

**CHRA Congress Presentation**  
**“The Comfort to be Me: Home and Homelessness in St. John’s.”**

I want you to take a moment now and get an image of homelessness in your mind’s eye. For most people, when I ask this question, they describe this type of image, a man who is sleeping on the street, wearing dirty clothes, and who is presumed to be an alcoholic. This particular image is not one that you see much of in St. John’s, so when I tell people what I am researching, they often say, ‘but we don’t have homeless people in St. John’s.’

The situation in St. John’s can be referred to as one of hidden homelessness. This means that many people are living in unsuitable or unsafe housing or staying with friends and family.

For my research, I completed semi-structured interviews with 15 people, 10 women and 5 men. The participants’ ages ranged from 25 to 64 and they have a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. They discussed housing arrangements that vary from living in a tent downtown, staying in a shelter, living in deplorable conditions, and being forced to move back in with their parents.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, I gave four participants a disposable camera to take photographs with, asking each person to photograph what is important to him or her. Unless otherwise stated, the images used in this presentation are from these self-reporting projects and semi-structured interviews.

During this presentation, I will explore the term homeless and how the participants’ idea of home may affect whether or not they have felt homeless at particular points in their lives.

I will begin by discussing the term homeless and the problems with this term. I then give three examples that show that the participants' idea of home changed how they understood being homeless.

The participants in this research made it clear that homelessness, and the feeling of homelessness, is much more than lacking a roof over one's head at night. It can be a deep feeling of not belonging; it can be the feeling that you are intruding on someone else's space; it can be the loss of family, a partner or kids; and it can most certainly be sleeping in a tent or car, because you have nowhere else to go.

The fact that homelessness means more than not having shelter is why I believe that the term homeless is not sufficient in getting across the experiences of those struggling with housing issues. This term does not portray the sense of urgency and emotional upheaval that has been experienced by those in this research.

As I have mentioned, most people tend to only think of one aspect of this struggle when they hear the term homeless, the man sleeping on the street. It is important to note that this is also a gendered image of homelessness.

The ambiguity of the word homeless is problematic. I think that we need to use terms that refer strictly to what aspect of housing struggles we are discussing and trying to address within policy frameworks.

I think that we should replace the term homeless with three phrases to discuss a lack of physical and conventional housing, which lies along a type of spectrum. These are sleeping-rough, temporary institutional housing, and precarious housing; sleeping rough to refer to those sleeping on the street, in cars and tents; temporary institutional housing for individuals in shelters and other emergency housing structures; and, lastly, precarious

housing to refer to living arrangements that are outside of institutional housing, such as living in rentals that are unstable or in poor condition or living temporarily with friends and family.

In order to express the emotional side of lacking a home, I have chosen the phrase ‘Bereft-of-Home’. This phrase acknowledges the emotional turmoil that being without a home can cause. Ideally, I would like to reserve the term homeless for when we are discussing both the physical aspects of not having adequate shelter and being Bereft-of-Home. The stigma associated with the general understanding of homelessness, the idea of a marginalized alcoholic man who sleeps on the street, makes this an impossible task. Therefore, I think that we should consider discarding the term all together.

Three examples from my research that show how complicated the term homeless can be are the stories of John, Rob, and Eliza. The way these three individuals understand and have felt homeless is different from what we may think.

John’s housing struggle began when he left his partner. He lived in his car for three days. When I asked John if he felt homeless during this period he said:

No jeeze I wasn’t homeless  
I could have went to any family members

I believe John did not want to self-identify as homeless when living in his car because of the negative stereotypes he associated with being homeless. He understands homelessness to describe when people have no one else to turn to for help, and also a situation someone chooses to be in.

Later in his interview, when I asked John what home was he stated:

I don’t have a home  
I was brought into this world naked  
And I am sure I will go out of the world naked

...When you talk about family and stuff like that it is pretty much wrong  
You can't even talk to me about that cause I never had a family like I said I had 7  
foster homes before I was...10 year[s] old...  
...nobody loved me as a kid  
I was just passed around because somebody might have wanted a few extra  
bucks...

Here, as soon as I ask John about home he starts talking about family. While I realize the contradictory nature of these two quotes – above he said he could turn to family and here he said he did not have any family – I want to bring attention to the leap between home and family. For John, it is clear that home is family. John had family to go to if he wanted; therefore, he was not homeless. John's decision to not ask his family for help is another paper altogether.

As with John, Rob's housing issues began when his marriage broke down and he was told by his ex-wife to leave the house. When I asked Rob how long he felt homeless he said:

I still feel homeless because you know what  
It is a state of mind  
I try to explain to people, [what] they don't understand is that  
Once you lose your family  
You know...that is home  
Family is home  
And so if I'm living  
in a dive of a room in Toronto or my half decent apartment here there is still a  
sense of being homeless because I've lost everything.

Rob feels that people do not understand his struggle and how he can still feel homeless when he has an apartment. When he lost communication with his family, he lost his feeling of belonging, his home. It is clear that Rob's understanding of being homeless is linked to his feelings of home. Home for Rob is his family; without his family he is homeless, no matter where he is sleeping.

For Eliza, home is zero. It is a place she did not have to think about. A place that is always there, not somewhere that is threatened to be taken away. She stated that:

So it's like the good things and the bad things are the places that you go and everything  
But home is the...things in the middle  
You'll come back to it  
And it's not particularly good, or bad, it's not far, or near, it's  
...the point...from which you judge all other things.

This is why for Eliza, when she had to move out of the house she considered home and tried to find an affordable place to live, she felt homeless. Eliza had to stay with friends until she found an affordable apartment. When I asked her if she ever felt homeless she said:

Yeah when I was staying at [my friends house] I considered myself homeless...  
Yeah I mean I was staying there  
I guess by the end of it I was much more comfortable but...  
It was like a half way house is how I felt, I would get up every morning and I'd leave the house all day  
then I'd come back  
And it wasn't cause they made me feel like that but it was just  
How I was feeling at the time...

And I could have stayed in there all day long and I [was] kind of homeless in my heart ...home was gone  
You know what I mean  
it was like an empty feeling  
Like home is a feeling of safety...

When Eliza started to feel that she did not have a claim to the space where she was sleeping she started to feel homeless. Home for her was the ability to not worry; to not think about how she was imposing on others; and to have the security that this place would always be there.

These three examples 'drive home' how vague the term homeless is, and how "being homeless," means many different things to those struggling with these issues. We

therefore need more specific terminology to discuss homelessness. Despite society's perception of homelessness meaning a lack of shelter we cannot forget that for those who are struggling with housing, it is also a feeling of not belonging, a feeling of being bereft-of-home. This research shows that we must remember that shelter alone is not the answer to ending struggles with housing. We all must have, as one of my participants said, the 'comfort to be me.'