

# WALDO 101:

## MAPPING THE INTERSECTIONS OF SPACE, PLACE, AND GENDER IN THE LIVES OF TEN HOMELESS YOUTH

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### What do you need to know?

The childhood favourite “Where’s Waldo?” can teach us three lessons. The first is that in public spaces we are nearly always seen, even when we do not want to be – homeless youth understand this, trying to blend into the background at certain times, while drawing attention to themselves at others. Second, where one stands largely determines whether one will be seen – in some places and spaces favoured by homeless youth, like parks, social service agencies, and street corners, it is nearly impossible to be hidden. Third, Waldo’s unmatched access to hiding spaces is largely the result of his being male. On the street, homeless men have considerably more freedom of movement than their female peers. Based on research with homeless youth and considering these combined lessons there is a need for services that are spread throughout the city, initiatives that reduce stigma, improved police engagement, and additional supports for women and the dogs that frequently travel with them.

### What did the researcher do?

Open-ended interviews were conducted with 10 participants (5 female, 5 male) between the ages of 17-24. Participants were asked to describe their experiences of being homeless in Toronto, as well as to recall the 24 hour period (12:00am to 11:59pm) prior to interview. With this informa-

tion in mind, participants sat in front of map of Toronto and marked their destinations and pathways through the city. As they diagrammed, they discussed where they went, the routes they took, their means of transportation, why they chose to go to different places, and with whom they travelled.

### WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?



This chapter reports on the findings from a study conducted in the spring of 2010. It offers a way of thinking about the connections between space, place, and gender in the lives of ten homeless youth. At its heart, it is a discussion about embodied difference and spatial practices – or how our daily routines and the ways in which we move through spaces and places is related to our physical bodies and the meanings that get attached to them. For instance, a person’s body may be categorized differently depending on factors such as one’s gender, age, race/ethnicity, and physical abilities, among others. This research examines the ways in which being young, homeless/poor, and either male or female impacts one’s experience of living in Toronto, with the goal of seeing what can be learned from their experiences to better inform our understanding of street life.

#### ARTICLE SOURCE

Buccieri, K. (2013). Waldo 101: Mapping the Intersection of Space, Place, and Gender in the Lives of Ten Homeless Youth. In Gaetz, S., O’Grady, B., Buccieri, K., Karabanow, J., & Marsolais, A. (Eds.), *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice* (425-443). Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.

# What did the researcher find?

Participants moved through a circuit of service agencies throughout a given day in order to meet their needs, creating a kind of enforced movement, as young people were drawn in at certain times (like dinner or shelter curfews) and driven out at others (as when the shelter closes in the morning). Youth reported feeling the public gaze on them, particularly in public spaces such as a public park or social service agency, or when sitting in high traffic spaces such as on street corner to panhandle. Services the young people relied on were often in the downtown core, making homeless youth a visible presence in this space. This high visibility meant that police paid close attention to their presence and movement. When the young people were in public they used alternative strategies, either trying to blend in with the general public at certain times (to avoid police attention, for example), or highlighting their bodies, poverty and need for support at others (such as when begging for money). Some of the youth – generally males – were able to move through more hidden spaces such as alleyways in an attempt to avoid the public gaze, while females had more difficulty escaping public and police view. Females experienced an inability to access the city's hidden spaces without putting their physical safety at risk, which often left them visibly exposed with nowhere to hide. Some of the strategies used by the young women included relying on men and/or dogs to protect them, or travelling to suburban parts of the city where they could stay either in a shelter or with a boyfriend. This unfortunately could increase their risk of victimization at times by causing them to travel long distances alone. In addition, when females made money in non-traditional activities in highly public spaces, they not only drew attention to themselves, but to their violation of feminine gender norms.

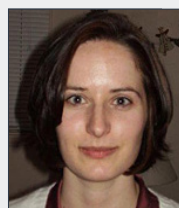
## How can you use this research?

This research can be used to generate awareness in the public of the ways in which homelessness and gender intersect to marginalize many youth from the use of public spaces. It demonstrates how social stigma can result from making one's association with particular places known, such as social service agencies. While these agencies are helpful and necessary, they may have the unintended effect of reinforcing social stigma by drawing attention to individual clients and limiting their ability to blend into the crowd. This alerts policy makers and service pro-

viders to the need to address several of the recommendations made in this report. First, this research highlights the need for diversely located services. This could help youth by allowing them to travel more freely, decreasing the number of young people downtown (and consequently the attention they draw from the public and police), reducing the financial burden youth face having to rely on public transportation, and decrease the number of women alone downtown at night. The second recommendation suggests that social service agencies should

engage in stigma-reducing strategies by making their presence known in the community in positive ways. This can be done directly through public education campaigns or indirectly by participating in events like community clean-up days. Third is the need for improved police engagement. Efforts must be made to bring police together with youth representatives, perhaps through a formal council with regular discussion meetings. Finally, this research suggests that social service agencies need to change their policies to allow dogs to accompany women.

### About the researcher



KRISTY BUCCIERI is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. Her research has focused on the lived experiences of youth homelessness, including studies into substance use and harm reduction, violence and victimization, gender and sexuality, health and mental health services, and daily routines on the street.



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