress are forced into a shared living situation.⁶ Most of these trained staff members agreed that the vast majority of people we had met and worked with made very good neighbors, but also agreed that there were a few people who we were happy not to have living in the next house or apartment. Not surprisingly, none of these former shelter residents had been asked to speak at the community education meetings.

Additionally, I found that neighbors' imaginings about some homeless people as deviant, pathological, and outsiders were con-

firmed for them through the practices and languages with which homeless advocates and service providers addressed the growth of homelessness in the city. Many of the same people who were labeling the opponents of the location of the shelter as misinformed and bigoted for portraying homeless people as pathological have spent the past decade reinforcing just such images. In fact, the opposition to the location of the shelter by residents of Ward Three was unwittingly and unintentionally assisted by the very people who were advocates for the shelter by virtue of the fact that the advocates had also largely reduced the issue of homelessness to a question of individual pathologies in their public articulations.

An examination of fundraising appeal letters, shelter statistical record-keeping practices, shelter newsletters, grant applications, quotes given by shelter administrators to local newspapers, and similar public representations of homelessness reveals that the local sheltering industry itself contributed to these popular imaginings by symbolically representing homelessness as the result of deviant and dysfunctional individuals in need of reform and retraining. As homelessness has become routine in this community, these advocates and service providers have publicly argued that they have the solution to homelessness within their shelters. The image has been publicly portrayed that the professionalized and trained shelter staff is necessary to solve local homelessness through reforming and retraining deviants. These articulations urge the community to give more donations and support grant applications asking for more staff and more programs to help homeless people address "issues within their lives."

Year after year public reports, fundraising appeal letters, newsletters, and media accounts lauded the efforts of the local sheltering agency "helping" treat such conditions as drug addiction, alcoholism, mental illness or poor work ethics within the individualized bodies of homeless people. Little to no attention was spent addressing issues of systemic inequality in language or in practice. As one sheltering industry employee told me, "We can't talk about those issues, we'll turn off all of our donors in the business community." Instead, a position has been publicly put forth that staff will solve the problem of local homelessness by reforming homeless individuals. These texts urge community members to give more donations and support grant applications asking for more staff and more programs to help homeless people address "issues within their lives." Those issues were substance abuse, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other such pathologies.

For example, in 1996 the shelter received significant state funding creating the opportunity for hiring two additional staff members. After a contentious process involving input from staff and guests, job descriptions were written. One position was to work during the day with primary emphasis on case management of younger homeless people and creating workshops and job trainings for guests in the shelter. The second job would be mostly an evening position of "site manager" with additional case management and surveillance duties at the shelter. When an advertisement was placed for the two jobs, qualifications included "experienced with the homeless population and knowledge of alcoholism and addiction issues and recovery. Bilingual (Spanish) preferred. Must have reliable transportation. Excellent organizational skills required."⁸ These are the "common sense" traits and skills assumed to be needed in a professional shelter staff and represented to all those reading the job advertisement. Perhaps more importantly, the hiring of these new staff members, with an emphasis on their job responsibilities for reforming homeless people and their qualifications for doing so, played prominently in the shelter newsletter distributed to over a thousand city residents that fall in a public relations and fundraising effort.

To cite a second example, a 1995 grant application to HUD argued (much to the dismay and amazement of many shelter staff and guests) that 82 percent of locally homeless people were homeless due to mental illness or substance abuse. Likewise, the shelter received significant state funding for the first time in 1995 through the state Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA). The DTA required the compilation of statistics in a monthly summary of how many males and females used the shelter during the month, how many people were served meals, and how many homeless people were case managed through referrals for mental health, job training, and substance abuse services. Resulting were monthly reports detailing the extent of pathology among the population of the shelter. To justify their opposition, opponents of the shelter subsequently cited data imbedded in these reports.

My research showed that shelter staff and administrators became quite cognizant of the problematic nature of how they were representing homeless people. The staff at one shelter spent much of 1995 and 1996 debating how to both work with homeless people in new ways and how to represent the political economic factors contributing to homelessness more fully in public forums. These discussions resulted in some new practices. For example, shelter staff and a local television news reporter put together a

three part series on homelessness broadcast during the evening news in late November of 1996.⁹ This series focused on working homeless people, young people, and causes of homelessness with a consistent focus on economic restructuring, pay in existing jobs, and housing costs. In fact, most interviews with homeless people emphasized how they were recently lower-middle class, housed citizens, but could not find a job with wages adequate to maintain that existence. By 1997, the shelter newsletter and fundraising appeals also began to move away from any discussion of substance abuse and mental illness and towards education and skills training. Recent newsletters have even included articles like, "Welfare Runs Out, But Poverty Persists" and "Northampton Jobs and Living Wage Campaign" while fact sheets on child poverty, increasing inequality, and lack of affordable housing have been distributed at public events.¹⁰

Interestingly, however, when opponents of the shelter used the characterizations of deviancy imbedded in previous accounts to justify their NIMBY politics, shelter administrators and city officials characterized those residents of Ward Three as simply uninformed bigots. To the opponents of the shelter, this proved extremely frustrating. For example, in a November 11, 1997 letter from the city councilor representing Ward Three to the City Planner, she wrote:

[The agency running the cot shelter] repeatedly uses a kind of circular logic to forestall debate: claiming immunity from local laws because it services those protected by federal and state laws, but then claiming that the neighborhood has the wrong idea of the homeless, assuming they are mentally ill or alcoholic. [The agency] has also attempted to dismiss neighborhood concerns by stigmatizing anyone who questions their practices as bigoted or prejudiced.

I am not suggesting that selfishness or bigoted stereotypes of homeless people do not play any role in NIMBY responses. Nor, am I suggesting that many public imaginings about homeless people are produced only by those employed within the sheltering industry. Opponents of the shelter, volunteers, city officials, and homeless advocates have all been exposed to a vast array of images about homeless and housed people. These representations help to outline the parameters of how these people respond to homelessness. What I am suggesting is that the notion of "the homeless" as a discursive category consisting of deviant, homeless people in

need of professional reform and retraining was re-produced and reinforced through these well-meaning efforts by the sheltering industry. These languages and practices may have unintended, often contradictory effects through which advocates for homeless people become complicitous in crafting NIMBY opponents by promulgating images of dysfunctional homeless people in need of the expert help professionals within the shelters can provide. In this manner, these common sense, "helping" efforts may actually contribute to producing community opposition to public homelessness when the resources spent on more shelters does not appear to decrease homelessness or address larger economic, housing, and wage concerns. At the very least, they contribute to the content of that opposition.

The discursive resources available to members of this community were such that they could not imagine practices which would actively work to change existing systemic conditions. Several opponents of the shelter suggested that to really do something about homelessness, the community would need to have a broader grassroots discussion about where it's going and what problems exist in the city. However, opponents of the shelter saw the city and social-service agencies as resistant to such discussions. As one neighbor stated, "You can't just create that in a vacuum. You have to have a city hall that's conscious of the need. You have to have more democratic organization of the town, which doesn't look like it's going to happen for a while." As a result, the practices of both neighbors opposing the shelter and supporters of the shelter worked towards reproducing existing social relations. An opportunity was missed by administrators of the local sheltering industry, progressive city politicians, and neighborhood activists to work towards a broad-based movement addressing political-economic issues of concern to many citizens in the city rather than simply living with systemic inequality and abject poverty by building more shelters.

If we hope to make sense of, or stem the tide of, the growing phenomenon of poverty within prosperity, organized NIMBY mobilizations against social-service programs, and the proliferation of anti-homeless legislation being enacted throughout the nation, it is imperative to analyze the interplay between power and class dynamics within communities and the subject making effects of discursive representations regarding homelessness and homeless people. Through such an analysis of how social actors make sense of their conditions of existence, a more complex understanding of the practices of social actors may be discovered. Ultimately, new

understandings may emerge through the process of such ethnographic research providing for opportunities to stretch the parameters of "common sense" understandings about economic restructuring, community instability, and potential practices.

Notes

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¹In December of 1999, the Department of housing and Urban Development (HUD) along with other federal agencies released the results of the most comprehensive study to date of homelessness in the United States. The report clearly demonstrated a continued, pervasive homelessness problem throughout the nation (Interagency Council on the Homeless 1999). A few months later HUD released a further report suggesting that millions of additional American families were at risk for homelessness as 5.4 million families across the nation paid more than 50 percent of their income for housing in 1998, an increase of 12 percent since 1991 (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2000). These reports confirmed the findings of several other studies (Burt 1995; Dolbear 1999; National Coalition for the Homeless 1997; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 1999; United States Conference of mayors 1998; United States Department of Housing and Urban Development 1999) in demonstrating that homelessness, hunger, housing stress, and economic inequality continue largely unabated throughout the United States despite widespread proclamations about a vibrant, expanding economy.

²Here I am drawing upon Stuart Hall's reading of Antonio Gramsci in terms of how understandings of the meanings, possibilities, and sense of the world is made up and produced through practices of signification and representation (Hall 1985; 1999).

³The "continuum of care" approach came out of a summit of experts brought together by HUD and HSS early in the first Clinton presidential administration to develop a comprehensive solution to homelessness. What came out of this meeting was a goal having the federal government and local communities work together to provide all the services needed to detect, diagnose, and treat the conditions which made individual people homeless. Unfortunately, the early stated commitment to increased affordable housing as a part of this plan never materialized in practice.

⁴Smith College is located in the heart of the city while Mt. Holyoke,

Amherst, Hampshire, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst are all located nearby.

⁵This "self sufficiency standard" is derived from a formula that factors in the costs of food, housing, child care, transportation, health care, taxes, and other household expenses rather than the federal poverty standards which are tied primarily to food costs.

⁶I had worked alongside many of these people as a fellow staff member and, later, as assistant director of one of the other shelters in the city for over five years ending two years previously. Prior to that, I had worked in a different shelter in Connecticut for several years.

⁷See Lyon-Callo (1998) for a fuller discussion of the role that funding concerns play in constraining the practices and politics within the homeless sheltering industry.

⁸This quote is taken directly from the classified advertisement for the position from *The Daily Hampshire Gazette* of February 3–4, 1996.

⁹The series was broadcast on Channel 22 out of Springfield, Massachusetts in November 1996.

¹⁰These articles appeared in the shelter newsletter/funding appeal in 1997 and 1998 and the fact sheets were given out at a 1998 workshop.

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