

GOVERNING THE STREETS:

THE LEGAL, SOCIAL AND MORAL REGULATION OF HOMELESS YOUTH

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What do you need to know?

Changes in political, social, and economic practices over the past few decades (referred to in this chapter as neoliberalism) have shaped the way government and society at large view and address youth homelessness. These practices include reduced social support, increased individual accountability, particularly in regards to maintaining employment and managing personal finances, and greater reliance on the private sector to provide shelter, food and health services to the homeless population. An overall increase in intolerance for crime and disorder has also resulted, leading to a legal response to urban homelessness sometimes referred to as the “criminalization of homelessness”.



WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?

This chapter explores the ways that homeless youth have become subject to various forms of legal, social and moral regulation. It is organized into three parts: The first section addresses how neoliberalism has placed more emphasis on a type of citizenship that encourages responsible behaviour in all aspects of life, as well as how public spaces have become increasingly regulated and less tolerant of disorder. The second part explores the various ways in which youth homelessness is viewed as ‘problematic’ and how current responses are formed in reaction to these perceived problems, including punishing homeless youth who occupy public spaces by enforcing legislation aimed at stopped panhandling and begging. Finally, the third section explores the broader implications of the present political and economic climate and argues that current responses to youth homelessness further reinforce the idea that homelessness is an individualized problem, ignoring the structural factors like the shortcomings of the foster care services, transitional housing and overall high rates of poverty.

ARTICLE SOURCE

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What can we do with this research?

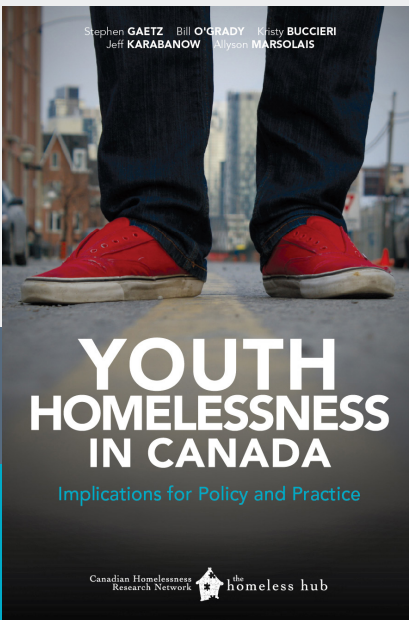
This chapter asks service providers to reflect on their role in guiding and shaping youth into responsible citizens. Currently there is a complicated and contradictory web of responses to youth homelessness where on the one hand shelter workers strive to empower youth, provide refuge and act as a starting place for transition, yet on the other hand send mixed messages to youth through their disciplinary practices. Hence it is important to reflect on how shelter staff and administrators can continue to help youth without contributing to

the neoliberal idea that homelessness is primarily a personal deficit or problem. It is also important for workers to challenge local and state governments to do their part in addressing the structural causes of homelessness such as poverty, unemployment and lack of affordable housing. Similarly, public opinions have changed considerably during neoliberal times, allowing punitive responses to be introduced with little public outcry. Only by continuing to draw attention to this unjust enforcement of laws that only punish the poor is meaningful change possible.

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About the researcher



RORY SOMMERS is a PhD student at the University of Guelph in the Sociology and Anthropology department. His current research examines the role municipal by-laws play in regulating city spaces and the conduct of citizens. Rory's research focuses specifically on how municipal by-laws affect those living in poverty.

This free e-book is available at:

www.homelesshub.ca/youthhomelessness